Volume Two — Exegesis

*Altaring the Literary Landscape:*
An Exploration of Literary Techniques for the Representation of Human Sacrifice

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Cassandra Austin

23 December 2008
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This MA project is indebted to Adam Simon
for his patience, his library, his rereading and his faith.

This MA project is dedicated to Antoni Jach
for his inspiring conversation and his excellent supervision,
and for his unflagging ability to assist above and beyond the call of duty.
Thank you my friend.
Man is born to believe. And if no church comes forward with its title-deeds of truth, sustained by a tradition of sacred ages and by the conviction of countless generations to guide him, he will find altars and idols in his own heart and imagination.

Benjamin Disraeli
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The collapse began with a groan. The metal groaned. And then squealed as it began to shift. A moan followed by an ear-splitting screech: the distress of mortally tortured steel. The legs swayed to one side, crashing under the deep-V of weight created from the buckling concrete span, and, as that all thundered earthward, red soil exploded up into the air and then took its time billowing gently down, covering the wreckage.

The girders had travelled all the way from Melbourne. The “BlueScope” logo stamped on the underside of the long bars that rammed the dry ground. It made a hell of a racket at 3am.

People on the south side of the divided town of L— had been sleeping and some of them, when asked to describe it the following day, said that it sounded as though a plane had crashed. Those on the north side of the town were too far away to hear much. Maybe a baby woke: maybe his parents thought he was teething.

But those on the south side of L— got out of their beds that night. They didn’t bother with dressing gowns because there was just too much noise for that, and they opened their doors and stepped out. A parade of cotton t-shirts, faded nightgowns and bare feet.

Outside the dark air winked quietly back. Nothing now. Big squeal of metal and then completely quiet. Didn’t fool the people though. They knew exactly where to look. Down the dead riverbed. Down in the chasm. People on either side of the banks craned their necks.
Someone called the policeman—just the one for this side of town—and he came. Even without the additional circus of the sirens, it was exciting to see the blue and red lights spilling intermittent colour over the wreckage.

The policeman, and the man who called him—balding, dressed scantily in only his shorts—made the journey down to the ruin. There were calls to watch out and be careful. After all, the whole thing had collapsed only moments before. But the two men picked their way amongst the debris, torches highlighting sharp angles of concrete and bits of metal slammed into the earth for the spectators.

It occasioned a lot of yelling. Arguments about leaving the exploring for the morning proper. But then some of the evidence might have disappeared. What evidence. Well, animals might shift something. It was mostly good-natured badgering. They weren’t supposed to be getting excited about the failure of the bridge, especially since there would be no rain, no water, ever, to mosey along underneath it, but then isn’t that just human nature? Something like this made the adrenalin rush whether you thought it appropriate or not.

About an hour later, people began to tire of the unchanging sculpture. They left in little troupes of three or four, and finally the policeman and his self-important attendant left also. Although when the latter went back inside he didn’t turn his lights out. Didn’t know why, just didn’t want to.

So no one saw it that night. Flung off to one side of the dark metal shafts. The pull of the girders from the embankments had pitched it like so much chaff, but failed to pin it, to crush it. It lay unblinking, intact, waiting.

But no one saw it until the following morning.
Part One:

Three Weeks
'Can you fix it?'
'What did you do?'
'I didn’t do anything, that’s the problem, isn’t it?'
'You got a half-wit in. Let him mess around.’
'You’re not the only man for the job.’
'Social call then this, is it?’
'No. All right. You’re the only man for the job.’

Silence.

‘Can you fix it?’
‘Screwing around. You can’t screw around with this.’

Silence.

‘Cheaper was he?’
‘Yes.’
‘Not anymore.’
‘No. No. Hell. Can you fix it?’
‘What did he do?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Anyone else see anything?’
‘I don’t know. I don’t know anything except that whatever he did with it, didn’t work.’
‘Whatever he did with what?’
‘With the— with the thing. I don’t know what you do with it. I thought he could find out.’

Silence.

‘Look. Can you fix this or not?’
‘He still around?’
‘Who?’
‘The half-wit.’
‘I don’t know. Probably. He lives there.’
‘He what?’
‘You heard.’

Silence.
‘For God’s sake, can you fix it?’
‘I’ll get back to you.’
Tuesday 10th February

Shane

He had not even sat himself up properly in bed before he had his first cigarette. Camels. He and Sarah used to smoke together, and it didn’t lessen the pleasure just because she wasn’t around to do it with him anymore. After a few searing sucks he stubbed out the butt on the jam jar lid he kept specially for the occasion, then half-heartedly pulled at his cock. But ended up just scratching.

He should have said no. What use was the money now anyway? Buy him a one-way ticket to no-wheres-ville. He wasn’t going to relocate. Mining, construction—that was all he knew. Money didn’t change the way your brain worked. It was easy money though. Dead easy. He blinked a couple of times. Looked around the bedroom.

There wasn’t much in it besides him—an old dresser he’d swept clean with one arm about eleven months ago and a fancy chair he didn’t dare sit on—so he got up and opened the window. Tipped out the ashen remains from the jam jar lid, then padded to the bathroom for a piss.

His reflection stared all eye-sockets from the tiny mirror. Sarah had always complained about that mirror. Pathetic, she’d called it. Could barely see herself in it because she was too short and even when she had heels on there wasn’t enough silvered glass to see her whole hairdo. She hated the bathroom and on their wedding night he’d recklessly promised to tear the whole thing down and rebuild it. A real renovation too: not some half-arsed replace-the-front-of-the-cabinets job.

And so he had finally gotten around to it. The half-arsed version anyway. He’d freshly scoured the water-stains in the bath until they were a lighter brown; the once curled corners of linoleum strained at the nails he’d hammered down; and brand spanking new
shower tiles—each one an exact replica of the factory-minted original—sat flush with the base, just like they were supposed to. Didn’t feel like he hoped it would.

He wandered into the kitchen, unwilling to sit since he hadn’t pulled on any jocks yet, checked the kettle’s weight, flicked the switch and went to stand at the sink. The flimsy-flamsy lace curtains he’d taken down hunched like a cowering pup on the bench top. Another remnant. He looked out through the bare glass.

The sun was already strong: nothing to make shadows with in his yard it would just bake the plain earth. He and Sarah had cooked an egg outside once, by the sun. He’d said something about her wearing a hat. She had shocking white skin that was always pinking and peeling because she refused to wear a hat. She argued back—almost without thinking they’d been on the subject for so many months—didn’t have a hat face, she said. What are you supposed to say to that? Female logic; no logic. Then she’d topped it off by taunting that they never went anywhere to get burned anyway and he’d made the remark about the heat frying her brain like an egg. Nonsense, she’d said and typical bloody-mindedness, took an egg, marched outside and cracked it open on the slab of concrete that he was planning to extend all around the house as verandah foundation.

He charged out after her to watch. It took ten minutes, but it cooked beautifully. She ate it then. Right off the concrete. Slopped it up with her fingers and ate it. Grinning at him. Best damned brain she’d ever eaten she said tartly, and he’d picked her up and carried her right into the bedroom. Didn’t change her mind about the hat though. Her stubbornness made an absolute idiot of her. Made him want to smack her and made him marry her.

He pushed away from the bench, cup of instant in hand, and kicked the back door open. Bluey immediately bounded up against his naked thigh. Left scratch marks. Shane cursed as he snapped his fingers, then, when she’d come to heel, he kicked her hard. She laid her ears low and scooted around behind him, yelping. Lesson learned. Beautiful mongrel of Queensland Blue and Kelpie cross. A bit mangy looking with half an ear taken by a pitbull. Lost his money on that one.
Standing back against the weatherboard, he turned his feet turned to one side to avoid the slightest touch of direct sun. Even this weaker early morning variety. He copped a lot of flak for that. Big girl, they called him. Behind his back—no one would say it to his face. But he didn’t have those facial lines that looked as though they’d been cut in with a pocketknife, so sharp and fine.

His phone rang and he sniffed and threw out the dregs of his coffee, pockmarking the dust. He wanted to let it go. But it jiggered his insides and he couldn’t let it go after all. Flywire door whacking behind him, he walked back into the house. Poked around in the living room to find the receiver. Lit his second cigarette. When Pete started talking Shane laughed. Not thinking.

‘Fuck you, you bastard. Bit early for that crap.’ He drew on his cigarette, listened a bit longer. ‘Bullshit.’

He stood a while in the living room after he’d hung up. Got the shakes. First thing he thought was that the money wasn’t looking that easy now. Second thing was that he pretty much failed at everything he turned a hand to. Third thing was that he’d been set up somehow. Big Patsie.

He took the ute and kept glancing in the rear view mirror to see his dog on the tray, grinning away, tongue tasting the air. Shane shifted on his seat; the underside of his thighs wet with perspiration already. Another cigarette on his bottom lip. He shut his eyes briefly and dragged fit to set fire to a lung.

When he leaned his head over the bank, he thanked god he’d gone to see what had happened straight after the phone call. “Sheila” was lying a fair distance from the main rubble. But she was completely exposed. Completely untouched.

He used his wrist to wipe away the accumulated sweat from his forehead and sidled down the embankment. Boots skidding in the dryness. One minute to look around, then he
started dragging the wooden structure back up the embankment, bum in the air, work boots struggling to get purchase. A couple of times he had to rest, bitten fingernails just barely hanging on beneath the crude head. He slowed down. Grunted as his back took the weight. Finally pushed her up and over the rise.

She wasn’t touched. Carved teeth—they’d taken him ages and bits were splintering off. Eyes he’d just hollowed out. He’d even glued some knots of rope on for the hair. Not that he knew what a proper effigy looked like, even was before the call. He just ran with his imagination.

Bluey got a proper chance to sniff at her, tried to cock a leg over her.

‘Get out of it, you mongrel bloody dog.’

Shane lifted his Akubra to let some air circulate then rolled Sheila along, using the sudden forward momentum to frighten his animal away. Laboured a bit getting the wooden lump up and into his ute tray. Bluey urinated on her immediately. Shane was too buggered to do much more than roll his eyes.

They stopped off at a milk bar. Little place run by some Turks who used paint to handwrite about the shop’s wares on the brickwork outside. The blue and red advertising slanted unevenly, boasting about *pide* and *kebaps* and *ladie’s thigh meatballs*. Shane loved that “thigh meatballs” sign—not that he’d ever try some. Didn’t much like new food. He bought his regular packet of Camels and a chocolate Big M. He sat in the cabin of his ute to avoid the sun and drank the milk in between sucking on his cigarette.

He wouldn’t return the money. It was a crazy idea anyway. That’s why he’d liked it, but it was a crazy idea. When the ute throttled into life he put his hand out to thump the rooftop: made Bluey bark like mad.
Moriah

The sun was still low in the sky—streaking under the blind and across the bedroom wall—when she woke. And she woke because her father’s voice hammered against the walls.

‘Damned right! Of course, it’s possible!’

Moriah closed her eyes. The flare of sunlight made a moving white blob against her eyelids and after a moment she realised her heart was pounding. Her father’s voice even louder.

‘Well, it’s an inanimate object, for god’s sake. No. I understand. Shock. Hard feelings.’

She held the pillow over her ear for a few seconds, then threw it off. Pulling on her dressing gown, she opened the bedroom door. Squatted down at the top of the stairs and looked at her toes. At the nails that needed cutting. They were ugly toes. Toad toes. Made more unattractive as her weight splayed them even further. Her father hung up on the “possible” conversation and immediately called someone else.

‘Don’t touch it. I want to see it. I don’t care—leave it!’

Moriah rocked on her heels to watch the blood rush back into her toes. She should go downstairs. Or have a shower and get ready for school. When she heard him hang up the phone, only to dial yet another number, she sighed and went to undress in the bathroom.

She avoided her reflection.

Standing in the shower she let the temperature get too hot. The sluicing water was just short of stinging and she bent her head because she was tall and the shower rose wasn’t. She looked down. For a long while. This was her favourite position in the shower. Not doing anything—just standing still and watching the water run in rivulets down her stomach and legs.

‘Moriah, are you still in there?’
She didn’t answer. Just inspected the red skin on her stomach and arms.
‘Fifteen minutes,’ he shouted.

By the time she found her royal purple socks and sandals, her father had yelled another two times, and by the time she had wound her damp hair into tight braids the way her father liked, she had practised what to say to him.

‘Did something happen, dad?’

‘Where’s your bag?’

She pulled it from its slump under the worn Laminex table.

‘Get an apple and a banana, and I’ll meet you in the car.’

She hadn’t even brushed her teeth yet.

‘I guessed about the bridge,’ she told the empty kitchen.

The apples had brown bruises on them because he never checked at the supermarket. The bananas looked okay though and she took three.

There was no news radio in the car. This morning was too serious for that.

‘Did you want to check my spelling?’

He gave her a sharp look. ‘Don’t get ahead of yourself. Whatever you heard this morning has to be confirmed first. After all, they turned me down before. Don’t want to get ahead of ourselves.’

He slapped the dashboard. Happy. Loud.

Moriah peeled the skin of the first banana halfway and saw a yellow flower with a penis in the centre. She bit it quickly.

‘I’m going to take you to the corner of High St and you can walk or take the tram down to Rushall Station, all right?’

She nodded but he wasn’t looking.

A little while later he leaned across and opened her door. As she struggled out, he patted her head.

‘Bye.’

She wanted to bark at him in return for the head pat, but she stood watching the car surf traffic a while, then sat at the tram stop to eat the second banana. Now she had
sticky bits of yellow-white banana on her fingers. She wiped them on her skirt and then she had banana on her skirt.

Along the footpath, in front of all the houses that adults were allowed to stay in all day if they wanted, it was easier to breathe. Moriah pretended to look at a watch she didn’t have as she walked up the hill. It was a slope really, because her father said Melbourne didn’t have proper hills. But it felt like a hill when you walked up it. She had long noticed that there was a difference between the way the world looked and the way the world felt.

She tried not to hunch her shoulders as she walked, but it was habit now. She was ‘too big, too big’. She had only been three-years-old the first time she heard it. The boy on the other end of the see-saw insisted she would send him into the sky if she was allowed to sit. ‘Too big, too big’. It had advantages now though—people thinking she was older.

The redbrick cathedral loomed ahead, spire poking the sky. St Joseph’s Church, the sign said. She memorized it. By the time she reached it her hair was sticky on the back of her neck. She raised her plaits a few times to cool off, then slunk inside.

At first, all she could make out were some tiny points of flame down near the altar. She crept blindly along the back wall, then down the side of the dark and cavernous space—making her way towards the confessional. Sometimes the door to the little room creaked, today it didn’t. Slipping in silently, bag lowered to her feet, she blinked rapidly, impatient for her pupils to dilate in the weak light. It was a low watt light. Her father said people used them for mood. The tiny globe perched high above her head and the illumination fell on her hair and spilled down over her shoulders. By the time it reached her arms and fingers it was quite faint.

She liked to come and sit. Think about whether God existed. If so, he was a bit like her mother—there was hardly any proof of her existence either.
Her back settled against the wall. It was hardly a room. More like being inside a coffin. Tall and narrow and dark. But then it had a seat and didn’t smell of dirt. In fact, it smelt of perfume. An ugly rose scent that reminded Moriah of the aerosol air-freshener her father bought for the toilet.

Her fingers prodded at the third piece of fruit as she tried to decide whether she could put up with the mixed smell of yellowed skin and sickly rose-petal if she ate it. Her stomach growled encouragingly.
Father Nott pulled the car up far too close to the embankment edge and Gussy immediately told him to back off to the tree line. Tree line. Three scraggly eucalypts hardly qualified—still they were a major landmark in a world without trees and last thing any of the men wanted was another complication, so she’d tapped on Father’s shoulder until he backed up.

She eased her way out of the car, using her free hand to keep her floral housedress pulled down over her knees. She’d sat in back. Her legs were playing up. Besides which, she needed the room. She’d also put the food on the front seat, so Kelly, the hairdresser with the bad hair, was forced to sit in the back too. Father Nott had to play chauffeur.

Kelly was soon out. Opening up the containers of food after Gussy instructed her to set them all on the boot of Father’s car. The men had already broken for lunch. Were picking at their half-eaten drooping sandwiches and bruised fruit. They eyed the potato salad, crumbed cutlets, shepherd’s pie and cinnamon scrolls.

‘Eat as much as you like.’

Gussy raised her chin and smiled at Father. He picked up a plate that Gussy immediately took from his hand.

‘You wait for others to get theirs first.’

A priest was a waste of a man.

‘Do you know what happened yet?’

A couple of the men spat into the dust.

Pete, one of the labourers on the bridge, finally cleared his throat. ‘No.’

‘Ah,’ said Father Nott.

‘We’ve been told to just clear away anything that doesn’t require machinery. Tag it and bag it,’ continued Pete. ‘They’re getting inspectors in.’

‘Who ordered that?’ Gussy wanted to know.

He pointed to the other side of the river.
‘Well, where are they then? Why aren’t they helping? Where’s Robert?’

The men looked away. Was again Pete who finally spoke. ‘He’s done a runner.’

‘You’re joking.’ Gussy started laughing. ‘Told you he wasn’t fit for the job. This,’
her accusing finger jiggled the curtain of flesh hanging along her upper arm, ‘this was
obviously something he did then.’

Pete shrugged.

Bloody male loyalty—they wouldn’t turn against a fellow male come hell or high
water.

‘What about the north side?’

‘I dunno, Gussy. It’s too soon to say. They’re going through government to
arrange the inspection.’

Gussy raised an eyebrow. Would have liked to pursue the conversation further.

But Kelly had set sights on Adam and began swinging her hair around her shoulders a bit.

Several of the men were watching.

‘Fair go, girl,’ interrupted Gussy. ‘You’ll get neck-ache.’

There was laughter and Kelly had murder on her face.

Gussy helped herself to some cutlet. She wished she could save Father Nott the trouble of
searching for something to take the slight away. One thing you could always count on in
a man was the desire to rescue an ailing woman. Sure enough Adam stepped up to the
mark to talk to Kelly—wouldn’t have had the gumption if he hadn’t perceived an injury.

Not that Gussy would get credit from Kelly for setting that up. Too dim-witted. All those
the hair dyes.

Gussy shifted weight from one leg to the other. If Kelly was smart she’d direct attention
away from herself now and onto the important work that Adam was undertaking. But no,
the young hairdresser kept the conversation on herself.

‘Pride comes before a fall,’ said Gussy—loudly.

‘Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18,’
corrected Father Nott.
Gussy smiled tolerantly.
‘Thanks for this,’ said Pete, indicating the food.
‘Don’t you worry. This’ll all come out with the rain,’ offered Father.
‘They’re getting a city construction company in,’ Pete said.
‘Ah, good. That’ll take some pressure off.’
‘And how are we paying for it?’ Gussy demanded.
Pete shrugged.
‘Typical.’

Another half hour of eating and Pete clapped his hands together.
‘Back to it then.’
‘We should get away.’ Father Nott brushed remnants of bread roll from his garb.
‘Yes, you don’t want us women in your hair,’ Gussy said.
Father Nott set his mouth but made no comment.
Gussy called to Kelly for help getting into the car. The young woman was a bit rough. Wedged her blood-mottled leg against the seat.
‘Sorry.’
Gussy said nothing.

Father Nott talked all the way back to the north-side town centre. Making up for Kelly’s silence and Gussy’s lack of interest. They dropped Kelly in front of the Split Endz yellow neon sign. Father made a comment about how the younger woman had graciously given up her lunch hour—at which Gussy burst into laughter—and Kelly slammed the car door.

‘It’s as though they can’t hear anything,’ said Gussy.
‘Sorry?’
‘Slamming car doors. She’s a comely looking girl for the moment, I’ll give her that. But she tries my patience with her youthfulness.’
Father Nott looked into the rear vision mirror. ‘We were all young once.’
Gussy turned her neck to look out the window and didn’t speak another word until the car was idling in front of her house.

‘You coming in for a cuppa, Father?’

‘I’m afraid duty calls.’

She opened the door and hefted a leg out. ‘I wouldn’t know what duties a priest out here could possibly have, Father. Except for helping his parishioners. I appreciate very much your lift for me and Kelly out to see the bridge. I notice she didn’t thank you for it.’

‘Are you right there?’

She slammed her car door as best she was able and walked the few paces to her front gate. The mailbox lid squealed for lack of oil revealing an empty space. She let it drop and then walked up the few steps and inside. It was a large house for one person. She’d traded up in the number of bedrooms each time one of her husbands had died, so this house had three. And was brick.

She wandered on through the passageway to the kitchen. Swished some warm water around in the kettle and tipped it out. Drought didn’t mean she had to have awful tea. She put the kettle on to boil and sat back down at the table. Hand propping up her head.
Will looked on as Jim unbuttoned his expensive-looking suit jacket and opened a small notebook. The CEO would have been a handsome man: had the kind of rugged face that Will admired, except that it had been encased in plastic. Hazard of the job. His posture behind the makeshift lectern—arms crossed, legs apart—suggested he was ready for combat, but his face was unreadable behind the permanent grin that he used to face the press corps. Will felt his adrenalin surge just looking at the man.

‘London Bridge,’ Jim said. ‘Oklahoma Bridge. Kinzua Viaduct—which was once touted as the Eighth Wonder of the World. West Gate Bridge. Princeton Street Bridge. Entre-os-Rios Bridge. Tacoma Narrow Bridge. Tasman Bridge. Minneapolis Bridge. Bogantungan Bridge which is just up the road in case you’ve never heard of it.’

Then he stood quietly. Evidently waiting for the journalists to make something of the list. When that didn’t happen he trumpeted on: ‘The West Gate came down in?’

‘1970,’ someone shouted.

‘Because of?’

No one answered, so Jim continued. ‘A combination of causes—design faults, construction mistakes, poor communication between the consulting engineers and so on. My point is?’

A lot of pens at the ready now.

The grin widened. ‘My point is that it happens all the time. Bridges come down here and overseas.’

‘Not typically the day after they’re completed!’

Some scattered laughter.

Jim held up his hands. ‘Granted. But that simply pinpoints where we’ve got our work cut out for us.’

‘Do you know the cause of the collapse yet?’

‘Our site investigators are analysing it now. No conclusions yet. The design was sound. Materials were first-rate. Construction looked solid.’
Some dissension from the journalists now. ‘It fell down.’
And another: ‘It’s not normal. There must be something wrong with the—.’

Jim sighed, as though he had a right to be impatient. ‘It’s a basic beam design. It’s probably the most straightforward form for a bridge that exists. The vanilla of bridges, it’s called. If you’d done your homework you’d know it’s not remotely original.’

‘Then it had to be put together incorrectly.’

‘There’s simply no evidence yet. Fatigue cracking is the highest priority problem with steel. This steel hadn’t the chance to fatigue. Slump tests for the concrete were spot on before fabrication. We’re looking into embrittlement in heat-affected areas—the welds—but we’re not expecting to find anything there either.’

Will looked around at the scribbling hands, tape-recorders held aloft.

Jim continued. ‘Bridges fall, people. That’s what you need to print in your papers. Go and research past collapses and write them up. Show the public how normal it is.’

Will bowed his head towards his crossed arms. The journalists hammered away.

‘Normal. Isn’t this just government unwilling to admit to a failure?’

‘I’m standing in front of you right now admitting to a failure. Next task is to get on with rebuilding.’

‘What? Just blithely go ahead with the project at taxpayer expense?’

‘Blithely. Lovely word. But I wonder if you would put that same question to the institution of marriage? Almost one half of marriages fail, but that doesn’t stop either participant from trying again—sometimes several times over.’

Will looked up at the laughter, but the journalist retorted. ‘Not with the same partner. Why is the government continuing on with a company that couldn’t get it up—so to speak?’

Jim smiled appreciatively. ‘The chances of marital success don’t get any higher for having a new partner, do they? The Quebec bridge failed twice—and is standing now. But then I’m sure you all already know that having done your homework on bridge construction. Besides we’ve attached a different foreman, different construction team.’
A young man from the Herald-Sun raised his hand. ‘Sounds a bit like rearranging chairs on the Titanic. Your company is the one responsible for the collapse. Letting you employ a new foreman seems superfluous.’

Jim smiled. All those teeth. Even Will had to admit he looked confident. ‘If you get your car serviced and two weeks later something goes wrong, you take it back to the same garage.’

‘First marriage and now car servicing. Do you honestly think the public is going to buy this?’

‘I think the public has enough good sense to know that if some one does something wrong, they have to keep going until they get it right. Any more questions?’

‘What’s your relationship with Abrahamson Construction?’

Jim focused on the young woman asking the question seated in the front row. ‘I presume you’re now casting aspersion on the tendering process? All the documents are on the public record. Feel free to peruse them.’

‘That wasn’t my question.’

Jim rolled his eyes. ‘Do I know anyone in Abrahamson’s personally? I do. Is the person I know a drinking buddy? No. Do we play golf? No. Do we even particularly like each other? Not really. Question answered?’

‘Why can’t we contact him personally for comment?’

Jim snorted. ‘That’s not the way these things are done and you know it. Give me a break.’

‘When will this next attempt be concluded?’

Jim looked at his watch, then fiddled with the leather band while he answered. ‘I don’t have the answer to that. Let me get back to you.’

He held up his hands and journalists and photographers immediately began packing away their notebooks and camera equipment before filing from the room. None of them gave Will a second glance, but he kept his place. Jim had seen him.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’
Will wasn’t surprised at the question. Just the ferocity with which it was delivered. ‘I wanted to see for myself.’

“If they had known, if any one of them had taken the time to look at your bloody boots it would have been all over. I can’t stop them from talking to you if you show up at a damned press conference, Will. Jesus Christ!’

‘Settle down, mate. What’s the problem?’

Will watched as Jim visibly forced himself to rotate his shoulders, open and shut his balled up hands. ‘I don’t want a word from you or your crew about what happened. No need to rubbish the man gone before you. Journalists are sharks: all they think about is the kill.’ He pulled up his trousers around the belt. ‘A collapse is a complicated business.’

Will felt himself nodding. Reassuring the man.

“We’re officially suspecting it was a failure of “materials”, all right?’ Jim said.

“The inspectors have said that?”

“No. Of course they bloody haven’t. They’re weeks away from a decision. But the public needs something in the meantime and a suspicion of materials is logical.’

Will ruminated on that.

‘Look, we won’t announce which company supplied what.’

‘But they’ll find out.’

Jim nodded. ‘Fine.’

‘Jim, I want the site cordoned off—I want to look at it myself.’

The CEO narrowed his eyes. ‘All right. But to be perfectly “off-the-record” with you, I don’t care about why it happened, I just want you on top of how it will be rebuilt.’

Despite himself, Will couldn’t stem his pride. Abrahamson Construction was in charge of its first bridge build.

Jim laughed. At ease now. ‘You know, I told my wife I was going to let you build and she said she suspected I was doing something illicit. I could see on her face that she wanted to ask further questions, but she raised her newspaper again instead. Aren’t
women goddamn nosy? So you and I went to high school together—as far as I know there’s no law against us working together as well.’

Will smiled but didn’t meet Jim’s eyes. At high school they’d barely spoken. He’d actually wondered whether Jim even remembered him from those days at Kensington Community High School. Before Jim had gone off to Monash University. Before Will had taken an apprenticeship. Not that he had anything to be ashamed of. He played football for the school. Didn’t excel, but didn’t disgrace himself.

He was just about to suggest a cup of coffee, when Jim spoke again.

‘Now listen, the government wants cross-bracing.’

Will took a second, then said, ‘For this bridge?’

Jim looked at him as though he was an idiot.

‘You’ve already approved a design. You can’t just add stiffeners if that’s not what’s called for. It won’t make your bridge any stronger at this point.’

‘They want it.’

‘You haven’t allowed for it.’

‘Allow for it.’ Jim looked at his watch. ‘Citizens of L— pay taxes, Will.’

Will said nothing.

‘A bridge—for the good citizens to easily get from the north to the south or the south to the north of L—, without having to circumnavigate—was part of the local party platform. The government contracts out to me. You meet the tender requirements. They want a bridge with cross-braces, they get a bridge with cross-bracing.’

Will cleared his throat. ‘And the budget?’

Jim played Cheshire cat.

‘If you want to add cross-bracing the budget has to expand.’

Jim sniffed.

Will steadied his voice. ‘I need the new budget faxed through this afternoon. And if it rains—.’
Jim interrupted. ‘Let’s not do this arse backwards; I’ll send you the new plans, you get your newly anticipated costs to me. All right?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Shit.’ He straightened his tie and then buttoned his suit jacket. ‘I’m counting on you, Will.’ Then he was gone.

Will smiled. He could be counted on. His bridge wasn’t going to fall down. He’d sleep on-site with the thing and damned well prop it up himself if he had to.
Janice

She knew why the bridge fell down: how anything had the energy to be upright was beyond her understanding. Besides which, L— was a town of losers. Not the north side where Greg was from. But the south side limped along in the north side’s shadow. That’s why he’d moved to Sydney: to stop dragging her south-side arse around. Janice could barely drag herself around at present. She was due right now. This day. This instant, if she had anything to do with it. But apparently she didn’t. Apparently, it was still the amphibian growing inside her that called all the shots. The amphibian and the south-side of L—.

She tried not to make connections. They didn’t often see reptiles in the veterinarian surgery, but she knew too much. That was the problem. Her work life crowded her pregnancy. The whole evolution of the human inside the womb—from amoeba to lizard to wombat to baby—was too animal. Janice turned her head away from the screen.

‘Your amniotic fluid is 7.5.’

‘That’s on the low end, right? It won’t get lower, will it?’

‘Not before you go into labour.’ The sonographer was being reassuring. It wasn’t her responsibility to give bad news. To cope with women breaking down in the little cubicle. The room was too small for emotion.

‘Daddy will be excited to see this.’ She placed a grainy ultrasound picture on Janice’s stomach. ‘It’s the side of the head.’

Janice took a deep breath. ‘I found “daddy” screwing someone else in our bedroom,’ she said.

‘Oh my god. I’m sorry.’ The sonographer turned around to face her.

‘I threw a book into the room—scared the living heck out of them.’ They both laughed. The woman asked, ‘He still with her?’

Janice shrugged. ‘I didn’t even see her leave. She tiptoed out of the house and later wrote me a note apologising.’
‘Pathetic.’
‘Apparently sex in the car was hurting her back. And you know what my boyfriend said when he finally had the balls to come and talk to me?’
The woman shook her head.
‘He said, “I told you you were too good for me”.’
The woman reached over to pat her wrist. ‘Good riddance to bad rubbish. Now you take this picture to put up on your fridge so you can see the little miracle coming and I’ll leave you to get dressed.’

Janice didn’t reply to that. Nor did she get up. The picture—black background with grey-green sound waves etching shapelessness—didn’t move her much. The in utero forehead bulged. She studied it for a long minute. If she hadn’t ample stomach as evidence, she could almost refuse to believe it was inside her. It. She didn’t know the sex—caught up in her sister’s insistence that the surprise made the delivery bearable. But that left it an “it”.

Her bunched rag of skirt had to be forced to stretch over her hips.

‘I’m going to put a question mark beside your next appointment,’ smiled the receptionist. ‘I think you’ll go.’

Janice popped the ultrasound picture into the glove compartment of her car. It would get hot in there and the edges would curl up. It was not going up on the fridge. It should be sent to Greg. But his move to Sydney had been as clear as his words when she said she was going ahead with the surprise pregnancy. ‘It’s not mine as far as I’m concerned. And it’s your decision to keep it, not mine, so as far as I’m concerned it’s not mine.’

She’d told him he was repeating himself.

Janice sniffed. She needed an ice cream cone. It might not be high forties, but it was still so hot even the leaves on L—’s three trees had given up: they hung down like parched tongues. She made her way. Stopping to lean on bins and public benches. Stopping just to cope with the hot air going into her lungs. It was hard to believe that each breath was
keeping her alive rather than slowly suffocating her. Janice put a hand to her midriff, wherever her midriff was, trying to lift the baby up a little. Take some pressure off her back.

It was the image of herself that kept her moving forward. She wouldn’t give in to the devil-may-care attitude that hovered around pregnant women. It went along with the pained expression and lowered expectations. Stretchmarks brought it on. She had them. ‘Tiger scratches’. Her sister told her it was fanciful giving stretchmarks a name and handed her a tube of Vitamin E cream. Janice used it, but still imagined that she might one day tell her son or daughter that a tiger had mauled her, and that she had run and run to keep him or her safe inside. She pulled a face as she rounded another corner. You weren’t allowed to tell children things like that. It would come up in therapy sessions later in life, apparently.

By the time she reached the milk bar there was a small queue. Good: she had time to look at the selection of ice creams. Honeycomb with actual pieces of the golden sugar, or coconut or passionfruit with the pips, or chocolate or banana.

‘Hello, love. Any day now?’
She nodded, too red in the face to reply.
‘You want to come out the back and sit down? You’re looking a bit overheated.’ The man’s eyebrows were meeting with concern. She shook her head no, and pointed to the chocolate. She could feel her ankles throbbing. She should have a glass of water and raise her feet. Should have driven the few measly blocks. Janice barely made it out of the shop without crying.

But she held her head up high, noting that they’d given her extra because of her belly. She had to lick it fast because the hot wind sent little brown fingers dripping down the cone. It was delicious and cold and refreshing, and just as she was loving it she licked it too hard and the whole mound of chocolate fell from the cone onto the ground. Brown flecks splashing her ankles. She wanted to kick it.
A few passers-by offered consoling grins and she knew she was supposed to throw her hands in the air. Que sera sera. She frowned. It was a five-dollar ice cream and now it was splattered. Uneaten. She didn’t have the money for uneaten ice creams and she turned back the way she came.

She would post the ultrasound up to Greg whether he wanted it or not.
Father Nott

In the spartan room—plain pine bed, desk, chair and shelving with a bare wooden cross hanging above the bed—Father Nott took off his chasuble and hung it up immediately. Then off with the stole and cinture: folding the former into a neat square, and the latter into a tidy loop to put away in his open shelving.

His belly expanded in delight at the lack of cinture. He kept this symbol of chastity on the tight side. A constant nag of his vows. He put a hand under his shirt to rub at the indentations. Even when he changed from clothes to singlet and pyjama shorts, he didn’t look at his flesh. Sheer habit.

It was all habit. He didn’t have to wear the chasuble outside of the mass, but he preferred to set himself apart a little. He could admit to some vanity—that was the only way to make sure it didn’t best him.

Peeling back a worn blue sheet, he hopped into the single bed. It had just gone eight o’clock. He settled himself and then reached under the pillow for his rosary beads. Finding them safely housed, he let them alone.

Out with the teeth. Just the top set softly plopping into the glass of water. He rubbed his tongue over the gums. A little sore. Dentures were a necessary evil. His cheeks dropped in now. and to clear his throat, or cough, he had first to blow his cheeks out—so they wouldn’t catch between his bottom teeth and upper gums. Sometimes, like this evening, he had to blow out his cheeks a few times because his mouth was dry and everything stuck.

Now, he had his pen and pad and all the time in the world. For a couple of hours. And those hours needed to be dedicated to a thesis topic. The sooner he decided on something, the sooner he could get on with it. A conversation on paper. A means of joining the great historical Conversation via his own research and thought—there in black and white. Free
to be consumed again and again. The subject was Theology in Contemporary Australia—but what was his topic?

Perhaps he should write about parish life in rural Australia. His supervisor had told him to be as specific as possible. Meditating on the importance of the gold, mining and precious metals index, he wrote: Through the Eye of a Needle: Camels, Opals and Doing Well versus Doing Good. Then he wrote ‘An Opal Beyond Price’; The Mystical Body of Christ and Social Relations in the Mining Communities of the Australian Outback.

He sucked on the end of his pen. There was always the weather. Never ending griping about weather—which, in his short experience, varied between a couple of years of drought and then six months of milder drought. He wrote: The Fire Next Time: Eschatology and Climatology in the Outback. He laughed. Wrote: Hot Enough for You? Reflections on Holy Saturday and the Harrowing of Hell in Outback Australia.

And then there was the tourist trade—the need for and dislike of the tourist: The Good Samaritan and Other Tourists or We Need You But We Hate to Need You: God, Tourists and the Outback Australian.

Or perhaps he should write about the disappearing outback priest. He wrote: Bunyips, Outback Priests and Other Mythical Creatures, then crossed it out. Wrote: Fishing for Loaves: The Crisis of Clerical Recruitment in Outback Australia.

Not bad. A beginning. The problem was that none of the topics interested him. Or were remotely original. Who cared if a rich man had less chance of entering heaven than a camel passing through the eye of a needle when the choice was poverty? Hell on earth was an old topic. Hating to need God was done to death in any Jewish thesis, and the dropping number of priests wasn’t exclusive to the outback. Father Nott tore out the page, crumpled it and threw it over the foot of the bed.
If he were honest about what interested him, he should write something about the bridge. About how a symbol of bringing together would alienate him from where he wanted to be. Because if it didn’t work, and he couldn’t see why it wouldn’t ultimately, so didn’t feel traitorous just having the thoughts—man-made structures collapsed and were rebuilt all over the world—but if it didn’t work and the south side of L— dwindled the way they all expected it would, with people selling up and overdrafts finally being cancelled, if it didn’t work, he would be sent back to the city. And he did want to be in the city.

There was nothing wrong with the outback. Per se. He didn’t feel the blazing heat anymore and he quite enjoyed the wildlife that wasn’t killed by the dogs and had some capacity to interact: parrots. He had a lot of time to himself, which meant ample opportunity to read everything he’d always said it was going to take him another lifetime to get to. But, the conversation, the conversation. He accepted that admitting his need for what he considered ‘literary’ or ‘highbrow’ was a sign of his own failure, not anyone else’s. That he was not above his fellow man—not any one of them. That his pride would get the better of him if he wasn’t careful. That he needed to extend his areas of interest.

He knew all this, and yet. It was inconceivable to him to imagine passing the rest of his days out here. He looked up at the ceiling. A bright, white, low-hung ceiling. Like the ceiling of so many other new prefabricated houses out here. Out here. It was a test. It was a powerful test of his faith and his purpose and his sense of self and his sanity. It was not a test he felt he was going to pass. Between the slights of a misanthropic widow and the general disregard of the rest of the south-siders, between his relegation to town chauffeur and the reluctance of anyone—anyone—to call upon him with any suggestion of religious need, Father Nott felt impossibly sandwiched. He couldn’t begin to imagine how to build a community around the Lord in L—. It simply wasn’t possible.

As a young man he may have taken up the mantle with gusto. May have needed to fail spectacularly before he could see what at 52 years of age was unfortunately manifestly obvious: the south-siders of L— didn’t want him in their town. At first he thought it was outsider syndrome or that he was suffering from a general homesickness for city life. And
there was no doubting that either of those truths ran right alongside the larger reality. But after several months had passed Father was forced to admit that apathy played less a role than disdain.

His dress, his creed, his carriage, his intentions, his tools—all of it seemed a positive annoyance to the south-siders. His mass was regularly attended by precisely three: a lonely bag-lady—no other word for it, she lived in the street and was having no truck with charity—a Turkish woman, who made it perfectly clear that she was being heretical just by attending so he wasn’t to speak to her, and a farmer. Father Nott hadn’t the heart to ask him his story.

It wasn’t that any of the non-attending south-siders ever said anything to him. Except for Gussy, who while she drove him to distraction, Father Nott at least credited with a type of Tourette’s Syndrome honesty. She made his days more difficult, but she didn’t trouble his soul. The rest of them simply pretended not to know what he wanted. Ignored his station. A truly humbling experience to have people ignore your vocation not because they disliked those religious, or the religious cleric in particular, but because they honestly felt you useless.

He was tempted to pray for them and he was tempted not to pray for them. He couldn’t decide which they would dislike more and yes, he did want to know.

The word for how he felt was ineffectual.

Perhaps that was what he should write about—*The Male Nipple: An Australian Priest in the Outback*.

Father Nott put the light out.
Old Charlie

Old Charlie slunk around the embankment, looking down at the site, concentrating less on the steel carcass and more on how well his legs were doing in their attempt to keep him up. Wasn’t like it was the first he’d ever seen; he’d been working on bridges for centuries. They went up, they came down. Depending. He watched his left knee rise, foot forward and down, then the other knee. Other foot. Now he had the hang of it.

This collapse was quick though. Maybe too quick. What additional mistakes had been made by the crew to cause this? Or maybe he needed to look up the history of the land here; maybe there were some extra Aboriginal forces he hadn’t factored in. He tapped the side of his skull to make a mental note.

Only a few bridges fell as the builders removed the scaffolding—solving their own problems with minimal effort. Others, like the Tasman Bridge, took a longer time. A grin creased old Charlie’s face as he wondered whether the correct word would be ‘ruminated’. A bridge ‘ruminating’ before it fell.

He lurched despite himself and then almost overcorrected. Slower. Slower foot up and down. He looked into the chasm at the wreck of the bridge. It looked like a giant praying mantis, legs drawn up in dry death. It looked like a steel cairn left by giants. It looked like ruin. More head-tapping. Was it too soon to be a proper fall? He spat.

The thought distressed him, and, because that’s where the gold was—in distress—he pressed it further. Could this metal mess simply be a problem with the differential calculations, instead of the actual want of a bridge? Man-made mistake instead of the gods’? If so, if that was so with this wreck, then his performance wasn’t required yet. Goodnight ladies, goodnight.

It was possible. It was possible that this was just a bungle. Most bridge forms were a reflection of engineering attempts to marshall the twin systems of force and load into a
recognisable pattern. A bridge cut from the air on the basis of physics. Built from the forces up. Did anyone understand that? There was a dark beauty in it. The invisible shaping the visible. The cart before the horse.

Old Charlie hid behind a tree, prised a hip flask from his coat pocket and tipped his head back to drink. At the same time, he opened up the front of his pants and let what went in, come out. It took a minute. Age creeping up. He shook himself with one hand and capped the flask lid against the tree with the other. Ambidextrous gibbon.

By the time he re-emerged, the only person in sight was the moon. Big see-all. Wreathed by birds swooping at insects. Charlie shook his head as though ridding it of the tides, then began the walk back to the rental house.

It was a long way. He kept his head down and seemed almost to sniff at the ground, so low his back was, so thrust forward his shoulders. His hands jutted out to prevent a fall as his boot caught the edge of the bitumen. Humans beings tarred everywhere like dogs pissing—only dogs had sense enough to make their marks less permanent. Dogs, like other animals, like very few humans, understood that if you did anything permanent to the land there were consequences. Stake your claim, let others know the lie of your land, but leave the dirt, the soil, the red and brown and black guts of it be what it was.

Charlie stopped, steadied himself and spat. Then wiped his mouth along his jacket sleeve, looking around. Destitution behind the brick veneer, behind the weatherboard, behind the concrete and MDF. Look at how they were abusing their relationship to the land. Manipulating it so it would support housing estates. Turning concrete into a coffin for live soil. Growing things out of season. Men dug deep into the earth to house their cars. Erected scrapers that punched the sky to hold their computers. They distressed the ratio of productive land to resting land. It was all short-sighted. Foundations would sink. Grass would force its way up through concrete. Unseasonal produce was merely pesticide in the shape of apples and potatoes.
He dragged his gaze across the warmly-lit windows, across the parked cars with their
ticking, cooling motors, across the shapes that were losing definition in the dark. People
inside these houses woke continuously from their sleep and blamed stress or coffee. They
suffered daily ailments they tried to cure with television, yoga and alcohol. He faltered
onwards. Not that old Charlie had a harsh word to say about alcohol. No, no. He used
alcohol in the same way: to block out the cries. His hands reached up automatically to
cover his ears. He could hear the earth when he remembered: when the day was over and
there were no man-made distractions. His jacket weighed as heavily as a dead man on his
shoulders when he heard the earth.

The land demanded a relationship with the people and the point was not to have to force
the heart of it. If the heart was in tune with wants then everything would be all right. But
if you had to insist or manipulate or superphosphate, then perhaps you should look at why
you were in the relationship in the first place. A bridge, whole span, came down in
Tasmania only a couple of years ago and were any of them learning the lesson? Steel
arms and legs made too mechanically. The only intention behind that bridge was to get
from one side of nowhere to the other.

Charlie raised his arms in an attempt to keep his jacket on. He pretended to be reaching
up to the heavens when really his mind was far below. He had no knowledge of the sky.
His whole life was dedicated to the land. The land and the parasites on it. If people
weren’t working with it then they were parasites on it. Whining mosquitoes. Starved of
nutrients, thin and grasping until—proboscis plugged into flesh—they could suck all they
needed. Then they bloated.

There was nothing noble about human beings. He included himself. Lowering his tired
arms, he stopped. He was as weak, as conniving, as desperate as the worst of them. No
matter how he schooled himself, he lived according to their laws, their strictures, their
excesses. He was ashamed of himself on a daily basis.

The rental house was dead in front of him now.
Charlie pushed open the front door and stopped, caught by surprise at the waiting individual. Not that he locked the door—you couldn’t keep out what ailed the soul. But nonetheless, he hadn’t invited anyone in. He stood stockstill: he hadn’t been seen yet. Shook a finger at it. A silent warning. But the Tarbaby he don’t say nothing. Charlie walked closer, a fist raised, and that’s when he realised it was one of his masks. Propped up on a coat that he’d hung.

So he laughed loud. Dropped his hands to his knees and opened his mouth with the forced gale. Got to laugh to show that it meant nothing. Pity, in some ways, the inanimate hadn’t worked on the bridge. Never did though.

He looked down at all the masks and doll-like artefacts hanging from his open suitcase, blackened by the dim light. Some were properly nailed down—kept them together—others swung loosely by hair or shreds of clothing. They were always changing between the animate and the inanimate and sometimes he caught them. He had to blink to bring them back into mask form. This kind of recognisable puppetry was evil. No doubt about it. But the way Charlie always figured, it was better to be able to see and point at what was evil than to not know where it was.

He propped himself against a wall and used the toes of one boot to stand on the heel of the other. Shucked it off. Then he bent and pulled the first one off. Shoeless he rose suddenly, and laughed as he fell backwards as he’d known he would. His head hit the floorboards and wiped the grin from his mouth and he had to hang on so as not to fall off the floor into somewhere else. He didn’t know where; he’d never let himself go yet.

It took him an hour-long minute to slowly push himself into a sitting position. He could pick out the shapes in the room quite clearly now. The pieces of rental furniture that he couldn’t disguise with his own life. It was just him—that was the problem. He couldn’t find a mate in either world. White women wanted a man who worked and the gins wanted someone who wasn’t going to bring unnecessary aggravation. He had tried telling
a couple of them that it was necessary; that if he didn’t rouse-about with words men
would destroy everything. But they left him alone after that.

They were right to. There was something sickening inside him. A worm. Like in that
poem burrowing about in his rose. Sometimes it caused a terrible stomach-ache and
sometimes, to his great shame, it caused tears. He didn’t seem to have control over them.
They came like the rain wouldn’t. Ah well, at least he knew it. Most sick men had no idea
they were sick.

There was disgust in the air now. Thick disgust and old Charlie couldn’t work out where
it was coming from. His muscles slackened so quickly, let him go so violently, that
Charlie thought he would fall even from off his sitting bones. But his body remembered
what to do and so he just leaned precariously forward. Looked down at his boots, sitting
akimbo a little ways away.

He sat like this for a while—unused marionette—and when the image came to him he
flung his head back to deny it. His head went too far and if he tried to bring it forward he
knew he would retch. He closed his eyes. He forced his eyes open again. Heard a mutter
of disgust. Had to keep concentrating on himself. On his heavy mouth. The house
thumped and he tried to find an explanation, but it was too much and Charlie let his head
fall forward, let his mouth open, let the drink out.

Then everything went black. Inside and out.

It was later, much later that, beckoned by the electronic mutterings of the fridge, old
Charlie pulled himself back into a stand and made his way to the kitchen. He opened the
fridge door and fetched himself a long neck bottle. The small circle of tin lid smacked
expertly against the handle, then skittered across the floorboards. His foot would find that
later.

Leaning his head back, way back, he thrust his tongue into the neck of the bottle to drink.
Thursday 12th February

Moriah

It didn’t hurt as long as she didn’t move her head to the right. They’d stapled her hair to the desk so unevenly—on the right, staples clamped the hair down close to her ear, and on the left, the staples were further back, leaving wriggle room. They’d sat her on the chair and ground her forehead straight down into the desk—perfectly symmetrically placed. And still they fucked up the stapling. Pathetic. If they were going to torment her, better to do it so she couldn’t move her head at all.

The condensation prickled. There were pinpricks of sweat or heated breath all over her face. Her hair didn’t help because it was thick. A ropey thick curtain trapping the air around her face. By the time she got herself out of this she was going to have bright red cheeks.

She eased the desk lid up, which forced her to stand crouched over, then she turned her face to the left, which released the pinch of the closer staples and increased the pull of the further ones. Her breath wasn’t hot against her face now, but her mouth was up against her hair. She used her fingers to snake into the small space of open desk she’d created. Searching. She’d be free in half an hour, she guessed. If they’d done it properly she’d have had to call for help.

Moriah hated things half-way. That’s why she wore fake glasses. If she was going to be the one picked on, may as well fit the image. Her father told her that looking through plain glass would hurt her eyes, but he also thought the glasses were some kind of fashion statement, so she ignored him.

She wished she was tough enough to just wrench her head up. Jerk the staples out. But she had images of bits of scalp coming away, so she continued feeling around in the desk. What for, she wasn’t quite sure. It wasn’t as though she kept a pair of scissors in there.
Pencil case. Geography textbook—she could tell because it was one of the subjects she liked and when she liked a book she dog-eared the picture pages. Her fingers spidered around her collection of stick pins: the ones she kept at school were generally boring—anzac pins with the sun rising, at least she thought it was the sun, and cancer donation pins shaped like ribbons, and a couple of flame pins her father had given her, she didn’t know what they symbolised—they were all good to stick her fingers into whenever she had the urge.

Her neck ached a bit at the forced position and she slowly scraped her head back along the desk to manoeuvre her forehead straight down again. Concentrating too hard on what she was doing meant she didn’t realise until too late that she’d drooled, and her chin dragged through it. Now she had the heat of her breath again, plus the sticky wetness. But she also had a pin in her hand.

She pulled it free of the cavity beneath the desk and sat down on her chair again. That was some relief: her thigh muscles had cramped. She took a minute to decide which staple to go for—chose one that was closest to her right ear—and used her fingertips to ease the pin beneath the staple. Levering the pin end against the desk, she pushed. The pin immediately bent.

‘Fuck.’

Moriah didn’t typically like swearing. It was mostly lazy. But she was hot, she had a headache coming on, and if she didn’t sort herself out in the next ten minutes she would have to deal with the added humiliation of kids coming in for a class. She flicked the stick pin away and tried to tear at the staples with her fingernails. No go.

She smiled at herself in the little hairy room of heat. This was the situation she had always dreamed of: a situation, not of her own making, in fact, a situation specifically put
upon her by others, designed to test her fortitude. She might crumble, or she might prove larger than her tormentors.

Yes, the cretins who bullied her had done other things: painted her textbook pages black—joke was on them, since textbooks were all but useless to her, the words worming across the page—planted a stink-bomb in her locker, and hung signs on her back. So original. To this day she didn’t know what the signs said—some people laughed, a few told her she had the signs there—but she just crumpled the paper up instead of trying to read them. The point was, she hadn’t needed much guts to cope with anything they’d done before. This was different. Stapling her hair, effectively her head, to a desk, was different.

Could she hack it? She smiled again. The real question, the question she was avoiding asking, was whether or not she could be like a saint.

Moriah hated the saints. She had long decided that they weren’t stoic: they were idiots. There was one—she had done some painstaking research, just to assure herself that they were fools—who sat upon a pillar, lived up on that pillar eating, sleeping, and all the rest of it, for something like 50 days. Until he had a sign from the lord to come down. Who knows what the sign was. And one of the St Anthonys had supposedly managed to get a school of fish to stop and listen to his preaching—heads above water. Yeah, right.

There were a whole lot of illnesses and pustilences and tortures inflicted on the saints that seemed to go away soon enough and if there was another thing Moriah hated it was a faker. Girls at school said Moriah was a faker—when she wore a bandage and didn’t have to take PE. She had wound the bandage so tight, her whole foot pulsed and when she finally was excused and she took the bandage off, her foot looked like a great, white, pulsing slug. She wasn’t faking: she hated PE. Another hate.

She fossicked in her desk again—this time keeping her legs dead straight and hunching over more, so as not to put the strain on her front thigh muscles. It still hurt though.
Finally, finally, she found her weapon—a biro. The tip would be strong enough to prise the staples out. Sitting again, she found the staple she wanted and tried to place the tip of the biro beneath it. No luck. The nib was too big: the staple whammed flat into the desk. She had more luck with one of the further staples on the left, but tears came to her eyes when her fingers nimbly informed her that it was the only staple not punched in properly.

The bell rang.

She ran her hand crazy inside the desk. She did have scissors: craft scissors. She wanted to pitch them across the room. The stupid plastic-coated blades were too thick to wedge beneath the staples. Her head hurt. Her legs ached. She sat down again, scissors in hand.

Her father was going to build, rebuild, a bridge. And she was going too. Way away. Way away in the outback. Woop-woop. It didn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter out there. Who was going to see her? No one, that’s who. Besides, it would probably annoy her father, and since that’s the only reason he even noticed her anymore, why not?

She opened the mouth of the scissors and started shearing through the sections of hair pinned to the desk.
Shane

He drew on his cigarette and locked the back door. Time to get out. Shrugging himself into a leather jacket, he washed up and headed off to the Terminus on the north side. It was his favourite after-hours watering hole. Even as he was still coming through the door, running his fingers through his unwashed hair, Shane felt that he was going to get lucky. Sometimes you could just tell.

He mock-saluted a couple of mates near the pool table and took himself straight to the bar. Olivia was working. A tall woman with cropped blond hair and large tits.

‘What’ll it be, stranger?’
‘Bitters, thanks, Liv. Looks like you’re in for a night.’ Shane leaned against the bar, surveying a reasonably full room for mid-week.

‘No. None of the hard-core drinkers. You’re all working stiffs.’
He hesitated, then pushed away. He’d tried chatting up Olivia before and she hadn’t given an inch. Icy professionalism or a bull dyke, he guessed—unwilling to really let it cross his mind that she just might not be interested in him. Either way there was no sense ploughing barren fields.

He swung over to nudge an elbow during a crucial shot. Watched as the white drove straight for the pocket.

‘You’re a fucking arse, Mannis. You owe me a beer for that.’ The irate was a rough-looking lad with dead straight brown hair and almost no eyebrows. His opponent laughed and hi-fived Shane, who raised his shoulder and eyebrow in a supposed imitation of innocence. Then he dropped the act and sat, drawing on his beer.

‘Heard you’re not worth your pay-packet, mate: that bridge you were working’s already come down.’

Shane whipped around to face his accuser, but there was laughter and he forced a grin to his own mouth. Every damned time someone mentioned the bridge his back went up. Time to let it go.
‘What’d you do, Mannis? Build it with mud?’ This from Trevor, Trev, for short.
‘No, we thought we’d try your brains, dickhead.’ But it wasn’t a witty comeback and they looked at him expectantly. ‘I dunno, do I? They’re getting inspectors in.’

He’d been alarmed to hear that at first. But he hadn’t done anything wrong. Just laid a hunk of carved wood on it. And now that wood was burned up. No proof of anything. They could bring the inspectors if they liked.

‘Inspectors—that’s serious, mate.’

‘Nah. Paper-pushers.’

‘From where? North side or bloody Coober Pedy?’
‘Coober Pedy. Sending in government officials.’

Shane pretended to go mincing about. Stood up and used his shirtsleeve to wipe off a barstool. Sat back on his stool pretty and posh, and used a straw in his beer. The small group exploded with laughter.

The talk shifted and while his mates had their eyes on the green felt, Shane had his on a piece of red at the bar. He hitched up his jeans and went to try it on.

‘We know each other, right?’

‘Not tonight.’ She didn’t even look at him. Just took her drink from Olivia and left.

Trev gave him the thumbs up and Shane returned a two-fingered salute. Then Trev pointed further up the bar to another woman Olivia was serving. She was blonde, which almost made Shane head back in the opposite direction, but then she turned so he could see her profile and it was so instantly different to the one etched in his heart that he roused himself and went to lean on the bar beside her.

‘We know each other, right?’

Olivia rolled her eyes. ‘Watch this one,’ she said and put the woman’s drink down. It was some sort of girly drink: sickly green colour and straw to match. ‘Six fifty.’

‘Ouch,’ said Shane.

‘Too expensive for you?’ The nameless woman waited for her change.

‘Maybe,’ Shane played along. ‘I’m game to find out.’
‘I’m here with friends,’ she said.
‘Great, and I know some guys are into that, but I’m strictly a one-woman-at-a-time kind of man myself.’
She laughed and Shane felt the flow of blood. Knew he’d been right at the door.

Kelly was her name. She got excited as soon as he told her his name was Shane and she squinted at him a minute, then launched into a recollection of them meeting at a barbeque a year or so back. It sparked nothing for Shane, and Kelly couldn’t provide details beyond her insistence that he’d been the only one brave enough to stick his head underneath the homemade barbeque for long enough to light the gas. Shane shook his head admiringly and tried to bring the action to mind. He half-heartedly suggested that it was idiocy not bravery, but the possibility of them having met before suggested a kind of safety that didn’t usually accompany a bar pick-up and that pleased them both.

Shane ambled over to meet her friends—making sure to be polite and chatty and trying to make them laugh—while keeping his eye on Kelly. She had a cute way of flicking her hair back over her shoulder, even though it was barely shoulder length. And she shot him a couple of appreciative glances and seemed—unbelievably—to be a little concerned about whether he thought her friends were nice.

He excused himself for a moment when the conversation turned around to Latin American singers and walked back over to the pool table to pick up his jacket and receive the necessary accolades.

‘So much for the game, you dick.’
Shane shrugged. ‘I could use a couple of good wingmen.’
Several heads craned to check out the women.
‘One of them’s all right,’ offered Shane.
‘Piss off, you prick.’
Shane smiled and bowed his head a little. ‘Learn from the master.’ Then he turned and walked back to join the women—leaving behind four mates pleased he’d managed to hit paydirt.
Shane eased back onto the bar stool next to Kelly and began inserting mention of his house—which by the way wasn’t far from here—into the talk. It may have been that, or it may have been the rapid imbibing, or the laughing, or something as random as an accidental touch on her back, that meant that they, Kelly and Shane, found themselves in his bedroom, two hours later—disrobing. Or rather, he was taking her clothes off as she lay giggling on the bed.

He’d cranked up the stereo because it drowned out a host of sounds that they weren’t intimate enough to cope with yet, and besides she’d mentioned that she liked The Boss, so that was a no-brainer. At the moment though he was wishing he was a mite soberer. She was wriggling seductively underneath his ministrations—but that was making it difficult to get anywhere. Finally he threw himself on the bed beside her and half-yelled—although against the strains of *Born in the USA* it was a whisper—that she take her own jeans off. She pouted a little too much for her face and then suddenly acquiesced and Shane hopped out of his clothes in a second. Warm flesh.

Kelly then yelled that she was getting goosebumps being on top of the covers, so he ripped them out from beneath her. Sent her sprawling across the bed, laughing hysterically. He wore the doona as a giant cape and laid himself directly on top of her. Stopping up her mouth with his. She returned the kisses and wrapped her legs and arms around him—which was lovely but left him completely unable to move. He pulled himself upwards to turn down the music and she clung to him a moment before letting go and falling back onto the bed. Now that his limbs were free he took one of her arms and pinned it above her head.

‘Well, hello.’

He kissed down the side of her neck to her left breast. She had a giggling fit and nearly gave him a black eye in her elbowed attempt to move him away. So Shane lay down on his back beside her and waited. It didn’t take long.
‘What’s the matter, baby?’ Kelly clambered up onto her side and stared down at him. A flop of hair kept falling into her eyes even as she repeatedly pushed it away and it made Shane smile.

‘Find out for yourself.’

She cocked an eyebrow at him and bent to kiss his chest. Her tongue was wet and warm and her breath came hot. He closed his eyes, anticipating her hand on his cock; she could hardly keep hold of it he was so ready.

He flung her back over and laid himself on top of her—sending his fingers down to find out whether she was at all ready for him.

Then she said, ‘Shane Blackstone, I want you inside me.’

He almost managed to ignore it. He was almost too far gone to let something as little as an incorrect last name get in the way. But even if his mind worked furiously to pretend, his body immediately packed it in.

Kelly held his limpness in her hand. ‘What’s the matter, baby?’

He scowled and rolled off her.

‘It doesn’t matter. We can wait.’

‘My last name’s not Blackstone.’

She narrowed her eyes, squinting to understand. Or squinting, he now saw, to try and see him a little better.

‘It’s Mannis. Shane Mannis.’

Kelly giggled and put a hand to her mouth, then with some dim semblance of how that must appear, dropped her hand and tried to shrug. But it didn’t work because her next words were: ‘You’re that guy whose wife—?’

Shane closed his eyes. ‘Jesus fucking Christ.’

‘Sorry. Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.’ She reached out to put a hand, a cold hand, on the flat of his stomach. ‘I just mean that I do know you, that’s all. I just got confused.’ When he didn’t reply she said, ‘Well, what’s my last name, smarty?’

‘Piccoli.’
She lay down beside him, wrapping a leg and arm across his body.
‘Stop staring at me,’ he said.
‘Do you want me to go?’
‘No.’
‘Well, are we going to do anything?’
He ignored her.

She started to withdraw her leg, but he grabbed it, so she lifted her arm—and right out of the blue—began to stroke his forehead. And for some unknown reason that completely did him in. Tears in his eyes. Out of nowhere. To hide his embarrassment he clung to her. His wiry frame wrapped around her tiny body. That just made it worse. He buried his face in her armpit, clutching her waist and hips as the few hot tears came. She let him. She rested her chin on top of his head and ran her fingers through his hair. Telling him it was all right.

But it wasn’t all right. He felt spent and he was gripping breasts and hips and they did nothing for him. He had thought he was ready for something different and instead the evening had ended with him blubbery. Another fucking failure. He gritted his teeth and pushed his head into her.
‘Hey,’ she said. Surprised.

But it felt good and he kept pushing. Grinding his forehead into her chest now. She scrambled to get away from him, sit up, and he held her a moment, pinned her down with his head, his hands. Enjoying the hurting. Then he let her go.

She sat up properly. Got out from under the doona.
‘Oh, shit, Kelly.’
She marched over to the door and switched on the light and they both blinked against the sudden onslaught. She was soon picking up her clothes and trying to make them fit over her body.
‘I’m sorry, all right?’
She wasn’t responding and he got out of bed. Followed her from item to item, trying to touch her, but she kept ducking and weaving. Finally he just sat on the bed and watched her. Bruce was still going. Faint.

To push her feet into her shoes, Kelly sat on the edge of the bed. Shane didn’t try to touch her even though she was right beside him.

‘Please don’t go.’
‘Whatever.’
‘Kelly.’

She finished tying up her laces and turned to look at him. Her mascara had run, but it only made her brown eyes more prominent, and bed hair suited her.

‘It’s all right,’ she said.

He hung his head.
‘It’s not your fault.’

He screwed his face up, willing her to shut up. Shut up. Shut the fuck up.

She patted his arm. Which made him teary all over again and now he really didn’t want her to go because when she left there was only going to be him. Him and the bed. The dead wife’s bed. He gripped Kelly’s legs as she stood.

‘I can cook a mean breakfast. Eggs, bacon, tomatoes.’

She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled her legs from his embrace. But every time she made to walk, he grabbed her again.

‘Please don’t go.’
‘I have to get up early.’
‘I’m such a dickhead.’

She didn’t say anything, which was awful. At least she could have denied it. Then even Springsteen stopped. And then she stepped away from him, walked out of the room with her handbag over her shoulder.

He followed her to the front door, trying desperately to think of something to say to salvage things.

‘Bye,’ she said.
‘See you at the pub, hey?’
‘Yeah.’
And then she was out the front gate and in her car and down the street and gone.
He stayed leaning on the door frame. Watching the moths flicker under the street light.
Friday 13th February

Janice

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Can’t do this.
Can’t.
Fuck.
Oh, God.
Oh, God.
Oh fuck.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

‘You’re doing really well.’
‘I’m not.’
‘You are.’
Shut up.
‘Just keep going.’
‘Don’t want to.’
‘You’re doing really well.’

Oh, no, no, no.
Fuck.
Oh, fuck.
Oh, no. Oh, god. Fuck.
Make it stop. Oh god.
God, god, god, no.
No.
No.
Oh, god.

‘They want to check your dilation.’
‘No.’
‘They’re going to.’
‘No.’
‘She doesn’t want you to. Just breathe, babe. Try to relax as much as you can.’

Oh, no. No, not this.
No, god, no, god, no.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
God, no, please, no.
Oh god. Oh god.
No. No.
No.
No.

‘Get up on the bed.’
‘No.’
‘Janice, they have to check you. They think you’re ready to push. They have to check and see whether you’re dilated enough.’
‘I’m not pushing.’
‘She says she’s not pushing.’

Oh, god. Oh, god. Please no.
No, not. No.
Fuck.
No. No. No.
No. No. No.
Please.
No.

‘Come on. I’ll help you onto the bed.’
‘No.’
‘That’s it. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.’
‘No.’
‘It’s all right.’
‘Don’t!’
‘You’re ten centimetres, Jannie—you can push.’
‘I want an epidural.’
‘What?’
‘Now. I want it now.’

Now. Please. I can’t.
I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.
No. God, no.
God. Oh, god. God.
No. No. I can’t. No.
Now.

‘Get it now.’
‘I already asked and you’re too far along.’
‘No, I’m not.’
‘You’re doing really well. Just keep going. Push again.’
‘I want an epidural. I mean it. I mean it, Layla. Please. Get it.’
‘She really wants it.’
‘Please.’
‘Please.’
Please. Please. Please.
Just please. Oh, god, please. Please.
Please. I can’t. I can’t. No.
Please. Please. Please.
No, please. No. No.
God, no. Please. No.
Please. No.

‘Please.’
‘No, babe. They can’t. You’re right here. Baby’s right here. Just keep pushing.’
‘No.’
‘Yes, it’s all over then. Just push it out.’


‘Janice—I can see the head, the hair.’

‘FUCKING GOD. NO. PLEASE. NO. FUCK, FUCK, FUCK. STOP. NO. NO. NO. JUST STOP. PLEASE. PLEASE GOD STOP. PLEASE. PLEASE. PLEASE.’

‘Oh. Oh Janice, you’re nearly there—head’s out. HEAD’S OUT!’

‘OH OH OH OH NONONO GOD FUCKING STOP PLEASE GOD STOP NONONO OH I CAN’T I CANT LORD I CAN’T I CAN’T I CANT NO STOP’

‘It’s a girl, Jannie! A little girl. Dark hair like what’s his name.’
Saturday 14th February

Will

The single track of railway stretched ahead and behind without a curve: no chance anymore to see the hot, shining rails ribboning into infinity. The view, as it had done for hours, constituted a dome of washed blue sky looming impossibly high over the scrub of ghostly green saltbush. Dull colours simply coping with heat. The fading landscape was relieved only by the red soil—a rich ochre at first startling, now commonplace. Will couldn’t smell or feel it yet, but he watched the dust rise in small eddies as the train rushed along the track and knew he would become intimate with it.

Twenty-three hours into the train trip and he had become adept at spotting the few anomalies in the largely unchanging landscape: the spine-like leaves and yellow fluffy balls of the dwarf acacia jutting inches from the ground, the eagles that the crackling headphones had droned about, and even a piece of paper or a faded cigarette packet blown miles away from where it was carelessly dropped.

Coming out of this reverie, he again picked up the heavy documentation resting on his knee. West Gate Bridge Royal Commission. Most of the knowledge within did not interest him. Jim was correct in saying that the L— bridge design was unoriginal: it was also completely unlike the West Gate Bridge. Will only studied the document for a better understanding of the way steel behaved under stress.

The L— bridge was a beam design which meant that forces ran in a straightforward way, axially along each bar. Choice of material had been straightforward: 50-ksi, low-carbon high performance steel—chosen for strength and weldability—within prefabricated concrete. Strong and resilient. Steel was easy to improve, which made its quality controllable and its behaviour amenable to simple analysis. Steel also had a frank linear strain behaviour. Overstressed, it yielded, but kept right on working; just shedding load...
into other components. Its structural forgiveness was very high. Made it very attractive for bridge-building.

The government wanted function, not expression. They weren’t ruling out any applied forms, but they weren’t paying for them either. The L— bridge was a workhorse. Will already imagined that the flaw in the previous bridge had to do with the handling of the raw materials in the particular climate that was the Australian outback. His job was going to be convincing the government that it needn’t react hysterically to the collapse by insisting on cross-bracing, when he could improve the ductility of the steel piers by using inner cruciform plates.

Getting it right would take an encyclopedic knowledge of steel and plain engineering precision. Running water, Jupiter’s pull on its moon Ion, or the strains of an object under load could all be mapped by differential calculation. Show how a system, a rate of change, would behave under certain circumstances and predict, ergo. But the end result was something other than mere building.

Some bridges lent grandeur, others longevity. At the very least a bridge offered a type of dignity and gravitas: men were here. The land, the weather, nature itself had been forced to conform to man’s needs. It could not be any different for L—. Just the thought of what it would mean to create an object that would last hundreds, even thousands of years, filled Will with purpose.

He allowed himself a clenched fist. A triumphant fist. Then he ran his fingers through the unruly brown carpet of his hair, excited again. He could feel his blood coursing. The stirring of an erection. He didn’t look down at himself, not wanting to encourage by observation, but there was no escaping his sudden sense of aliveness. A lifetime of work and reputation on the line and the old man stood to attention. His face flushed too—half embarrassment, half pleasure. So long. Too long. He turned his whole body towards the window, his arm bracing him as he leaned towards the rushing infinity of view. He waited, counting down the seconds until the blood began disgorging.
When he was satisfied he had himself under control, he turned away from the window and spoke.

‘That way,’ he pointed north, ‘the Nullarbor is unexplored. They estimate 100,000 square kilometres of plain.’

His daughter didn’t respond at first. She was refitting plugs into her ears and didn’t like his facts, he’d forgotten. He looked insistently at her. At her self-imposed haircut: some of it dangling around her face, some of it so short as to stick up. It was another railing against the world, much like the fake glasses.

She took up almost as much of her seat as he did: tall girl. Not fat, but chubby. Puppy fat. He knew she was enjoying this—out of school at the start of the year. She was a truant. He’d had more phone calls about it than he knew what to do with: but as he’d said to her teachers—at each of the schools—if she wasn’t coming home that was his problem, but her not coming to school was their problem.

‘You said Alice Springs was that way.’

He shifted forward eagerly at her statement. ‘It is. But to the west of Alice Springs, no one knows. Could be anything.’

‘Not pirates,’ she said.
‘No, but—.’
‘Not sky scrapers.’
‘Obviously not. Okay, not anything, Moriah. But something. Put it that way: there could be something there.’

She sniffed and resumed fitting her earplugs. He sat back again. Shoved the heavy report into his bag.

So much he wanted to tell her, tell someone, about this journey. Limestone. The Nullarbor Plain was the largest single piece of limestone on the earth. And men had buried themselves in the sand to escape the heat. There were cave-owls in the various nooks and crannies beneath the limestone—because there were very few trees: *null abor.*
And the whole thing was once under the sea. But it wasn’t only the environment he wanted to talk about: there was something strange about a bridge designed to span a chasm between two halves of a town, and yet never see water run underneath.

He had read up about the area: the mining boom, the lack of water for keeping down the dust during the mining process, the sudden housing problems. None of that interested him. It was the inferiority complex the town suffered in being located only an hour or so away from the famous and thriving Coober Pedy that intrigued him. He harboured a belief that the bridge would help the township, and he was astute enough to see that hoping it would help the township was merely a way of disguising the ways in which he imagined it was going to help him. A construction company that built bridges had work cut out forever.

Moriah didn’t seem able to perceive any of what was going on for him. Her only questions had been along the lines of electricity, the internet and desert cults. Her excitement purely a result of the freedom she thought this trip would entail. Not that leaving her behind was an option. But there was something about the way she had spread her few belongings out in the cabin, something about her blithe ordering of the most expensive meal on offer last night, that irked him.

He’d wanted them to take two upright seats, but was advised against it. He could do it, but his secretary had insisted that Moriah wouldn’t manage over 24 hours of a single seat, so they were booked into a Red Kangaroo sleepers cabin. As far as he could tell the main advantage to booking a class even higher—something inanely titled Gold Kangaroo—was a lot of jetsam: certificates, stick pins and complimentary toilet bags. Not that anything was complimentary: he would have paid an extra $500 for the minor privileges. And Moriah didn’t care about things like that. Which was why he couldn’t say anything about the $40 steak she ordered: she didn’t behave as though she felt entitled and she didn’t order it to annoy him and that was the problem; he didn’t know why she did it. He didn’t know why daughter did anything she did anymore.
He watched as she painstakingly contrived to shift the angle of her body so that even her peripheral vision wouldn’t detect his movement. Her ears clogged with digital music. And she had her eyes glued to that book on saints. He’d flicked through it—just to make sure. Of something. He didn’t know what. She knew religion disturbed him, which was precisely why she was into it. He tried to be nonchalant, but she hated reading at the best of times, so it was difficult to see how to otherwise interpret her insistence. Did she actually believe in a god? It had never occurred to him to ask.

Reaching across, he pulled out one of her earplugs.

‘Are you ready?’

She swept her hands wide. An adolescent gesture that he knew indicated that she thought he was blind. Her case was packed. Her hat lay in her lap. What more could he want, for goodness sakes. But he didn’t mean it literally, and even as he tried to find words, the train started to drop its speed. She quickly stood to press her face against the glass, searching for a station, or for something resembling a station.

‘They’re just letting us down.’

She looked back at him uncomprehendingly, pulled out her earplugs.

‘We’re going to walk a mile or two before we get picked up.’

‘Yeah right, dad. That’s illegal—you can’t just drop people off a train.’

He lifted their suitcases down from the rack, pleased at their reasonable weight. He had stressed to Moriah that she should pack lightly.

‘Dad?’

He didn’t reply. Just hunted around his seat for any bits of rubbish to stuff in the tiny plastic bag meant to accommodate such need.

‘Dad, you’re in a suit.’

‘I have an impression to make.’

‘You don’t even know which way to go. We’ll get lost. And no one will miss us. We’ll die.’ Her voice was becoming shrill with panic.

Without intending to, he smiled at her. ‘I doubt it.’

The train had finally come to a complete halt and a knock at their compartment door now had his daughter close to tears.
‘Just coming,’ Will yelled. He leaned over to his daughter, ‘I know what I’m doing.’

Off the train, standing in the blazing heat of a setting desert sun, he smiled at the picture the two of them made: a middle-aged man in a suit, and his equally tall daughter in jeans and t-shirt, both pulling suitcases along in the thick red dirt. Walking north.
Charlie

He was sitting on the toilet. Likely to be a while. He knew. He knew. He didn’t water his body. But this was often the best place to simply give in to the demands. His brain was always clammering for more time and this was the place. Yes, sir. Charlie had his feet up on some blocks in front of him: best way to shit—changed the ‘s’ pipe into a straight line. Or was that what raising the legs did for women in childbirth? All his knowledge getting gabbled.

That’s why he’d been looked over. Faithful service for fifty odd years, then a couple of slips—nothing significant: a couple of enquiries into accidents—and suddenly the call goes to somebody else. This was how the elderly felt and he wasn’t old. Nearing sixty. Nearing. Not even there yet and most guessed him to be around fifty. He had a strong barrel chest only just starting to sink all pigeon-like, and his legs were as veiny and tight as they had since his early thirties.

In the city his mistakes might come home to roost. OHS regulations; badges of authorisation; walkie-talkies to speed communication: he couldn’t just come and go. But out here there were so many blow-ins he’d barely raise an eyebrow. Funny how a smaller population meant he’d be better camouflaged.

But it was true that he couldn’t do it all himself anymore. That much was true. And that hurt. A man’s pride was his downfall. Couldn’t help wanting the body to keep up, to shed its dereliction like a snake shedding skin. Instead it pissed its own strength away. And it couldn’t even do that without stopping and starting anymore.

Still, brains would out over brawn ninety-nine percent of the time. First thing he’d done after arriving was get to what functioned as a hospital out here. Really just a combination doctor’s surgery and recuperative rooms. He learnt quick smart that for anything serious, the south-siders trekked over to the north side. So, no easy access. On the other hand, he
guessed there were some paperwork nightmares with that system, and people might just slip through the cracks. It would just take a little engineering.

There were no old folks’ homes though: people went elsewhere to retire, to rest, to die. Septugenarians liked moist heat and there was none of that on offer without the sea. Climate here too harsh to while away time in: can’t grow grass, then no lawn bowls. The lack of oldies struck off a lot of options. Then again, there were easier pickings. Old folk liked to fight: too stubborn to accept what was coming. He shifted a little on the toilet seat. No sense fighting.

He’d heard there was one just born, of course. Felt it first though. Felt it in his gut. It was a small bridge, no need to get carried away then. Trick was to only use what you needed—nature abhorred a vacuum apparently.

For the moment he wasn’t worried about the orchestration. Don’t start trying to jump through hoops until you can see them properly. That was the problem with training someone up: they would always be wanting to get to it. Whole damned world was getting to be that way. Well, getting to it had failed, and now they really had to line those hoops up. Do some testing. Only thing old Charlie could think of. No point having the bridge come down again. Best to lay things out and find out what it demanded.

Still, even before he could get to the hoops, he had to get to the upstart. Find out how his mind was hanging: can’t put together an effigy and then just walk away because the bridge fell. Some part of him had to be churning away. Now it might be that this young fellow’s mind would just keep going until it made itself stiff—like cement. Or it might be that this particular mind put the knowledge in a suitcase out the back, letting it fester and mould, until coming across it again all surprised.

His feet were beginning to ache sitting propped up like Jacky. He eased them down. Leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, hands holding each other. Looked like he was listening hard to whatever the doorframe had to say. He looked down the white hallway.
White signalled brand new. Paint thinner still perfuming the rooms. Old Charlie preferred a darker colour, but beggars can’t be choosers.

He was a young buck himself when he’d been introduced. Barely fifteen. That miraculous age when the body is still revving up to peak and what the mind doesn’t know really doesn’t matter. Hormonal soup. He’d been plucked from ignorance and shown the way the world worked: who owed what and why. There was no nice way to receive knowledge; Adam and Eve sure found that out. Not that old Charlie would have said he’d been kicked from paradise, but he accepted the snake in the drink around about that time. Then set to working out the see-saw of forces: his own versus the universe’s. Course, after a while he came to see that they could marry each other like top and bottom teeth: effective force was created by bringing the two together.

He’d lit out for the territories then. Left the blackfellas camp and gone and got himself an engineering degree. Hardest thing he’d ever had to do—stick to the rules of the every day. Write this down here. Rote learn these equations. Only fun he had was with the experimentation: mocking up trials to show how water behaved in areas of heavy salination; how two metals created an electric current; and, of course, how to keep a bridge standing according to mechanical theory.

Long way behind him now. It all lay in front of someone else. Perhaps he could enjoy role of teacher for a while. Get an acolyte going. A student. An amateur. He hung his head, watching the blood pool in his hands. He wasn’t an amateur anymore. Not that he didn’t do it for love—he did, he did—but he depended too much on the money. For the booze. And just thinking about it, he stood, and, leaving his pants down around his ankles, set off down the hallway for a drink. He could always come back.
Sunday 15th February

Gussy

Completely different in her day, not that she’d say anything to Janice, but all this sterilisation and nurses fussing and all the rest of it—you’d think someone was dying. Not that Gussy had ever subjected herself to the torment of childbearing, but she’d been around and seen a thing or two and honestly, anyone would think it had never been done before with the way they carried on nowadays.

Mind you, Janice looked completely washed out, pale as pastry and word was she had stitches up the whazoo, poor thing. All of which was why Gussy had come to give her some good news. Babies were supposed to be good news, but Janice hadn’t so much as glanced at her child in the whole half hour that Gussy had been sitting here, and frankly, Gussy just wasn’t the kind to coo over newborns with funny shaped heads and waxy, old man faces. The little tyke was keeping nice and quiet, so better to let it be.

Not that Janice was talking to her. Janice hadn’t responded to anything in the half hour Gussy had been there. Hadn’t touched her sandwich—devilled ham and eggs—not the ripening fruit basket, very expensive out here, and not the prune juice that Gussy noticed had been specially delivered. Obviously some problems below.

‘So I have some news for you, love.’ She petted Janice’s hand.

No response.

‘You have a neighbour. A new neighbour.’

The young woman’s eyes turned to meet her own.

‘I thought you might be pleased. It’s a man.’ She watched as Janice tried to smile. It didn’t look like a smile really. More a friendly grimace. ‘Are you all right?’

Janice’s eyes welled up.

‘Dear me. Do you want me to ring for a nurse?’

A small shake of head.
‘Are you in pain?’ Another shake.
‘Just exhausted, I imagine. Still, once you get her home—.’

Janice finally looked over towards the infant crib. Then back at Gussy.
‘Probably seems like a huge responsibility.’
Janice’s eyes seemed to grow larger, darker.
‘The man who has moved in—not that anyone has spoken to him much yet, and you know they walked in from the train? Not all the way of course, but a substantial distance, wants his head read, fancy doing that to his daughter—anyway, that’s what I was getting to: he has a daughter. So he’ll be able to suggest all kinds of things to you. You want to let him know that you’d like some advice. Men love giving advice.’

Janice had sunk back into her pillows. Head turned off to the side again. Gussy wracked her brains as to how to resurrect her again.
‘He’s the foreman. For the bridge.’
Nothing.
‘He’s quite good looking.’

Janice’s head turned again and Gussy couldn’t help but smile.
‘There you are. I was beginning to think we’d lost you for good. He’s got wavy hair. Very thick. Doesn’t look like he’ll be losing it either, which, in my day, was as good as saying you’d have your own teeth for life.’ She paused. ‘I don’t know how things are back home, but I’ll bet my bottom dollar that if he’s bringing his teenage daughter all the way out to the sticks, there isn’t much going on. If you get my meaning. Not that I’m suggesting anything too much. You have your hands full and he’ll be pushing you-know-what up hill to get the town on his side after blowing in here to take over the bridge project. But that daughter of his, well she might need a friend, and you might need a babysitter.’

Now she had her. Janice was at last actually paying attention. Gussy smiled broadly, thoroughly impressed with herself.

‘So what are you calling her?’
Janice cleared her throat before speaking. ‘Deidre.’

‘Well, I’ve heard of that before. So nice you’ve chosen a name that isn’t some play on spelling or something modern and ugly.’

Janice dropped her gaze and lightly fingered the sheet edging. ‘It means “sorrowful”.’

‘Does it?’ Gussy frowned. ‘Well. A family name, is it?’

No reply.

‘It’s all fancy nonsense assigning meaning to names anyway.’

The wan figure made no further comment on the matter.

Gussy took up her knitting again. A throw, she was working on. In sensible browns and creams. She would send it to her niece in Melbourne—got cold enough there. She didn’t knit as a hobby. Wasn’t old enough for that sort of nonsense. No, she knitted to keep her hands busy so that her mind was free to wander as it would. People made all kinds of mistakes thinking that keeping the body occupied meant the mind would quiet. It sharpened, was what it did.

‘Have you heard from him then? From Sydney?’

‘No.’

‘Hasn’t been time really, has there?’

She pretended to be examining a dropped stitch, but kept an eye on Janice all the while. If it were possible the woman had paled. Everybody knew about Janice’s situation. What Greg was doing in L— in the first place was the issue. He had no business being here and attaching someone to himself. He never had been a small town fellow. His nose was too big.

‘He won’t contact me either way.’

‘Probably best. Stir up trouble if he did.’

Tears again.

‘She’s a quiet little thing, isn’t she?’
They both looked over to the crib. Gussy watching as Janice tried to smile. Love wasn’t going to come easy here. Deidre was going to have to work hard. Still there were plenty of young ones worse off—only had to turn on the television to see that.

‘Your mum coming out here?’

‘She doesn’t like the heat.’

‘That’s right. Why she left, wasn’t it? I can understand that. I end most nights with my feet in the bath. It’s even harder to endure with thighs like mine.’

‘Layla will take me home.’

‘You mean “Take us home”.’

Janice didn’t respond.

‘Us. You said “me”. You’ll have to get used to saying “us” now.’

Janice shifted in the bed. Stitches hurting probably.
Father Nott

Father Nott stood at the altar, finishing up the Sunday service with the parish news. It had been a poor turn out. As anticipated. He drew a deep breath and read through the list of community news items printed on the back of his typed newsletter. The parish couldn’t afford to make copies of it, so he pinned it up to the corkboard after the service. But his parishioners never read it: they gave him the news to type out in the first place. It was all a bit silly.

When he finally stepped out from behind the pulpit, he noticed what should have been seen earlier, what would have occasioned an entirely different train of thought during the service: there was a new parishioner, a girl, in the very back pew. And she was kneeling—must have been kneeling the whole time—in fact, she actually appeared to be praying.

He forced himself to smile and make the necessary remarks to the two familiar faces in attendance today, enjoying restraining himself as the weathered skin pressed itself into his hands and the sun-bleached eyes gazed all around the small church without once alighting on his face. And it was all the more pleasurable because she was waiting for him.

‘Welcome.’ He held out his hand, which she twisted gently away from as though trying not to offend. He softened his voice. ‘I’m Father Nott, and you are?’

‘Moriah.’

‘And how would you like a cup of tea, Moriah?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Don’t you drink tea?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, let’s find out.’
He turned and lead the way back towards the altar, but turned off to the right side into the vestry. He shrugged off his outer garments, then turned on the electric kettle. Moriah stood in the doorway, evidently unsure about entering the small room. She had strangled her hair with some kind of scarf and bits of curly black fringe were working their way loose. It softened the glasses.

He popped a couple of shortbreads on her saucer and whistled as he waited to pour out their tea. ‘Now how do you have it? With milk and sugar?’

She shrugged again and he decided for her.

‘Come in, I won’t bite.’

‘Where’s your confessional?’

‘My what? My confessional? Well, I don’t have one out here. Are you wanting to confess?’

She blinked wordlessly at him and he had a sudden sinking sensation in his chest: perhaps she was half-witted.

‘What are you reading there?’

From underneath her armpit she pulled out a book on saints. Held the cover up for him to read. He fumbled around in his pant pockets and then, from his breastpocket, pulled out his glasses—yellow glass—and glanced at the title.

‘Well, I’ve never read it myself, but I’ve heard it’s good.’ He looked over the book jacket at her and Moriah shrank away. He took the yellow glasses off and winked.

‘Look a bit like an alien species, don’t I?’

She didn’t answer.

‘I can’t read without them.’

‘I can’t read.’

Her face and neck crimsoned. Possibly hadn’t meant to admit it. But his heart sunk further at the admission. She couldn’t read. At her age. Whatever that was.
Still, he was good at putting on a neutral face and he sipped at his tea, pronouncing it too hot. Moriah put the book on the table and took a biscuit. He watched as it crumbled in her fingers and she quickly shoved it into her mouth.

‘Funny thing to carry a book when you can’t read.’

‘I can read a little bit.’

‘Why the saints then? Why read about the saints?’

She shrugged. ‘The stories are weird. Funny.’

‘Are you a religious?’

She stared at him a long moment. ‘I don’t know.’

Father Nott put a hand over his mouth and stared back at her. Maybe she was a religious. Maybe she was going to be interesting after all. He watched her pick up her cup of tea and sniff it.

‘Haven’t you had tea before.’

‘No.’

‘Why ever not? Have you been living on the moon?’

‘Dad only drinks coffee.’

‘What poverty!’

She bristled. Tread gently around dad then.

‘Try it.’

‘No, thanks.’

He’d offended her.

He picked up his own cup and sucked up a large mouthful, burning his tongue.

‘I can never wait. No patience my dear mother always said and she was right. Are you a solitary soul then, Moriah? Like me. Have you got any brothers or sisters?’

‘No.’

‘That’s it then. You’re just like me.’ He grinned at her. And when she didn’t smile back he fussed about with the teaspoon, realising with some surprise that he was trying to think of something to say.

‘Should I ask about your favourite saint then?’
‘I don’t like any of them.’
‘Not a one? And why is that?’
‘Fakers.’
He frowned.
‘You asked,’ she said.
‘I did indeed.’ He was pleased to concede. Pleased she had enough nous to make him. ‘But I hardly think you can fake martyrdom.’
She squirmed in her chair. Nodded.
One all.

He pursed his lips. ‘Now I’m going to ask you another question, Moriah, and it goes something like this—how does a girl who knows the meaning of the word “martyrdom” not know how to read?’
She stiffened, although her eyes didn’t leave his.
‘Didn’t anyone teach you how?’
She rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve had a tutor.’
Father’s eyebrows rose. ‘Oh well then, I’m barking up the wrong tree. You should keep at it though. How on earth are you going to know about the Word of the Lord, if you can’t read the scriptures?’
She looked at him, this time warily. And he couldn’t determine whether she was defensive about not reading or ignorant of what he meant by the Word of the Lord. Either way, perhaps he’d had enough of the religious.
He held up both his hands. ‘I’m a nosy parker. Another fault of mine. I’m riddled with them. So you say to me “Father Nott, mind your own business”.’
He was pleased to see the corners of her mouth turn up.

He sipped at his tea and finding it the right temperature drained the lot in one go.
‘Well, Moriah, I’ve got a parish to see to.’
She immediately stood.
He smiled at her. ‘You’re a tall girl, aren’t you? Like me. I bet you’ll have problems finding a good bed when you get older. How old are you?’ Before she could
answer, he pointed his index finger at her. ‘Now don’t you answer that. Don’t you answer any of my questions unless you want to.’

‘It’s okay. I’m thirteen.’

‘Good. Now I’m going to think on the matter of you reading and you can think on it and maybe next time we meet one of us will have come up with something. All right?’

Moriah collected her book as he stood.

‘Goodbye then.’ He offered her a hand to shake and this time she took it.
‘Well, I’ve got things in my sights.’
‘That’s all I need to know.’
‘I still haven’t met your interloper—that’s next on my list.’
‘Okay. Well—.’
‘I won’t bite.’
‘I’m not worried about that.’
‘You’re worried about the abdication.’
‘Sorry?’
‘You’re worried about whether he’ll roll over.’
‘Something like that.’
‘Or whether I won’t.’
‘I didn’t say that.’
‘Maybe there can be two kings.’

Silence.
‘I’m not buying it either.’
‘I’m sure you’ll work it out.’
‘Are you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Confident in me again. Wind blows mighty fickle where you come from.’
‘Was there anything else?’
‘No.’
‘Good. Okay. Well—.’
‘Want me off the line, do you?’
‘Jesus. You want to know why I didn’t call you—this is why. Dealing with you is like dealing with my teenage fucking son. You’re a pain in the arse.’
‘Won’t slip quietly into that good night.’
‘How about we leave it as is—straight up? How about you just do your job with none of the bullshit and none of the threats. Okay?’

Silence.

‘Charlie?’

‘I hear you.’

‘Good. Let’s just get on with it. I’m big enough to admit I made a mistake. I hope you’re big enough not to rub my nose it in every fucking phone call.’

Silence.

‘Charlie?’

‘I hear you.’
Monday 16\textsuperscript{th} February

Will

The two steel legs were wrenched sideways, halted in their plummet to the creek only by the twisted length of span. There were holes gouged in the banks on either side where the railing and span had been pulled out from the concrete stabilisers. It didn’t look as though the centre section of the span—the weakest part—had collapsed first. Although that would have been logical, even typical, if previous collapses were anything to judge by. It looked as though someone had violently shoved it over: dragged it out of the earth at either side and smashed it downwards until the steel ached. It looked wrong.

He had been at the site all night. At first just walking around in a daze. It was almost physically impossible, except there it was. By torchlight it looked monstrous—larger in pieces than it would have been complete. All his thoughts about what must have happened were obliterated by the scale.

Will couldn’t help but marvel at the bloody thing. In order for that weight to fall so heavily, so seemingly easily, the steel or concrete must have just given way. It was the only explanation. The sight of it had tamped down his excitement somewhat: after all, someone else had stood where he now was, first envisaging, and then constructing, a bridge. This wreckage was what remained of his attempt.

At 6.30am the inspectors arrived. He introduced himself and got on with it.

‘The steel has to have integrity problems. There’s just no way this could have happened otherwise. There were no compressive stresses. No tensile stresses. There’s just no other explanation.’

The two men fidgeted. Neither of them looked at him. A lot of interest in the ground.
'This doesn’t make sense, right? Am I right?’

‘We’re completing the structural analysis.’

‘Well, what about a sudden creep, if I can put it that way, because of pre-stressing force in the girder? It only took one eyeball failure for the whole of the Silver Bridge to come down.’

They didn’t answer.

Will held up his hands. ‘Look, I know you don’t want to jump to any conclusions and I know that the last foreman has actually skipped out, but I’ve been down to check the welds myself: and not only is there no shearing, they’re still holding.’ He looked at them expectantly. ‘The damned thing has held together even after falling. In fact, the only problem is that it has fallen.’

‘Can you get the media off-site?’

Will wheeled around to look down at the mangled jut of railings. A photographer with her eye inside a camera stood at the bottom of the chasm, getting what he instinctively knew would be very dramatic shots of the main body of the bridge. Was that where it had failed; a badly calculated load distribution? But the calculated failure load was irrelevant if there was no load and, as far as he knew, they hadn’t allowed anyone on it.

He looked briefly at his watch. Had to remember to call the house they were leasing to wake Moriah up for school. She’d been complaining non-stop since the walk in from the train, and knowing she still had to attend school hadn’t helped her mood. She did try at her work. There was just something about reading that she didn’t get and he couldn’t help her. It hadn’t seemed to matter much until secondary school. But the schools were only bloody concerned with the truanting, of course. He hoped L— might be different. Small school, less chance to bunk off and maybe, some better and personal attention.

He turned to face the bridge again.

‘Doesn’t look as though there’s been any sinking, does there?’ He couldn’t help himself. The combination of never having built one himself before and being handed the opportunity meant he wanted every possible angle on the collapse revealed.
‘There was no wind. There was no snow. It’s not a live load.’

One of the men looked at his watch. ‘If you could get her out of there, and in future make sure the OHS regulations are followed.’

Will’s eyes narrowed. ‘Is this about sabotage?’

‘Mr. Abrahamson, we just want to get on with our job.’

Will nodded and stuck his notebook in his back pocket. He knew they weren’t officially allowed to voice an opinion before releasing their report. And yes, he should have kept any media at bay, but his blood was pumping. He thought he was going to find an obvious fault. Thought that with his experience in construction it would have stuck out like a sore thumb. But the collapse didn’t look like a collapse.

The bridge looked like it had been knocked over on purpose.
Shane

They were coming out of a milkbar just to his right. The three of them held hands to cross the road together, running helter-skelter all the way to the other side. They must have been about 16. Maybe 17. He watched as they waited for their chance to enter the School of Air yard without anyone knowing they’d left. Watched until they disappeared into the new brick building. And then he followed them.

He wasn’t thinking about anything much as he followed. Just that he liked the flash of laughter, the apparent naughtiness. Just that he wanted to look at a whole lot of girls. Girls who weren’t old enough to judge him.

He wasn’t entirely unthinking though and he tucked in his shirt and kept to one side of the School of Air frontage. Perched himself on top of a fence and looked at his watch. He could make believe he was waiting for a ride from someone and in the meantime keep half an eye out for the girls. His luck held: must have been lunchtime, or recess, or some other reprieve that allowed them all to come suddenly swirling, slinking around with their painted toenails and exposed legs. Of course it didn’t take them long to spy him.

He scratched the back of his neck and looked down the road for no one. Then he stood and strutted around a little, did some push-ups against the chain-link fence. Which made the girls who were watching him giggle again. He’d forgotten how easy they were to impress at that age. Or perhaps he’d never known. It’s not as though he was any sort of chick-magnet at high school. His personal explanation was that he hadn’t stayed on longer than year nine.

Finally one of them ventured closer.

‘Got a cigarette?’

He looked at her. She was standing in the very corner of the yard. Probably blocking any adult view of him. She was also more well-developed than the others. Taller, larger breasted and wearing enough lip-gloss to wet anything she kissed.
‘You’re a bit young, aren’t you?’
She shrugged and tossed her long reddish hair back over her shoulder. ‘It’s not like I’m addicted or anything.’

He fetched his packet and tapped out a cigarette. Lit it, dragged and then surreptitiously held it out toward her. She took it, sucked mildly, smiled over the unpleasant taste and handed it back.

‘Cool,’ she said.

He nodded.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

‘Shane.’

‘Nice to meet you, Shane. I’m Julie.’ She turned and flounced off. Her waiting girlfriends clutched at her wrists, pulling her towards them to discuss the events. Now the giggling just sounded childish.

Shane sighed and straightened. But before he had a chance to move, another girl ran from the schoolyard and without thinking he again followed. Ran after her.

She hadn’t noticed him and he kept his distance until she sat down on a street bench. Luck again—he would have had to stop following her pretty quickly because she would have noticed. He was a cagey bastard though. Didn’t look at her at first. He checked his cigarette packet. He contemplated something in the distance. Then he sat. And looked.

Young. Younger than the flirt he’d spoken with, although with the headscarf thing she could have been 50—which disappointed him at first. Young and flustered. Doing her best to look relaxed. She had a note from her mother, or an extra curricular activity or a visit to the dentist. But the more he watched her, the less Shane thought she had any legitimate reason to be skipping out.

He had half a mind to scare the pants off her and ask her why she wasn’t in school. Then she looked his way, not quite at him, but enough for him to see her face clearly and his
mind stopped. Sarah’s eyes. Blue, blue, blue. Only this girl’s were even more extraordinary because she had dark lashes and dark hair instead of the blond. Then she looked away. Her face turning a dull red at what must have been his shocked expression. Shane looked away too.

He rearranged his legs out long in front of himself, then shifted them sideways so that she was forced to jerk herself more upright. Even apologise to him. He smiled at her.

‘My fault,’ he said and she blushed deeply. He felt like laughing. God this was easy. ‘You got the day off school?’

She looked furtively around at the passing adults—a woman with shopping bags, a man old enough to be her grandfather—neither were paying attention. Shane stared at her, still smiling.

‘No,’ she finally confided.

His grinned widened and he raised his eyebrows at her. She smiled too. It was difficult to guess her age. She was tall, but she had none of the spark that older girls generally had. But then she was a little podgy around the middle and those glasses weren’t doing her any favours. Perhaps she was just shy. One of those girls that got lost in the shuffle. Be hard to act your age when you were constantly being looked over for the prettier ones.

‘Guess you’re having a day off then?’

She didn’t answer.

Shane stretched his hand along the back of the seat, getting real comfortable. What else could he ask her? He wondered where she was going. Maybe she was meeting her boyfriend. For some reason the idea pleased him and he tried to imagine just what kind of boy it would be. He pictured someone shorter and with bad skin, before it occurred to him that she might be meeting someone older. After all she was brazen enough to bunk off school—what made him think the meet-up would be innocent?

‘What’s your name?’

She stared at him again and he smiled at those eyes.
‘Moriah.’

He held out his hand, took hers and shook it. ‘I’m Shane, Moriah, and I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.’ He looked around again, trying to figure out how to suggest that they converge their paths for the afternoon, when a car drew up in front of them.

‘Hello, Moriah. How are you getting on?’

It was the priest. Shane knew him by sight, hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with him that he could remember. He pretended not to be listening, looked at his watch. Moriah didn’t answer.

‘You supposed to be in school? Or do you want a ride home?’

She shrugged, but stood. Turned to Shane, looked at him a moment and then got into the car.

He shouldn’t have given any more thought to her. She couldn’t be more than sixteen probably. But as he sat, watching the empty schoolyard, he kept seeing those eyes.
Wednesday 18th February

Father Nott

Father Nott never rang first: the locals knew exactly when he was due. This client was new though. Had signed up for help as soon as he arrived, but Father knew next to nothing about him. An elderly gentleman. Alone. He rang the number the community centre nurse had given him. No answer. He let it ring out, then hung up and dialled again. A little trick he’d learned over time. The receiver lifted but no one said hello.

‘Charlie Baber?’

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s Father Nott, you signed up for food delivery. I’m on my—.’

‘Yeah,’ interrupted the voice and hung up.

Ten minutes later and Father was repeating his trick, this time on Charlie’s verandah.

‘Hello.’ A fair amount of knocking was required. ‘Hello, Charlie!’

Shuffling inside. The door opened and the wizened man inside instinctively shielded himself from the light of day.

‘Hello, Charlie. How you doing?’

‘Same old.’ He lead Father into his kitchen.

‘Lovely day, isn’t it? I’ve been trying to get into the garden.’

Charlie didn’t seem to have heard.

‘Growing some herbs. They like dry heat. You ought to give it a go.’

Old Charlie squinted at him. ‘I like my food delivered.’

Father laughed. ‘Well, there’s the milk and bread and whatnot, but an extra.

Clothing.’

The man looked at him quizzically.

‘Some tourist left some things behind and they’ve been donated to the church. I thought I’d bring something around in case it fit.’ He watched, pleased, as Charlie dipped into the box. Pulled out the purple jacket.
‘It’s scratchy,’ said Charlie.
‘Well, you wear it with something underneath. Not by itself.’
‘No, it’s scratchy on my eyes.’

Father Nott knew that charity came hard to both sides of the fence: the givers and the receivers. ‘Purple is the colour of kings,’ he offered.

‘Pity it’s not cor-du-roy then,’ retorted Charlie. Winked at him. He wandered, in the jacket, down the hallway to the bathroom. ‘Look like bruised fruit in this. King of the eggplants.’

Father chuckled. Pleased at the banter.

‘Feel like a king,’ repeated Charlie as he came back into the kitchen.

‘Splendid,’ said Father.

But Charlie took the jacket off and hung it over Father’s arm. ‘Wrong king,’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I’m not the king, I’m the servant. You play king.’

Now Father could feel his temper rising. He was being made fun of—perhaps his religious beliefs, perhaps his ability to assist—whatever it was, the old man was poking a good sized hole in it and Father didn’t like it in the least.

Charlie had also removed his shirt and was now looking down at his dark blue singlet. It sagged around his paunch. Had a dark, barely discernable mark along the left side. He looked back up at Father and smiled all yellow.

‘This is who I am,’ he said.

‘You’ve made your point.’

The old man’s expressive face softened at Father’s tone. And he nodded. Almost, it seemed, apologetic. But Father knew better than to assume. He watched, silent now, as Charlie put the milk and bread and cereal away. He had a feeling that none of it would be touched, but there was something comforting about their presence in a kitchen.

‘What have you been up to today then?’
‘A little of this, a little of that,’ Charlie said. Then he looked at Father. Properly. Crooked a finger and invited him into the living area. At first all Father saw were piles of newspapers and magazines, spread higglety-pigglety over the floor. It wasn’t until his eyes began to adjust to the darkened room that he understood there was a system involved: some system of knowledge.

He could see books of nursery rhymes. And engineering books. Video cassettes marked with the word ‘collapse’. The *Journal of Performance of Constructed Facilities* and several other journals beneath it. Opened to specific articles. A small stack of odd-spot clippings beside diaries that were opened and penned in nearly illegible capitalised handwriting. He walked towards the diaries, trying to read upside down, but the capital letters made it hard going.

‘Can’t do cursive,’ said Charlie. ‘Like the devil decides to go on a whirling dervish when I try.’

Father had seen his share of homes like rabbit warrens: people addicted to collecting junk mail, or determined to keep every newspaper since a significant life event. But he sensed a method to this madness and decided to wait Charlie out. He perched himself on the arm of a chair occupied with open-faced encyclopedia entries. He knew all about the longing for an audience and he simply looked at his watch. That did the trick.

‘Haven’t got time for my books, Father? Can’t be bothered with an old man’s ravings?’

‘I’m ready to listen any time you want.’

Old man looked at him distrustfully now and Father knew he wanted a more compliant, more bewildered listener. But it would be better to show Charlie that he had the mettle for a proper dance. Find out what this was really all about.

‘Would you like a beer or a tea?’ Charlie used a sober, low-key voice.

‘No, thank you.’

Charlie bent, gingerly, to pick up the first thing he could find. A book. He shook a fist at the ceiling and then kissed the book before opening it.
‘The words are small,’ he said with a dry, clicking tongue. He thrust the book at Father, failing despite his almighty best to control his now shaking hands. ‘Read the underlined.’

Father cleared his throat. ... we may, he began, illustrate the course which thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads – the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths, drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store. Could we then survey the web of thought from the beginning, we should probably perceive it to be at first a chequer of black and white, a patchwork of true and false notions, hardly tinged as yet by the red thread of religion. But carry your eye further along the fabric and you will remark that, while the black and white chequer still runs through it, there rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain ...

‘That’s quite poetic.’

Old Charlie hitched up his trousers with his wrists, then took the book out of Father’s hands and carefully laid it on a chair arm. Reverent. ‘You know a lot of the Aboriginals were scared of the first white men because they thought we were dead spirits walking.’

‘A fascinating thing—perception.’

‘Why are you here?’

Father looked at him. ‘I’m your parish priest.’

Charlie grinned, his teeth in varying stages of decay. He pointed a lone finger at the ceiling. ‘I know why you’re here. I’ve been told.’ He dropped the finger to land squarely on the book. ‘I know my history.’

Father clasped his fingers together and bent his head while the old man fussed around the floor of the living room, picking up books and newspapers and then putting them down again. Making his selection. The next book Charlie put in front of him was the Oxford
Book of Nursery Rhymes, opened to a particular page. Father obligingly held the book up, but Charlie pushed it out of his hands.

‘Get to that in a minute,’ he said. ‘I’m just trying to get this stuff to soak into the corners of your mind, no need to look at it all directly.’

Of course not, thought Father. To look at any of it directly was to make it disappear. Like dragging vampires out into the sunlight according to that particular mythology. He stifled a yawn.

Charlie held out a splayed book of black and white photographs of a bridge. Brooklyn Bridge, the accompanying text said. Father looked at it carefully, turning the pages.

‘Don’t go supposing that’s more important than the nursery rhymes, Father.’

Father Nott nodded. What on earth was he supposed to say to that?

‘L— bridge is just like that bridge.’

‘A mite smaller, Charlie.’

‘That one took fourteen years to build.’

‘Did it? I hope ours won’t take quite that long.’

‘But, that one was built properly,’ Charlie continued. ‘And it will never come down.’ His voice, sick with age, sang:

\[
\text{London Bridge is falling down, falling down,}
\text{falling down.}
\text{London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.}
\]

\[
\text{Build it up with stick and stones, sticks and stones,}
\text{sticks and stones.}
\text{Build it up with sticks and stones, my fair lady.}
\]

Something suddenly dawned on Father Nott. He gestured towards the textual paraphernalia taking over the living area. ‘Is this all about bridges? Is that why you’re here? You follow bridge-building?’
The elderly man suddenly turned towards him and nodded.

Well, well. Father Nott’s eyes narrowed in consideration. A lot more to old Charlie than met the eye. ‘And what exactly is the purpose of all this?’

Charlie tapped the side of his nose again. ‘To be revealed.’
‘When?’
No answer.
‘Do you have any idea why the last bridge fell?’
‘I didn’t do enough.’

Father thought about this for a moment. ‘Are you saying you could have prevented it from falling down?’

Charlie grinned from ear to ear and then bowed low.

‘Have you ever built a bridge, Charlie.’
‘No.’
‘Ah.’
‘But I’ve kept hundreds of them standing.’
‘Well. Well.’ Father stood. ‘I’d better get going then.’
The old man just smiled at him.
Thursday 19th February

Janice

She was crying when she heard the knocking. Well, not crying exactly, but tearing up. Feeling sorry for herself with ‘baby’ and the dreams and being alone and now the savaged chicks.

She’d buried the yellow chicks. She’d been tempted to bag them and sling them in the rubbish to avoid the stink: a smell that suggested they were waiting for some other living thing to eat more of them. But in the end she hadn’t been able to touch them even for a moment, and dumping them outside in the rubbish didn’t seem right. Which was patently ridiculous because there was no set formula for these things, surely.

At work they used an incinerator and it did cross her mind to bag them up for that, but she wouldn’t have been able to take them in until god knows when and there was no way she was going to let them sit in the car boot all that time.

She shuddered. It was some kind of karmic torture that there were chickens buried out near the back fence. Wait until she told her sister. That bloody cat. All teeth. Janice hadn’t been able to do more than kick it, let alone drag it off its kill, because of her stitches. That’s why she’d had to yell for Moriah. She hadn’t had time to get all silly about it either. Just fetched the spade and slowly got on with it.

And ‘baby’ slept through it all. Was still sleeping. Janice was tempted to tiptoe into the room to see whether the small thing was breathing, but she’d been caught out doing that before, and then there were hours of screaming: better to let little beasts lie.

So Janice was drinking her second glass of wine, planning on drinking the bottle, when the knock came. By the time she made her way to the door, wincing from the damned stitches, she was afraid whoever it was might have gone.
‘Sorry to disturb you,’ he said.
She couldn’t see his face properly and she nearly closed the door on him. Then he cleared his throat and she realised he was not one of the men from her dreams.
‘I told your daughter not to tell you.’ She put a hand up to her mouth. ‘Sorry. We haven’t met properly. I’m Janice.’
‘Will Abrahamson,’ he said.
‘Do you want to come in?’ She stepped to one side and invited him with a sweep of her hand.
He accepted reluctantly, it seemed to her.
She slipped slightly on the hallway rug in her hurry to get past him. Wanting to look over the lounge-room to see whether there was anything awkward or personal that she didn’t want him to see—nappies, pads, the bottle of wine. Since the wine was in plain view, she announced, ‘I’m having a forbidden glass of wine, want one?’ She sat, then immediately struggled to stand again in case he did want some wine. But he wasn’t looking at her. He seemed to be inspecting the floor. She waited him out.
‘I just wanted to apologise for what the cat did,’ he said, finally.
‘Your daughter already did.’
He looked at her very briefly, then away again. ‘Can I pay you for the loss of—?’
Janice put a hand up to her throat. ‘Look, do you want a wine? I’m really not in the mood to stop.’
He nodded. Shrugged.
She fetched another glass of the pinot noir, glad she’d not chosen something cheap, and sat it in his hands. They were inexplicably cold and she almost commented on that, but refrained. She didn’t have the energy for small talk. Instead, she allowed herself a good look at him—brown hair mopping his face, square-cut nails on broad fingers, scuffed boots—and couldn’t help a frisson climbing her spine. Just as quickly it dissipated. Here she was in a housecoat, bottle of wine half gone, hair not brushed in days.
‘Look,’ she sighed, ‘the chickens aren’t, weren’t—.’
He drank. When he lowered his glass a small semi-circle of burgundy marked the corner of his mouth.

She took a breath. ‘What I’m trying to say is that I wasn’t keeping them.’

He nodded. Was that all he could do?

‘My sister was going to rear them, but decided she had no room. Well, then she was going to dispose of them and I, I don’t know, I didn’t like that, so I thought I might be able to sell them or something. I agreed to take them before having my own baby—no one tells you what that’s going to be like, do they? But I wasn’t selling the chickens for money, so I’m not saying that because I need you to reimburse me, okay? I just wanted to save them from—.’

He smiled.

She hesitated, unsure. ‘Save them from being killed,’ she finished quietly.

Now he was really grinning.

Suddenly she saw why and she started giggling too, clutching the bottle of wine to herself. ‘I was saving them from certain death.’

He threw back his head, laughing richly, and Janice joined in. They were both laughing hard now. He had to put down his glass and she was holding the bottle of wine and glass away from herself because she was shaking. It was ridiculous because it wasn’t that funny, but somehow, just at that moment it was.

It took a long time to wind down. Finally Janice left her drink on the side table and got up to blow her nose. When she returned they seemed able to look at each other and just smile without it getting out of hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again.

‘Whatever.’ She flapped a hand at him, suddenly all teary again—this time at his concern; so lovely, so unexpected to have a man concerned about anything to do with her. ‘It’s funny. It is and it isn’t. You can’t save things from death. Right?’

He gave her a small smile. ‘What exactly happened?’

Janice spread her hands wide. ‘It must have been during one of the baby’s crying spurts—I can’t hear anything over that. It’s a wonder I can hear my own thoughts.’ She
chewed at her lip. ‘Anyway, your cat slipped under the piece of cardboard I had sitting on
the cage as a roof. My fault. Look, it really doesn’t matter. I was more worried about
Moriah because I had to call out to her to come and catch—what’s its name?’

‘Moustache.’

‘Right. Anyway,’ she couldn’t help a grimace at the memory, ‘I wouldn’t have let
her see it, but I just couldn’t get him away by myself.’

‘Her.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Moustache is a female.’

Will smiled again, only very briefly, tightly, and Janice shivered—not unpleasantly—but
he seemed grim again. Or not grim exactly, but proper. And before she could help herself
she matched his tone: ‘You know she’ll have to be put down?’

He looked up.

She tried to downplay what she’d just said. ‘I mean, you could keep her locked up
all the time. Obviously. That’s an option. But if not, then the cat has to go because she’s
got a taste for killing.’ She looked down at the floor. ‘At least, that’s how it is in these
parts. They go feral.’ She looked back up at him. Leaned forward. ‘Anyway, I should
organise a meal, a dinner. Welcome you both.’

He cupped the bowl of his wine glass with his big hands. Didn’t reply. She wondered
whether it was possible that this was the same man who minutes ago had been laughing
loudly. ‘Are you all right?’ As soon as the question aired she realised it was a mistake.
She didn’t know why, but things changed again and he stood.

‘A few things on my mind. I’d better go. Thank you for the drink.’

‘I hope you’re not upset that I called Moriah over?’

Will shook his head. ‘Moriah is fine.’

Janice stood too, watching him look for somewhere to rest his half-full glass.

‘The Jensons bought it before leaving,’ she said. ‘Crazy. A cat out here.’

‘Keeping it,’ interrupted Will, as though she hadn’t spoken, ‘was a bit of a
concession since Moriah’s mother—.’ He bent over almost completely and sat the glass
on the wooden floorboards. Then he straightened and looked at her. ‘Thanks for the
drink.’

‘Okay.’ Janice could feel all the warmth leaving the room and she couldn’t seem
to think of any way to stop it.

Will started walking past the couch towards the hallway. She hurried after him trying not
the wince at the stitches, fingers along the wall to keep her balance. ‘Maybe if you just
fix your side of the fence? I don’t have any more chicks anyway,’ she added, forcing a
light tone into her voice.

He opened the door himself. ‘Goodnight.’

Janice leaned on the open door. Watched him brushing past the two potted lavender
bushes at her front gate. Shit. What had gone wrong? She tried to replay the conversation,
but couldn’t come up with a reason for what felt weird. Perhaps she was being too
sensitive. Tiredness and bad dreams wearing her down. After all, she’d managed to slip
that bit about dinner in. “Planting seeds” her mother would have said. Single man with a
teenage daughter. Single woman with a baby. It was perfect, wasn’t it?
Moriah

She had only just lifted two plates from the cupboard when she heard her father’s footsteps on the gravel outside. She raced around the table, trying to make sure the placemats and salt and pepper were ready by the time he entered. He said nothing. Just looked at her and then looked away and she knew he was seeing her mother’s eyes.

She wanted to ask about that. Ask whether she was like her mother in any other way, but it was never the right time. Not that she couldn’t remember her mother for herself. Tall. Black hair and tanned skin. Moriah had her eyes and height and hair, but what she wanted to know about was whether she was like her mother. The problem was that if her father said yes that might not be a good thing as far as he was concerned, but if he said no, then it wasn’t a good thing as far as Moriah was concerned. No win.

He went upstairs.

When she told her father what had happened, when he returned from work, his face got rigid. It wasn’t Moustache’s fault. That was just the kind of dumb thing that cats did. They ate their own vomit, didn’t they? He’d gone next door to make amends, only it didn’t look like it had worked, if his expression was anything to judge by. Her father wasn’t great at smoothing things over. He was like her: picked at things until blood came.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the chickens. Miss Harding had tried to stop her from seeing, but she saw all the same. Their heads were almost wrenched from their bodies, left attached only by thin, bloody strings of feathered skin. They had been strewn, flung, and it made Moriah shiver when she thought about it. So much for intestinal-fortitude.

She hadn’t waited to see what Miss Harding would do next and she didn’t offer help either. She just took Moustache and came right home. But she hadn’t been able to get the soft little yellow bodies flowering the gravel out of her mind. All the helpless things got
ruined by the world. She trusted that the meek and mild would inherit something, but she hoped it wasn’t the earth because they wouldn’t last for long.

At a sudden thumping sound she ran to hold the washing machine tight as the cycle wound into its final frenzy. She had already memorised which buttons were for a normal wash and which for a delicate one. Her father thought she was reading and she almost was—once she knew which was the ‘normal’ button, then she could read ‘normal’ quite easily. It was just that if she didn’t know that the word read ‘normal’, then it might look like ‘night’ or ‘option’. Her father still had the idea that she would go to university; it was his lie. She didn’t want more years of study. Didn’t even want a career.

See-through blue-prints and photocopied building elevations were fine. She understood symbols. They made life easier and she copied the arrowed compasses that showed which way was North into her diary. But every picture had documents that went with it. Disclosure documents and contracts, and even the building manuals she was sure would be a series of photographs that showed the steps of how-to, were just paragraph after paragraph of words. Words did not treat her the way they treated other people. For other people they stayed still and for her they swam and made her feel nauseated. Made her mind freeze. She had already decided that working in the supermarket with electronic scanning would be fine.

She left the wildly rocking machine and quietly opened the back door. Moustache’s tail was curled around the wooden post, tip waving. Angry. The poor thing was going mad with the frustration of being tied up and kept using its back leg to scratch at the improvised collar. Moriah bent down to stroke it. And Moustache did that cat thing of raising her back and then bum into the air as Moriah’s hand traveled her body: it was like Moustache was afraid Moriah would leave off petting and wanted to make sure of every last second of touch—even though most of the time Moustache didn’t like to be touched anyway.
Moriah tickled the white patch underneath the cat’s nose and chin; the distinctive marking that suggested her name. It was a bad name because Moriah couldn’t properly call it when she was putting out the food. The cat began to purr. Moriah pushed her away and returned inside to her chores. If she made sure everything else was going well in the house, perhaps the cat wouldn’t matter as much.

She opened the lid on the washing machine and began to transfer the prune-like clothes to a laundry basket—it was better to hang them out at nighttime she was learning: the sun turned everything into cardboard, and temperatures during the night scarcely got below 20 degrees anyway.

The faint peal of an electronic bell sounded, indicating that the microwave oven had finished its job, and she left the clothes in the basket to hang up later. There were some cold lamb chops in the fridge, and she’d cut up some vegetables while the clothes were washing, and set them to microwave. Moriah took out the chops and by the time her father came downstairs again, there were two plates of food waiting. It wasn’t until he walked right past the dining room table that Moriah saw he was wearing gloves.

‘Dad?’

He kicked open the back door and flywire screen with his boot, which made the three-year-old cat startle and hiss. She strained at her leash as he bent to unclip her from the trellis.

‘What are you doing?’ Moriah’s long body pressed against the flywire screen.

Her father held Moustache’s mouth shut with one hand, tucked her body under his arm with the other. ‘Silly bitch,’ he whispered.

‘Dad?’

Moustache frantically scratched at him, wriggling her muzzle trying to get free. But he kept her restrained. Moriah tried to open the door, but her father had a boot keeping it shut.

‘Go upstairs.’
‘Daddy, please.’
‘Did you hear me?’ He couldn’t keep one hand on the cat’s muzzle, the other on its frantic body, and still keep Moriah shut inside. He let the cat’s mouth go and she began yowling.

‘Dad, she didn’t mean it. She didn’t.’ Moriah was yelling now. ‘I’ll keep her locked up.’
He said coolly, ‘Go upstairs.’
‘No.’
‘Do as you’re told.’
‘No, daddy. Please.’
He turned to face her. His temper rising visibly as the cat’s scrabbling claws bit into his arm. ‘Did you hear me?’
‘Please!’
‘GET UPSTAIRS NOW.’
But Moriah wouldn’t. She only backed away from the door slightly. Her father hung his head for a moment, as though considering, but brought his free hand up to quickly, cleanly, break the animal’s neck. And when he moved Moustache dangled lifelessly from his arms.
Old Charlie

Old Charlie was deep inside the whiskey bottle. Rolling around and gargling the stuff. He could see the horizon in there. The real horizon. The higher astral plane. The spiritual Mecca. It was only possible to achieve that when with the gods, and how did he get to the gods but through the slippery medium of ambrosia.

Inside the bottle and outside the bottle. It hurt his head this lack of spirit level. He couldn’t keep balanced even while he was lying down. He tried to nod, but the floorboard held his cheek.

He could see clear into the bedroom from where he lay. Looking from the dust directly in front of him all the way along the hall to the dragging bedcover fringe. He needed that bedcover. He needed it for later when he got cold. But right now he could see that bedcover for what it was; a means of keeping him chained to his body.

Charlie made a fist of his hand and felt the blood begin to pump at the juncture of arm and shoulder—where the floor was cutting off supply. Body wreaked its own revenge when it felt ignored. He let his hand flop. Those floorboards were as unyielding as a disinterested woman. That made him laugh and then startle at the sound.

He was weak. He would crawl under those bedclothes later. He knew he would. Warmth was like a drug for the body. People made such horrible mistakes. He could feel imaginary tears rolling down his cheeks. People worried about drugs that affected the mind but the drugs, all the drugs that weren’t labelled a drug, they were far worse.

It wasn’t about religion per se. He spoke of gods, thought of the forces as gods, but wasn’t thinking of it in terms of Christ or Shiva or Gaia. Those gods seemed overly concerned with having subjects of one form or another.
He had a pain in his stomach. Flaring like a horn held down.

The Christians flagellated the body as though it poisoned the soul, when it was only a shrunken casing. Discard it, yes, but treat it well because it helps ease the transition. A man without skin is an uncomfortable man. Hard to think about the gods if you are in pain. Didn’t he know it? Shiva represented evil impulses as though these were discrete from good ones—the floorboards finally let him grin—although the Hindus at least maintained that both principles existed and both were gods. Wise and misguided in the one package. And the Gaia Principle, well, that was formulated by a hippie turned yuppie. Basically a feel-good idea of the karmic principle. Stolen ideas.

Charlie rolled over. He let his bladder release the warm golden urine that quickly became cold golden urine. But it felt more comfortable. Once upon a time he would have thought himself disgusting. Now he knew better. The body had its means of keeping him alive and if he got out of the way it was achieved far more quickly. Economically.

Charlie hawked up enough phlegm in the back of his throat to spit. Religions all stole from each other—that wasn’t the main point. The main point was that most religions didn’t exist if there weren’t followers. That was the first obvious flaw. That’s why men only knew the edges of the truth—truth wasn’t dependent on human consciousness. Human consciousness existed as an extension of it.

He was sobering up, that was the problem. All the thoughts were coming to him like a train on its tracks. There was no jumping off. He was sobering. People had no concept of what sacrifice meant. Add an “s” to laughter and you have slaughter. People ate animal. People wore it. Didn’t give a damn how it was killed for either of those pleasures as long as someone else did it. As long as they didn’t have to see it—oh heavenly Fathers inure us to what we are. Yet when that animal would be used as a gift to the land, people found it repulsive. Primitive.
Charlie had wanted to slap them out of their mindless existence. But he couldn’t do that. People had to come to the realisations themselves. Had to come to realise that they were a small part in a far larger opera. It saddened him though. Saddened the sick worm in his gut. How could they get caught up in the mundanities, the minutae, the ordinary, when the possibility of something so grand loomed behind the mirror?

That was the problem, of course. The mirror. The self. The reflected gaze. Not the wonder of existence, but the wonder of the self’s existence. See how sober he was getting? Thoughts like darts zipping by his mouth. The glorified human being who inflated with each year of life, until the body started to fail and then the sense of self began to deflate. One against Descartes. Then misery really set in. Feeble, false-toothed, incontinent and fearful.

He didn’t care for human beings but he still cared for human nature. It was a fine line. Not for the person but for the person’s situation. He felt it happening from the inside. His guts twisting themselves into a knot until he spoke up. Not because their wretchedness moved him, but because they were so consumed by it and that consumed him. Fascinated him. They kept their gaze on the tree they were standing under, while the whole forest went up in flames.

Charlie rolled the back of his skull into the floorboards. Didn’t matter how crazy it was, he still thought of all those gods, all that knowledge, against sacks of blood and bone. He had to speak up. Risk their jeering, of course. And his spoken words weren’t going to change anything, of course. The road was well-travelled. It was his weakness that made him speak though. His weakness that opened his mouth.

Why, why, why did he still care? Charlie ground a fist into the floorboards. Rejoicing in the meaty bruised feeling of skin shedding. He licked at the spots of blood. His care wasn’t helping. They would be better off if he didn’t interfere. They disparaged him anyway. Misguided selves looking down on his self. Especially his use of alcohol.
Drop, hard stuff, booze, canned heat, cocktail, firewater, nectar, hootch, intoxicant, liquor, moonshine, oil, palliative, red-eye, rotgut, sauce, spirits, tipple, toddy, intoxicant, brew, callibogus, cup, draft, glass, libation, potion, refreshment, shot, sip, balm, distillate, effusion, elixir, juice, tincture, slug, spot, swig, thirst quencher, toast.

An abacus of names he had stolen from some source long forgotten and yet so few understood its purpose. They preferred to smell of deodorant than sweat. They thought certain materials or certain cut of materials made some clothing Sunday dress and others Saturday field swag. They raised their noses at him and shifted seats if he sat nearby. And they used alcohol to obliterate rather than sink into.

He rolled over on the floor back towards the view of the bed. Back into the cold wet. Those low-life bastards. He shouldn’t be trying to help them save their petty bridge. It was time to try and get warm. He couldn’t feel his fingers anymore and he’d trained himself to get into bed as soon as he realised he was cold. It was difficult to know when he was cold. He just didn’t feel it very much. One for Descartes.

Men thought they were simplifying with all their scheming. They just built larger and more complicated edifices to thought. And what was thought? A series of electrical impulses. So was lightning, epilepsy and the movement between fabric and skin.

A laugh came from his mouth and he laughed again at the shock of the sound. Sounds that had meaning outside language made so much more sense. Those sounds travelled across people. Those sounds were connected to higher planes. Once you learned a language you could never hear those sounds without meaning. It was refreshing to hear a language you couldn’t understand to remind yourself of all the noise signifying nothing.

Charlie tried to sit up. Took all his thought to coordinate and he couldn’t do it. Put one foot over. Pushed from his hand. No strength. Fell again. Cheek stinging from where the floorboards bit. Clearly where he should stay for a while yet. It wasn’t too cold tonight.
How many hours were there until dawn? Six? Five? He couldn't freeze in that time. Maybe get a bit of a cold. Until then he would stay in the mud looking at the stars.
Saturday 20\textsuperscript{th} February

Gussy

‘So you’ve met them both?’

Janice nodded, glanced at Layla. Gussy could see exactly what the look meant—keep your mouth shut. Of course they had been gossiping about Will. Match-making him with Janice.

‘And what’s his daughter like?’ Gussy asked. ‘What did you think?’

Janice shrugged. ‘We barely spoke. There was a problem with the cat and—.’ She stopped speaking and looked at her sister who promptly leaned over and put a hand on her knee.

Gussy mentally sighed. Why she bothered she didn’t know. Well, yes she did: she needed a project. She was bored out of her mind.

‘Well, how is twinkle toes going then?’

Another look between the two.

‘You mean Deidre,’ said Layla.

‘I do,’ said Gussy.

‘Fine,’ said Janice.

‘Well, where is she?’

‘Sleeping,’ they answered simultaneously.

‘She a good sleeper then?’

Janice nodded. But she had very dark circles under her eyes, her skin was looking sallow and she’d definitely lost weight. They had probably just given the little blighter a dose of alcohol or cough mixture, supposed Gussy. About time.

‘And where are your two?’ she enquired of Layla.

‘With their father.’

‘How on earth did you manage that?’

‘Once a week he does it.’ Layla looked at her sister and they both smiled. ‘Then he gets sex.’
They all roared laughing.

And then Janice promptly began weeping. Sobbing. Layla got up wordlessly and lifted the box of tissues closer. Mopped up her sister’s cheeks, pressed a couple into her hand. But Janice didn’t care to stop. She put her head down into her lap and just let go.

Gussy looked at Layla with raised eyebrows, but got nothing back: they were tight these two. Still, it didn’t take a genius to figure out Janice was suffering from a little depression. The house was a horror. Dirty nappies in an open bin. Smell of something rotting—food perhaps. Baby clothes unwashed in a pile near the kitchen door. Janice in a nightgown or whatever it was, clearly not changed for days. Gussy had ignored it, of course. But if the silly woman was going to cry then it could all be counted as evidence.

She reached a hand over to rest on Janice’s knee, just like Layla had done. Only Janice looked at it as though it was a toad and Gussy retracted it.

‘Perhaps you need some help, love.’ She kept her voice nice, even though she was feeling hurt. And annoyed. Who else, besides Moriah-bloody-Poppins Layla was coming to see her? No one as far as Gussy could tell. Janice should be counting her blessings.

‘She needs a man,’ said Layla.

Gussy couldn’t dispute that. In this particular instance she might have liked to say that a man wasn’t going to be an immediate solution, but a man had always been her own immediate solution. No doubt about it.

She missed her men. Separately. They wouldn’t have gotten along at all. She’d purposefully experimented with different types. Geoffrey was a mechanic. Young and nimble with this fingers. Stanley had worked in accounts, in the city. That was possibly the biggest adjustment, and after he died, Gussy came right back to the outback with Wayne. Wayne sold mining equipment. She was hoping that her next husband would be an actual miner because none of her former husbands had any idea about jewellery and she liked it. But there wasn’t a great deal of choice of available men in L—. Very
provocative. If her health had been better, or admit it, her size a little less, she would have been shopping around in Coober Pedy by now.

She missed sex. Thoroughly, thoroughly missed it. And not all the lovey-dovey stuff, but the actual juice and throttle. Young women didn’t know that one day they would become invisible. You don’t realise how many men are looking at you until they stop, then you realise—the whole blinking lot of them. And they stop all at once. As though a secret letter has done the rounds.

It was devastating. The first day she realised it—she’d still had Wayne—she came home in tears. He’d cooked her up pancakes, their eternal comfort for one another, but that hadn’t helped. She went through a box of Kleenex that afternoon.

It was extremely disappointing to think that she might have to begin living out her romantic life through younger women. They simply didn’t have the pluck to choose well. Although at her age, Gussy had chosen equally as poorly. There was no advantage to the match with Geoffrey besides in the bedroom. She was just lucky a hydraulic lift had failed by the time they were in their early thirties. Gussy made a mental sign of the cross. Not that she wished him anything but well, but they were heading for a divorce and being a widow was much cleaner.

She should advise Janice to start at the other end. It had taken two marriages before Gussy realised that marrying someone considerably older and wealthier was an excellent proposition. Especially since they kept dying on her anyway. Mind you, she could barely conceive of kissing Ed Morgan, the old toothless goat, so could hardly expect that Janice would warm to the idea. Gussy bet the young woman hadn’t done anything more than flirt in her life. She wasn’t silly. Wasn’t spontaneous. Did she even know how to have fun?

She looked at the poor woman bent over double, crying. Clearly not having fun now. Mind you, that was a baby for you. One thing Gussy realised very early on was that her
former girlfriends all extolled the virtues of the baby beforehand, but seemed to spend all
their time thereafter griping about how it had irrevocably and unhappily altered their
bodies, their marriages and their lives. Lovely things, babies.

‘Buck up, love,’ Gussy said. ‘This is the easy part compared to later.’

Layla shook her head, but Janice, face buried in her hands, started laughing. She
looked up at Gussy, half crying, half laughing and asked, ‘Are you helping?’

Gussy spread her hands wide. ‘You’re not the first.’

‘Jannie, never mind her,’ said Layla. ‘You’ve got every right to feel distressed.
Gussy has never had kids, she doesn’t know.’

‘Oh meanwhile, it’s obvious that a man would fix everything here.’

‘Shut up.’ Layla livid, turned towards Gussy. ‘She needs to feel that she’s not
alone. That’s what a man does. You know that better than anyone—this is the first time in
your life you’ve been alone and here you are being a parasite on someone else’s life. So,
for god’s sake, shut up.’

Gussy rose up in her chair. Trying to decide whether to storm out or not.

‘Be quiet can you?’ Janice dabbed at her eyes. ‘I’ve got a headache.’ She
straightened up. Mopped at her face. Sniffed and tried to smile. ‘I’m just having rushes of
hormones, that’s all. And those men coming for the baby. They’re closing in: I can feel
them.’ She looked at her sister. ‘And there’s nothing I can do about it.’

Layla petted her hand, but had no reaction otherwise.

‘What’s she talking about?’ asked Gussy.

‘Sssshhhhh,’ said Layla.
Monday 23rd February

Shane

The two inspectors handed in their hard hats at the portable office—first using the plastic to bat away the dusty traces of red soil clinging to their jeans. Shane hung around his ute; clearing out McDonald’s wrappers and Big M cartons; fixing the catch on the tray with a piece of wire; killing time. When he was sure they had left, he walked over to the office.

Poking his head inside, he saw the new foreman’s broad back. He withdrew and knocked, then stuck his head around again. Will had half-turned. Didn’t speak.

‘Shane, mate. I’ll be joining your crew. Starting day after tomorrow’s the word.’

Will stood, nodded. Held out his hand and they shook without speaking.

Shane continued, ‘Look, I was just wondering whether you wanted a beer?’

The foreman looked at his watch, which was encouraging.

‘Just one, mate. Just up the road at The Peacock.’

Will turned back to his make-shift desk. Shuffled some papers. It was an interminable wait for Shane, but the man finally nodded.

‘Give me ten.’

‘No worries.’

Shane backed away, his gut suddenly telling him he’d done the wrong thing. He kicked at the back tyre on his vehicle and tried to think of a reason for running out. But nothing came to mind and soon the two men were walking together. Will apologising for having his head elsewhere—running numbers again—and Shane finishing his packet of cigarettes on the way.

It was quiet at The Peacock. It had been yuppified recently; the front section turned into fancy dining and the back bar getting a facelift with new carpets and air-conditioning. Not to any point: main problem with everything on the south side was lack of population.
They ordered beers, paid for them separately, then sank into some lounge seats. The first five minutes or so were spent silently sipping the cold liquid and things seemed immeasurably the better for it.

Shane tapped a cigarette against a fresh pack, lit and inhaled deeply. ‘So.’

Will said nothing. Eyes unseeing.

Shane sniffed. Nostrils flaring nervously. ‘Any word on what happened?’

The older man’s eyes came into focus. Shane could see the gears turning. Wondered what was going through that brain before Will finally answered. ‘Not yet.’

Shane nodded. Drank. Relieved. ‘Ah, that’s good.’

Will didn’t respond.

‘Pretty hardcore coming out here to do this. Locals aren’t thrilled job didn’t go local, you know?’

‘Probably fair enough getting someone in given what happened.’

‘Bit bizarre, wasn’t it? I’ve never seen anything like that. The whole structure just giving way altogether. Didn’t look right.’


Shane’s heart hammered. ‘What?’

‘Have you heard anything? Is there any talk about why the, it—? I mean has anyone suggested sabotage?’

‘You’ve got to be joking.’ Tried to keep his voice light.

Will sat back. Looked at his watch. ‘Right.’ Put half his beer away with the next mouthful. ‘Got to go.’ He stood and Shane half-heartedly started to rise too. ‘No, finish your beer.’

Shane nodded and gratefully sank back down again.

‘See you on site.’

Shane saluted, watched Will leave. Man walked too fast. He’d left half his beer behind too. Before Shane could get a hand to it though, bloody bargirl collected it up. Gave him a smile. Jesus. The dregs of his own beer were warmer now. He was ruminating on
whether to get up and order another or just pack it in when an old codger sat in Will’s empty seat. Christ if the bloke didn’t stink.

‘G’day, mate,’ he said without looking. The old fella grinned fit to split his face. His expression falling off slightly as Shane made to stand.

‘Sit,’ he said.

Shane looked down, slightly bemused. ‘Got to go, old man. Things to do.’

‘Saw you talking with Mr Abrahamson. Poor man.’ He laced his arthritic fingers together, didn’t look at Shane. ‘He can’t see what’s under his nose.’

‘Yeah.’ Shane struggled to think of a way to cut loose. ‘I’m off then. Have a good one.’

‘Wouldn’t know an effigy if he fell over one.’

Shane stopped. ‘Sorry?’

The old man squinted up at him as the blood rushed in Shane’s ears.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘What?’ The music had suddenly gone up a couple of decibels and the old man cupped a hand around his ear.

Shane leaned as near to the forest of spiky black hair as he could bear to get. ‘I don’t—.’

‘It didn’t want her.’ The voice was hoarse. ‘Didn’t even touch her. No good.’

Shane willed himself not to go red in the face.

‘Get some animals.’

‘What?’ Jesus that music was loud.

The old man smiled broadly. Yelled, ‘Get some animals. As many as it takes.’

‘What for?’

‘What?’

Shane bent down again. ‘I said, what for?’

Old man continued smiling. ‘We’ll have to do some testing now. Buy me a beer.’

Shane grimaced. ‘Look, mate—.’

The old man fumbled with his wallet. ‘Get us a couple of whiskies.’

Shane could see there was no shortage of cash.
Four neat double-whiskeys later and neither of them had said anything. Shane’s limbs had relaxed again. Head heavily floating.

‘Nowhere else for us, hey?’ the old man yelled suddenly. His voice was like a damaged horn.

‘What?’

This time having to yell over the music got funny. Shane grinned and the old man was seized by a laughing fit and his big rheumy eyes watered. Shane had to wait until the wheezing subsided before the conversation was going again.

‘Neither of us home eating whatever the wife’s cooked.’

‘No.’ Shane sobered a mite.

‘You got no wife,’ said the old man laughing.

Shane’s blood ran cold, and the old man moved suddenly, pulling on the younger man’s arm to draw him closer. ‘Lack of her turned you, didn’t it?’ he yelled, spittle flecking Shane’s face.

‘You fucking arsehole.’ Shane recoiled and with his free hand swung across to try and hit the old man in the face. But he got his shoulder and spilt his whiskey instead.

Old man dropped his empty glass in his lap and held up both hands in front of his face. ‘Go easy. Go easy.’

But Shane was still coming. He put his hands around the old man’s neck. Gave it a throttle. ‘Fucking arsehole!’ he repeated, breathlessly. Only reason he left off was because he was too drunk. His face flushed with the effort and he tried to stand. Tried to work himself out of the low chair. And when he succeeded, he staggered slightly forward.

Old man was coughing. Spluttering. ‘Your effigy was never going to work.’

Shane put a hand out to catch the wall. How did the fucker even know about it?

‘Pissing in the wind. Takes more than that to change the course of things.’

Shane forced himself to hold still, stop the swirling in his head, and when things looked as right as they were going to get, he pushed himself away from the wall.
The old man yelled, ‘I’ll try with Mr Abrahamson, but I’m afraid he might have a tape-measure for a brain.’

Shane didn’t answer, just resumed his efforts to walk straight, keeping the wall as guide.

‘You’re wiser,’ came the voice again.

‘Fuck off,’ said Shane, to himself. ‘Just fuck off, whoever you are.’

‘You get those animals.’

Shane wandered away. Presumably homeward.
Wednesday 25th February

Will

Will pushed open the little door on the site’s portable office, scrutinising his team—dogman, rigger, crane driver, boilermaker, ironworker and the local kid, the labourer, Shane—standing in a knot on the edge of the chasm. Will was already speaking as he joined them.

‘First things first. Inspectors are gone—for now.’

He waved a piece of folded paper then shoved it in his back pocket. ‘So, we’re waiting on lab work before we’ll know what’s what. I don’t want to hear any theories. Our job is to rebuild, not judge what was done before we arrived. Okay?’ He didn’t wait for a response. ‘Secondly, we should receive the girders by the end of the week. You’ve all worked with pre-stressed, prefabricated concrete girders before, but because this is Abrahamson’s first bridge build and because the previous bridge fell down, I want double, even triple, checks on everything. I know you’re not typically digging a collapse up, but I wanted us to look at what happened firsthand. The inspectors’ report, whatever it finds, is going to be words. I wanted you to have more than just words at hand when rebuilding. Okay?’

Again he kept talking.

‘Now, the entire new prefabricated structure will have already undergone loading trials—something ordered this time just because of the collapse—but, and I mean no disrespect when I say this, those trials were under factory conditions and now that we’re out here, it doesn’t take much to imagine that they’re not precisely catering to what this bridge is going to be dealing with.’

He drew breath and his crane driver, Topchian—or TopChick as he was known in Melbourne—jumped in: ‘What Will’s saying is, “Hello. Welcome aboard. We’re in for a ride”.’

A few grins.
Will took a moment to nod. He appreciated TopChick’s smoother introduction. His head was elsewhere. ‘You’ve all got your specs. Let me know if anything doesn’t add up. In the meantime, I want the remains of the last bridge completely removed—today if possible.’

Several necks craned around to look. Estimating what was possible.

‘All right?’

TopChick took over: introducing Shane to the others, assigning jobs, getting Stewart to move the crane closer to the edge of the chasm, insisting on the wearing of the glaring orange vests. Then he spun around to Will.

‘Probably not possible to get it all done today.’

‘Why not?’

‘The foundations are still holding.’

Will narrowed his eyes. ‘How in heck did this thing fall down?’

TopChick raised his eyebrows. Shrugged.

‘How long then?’ asked Will.

‘End of tomorrow.’

By smoko, the jackhammers had cleared out the abutment stabilisers on either side of the chasm, and Nick, the boilermaker, was halfway through opening up all the welds so they could lift the sections of steel up separately. A bitch of a job, Nick spent most of smoko soaking his fingers in water. While they had a cup of tea or can of fizz, Will told them they were going to shift the footprint so as not to be directly over the collapse. The limestone and surrounding geology, soft and prone to fault lines, couldn’t be bored into twice, and the revised placement shouldn’t make any difference, since the road leading to either side of the bridge didn’t yet exist.

They were just grinding work-boots into cigarette butts to get going again when Shane leaned over a wheelbarrow and pretended to vomit.

‘You smell something?’
After a short hunt, they found a dead kangaroo tucked into some scruffy roots on the north embankment.

‘Fell,’ said Shane. The younger man was clearly chuffed at being expert in the environment unfamiliar to the older men. ‘Got tangled enough for something to get time to rip it apart.’

The sun had heated up the stomach contents enough to explode, and the high ripe smell was putrid up close. The six of them stood over the dead animal, Stew’s boot fondling the maggotted carcass.

‘Dingo?’ asked Will.

‘Nah. A dog,’ said Shane, taking the opportunity to light up. ‘Savaged, not eaten, mate.’

They booted the eyeless roo onto a hessian bag Frank had retrieved from his ute. Dragged it up and away from the sounds of shovels and good-natured ribbing.

By lunchtime they were ready to lift the sections of steel up and out of the chasm. Will called a halt to the work. Could see that the men were glad of it. Shane didn’t appear fussed one way or the other: kid had his shirtsleeves rolled down and buttoned, and hat and gloves on—and he was the only one not sweating. The others stunk of it.

It was a wretched place to eat lunch: only three scrawny trees offering no shade and the sun heating up the inside of the vehicles. The men scrambled down the embankment to sit in some shade. The talk was of the heat and various accommodation arrangements. But it soon died down as the men realised they had to eat fast if they wanted any food. The incessant flies were making short work of the drying sandwiches, ramming themselves at whatever was on offer no matter how many times they were battered away.

‘Fuck off,’ said Stew finally hurling his bread and corned beef.

His workmates laughed.

‘Go and pick it up,’ said Will, and the laughter stopped.

Stew looked at his boss.

‘Don’t want to bring any animals down here.’

‘Flies’ll have it gone in ten,’ said Shane with his mouth full.
Will turned to look at him. ‘I wasn’t talking to you.’

‘No worries.’ Stew stood and retrieved the sandwich. Then ball ed it up in his paper bag and sat silently.

But Shane took off up the embankment.

Will relaxed. His crew knew him. Knew that if he gave an order he expected it followed. Shane would work it out.

Now that he was here, now that it wasn’t theoretical, Will had already figured out the way things were for most of the male population in L—: months of nothing, hours of urgency. They were used to running dry, nutrient-bereft soil through their fingers for months on end. Used to staring up at the skies and seeing nothing but a sun so used to blazing it had burned itself white. Used to spending long hours underground dynamiting, or hauling large carriages of dirt to the surface. For them, the bridge was decoration. Getting from South to North twenty minutes quicker wasn’t going to change lives here. Not like it would his. His plans to use the bridge to reconstruct L— weren’t dead, but they were shelved for now. He would keep his head down and his eye on the job.

The afternoon was spent winching the pieces of steel up and out of the chasm. A slow process with Stew driving the crane, Glen and Frank dogging and rigging, and Topchick and Will handling the pieces up on top of the chasm—tagging them as they settled on the back of the truck. Stew would have to reload them onto the train in a couple of day’s time.

Meanwhile, Shane and Nick started the shovelwork around the foundations and pile cap, which, if they weren’t careful, basically involved hitting the shovel into solid concrete — then the reverberation would ring up their arms and into their bodies. Will had done it often enough. Felt like his teeth were going to fall out.

When Will finally went down to check on them, he heard Shane long before he saw him.

‘I watched my poor meatball, all covered in cheese, roll under the table and onto the floor, and then my poor meatball rolled right out the door.’
Shane kept the song up the whole time Will made his way down the embankment, and when Will drew close to them, Shane said, ‘I reckon this wog’s not that into spaghetti, mate.’

‘He’s Greek, not Italian. What are you doing scraping that?’ Will pointed to where Shane’s shovel had etched into the side of the concrete casing. ‘You’ve got to be bloody careful. If the inspectors don’t know that’s post-collapse they might attribute cause to the wrong set of actions.’

Shane reddened. Stepped back to look at what he’d done. ‘It’s just a scratch.’

Will rounded on him. ‘Are you getting what I’m telling you? I want that “scratch” logged. Okay?’

Shane nodded. Sullen.

‘Next time he tries anything stupid, yell out,’ Will glared at Nick now. ‘You’re all accountable for what happens on this site.’

Nick turned his back on Shane and Will started to make his way back up the embankment. He was going to have to rein the kid in hard.
When she hadn’t turned up for a solid week, he was disappointed. He imagined that he hid it well, mostly from himself, but when she finally fronted on Wednesday, late afternoon, he couldn’t stop chuckling. Not that he let her see. Instead he continued flicking through the bible at the lecturn, waiting until she’d walked the entire way up the aisle before looking over his reading glasses to see who was there.

‘You gave me a fright, Moriah,’ he said.
‘I wanted to ask you something.’
He wagged a finger at her. ‘The first thing you need to do when you see someone is greet them. Find out whether they are well, whether they still have time, whether they even remember who you are.’
Moriah slumped against the side of a pew. Silent.
‘Because I used your name you can presume that I remember you.’ Father sniffed and slammed the book shut, still speaking even as he took off for the vestry. ‘But I expect you to say hello to me and show me that you remember me. Come along.’
She trailed after him.
He switched on the jug, then sat, crossing his arms over his rotund stomach.
‘Well, give me a goodly hello.’
‘Hello, Father.’ She sat on the other side of the small table.
‘Hello, my child. How are you?’ Without waiting for her answer, he kept on.
‘Now I ask that because you might have had a terrible day or week or morning and the last thing I want to do is prattle on about nothing if you’re really needing to tell me something.’ He lifted his eyebrows expectantly. It took a few seconds.
‘I’m fine.’
‘Rubbish. You’ve a face as long as a horse’s. But before we get onto that, you need to ask about me. I’ll tell you how I am: I’m as well as can be expected. I won’t tell you about my corns because you’ll have no useful thing to say on the matter.’
‘Do you have time?’
‘What?’ He stopped what he was doing and looked at her face. At her small wry smile. Then he remembered his instructions to her. ‘Very good. Yes, for a damsel in distress, I have time. Now let me stop this infernal kettle from raging and we’ll have a cup of tea and get down to brass tacks.’

When he sat a hot tea in front of her, she looked at it unconvincingly. Again.

‘You’re not going to drink it?’

‘No.’

‘Help yourself to the water in that little fridge there, then.’ He pointed. ‘And next time don’t let me get all the way with making you a tea if you don’t want one. Speak up girl.’

But she didn’t say anything for quite a while. Just sipped at her water and looked around the room. He tried to look at everything as though it were the first time too. Found he couldn’t do it. All the objects already had function and meaning for him.

‘So,’ he said. ‘What’s your question?’

Whatever it was she wasn’t ready to come out with it. He sighed deeply. Heavily. He’d become quite good at that. ‘Come on, come on. There’s no point giving in to black sentiments. The way through is always to fight. “Today I am afflicted exceedingly, but tomorrow I shall break my bonds”. That’s from vespers.’

She said nought.

‘I’ve been thinking about your reading.’ He reached over to the stack of books on the table and plucked off the top one. ‘The Holy Bible.’ He held it out to her. ‘What do you know of the Lord’s story? Anything?’

She made no movement towards the book. ‘I know about Christmas and Easter.’

‘Everyone knows about Christmas presents and Easter eggs. Do you mean you know about the birth and death of Our Lord?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Well, that’s a start. Where did you learn that?’

‘At my last school.’

‘At your last school. What about the School of the Air? Is it any chop on religious studies?’
'What?'
'I mean are they trying to teach you some Christian values? Do they talk about the ways of the Lord, or is it all just secular mumbo-jumbo about grief and rainbows?' He sighed. ‘Don’t bother trying to answer that. It’s a bugbear of mine and there is nothing wrong with teaching you how to handle grief or appreciate rainbows. However, I think you also need the important stuff.’ He peered at her. ‘I think we’ll proceed randomly. I don’t want the Old Testament to scare the be-jesus out of you—.’ He crossed himself. ‘You didn’t hear that. Anyway, I think that you might like some of what Our Lord has to say about coping when bad things happen.’ He thrust the book at her. ‘Come on, come on. Open it at any page.’

She took the book, but shoved it between her thighs. ‘I didn’t come here to read.’
‘I want you to put these on,’ he said, ignoring her and patting his breast pocket, then his trouser pockets and finally standing to retrieve his yellow glasses from over on top of the small bar fridge. He handed them to her.
Moriah wiped her fingers on her shirt, took off her glasses, then put his on.
‘Go on then, lass.’
She pulled out the book and opened it. Put her finger down along the sentence and tried to read across. ‘Try at loneliness picture—.’
‘You’re just making it up.’
Her face burned. She unhooked the little wire glasses and handed them back. ‘I already told you, I can’t read.’
‘I’ve got one more idea and if that doesn’t work, then we’ll call it quits.’ He put the glasses in his shirt pocket. ‘But before I forget, you had a question.’

She raised her chin and looked at him. ‘I want to know whether you think animals go to heaven?’
‘An oldy, but a goody. What do you think?’
‘I want to know what you think.’
He nodded. Pleased all over again at her spunk. ‘All right. I don’t know, Moriah. I honestly don’t know. But if St Francis is up there,’ he pointed at the ceiling, ‘you can bet there are animals up there too. Can I ask why you want to know?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that puts paid to conversation, doesn’t it?’

He took the opportunity to reach around behind the stack of books. One of the books toppled over the table edge as he drew out a sheet of plastic. A sheet of clear blue.

‘Try again,’ he said.

She held the sheet gingerly. Evidently unsure what to do with it.

‘Just lay it over the page, ducks. Gone on, if this fails, it’ll be the last you see of it, but for now humour me.’

Moriah laid the sheet over the splayed page and tried again. Very slowly she read:

‘Therefore I will be—.’

‘Unto.’

‘Unto—.’ She stopped again.

‘Unto Ephriam, yes.’ He closed his eyes briefly. Lovely to be read to.

‘As a moth—.’ She winced.

And he winced along with her. ‘What’s wrong now?’

‘The words.’

‘Nothing wrong with what you’ve read so far.’

‘Moth?’

He nodded. ‘That’s right. There are moths in the House of the Lord, although, on this particular occasion he may be using them as a curse. You’re doing very well. Just as I hoped. Let me pick a passage for you in case that one was just dumb luck.’

He dragged the book back across the table, wet his index finger and thumb with his tongue, then flicked through the thin pages. Finally locating what he wanted. ‘Try this.’

‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but I shall not pass away.’

‘Good.’
But Moriah kept reading—her voice getting louder and more excited. ‘But of that
day and that hour neth, neath, knew, knowing—.’ She looked at him for help.

He put his glasses on and peered. ‘Knoweth. Finish the sentence if you like.’

If she liked—the girl clearly couldn’t wait. ‘But my words shall not pass away,’
she read. ‘My words shall not pass away.’

‘Moriah, I wondered, I actually—for me—hoped so: you’ve got a form of dyslexia.’

He beamed from ear to ear, but her pleased expression disappeared. ‘It’s not life
threatening for goodness sakes. I’ve got it too. It’s just some circuitry problem in the
brain’s wiring. Makes us more unique.’ He held up the blue sheet of plastic. ‘But with the
help of some blue-tinted glasses, you’ll be right as rain.’

‘No.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

She looked away. Clearly bristling.

‘Good gracious girl, there is nothing predictable about you, is there? Now what’s
the problem? You clearly don’t need your glasses for anything, speaking of faking,’ he
wagged a finger at her, ‘so you can just have a pair of blue glass spectacles made for
reading.’

But Moriah said nothing.

He clicked his tongue. Disappointed. He had expected some jubilation. ‘We don’t have to
call it anything, I suppose. You can just get the glasses and put your fingers in your ears
if someone remarks.’

‘I’ll use the blue sheet.’

‘You can’t carry one of those around everywhere.’

‘I’ll cut it into something smaller.’

‘Pride. Dear me. Gets us every time. You’re not going to be stubborn, I hope?

Anyway, what about writing?’

Her face froze.

He held up his hands. ‘I’m not going to say anything more but I think blue glasses
might be of more assistance than the blue plastic sheet when you’re doing that.’
‘No.’

‘Let’s not argue about it now, shall we? My eyes are tired.’ How exhausting it was having a pupil with a mind of her own. And to think that earlier he’d been fretting about seeing her. ‘I’d like it very much if you could read a bit more.’ He pointed a finger idly at the page.

‘And what I say un-toe—.’

‘Unto.’

Slowly, slowly, she read, ‘And what I say unto you I say unto all, watch.’
Thursday 26th February

Shane

‘Fair go, mate.’ Shane had his safety hat tucked under one arm. He kept his voice low so that no one else could hear what was going on—but it didn’t matter; it was about to be bloody obvious.

‘No hangovers. No injuries. No time for it.’ Will didn’t even bother looking up from the figures he had in front of him.

‘My work’s fine.’

‘You’re slow. Frank’s had to tell you three times to get out of the way of the signalman.’

Shane sneaked a look back around at Frank. Frank and his stomach hanging over the front of his jeans. He was watching the lift of the vertical piles they’d pulled from the ground. Didn’t seem to be interested in anyone or anything else. That’s how it was though: Frank playing nanny.

‘Look I had a few last night. Sixteen hours ago or something. I’m as sober as a judge.’

Will took a moment to answer—muttering about costs. Then he looked up, found Shane’s face. ‘Take two hours off, drink a boat of coffee, then come and see me.’

Shane dropped his helmet at Will’s feet and slunk off behind the office. Someone called out his name, but he pretended not to notice. It didn’t hurt anything too badly except his pride and his back pocket. He’d be docked pay. Maybe he wouldn’t come back?

First port of call would be the 7/11 for some aspirin, then he was free to do whatever he liked. But sitting in his ute fifteen minutes later, nursing some sickly lemon soft-drink between his thighs, with an unopened pie on the dashboard, Shane wondered what he did like. He had tied one on at home last night, and given the noise it created on-site it didn’t seem immediately sensible to light out for the territories and do the same again this
afternoon. He looked at his thumbs resting on top of the steering wheel, then down at the can of soft drink between his thighs. In the end it was the memory of blue eyes that got him thinking about taking a walk and he hopped out of his ute with the pie pincered between his fingers—still too hot to properly hold.

Waves of heat beat his shoulders and face, and he had to stop and let a silver semi-trailer go and the displaced air and engine heat slapped him silly. He started thinking about going for a swim. His boots were making his feet sweat, and he tugged off his shirt and tucked it into the back of his jeans. Long time since he’d felt sunrays directly against his torso.

He looked down along the planes of his chest and stomach. It was all tightly packed and he sucked his stomach in and then contorted his upper body to make his muscles pop. The paper around the pie crinkled each time he sucked in and let go. He sniggered and looked away because the white skin hurt his eyes. Maybe he should get a little tan going. Maybe he should be like all those other men. But another couple of minutes of the sun on his back and he shrugged himself into his shirt. Not stupid enough to sunburn.

He waited until the start of lunch hour. Like last time. As luck would have it she was bunking off again. Only it wasn’t luck was it? His chest puffed up as she crossed the road, her face all lit up at seeing him, and he said, ‘Hello, lovely.’

She got flustered. Wouldn’t look properly at him. Walked over to the bench, the same bench where they met, and sat. Shane frowned until he worked it out: she was scared. He thought quickly and backed away.

‘If you don’t want to have lunch with me, it’s no skin off my nose.’

She floundered like a fish newly brought to bank and Shane cast an eye over the schoolground.

‘Teacher see you skiving off?’

‘I can go anyway. It’s only a half-day.’

‘What’s got you spooked then? Girlfriends? Bit jealous?’
She didn’t deny it and Shane settled comfortably onto the heels of his work boots.

‘I’ve got one hour, or less now that we’ve been gas-bagging. And you’ve got a decision to make. Come with me and tell me about whatever it is shied you off me. Or live the rest of your life wondering.’

He smiled. He’d always been a little cocky around women, but there was something else stirring inside him now.

‘Come on, Moriah. I like you, all right? If that’s a crime you’d best run away now.’

She finally giggled and he relaxed even more. Started to walk off, then looked over his shoulder and winked at her. She looked around. Followed. He led them towards the chasm. Much further around than the bridge site, but he couldn’t escape its pull. He hadn’t thought much about it before, even though he’d grown up with it. Maybe it was getting bigger.

He sat on the dry dirt, dangling his legs over the shoulder of the embankment. The pie he had purchased from the milk-bar was well and truly cold by the time they got settled. He didn’t notice. He was more interested in the combination of Moriah’s eyes, Moriah’s legs, and what was cycling around his brain.

Moriah unwrapped a dying salad roll. She didn’t look very eager about it.

‘Want some of this?’ he offered.

‘No, thanks.’

‘So you can talk then.’

She shrugged.

‘Jesus. Come on, are you going to relax or what?’

‘I shouldn’t see you.’

Shane cocked an eyebrow and finished the last of his pie. Mouth still full, he said, ‘Well shut your eyes then.’ But that didn’t go over well, so he swallowed quickly and tried again. ‘Who says you shouldn’t?’

‘Somebody at school.’
‘Well, your friend just doesn’t like that I like you. That’s all.’

‘She’s not my friend.’

Shane frowned and then his face cleared and he winked. ‘She’s a little older than you, isn’t she?’

Moriah nodded.

‘She’s a bitch. Am I right?’

Moriah shrugged. ‘I don’t really know her that well.’

‘Honey, you don’t need to know her.’

She blushed and Shane thrilled at the sight. He could barely contain himself. She was so young and innocent. He tried to think of a way of asking whether she’d ever been kissed. Couldn’t. He sniffed. ‘Am I right?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe? Jeez, that’s not much encouragement. Tell me what she said.’

The brazen girl he’d given the cigarette to had backed Moriah into the lockers and asked whether or not she’d ended up speaking with him after he’d run after her. Women—you couldn’t get anything past them. Moriah didn’t answer any questions at first, but then this girl—Julie, he recalled—wanted to know was she deaf, so she answered.

‘And what did you say?’

She shrugged.

He let it go, but he wanted to shake that shug out of her.

‘She said that she’d watch out if she were me.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Shane. ‘Why’s that?’

‘They said you’re probably a pervert.’

Shane spat out his mouthful of pie and hooted with laughter. ‘That’s harsh. They don’t even know me. What happened next?’

Moriah dropped her head down, voice quieter. ‘They said he probably can’t get a woman his own age so he’s robbing the cradle.’

‘It’s not like we’re getting married or anything.’

His mood darkened and her face reddened. She bit into her roll again and Shane looked at the dark hair falling in clumps on either side of her face. It wasn’t a pretty face.
But you forgot that when she looked at you with those eyes. He shivered. He felt infectious and couldn’t stop himself from looking down to make sure it wasn’t flooding from his pores. He looked at her again. She was eating so slowly, so calmly. It slowed his blood.

‘Do you get what I’m saying?’

She didn’t answer, dropped her hands with the roll, into her lap.

‘I didn’t chose this. It chose me. And it chose you.’

Her face turned up to his. ‘Okay.’

He grinned out one side of his mouth.

Unexpectedly, Moriah laughed. It was a great laugh. Sort of musical, but not shy. A bold one.

‘What?’ he said.

‘She said I should knee you in the balls.’ She kept laughing.

He joined in. Throwing his hands in the air, protesting. ‘I haven’t so much as touched you with a little finger, have I?’

She shook her head.

‘You can report me, first time I do, if you like.’ He looked at her as solemnly as he could manage. Then grinned. ‘Do we have a deal?’

‘Yes.’

She had pretty teeth. He lit up and offered her a drag. She refused it and he smiled. Nodded his head. Good.

‘I’m getting marks on my legs,’ she said after a bit and turned a solid thigh to show him how the stones were marking up her skin. White, white skin. Confirmed his decision to let his body turn brown. In contrast. Man and woman. All these changes. He started to unbutton his shirt and she immediately stuck her hands between her legs and tightened her thighs. He chuckled and prodded her with his elbow so she’d get out of the way and he could lay the shirt down for her to sit on. But she didn’t just move to one side, she stood up. Two long legs near his shoulder. She was just asking to be climbed.

He patted his shirt. ‘To save your skin, dopey.’
‘Oh.’ She sat back down but now she was cautious and made sure she wasn’t touching his naked torso.

He sighed. Jesus. Did he have the patience for a virgin? He plucked a sprig of saltbush from the ground and tickled her under the chin with it. She tucked her chin down to her shoulder, trapping the weed, and reached out, unthinkingly, to push him away. He grabbed her hands, pinning them to his chest and watching her face as she registered his speeding heart.

When she looked up at him, maybe openly, maybe even wanting a kiss, he instead let her hands go. Her face fell and he hid his smile. Now she was disappointed. Now she’d been made to feel as though she was rejected. He had the power. Had he done this to Sarah? He didn’t know. Couldn’t remember. Maybe he had, but he’d never thought about it like this. Perhaps that was because he and Sarah were the same age and being with Moriah, it was like he could read how she would respond. He knew beforehand.

He put an arm around her. ‘I want to take you to dinner.’ He could feel her heart now, knocking itself out. She wouldn’t look at him. He tried to put a finger under her chin, but she giggled and lifted her shoulder so her head wouldn’t move around toward him. So he thought for a second and abruptly let her go. It disconcerted her again. She didn’t know what to do if she wasn’t resisting him. He looked at his watch.

‘Better get going.’

Moriah sprung up. Pulling her dress down at the back as she bent to pick up their litter. He swiped his shirt from the ground, not putting it on. He just stood and stretched. Yawned.

‘I don’t have time to walk you anywhere. Probably better if I don’t anyway.’

‘I guess.’

‘I’ll see you around.’ His tone was cruel and he watched her wilt. Looked at his watch again. ‘So long, Marianne.’
She wasn’t moving. Probably didn’t know the song—thought he’d gotten her name wrong. And her waiting for him, wanting him to say something nice, moved him and he reached out to stroke her cheek. She smiled and her eyes were on him and he felt her look and it was like some kind of drug coursing through him.

‘Got to go, sweetheart. The foreman on the bridge construction is a cunt and I’m his punching bag.’

He put a hand to the back of her neck and pulled her forehead to him. Kissed it and then pushed away. Turned around quickly and began walking.

He missed seeing her sudden hot tears.
Moriah

It was too hot to still be wandering around outside, but that’s precisely what she was doing. It was either that or sit inside doing homework and now that Moustache was dead she didn’t like being in the house by herself. Having words nailed to the page with the blue plastic was great, and she could have gone back to the School of Air library, but the novelty of the school had worn off. Using headphones and listening to a staticky radio, even without teachers, got boring after a while. And it was just like any other school: rules, rules and more rules. Besides, Moriah wanted to think about Shane.

She had not had a boyfriend yet. Most boys her own age were hopeless. Interested in guns and wars and video games. They didn’t know how to speak to her and she had nothing to say to them. She towered over them too. The older ones, boys her Melbourne classmates professed love for, were creepy. Bad skin and lots of spray-on deodorant. They had plenty to say to her, only she didn’t want to hear it.

Shane wasn’t like that. He was a man. She liked the smell of him. Of his sweat. It made her feel crazy funny inside just thinking about the fact that she liked the smell of him. It had never happened before. And he drove a car. And he wanted to take her to dinner. There was a black spot hovering around when she thought about what he called her father. But she wasn’t talking to her father at the moment anyway. Not after Moustache.

God, it was hot. Her clothes stuck to her skin and her thighs rubbed together causing a heat rash. Between her fingers, where she’d picked up a handful of dirt sitting beside Shane, it was getting itchy and the dirt darkened with her sweat. She wished she had brought more than the one dress—she was going to have to wash it tonight. And she should have worn a hat.

There wasn’t anything to look at in this place anyway. It was all just houses without any lawns. Without fences. Without trees. Gravel and red everywhere, and even that looked tired and hot. She needed a drink. Stopping to rest against a fence, she watched as a fat
lady came walking down the road exactly where Moriah had just come. As the lady got slowly closer Moriah could hear her breathing. Moriah knew she was overweight herself, but this lady was big. The sun must be killing her. Squashing the breath out of her.

When she reached the same fence Moriah was resting on, the lady leaned against the gate to push it open. Moriah immediately straightened up. She hadn’t meant to choose this house or anything. But the lady used a finger to ask her to come over. Moriah didn’t want to, but she did anyway.

‘Come inside or you’ll fry.’

It took her a while to say it, but the lady didn’t wait for a reply. She just took off up toward the front door. Moriah followed. Didn’t think about it. Continued not thinking about it until she was seated in a cool kitchen, with an ice drink in her hand, and then, all of a sudden she felt very foolish. She would never have just walked into somebody’s house in Melbourne. Never followed them in just because they invited her and it was a hot day. Not even a day as hot as this.

Neither she nor the woman were speaking yet. They smiled at each other a little. But it was even too hot to do much of that. When the woman did speak it was only to scold her anyway.

‘Don’t you ever let me catch you out walking without a hat and drink again.’

Moriah sipped. Lime cordial. The liquid slipped around her dry mouth. Just the best thing she had ever tasted. She ignored the woman. She was quite good at ignoring adults. They were all like instruction booklets. Nothing interesting ever came out of their mouths. But she was grateful for the drink.

‘Thanks,’ Moriah finally said.

‘I should think so.’

Moriah nodded a little. Conceding. She might have fainted or something, although she was pretty close to the rental house.
She watched as the woman drained her glass in one go. Even the ice. She just crushed it between her teeth, sucked on the last bits.

Moriah tried to bite the ice but she didn’t like the feeling between her teeth.
‘Here, don’t you go trying to bite ice. I’ve been doing it for years. Your teeth are young yet.’
Moriah obligingly sucked. She would practise biting when she got home.
‘So who are you when you’re at home?’
She didn’t quite understand what the woman was asking, so she said nothing.
‘Hello? I said who are you?’
Why did adults always think they could demand things of her? They never did that to other adults. Off the cuff and maybe trying to be funny, she said, ‘I’m a saint.’
‘Beg pardon?’
‘I’m a saint. You know, I perform miracles. All that stuff.’
She smiled but the woman stared blankly at her.
‘Not really,’ Moriah said.
‘I know who you are.’ A finger wagged. ‘Your father is going to fix our bridge. Isn’t that right?’
Moriah shrugged.
‘Your father’s fixing the bridge and you’re a saint. I’d say we’re very lucky to get you two.’
Moriah sat glumly. She wouldn’t usually be smart to an adult, but she was feeling happy because of Shane. Even just thinking that made her smile again.

‘Do you know your father’s mobile number?’
Moriah shook her head. ‘It’s satellite or something.’
The woman gave a big sigh. ‘Can anybody else come and get you?’
And even though she could instinctively feel that it wasn’t a good idea to reveal it, she was too proud to hold his name inside: ‘Shane,’ she said.
The woman frowned. ‘Shane? Shane Mannis?’
Moriah didn’t say anything.
The woman leaned forward in her chair, bringing her stomach and boulder breasts with her. ‘Where did you meet Shane?’

Moriah shrugged.

‘You stay away from Shane. He’s had a rough trot and doesn’t need young whippersnappers frilling around him.’

Moriah wanted to shout at the woman. Shut her up.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘I’m not frilling around him.’ She felt close to tears for some reason. ‘He doesn’t even like my dad.’

Suddenly the woman laughed and some of the skin beneath her face wobbled. ‘I got the wrong end of the stick that time. I added two and two and got five.’ She reached out to grab Moriah’s wrist and shake it. ‘Never you mind.’

Moriah felt completely bewildered. She wanted the hand off her. She wanted everybody’s hands off her. Telling her what to do all the time. The only person who wasn’t telling, who was asking, was Shane.

‘He asked me to dinner,’ she said.

‘Who did?’ The hand clamped tight.

Moriah didn’t answer. Just saying that was enough.

‘Shane did? Missy? Is that who asked you to dinner?’

Moriah wrenched her hand free and sipped her watery cordial.

‘Goodness sakes. What’s the matter with you? I asked you a question.’

Exactly, thought Moriah. And her neck turned scarlet, but she held on to her silence.

‘You finish your drink and we’ll call Father. He’ll get you home.’

‘He’s on-site.’

‘Beg pardon.’

Head down. ‘He’s working at the bridge.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean your father.’ The woman snorted. ‘I mean the priest. Have you met him yet?’

Moriah nodded.
‘You do get about, don’t you?’ Suddenly the woman laughed hard and Moriah looked up to see teeth with lots of grey fillings in them. ‘I don’t think you’ll be up to babysitting.’ She laughed and laughed.

Moriah stood. ‘Thank you for the drink.’

‘For saving your life, you mean. Wear a hat, missy.’

‘Okay.’ She took a step backwards. ‘I have to go now.’

‘And do you know which way you’re going? Because it won’t take a minute to ring the priest and have him pick you up. I don’t want to read in the newspaper that you expired on the way home.’

Moriah pointed. ‘I just go back that way and then that way.’

The woman nodded. ‘Well, don’t dilly-dally. Do you know what that means?’

‘No.’

‘It means don’t do anything else but go home. And don’t say I didn’t warn you about Shane Mannis.’

Moriah ran down the passageway and out the front door.
Friday 27th February

Janice

‘So what do they have to do? Throw a brick through the window?’

Janice chewed a fingernail as she waited for the answer. But halfway through whatever she was being told, she held the phone away from her ear and hung her head to cry. Silently. They weren’t going to help her.

When she rejoined the conversation it was to yell. ‘No, it’s not all right! How would you feel? No. I don’t have any evidence—nothing you would think was evidence anyway.’

She continued to cry, now into the receiver.

‘Forget it.’

And she hung up.

So much for the police.

Deidre started to cry. Of course. Janice walked into the nursery. A furious little bundle of pink flesh kicked its legs and heels into the bedding. She bent to pick her up and then, abruptly, changed her mind and walked out of the room and shut the door. A little cry wouldn’t hurt her and Janice had to take care of something.

She sniffled a moment on the other side of the door, feeling the tears rise again. This was her day: get up with the baby, feed the baby, entertain the baby, put the baby to sleep, have a nap herself, get up with the baby, feed the baby, entertain the baby, put the baby to sleep, have a nap herself. In between, just for variety, were the nappy changes, the vomiting, the wailing and all the household chores that were going to hell. It was a thrilling existence.

She wound her hair around her fingers and stuck it behind her ears. Then looked around. There were flies congealing on dishes. A pyramid of clothes on top of the washer, a sodden, probably moldy mess of clothes inside, and a line full of stiff and tiny clothes
hanging in the sun. Vegemite smeared the chair arms. And the only smell worse than her underarms, a smell that sat limply in the livingroom, came from dirty nappies not yet taken out to the bins.

But she was coping with all that. Millions of goddamn women had done so for centuries. And she only had one child. Right? So she could cope with all that. It was the men that made it difficult. The men and their insinuating ways of letting her know that her baby wasn’t going to be hers for very much longer.

Entering the laundry, Janice opened an odd-shaped cupboard that she called the horse-shed. It had a section cut from one side that reminded her of a horse-float and she let the broom and mop heads dangle from the opening, kind of imitating an animal. This morning though, she reached for the hammer—and old-fashioned ball-peen—and then fished around in a large canvas bag of nails. She pulled out as many long, thin ones as she could find in the semi-darkness. The bulb in the cupboard had blown a week ago and she hadn’t yet replaced it.

She heard a scuttling in the cupboard corner and rather than investigate, like she would once have done, she hurriedly got out. Held the cupboard door shut with her foot, the hammer raised to hit whatever managed to shove her aside as it got out. But nothing came. Her shoulders relaxed. The danger wasn’t inside, she reminded herself. In her dreams the danger came from outside. Dreams of hands snatching Deidre. Or of an empty crib and she, frantic, running to the open window and looking out just in time to see one of the men running along beside the house. Dreams of Deidre crying for her, down a well. And dreams filled with horrid images that she wouldn’t allow herself to recall during the day. Sick, sick dreams.

If that weren’t enough, there were phonecalls. At first she tried answering, but no one spoke. Sometimes she just let the phone ring out. Lately she’d starting snatching up the receiver to listen *before* it rang, see if she could catch them out. Then they started calling around to the house. Pushing the front door bell and leaving, before she had a chance to
answer. Once they’d even left a box of clothes and food for the baby. She threw it all out. She wasn’t going to poison her baby. She’d had enough though. Enough.

Which was why she’d called the police—on the north-side. But all they wanted was proof that something had already happened, which was blatantly stupid. What was the point of only being able to act after the crime? Close to tears again, she cheered up when she realised that Deidre had stopped crying. The baby was doing that more frequently, she noticed: crying and then stopping all by herself. “Self-soothing” the books called it.

Putting the hammer and nails down on the kitchen bench, she went outside. Good lord the sun was strong. She blinked and blinked and blinked, but in the end she had to go back inside for sunglasses. Janice hadn’t been outside in the broad daylight for quite a while: she was usually sleeping. Along one corner of the back fence lay a stack of unpainted palings: leftovers from her sister’s landscaping. Janice had been going to sell them, and then she was glad to have them piled over the dead and buried chickens—keeping the cat off. Now she had something else in mind.

She gathered up an armful, noting with annoyance that a few splinters caught and ripped her little camisole. Not that it mattered too much: the once lovely pink satin top had gone grey with repeated washing. Inside she eased most of the palings up onto the kitchen bench, keeping a couple under one arm. Then she counted out twenty nails, which she placed delicately between her teeth and lips, and picked up the hammer.

Janice walked to the livingroom window, dropping the palings and hammer onto the couch. She thrust the curtains to one side. The view wasn’t much anyway. With her left hand she held a paling horizontally over the bottom of the window, then, with her right hand she eased a nail from her mouth and transferred it into her left hand. It took a minute to be able to at once push hard enough against the wood to keep it in position and still hold the nail straight out—all with the left hand only. When she had mastered that, she picked up the hammer and began whacking the nail through the paling onto the
window frame. By the time that one paling was anchored over the window, Deidre was crying again.

‘I’m doing this for you, darling,’ Janice called out. Then she picked up the next paling and laid it over the window. She would do every window in the house. Anything to keep the men out.
Saturday 27th February

Charlie

He sat up the back. Watched the man standing on the stage of the community hall clutching at a piece of paper. Like it could save him. He’d been hoping to see that interloper Shane here. But there was no luck but dumb luck and old Charlie was whip-smart. Too bad. But now that he was here he may as well throw peanuts to the monkeys.

A tall man handed the bridge foreman a microphone, but he refused it, and then, in a manner anyone with half a brain could see was totally out of character, pulled briefly at his trouser legs to sit on the edge of the stage. Getting closer to the action, getting down on the same level. Charlie could have saved him the trouble. Half the people in this meeting were here to gawk and the other half had a bee in their collective bonnet. But to give him his dues, the foreman waited until the hall was quiet before troubling himself to speak.

‘I’m Will Abrahamson. The new foreman for your bridge construction.’

A few people clapped.

‘I know a lot of you aren’t happy I’m here.’

Charlie grinned. Truth was guaranteed to put a lot of backs up. Seemed like Will knew it too because he continued on a different tack.

‘What I mean is, that I’m from out of town and I appreciate that what is needed here is local knowledge.’

A few nods.

‘Basically, that means I’m dependent on you to get this bridge right. There’s no word yet on what went wrong with the former bridge. We can’t say whether it was the actual construction or the materials.’

Charlie’s tongue snaked out to wet his chapped lips. He could put on a show for them at this point. Tell them what it was. But that was the beauty of his role: all behind the curtain.
‘For the record I don’t care what part of the process was at fault. All I care about is giving you a sound bridge in the shortest amount of time possible.’

‘Maybe that was the problem with the previous bridge—built too quickly.’ A middle-aged woman up near the back rows. Big woman. Big voice.

Will nodded. ‘Maybe. Maybe it was. All right, I’ll rephrase. I want to make sure you get a sound bridge—however long it takes. Whatever it takes.’

Now that was a honeyed phrase: whatever it takes. Did the man truly start off at that position, or was he going to have to be forced? Half sighing, half grinning, Charlie was glad the young punk with the effigy had failed. This was his territory now.

‘More money—that’s what it’ll take.’ Same woman. Charlie sniggered. He liked her gusto. Matched her girth.

‘Ma’am, you are?’ Mr Foreman finally had to acknowledge his heckler directly.

‘Gussy’s my name and as you gather I’m not so keen on this project. We’ve been driving around the perimeter of our town to get to the north side for years now and it always worked fine. Couldn’t really see the point of this bridge from the get-go and now the damned thing’s fallen over.’

Charlie wanted to clap at the circus.

Will pulled at his nose, looked at the floor. ‘I don’t want to get involved in your local politics, Gussy,’ he said. ‘The alternative route works for you. I suspect there are others in your community who might find it somewhat easier to get about their business if they don’t have to take that detour.’

‘This is about the new miners, that’s what this is about. Half-wits noodling about after the big dream. It’s not about the people who have been here for—.’

‘All right, Gussy.’ The tall gentleman who’d had the microphone stood and turned around to face her. ‘We’ve been over all this in the meetings last year. The bridge is happening whether you like it or not.’

‘Don’t cut me off, Joe. I’ve got a right to speak if I want to. Building a bridge takes resources that I don’t think we want to use that way. Or why not at least put the project off until we achieve some mining success?’
Joe turned to face Will. ‘We already voted on that, Gussy. Mr Abrahamson has come all this way, and I think we owe it to him to just listen to what his plans are. Please continue.’

Will looked at Gussy and smiled. ‘Like I said, however you came to this point is for you to know. I’m only interested in what happens from now on in. We’re underway and all I’m really saying is hello, let me get on with this and I’ll soon be out of your hair while the bridge will be carrying you across to the north side of your lovely town for years to come.’

There was no response from the floor. Old Charlie raised his hand.

‘Yes?’

‘What if there is a problem?’

A few faces turned to gawk at him. Stranger. But the foreman didn’t know he wasn’t local.

‘If there is a problem we’ll solve it.’

Charlie stood now. ‘I’ve been involved with the building of hundreds of bridges.’

He watched as Will had the decency to colour.

‘I’m just wondering,’ he continued, ‘how many you’ve been involved with?’

The silence in the room become acute.

‘None,’ Will finally said.

Charlie sat down again and let that set amongst the pigeons.

As anticipated there was fuss. Squawking and chest beating and strutting around. But Will handled it well. A credit to himself. He answered all accusations calmly. Maybe a little coldly, but that’s a man ruled by reason. Shouldn’t give little boys rulers and science sets: made their hearts seize.

Charlie let the wheels turn without him now. He was more interested in the woman who had been his partner in crime: the obese heckler. She might be just the kind of fertile
ground into which he could plant a simple weed: the kind of weed that would distract everybody from the flower he really needed to cultivate.
Monday 2nd March

Gussy

She began to hyperventilate. She’d done this before, so immediately stood and slowly walked over to a certain kitchen drawer from where she retrieved a brown paper bag. She inhaled into it and gradually calmed herself down. This was what happened when she got overly excited. She waved a hand at herself, fanning her flushed cheeks.

It took her the best part of the morning to come up with the idea of patronising the shop nearest the bridge site. And she got mighty weary of traipsing along the aisles, looking at the bags of corn kernels ready to microwave into popcorn, and the rows of sports drinks with added vitamins—all while dodging the first welcoming, then curious, and finally, suspicious gaze of the checkout girl. About an hour into this riveting adventure Will entered the shop.

Gussy laid a hand on her chest and shook her head for some time before she was able to get a word out.

‘Prayers are answered, Mr Abrahamson. That’s all I’ll say for now.’
He gave her a tight little smile, recognising her instantly, she saw. ‘Depends whose prayers,’ he retorted.

‘True. Not your daughter’s, I hope.’
His entire demeanour changed. Concern mixed with irritation. She would have to tread gently. ‘I don’t like to be the one to bring it up—.’ She could see that wasn’t a great beginning. ‘What I mean is that Moriah is a very singular girl and—.’

‘Has she been truanting?’
Gussy shook her head. No. At least not that Gussy was aware of, and for her that amounted to the same thing. ‘This is a more delicate matter.’

‘Sounds like I should stay right out of it then.’
‘Now that’s precisely the problem.’
Will sighed. Took a bottle of water off the shelf. She wanted to tell him he may as well be purchasing liquid gold, but he got in first.

‘If you’ve got something to say, Mrs—, I’m sorry I don’t know your full name.’
‘Everybody calls me Gussy.’
‘Please just let me know what’s on your mind, Gussy, I’m due back on site.’ He looked tired. Exhilarated, but tired. Far away from home.

‘I think your daughter might be taking up with the wrong kind of company.’
He looked at her a minute and she could see that he was thinking what she said wasn’t exactly a revelation. ‘Okay,’ he said slowly, like she was a little dim. ‘Well, thank you for the insight. I’ll keep my eyes peeled.’
Gussy cleared her throat and played the ace with triumph. ‘I mean male company.’

He was alert now. ‘Are you telling me my daughter is dating someone? Here? Already?’
Gussy held up her hands in partial denial. Now that she’d played her hand she could afford to backpedal a little. String things out. ‘I don’t know anything for a fact. I hear things. I see things. And she as much as told me someone asked her to dinner. I’m just bringing things to your attention. You’re busy building your first bridge. Ecetera, ecetera.’
Will took a minute, then smiled. ‘Okay. Once again, thank you for the heads up.’
She was enjoying herself now. ‘How many other children have your raised? This your first?’
Will wiped his mouth. Working hard to keep his patience. ‘What is it again that you’re bringing to my attention?’
Gussy hesitated.
‘Did you see her kissing? Hear her swearing? Catch her graffitting?’
Gussy huffed herself up. ‘I didn’t see anything. I’m just concerned about her choice of companion. He—.’ She stopped on account of Will’s smile.
He saw this and had the courtesy to look down at his feet.
‘Am I amusing to you?’ she demanded.
He sighed again. This time far more gently and when he looked at her she saw it was with patience. ‘Are you concerned about my daughter in the same way you’re concerned about the bridge?’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘It seems to me Gussy, that you’re concerned about a lot of things.

She was so thunderstruck, she remained absolutely silent.

Will continued, ‘I’m sorry you felt you had to trouble yourself with this. But if she has a boyfriend, or even the intimations of one, frankly I’m delighted. First I’ve heard or seen anything like it. Good for her. In the meantime, she’s probably having a hard enough time working it all out without us talking about her. If you understand my meaning?’

Gussy’s mouth clamped shut.

‘I appreciate you looking out for her. For us, if it comes to that. But she’s got a damned good head on her shoulders, Gussy, and her interests are rather tame. I’d trust her choice.’

Gussy gave a brittle laugh. ‘If you’re referring to her interest in all things saintly—.’

Will interrupted, ‘That’s exactly what I’m referring to and if you already know that about her, chances are this young man does too. I haven’t been that supportive of it in the past, but I’m beginning to see where it might have its advantages.’

Gussy shook her head. ‘You’re barking up the wrong tree entirely.’

‘I’ll take it from here.’

Gussy set her mouth as straight as a hairpin. That was it then. She’d warned the daughter, she’d warned the father. That was about as much as a body could be expected to do.
‘You’re a hard man to get hold of.’
‘I am. I am. Sorry you’ve had to chase me but I’m always on site and none of the mobile phones out here—mobile bricks, I call them—seem to keep a signal longer than five minutes.’
‘Five minutes is probably long enough.’
‘Right. Okay. I’ll keep that in mind.’
‘So where are we?’
‘The old footprint is completely gone. Took longer than I thought it would.’
‘How’s the schedule looking then?’
‘We’ll be back up to speed in 24 hours.’
‘Heard there was a bit of a ruckus at the town meeting.’
‘I’d hardly call it a town meeting.’

Silence.
‘They did learn that I hadn’t built a bridge before now.’
‘Everyone has to start somewhere.’
‘I said as much, but you’ve got no idea the small-town mentality.’
‘Out in the sticks, hey?’
‘Like I said, we’re making progress.’
‘Good. All right. Nothing specific I needed. Just like to be kept abreast of things I’m paying for.’

Silence.
‘It’s a joke, mate. Heat getting to you?’
‘Probably. Look, I’ll do a better job of sending reports. And feel free to drive out whenever you like.’
‘Ha-bloody-ha.’
‘You do your schoolwork today?’ His first words to his daughter across the dinner table.

She nodded. She wasn’t speaking to him at the moment because of the cat. She’d answer a question, but not verbally.

‘Good,’ he said, although he wasn’t sure whether to believe her or not. ‘I know it’s hard sometimes.’ He nodded when he saw her skeptical look. ‘I mean it. I know how hard it can be. I hated school when I was your age. And once again it’s all new people.’

She stared at him.

‘But I gather you’ve already met a few.’

He tried to read her expression. Was she afraid of what he might know? He honestly couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

‘I’m not prying, Moriah. I’m just trying to tell you that L— isn’t like Melbourne. People here, well they like to know what everybody else is doing. They especially like to know about new people.’

She was hanging on his every word. This was a new experience for him. He liked it. Or was it an old experience? Wasn’t this closer to what it used to be like—when he came home from work and she flung herself into his arms? When he was telling her something about the world that was new to her: how aeroplanes flew, or why some flowers opened their petals in the moonlight? Maybe he could have some of that with her again.

‘The number of times I’ve had make my way in new—.’ And just like that her eyes glazed over. He wasn’t sure why. There never seemed to be a reason. It was in these moments that he most resented his wife’s actions. This was partly her responsibility.

‘Anyway,’ he said, pushing his plate away. She stood to take their plates over to the sink. Her sullen and bulky form knocking against the table edge. He tried tamping down the thought, but there it was: he wished Moriah was a boy. It had to be easier. And possibly more enjoyable.

‘You be all right if I go out for a while?’
The water pounded against the plates as she affected not to hear him and he looked to the heavens while making a pretence of putting his hands around a throat and strangling it. When he looked over at her again, she was staring at him.

‘I’ve got to just run out for bit. Do you want to come or are you okay here by yourself?’

She opened her mouth as though to speak, but caught herself in time and just shook her head. She was too old for this malarkey and he had a good mind to tell her so—but he let his shoulders sink instead. Make her feel guilty for a change.

‘Okay. Well call me—the number’s on the fridge—or go next door to Miss Harding, if you get stuck with anything. I’ll be about half an hour.’

She nodded and around fifteen minutes later Will was sitting in the land rover outside old Charlie’s place.

Place gave him the heebee-jeebees. There was no noise and no movement. He knocked and after waiting a while knocked again. Gurgling sounded from near the back of the house. Deciding to disregard civilities, Will walked briskly around to the back yard. The old man was lying on the cold dirt, one hand pointed up at the stars.

‘Charlie?’

The old man jumped in his skin and then slowly turned his head to peer up at Will.

‘Are you all right?’ He made as though to help the old man up, but Charlie batted away the outstretched hand.

‘I’m Will Abrahamson. Remember? I tried knocking but you didn’t hear me.’

Old Charlie now tried to sit up—mouth pulled into rictus as he used every available muscle, and still failed. He stayed where he was.

Will sized up the situation immediately. ‘Maybe I can put the kettle on?’

‘Have a look at the stars,’ Charlie coughed.

Will craned his neck back, way back, the better to see.

‘Get down.’

Will sighed, hands in his coat pockets, and squatted. ‘Look, mate, I don’t really have time for this. I just wanted to talk about the bridge.’
‘Southern Cross. Brightest stars tonight.’

The squatting wasn’t conducive to astronomy so Will kept his eyes on Charlie. Trying to get a handle on how drunk he was and how much time to waste finding out out.

‘Originally or more formally known as Crux, the Southern Cross is made up of four points. One of those points,’ Charlie paused and used his index finger again and Will had no choice but to at least sit down on the ground and pretend to care. ‘One of those points, called alpha Centuri, is actually a triple star, made up, in part, of a red star called proxima Centura. I’m sure you can guess that proxima Centura is the closest star to our solar system?’

Will was trying to see which one of the stars old Charlie was pointing at. ‘I don’t look at stars much.’

‘Figured,’ said Charlie. ‘You think about the earth much?’

‘I have to.’

‘I don’t mean soil, I mean do you think about the fact that we’re living on a moving object?’

There was silence for a moment as Will gazed upwards. Charlie sounded lucid and knowledgeable and Will was getting dragged somewhere despite himself. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Figured.’

Will tried to laugh. ‘Too much on my plate down here.’

‘What’s on your plate down here is because of the movement of the planets. What do you think solar panels are but prayers to the sun.’

Will stayed quiet. He would wait for an entrance into what he wanted to say.

‘You know the earth moves around the Sun? I presume they’re still teaching that,’ continued Charlie. ‘Anyway, earth moves around the sun, sun moves around the centre of
the Milky Way Galaxy and the Milky Way Galaxy orbits in the Local Group of Galaxies. See how small we’re getting?’

Will did and it was making him dizzy. This was a trick he was going to remember. ‘What does the Local Group of Galaxies spin around?’ he asked.

Charlie smiled and spit to his right. ‘Well, I know that the Local Group moves at about 600 kilometres per second. A speed totally unexpected. But I don’t know, and I don’t think anyone else does yet, why it is that we’re moving so fast. Nor what around, to answer your question. What do you think is out there?’

Will shuddered. ‘Look, I appreciate your astronomy lesson, but like I said, I’m actually here to talk about the bridge.’

‘That’s exactly what we are talking about.’

‘We are?’

‘The bridge, the planet, the universe.’

‘If you’re trying to tell me that one bridge doesn’t matter you’re headed in the right direction, but you’ll have to convince a whole other lot of people who think it does.’

The old man spat again. ‘Never said it didn’t matter. The problem is that it matters much more than you think.’

Will nodded. ‘I can see you love all this old wise man stuff and I’ll admit I’ve learned something tonight but—.’

‘Help me up.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I can’t get up. You haven’t learned anything and I need to get up before I get chilblains.’

Will stood and heaved the fragile body upwards. ‘I just want to ask you one question.’

‘Yes?’ Charlie began walking towards the house. On the way he dropped his trousers and began pissing.

‘Christ.’ Will folded his arms across his chest.

Charlie zipped himself up and opened the back door. ‘I don’t like you either,’ he said.
Inside despite himself, Will leaned against the wall watching the older man’s hands as he filled an electric jug to make tea. When he wasn’t speaking he could have been someone’s grandfather. Bent over like a question mark. When his tea was finally handed to him, Will saw that the tea stains from last time hadn’t been properly washed away. He watched as Charlie poured a third of a cup of tea for himself and then filled the remaining two thirds with some colourless liquid. Figured he had approximately half an hour before talking would degenerate into pointlessness.

‘In here or there?’ Charlie asked.

‘Here’s fine.’ They scraped back some chairs and sat.

Charlie waited.

Will looked down at his hands, nodded slightly. ‘So, you knew I’d never built a bridge before.’ The question, the accusation was momentous to him. He had to fight the urge to qualify Charlie’s knowledge with his other building experience.

‘Jim told me.’

Whatever response Will had expected, it wasn’t that one. He didn’t realise Jim knew Charlie. He sipped at his tea. It was bitter and weak.

Charlie gave a lean smile. ‘Why do you think he hired me?’

‘I didn’t know he did.’

‘Just as consultant. Nothing important.’

Will nodded. Feeling slightly off-key. He didn’t know what was past and what was present here.

Charlie gave him another more generous smile. ‘He doesn’t like me either. None of us like each other. Not even from distant school days.’

Will narrowed his eyes.

Charlie laughed. ‘Poor Will. He thought he was the sun and he’s just found out about the Milky Way Galaxy.’
Will saw that he’d underestimated Jim and Charlie and purely for reasons of appearance. A CEO’s flashy grin and a drunkard’s slur and he’d thought he was smarter than them both. Instead, he was well and truly out of his depth. Weighing up his options he decided to risk asking what he wanted to know. ‘What’s your typical role on a bridge-build?’

‘You’re not ready for that. Ask another question.’
Will looked down at his tea. Frustrated. Confused.
‘Jim only does what he needs to do, Will. But then you should know him better than I do.’
‘I don’t think so.’
‘No. I don’t think so either. I’ve sat across the table from hundreds of men like you, Will. I’ve had this conversation hundreds of times. Some of you are a little quicker to catch on, some a little slower.’ He sipped at his tea. ‘What else is on your mind?’

Will shut his eyes briefly. Whatever he asked could only give the man more satisfaction. Any display of ignorance. But he was ignorant. In fact, he felt strung up by his balls. It was Jim he wanted to rip through now: Jim must have known his foreman would eventually find himself here, seated across the table like so many other idiots.

He decided to try a new tack. ‘What is a black hole?’
Charlie laughed—a gurgle in the back of his throat. He shook a finger at Will.
‘I’m not letting you sidestep. What’s a black hole; think of a rivet hole in space. What does that mean? Cavities concentrate stress. That’s what black holes do—concentrate stress. Concentrate energy. Millions of galaxies. Best to give in to it. Next question, real question.’

‘All right. Why did the last bridge fall down?’
‘Good question.’ He squinted at Will. ‘Do you really want to know?’
Will tried to understand the question. Couldn’t. ‘Of course I want to know. I don’t want to make the same mistake, if that’s what it was.’
‘No mistake.’
Will cocked his head to one side, as though trying to hear better. ‘Something obvious then, you think? Even deliberate?’

‘Ignorance.’

Will nodded. Okay.

‘Lack of respect.’

Will tried to make sense of this. ‘Referring to spirits or something like that? Is that what you mean?’ He had been warned that there might be some fuss with regard to sacred sites.

Charlie nodded.

Will sat back. Pleased with himself and at the same time trying to think through the implications. Charlie might be suggesting a type of sabotage because proper dues weren’t paid. ‘Well, surely we can get that seen to.’

‘Up to you.’

‘Okay, well I’ll put the word around.’

‘No, no, you have to carry out the ritual.’ Charlie drained his cup.

‘I thought the whole point was that white men weren’t allowed to.’

Charlie sneered. ‘You ever seen an Aboriginal bridge?’

Will shook his head.

‘So,’ said Charlie, ‘it’s not an Aboriginal ritual.’

‘Now you’ve lost me.’

‘All right.’ Charlie ran his tongue along his top gum. ‘Get me a beer.’

‘Look, mate—’

‘In the fridge. Get yourself one too.’

Half mindless with sudden frustration and the desire to get this over and done with, Will did as he was asked.

‘I open it on the door handle,’ Charlie offered.

But Will had the satisfaction of using his bare hand.

Charlie drank greedily. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘no doubt you want the simplified version. But do you want the long or short simplified version?’

‘Short.’
‘The land is living—moving, living, breathing. Running round the sun. If you want to alter the land you must pay it dues.’

‘What sort of dues?’

Charlie closed his eyes and nodded. ‘Exactly.’

Will could feel his jaw-line stiffen with restraint. He kept himself in check for Moriah’s sake. He kept himself in check by thinking about what he was going to do to Jim next time he saw him.

‘Just tell me what the dues are, Charlie.’

‘Blood.’

‘Sorry?’

Silence.

‘Come on, Charlie. You tell me about the hundreds of other men sitting before you, and I’m supposed to believe you’ve told them they have to offer blood dues?’

Charlie nodded.

Will took in a long breath. ‘Well, that’s all very interesting.’ He hoped his voice sounded as sarcastic as he intended. ‘I’ve never heard of this before and I’ve been in construction for over twenty-five years.’

Charlie fixed a lightless eye on him. ‘Doing renovations. Building on top of other people’s foundations. Including your office complexes. Have you ever built something on land that hasn’t had any sort of structure on it?’

‘Course I have. Vacant lots. All kinds of things.’

Charlie smiled. ‘Vacant lots,’ he repeated. ‘Vacant lots in the city are not so vacant.’ His eyes were like black prunes. But the smile didn’t leave his mouth.

Will stood. ‘It’s been a very illuminating evening. I think I’ll make my way now.’

Charlie clutched his beer. ‘You’re a free man. Do what you want. But you’ll be back.’
Will looked at him a long moment. ‘Just a small word of warning: if I find out that you’ve been sabotaging the bridge in any way—.’

Charlie had his hands raised in the air. ‘No need,’ he said. ‘But when you want to know more, you come back again.’

‘You can be sure I will.’

Charlie suddenly yelled. Banged his fist against the table. ‘You think you’re humouring me. You walk away and build your bridge and pretend you know nothing about the sun.’

‘I don’t know anything about the sun!’

‘Then walk away!’ Charlie fairly spat the words at him but then suddenly drooped. Looked his age. ‘It’s not that difficult. What are you getting so riled up about? I can give you books that will show you that men have been doing this for thousands of years. Round up some animals—.’

‘What?’

‘Find an animal.’ Charlie looked up at him. ‘Then kill it on-site, offer it and bury it. It’s as simple as that. You’re getting worked up over nothing. The Milky Way Galaxy is only one of thousands orbiting up there.’

‘What?’

‘It gets bigger. The story you’re in gets bigger.’

Will shook his head as though trying to rid it of everything he was hearing. ‘What if I tell someone?’

Charlie grinned.

‘I mean it. Imagine the field day the papers would have.’

‘So tell them.’

‘Does Jim know about this—your advice?’

‘Does the Milky Way Galaxy know about the Sun?’

Will held a hand up in front of himself. ‘Okay, stop. Just stop talking.’

Charlie nodded. But it wasn’t triumphant. It was perfunctory.
‘Just for the record, old man, I think you are silly in the head. I’m sorry to say that, but I think it’s best if you know where I stand.’

‘I’m tired,’ said old Charlie.

‘I’m tired too,’ Will said, and he left.
‘I want some help, Father.’ Gussy wasn’t looking at him when she said it, but he opened the door wider and pointedly looked at his watch, then back at her.

She didn’t bother trying to tell him it was only going to take a minute and he gently sighed and let her come inside. She was lucky, or he was lucky, that she hadn’t come ten minutes later. He’d already have been in bed with his thesis notes.

As it was he stifled a yawn as he followed her down his passageway and into the living room. He referred it as his prayer room because it was where he said his daily mass and where all his religious artefacts were. The cross and chalice and Bible. He liked to think it comforted his visitors to see all these otherworldly signs in the midst of their troubles. They certainly comforted him.

Gussy sat in the highest chair in the room and looked expectantly to him.

‘What seems to be the problem, then?’

‘I suppose I’m a bit lonely and I don’t mean to get involved in other people’s business, but I don’t have much else to do.’

He wanted to laugh. What a self-pitying piece of nonsense. She loved putting her nose in other people’s lives and the pretence at otherwise was a weak contrivance. But she had to know he knew that, so what was she up to? ‘There is always work for idle hands, Gussy. Are you here to volunteer your services?’

She half-smiled and he wished they could have just had an honest conversation, but as far as he knew it wasn’t possible. Better just to stick to the script.

‘What’s on your mind then?’

‘The bridge.’

That was unexpected. In Father Nott’s mind Gussy was the modern day equivalent of the old-fashioned matchmaker. Even at the bridge site she still concentrated her energies on the activities between the younger men and women. That was the singular misfortune of
women who lived for their men; when the man was gone, so was so much of the purpose. Still, Father Nott hadn’t deluded himself into thinking that Jesus was going to help her fill the time up.

‘What about it?’

‘I’ve heard talk that the reason it isn’t standing has nothing to do with the way it was built.’ He looked quizzically at her. ‘I’m referring to rituals, Father. Apparently there are certain things that need to be done in order to get a bridge to stand and let me just say that the only reason I’m paying any attention is because I don’t want to be pouring good money after bad. Again. Now do you know anything about these rituals?’

Father Nott shook his head, his ears pricking up. ‘What exactly was said? And who said it?’

‘I don’t want to attribute it to one person, Father. That hardly seems charitable.’

Despite himself he could feel his face crimsoning, and then, of course, at his discomfort she predictably relaxed.

‘I’m simply here to discuss the general matter with you.’

‘Well, I repeat myself—what was said?’

‘I didn’t follow it very well.’

Father wanted to throw his hands in the air, but he didn’t move. He stayed quiet. One of the things the confessional box had taught him was the power of silence. A question asked was a question asked indefinitely if you didn’t rush in and help the person who didn’t want to answer it. He simply looked at her.

She cleared her throat. ‘What I mean is that I probably didn’t understand what was said.’

Father once again held his tongue. There was very little, in his reckoning, that fell outside the powers of Gussy’s understanding, unless she flat out didn’t want to understand. She was just having fun teasing it out.
As if to confirm it, she frowned at his silence, then continued speaking. ‘He said the bridge needed help to stand. Or rather, that the land needed help to accept that the bridge would stand. Or would be there. Or something like that.’

‘I’m not sure I follow.’

Gussy bent and placed her handbag on her lap. He could see that she was on the verge of announcing her goodbyes.

‘Now really, Gussy, there must be a reason you felt compelled to come here and tell me about the conversation.’

She nodded.

‘Well, then, out with it. Plain speaking.’

‘I think he has, or is planning to kill an animal to make the bridge stand up.’

Father Nott looked at her. ‘Is that what they said?’

She shrugged.

He sat silent a good half minute. Then said, ‘Does that upset you?’

She looked surprised. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Gussy, animal sacrifice has been going on for a long time.’

She shuddered slightly, excitedly. ‘Not nowadays, surely?’

He nodded. ‘Possibly. Probably. People still cling to pagan rites. They like the tradition and they like the directness. And when you add alcohol,’ he peered at her to see if she would react, but she was sitting mum so he continued, ‘well, who knows where it leads. It’s far more difficult to sit with an unseeable God than to worship the sun and moon. The instinct to reach for a god is entirely correct, but many prefer a pagan illusion.’

She leaned forward. ‘And you’re not worried about it?’

‘Beyond hoping whoever it is chooses one of their own animals and doesn’t go trying to steal someone else’s or that he doesn’t perform the more garish ceremonial rituals, no, I’m not at all worried.’

Gussy put a hand to her chest. ‘Well, that makes me feel a lot better.’
Father Nott genuinely smiled. She was a strange one. Who would have thought that she could be spooked by such a thing? ‘We all have our beliefs, don’t we? It’s remarkable how limited they are in the scheme of things. Even I still knock on wood.’

‘I pray to Saint Anthony whenever I lose the remote control.’

Father Nott smacked his knees and gave a little chuckle. ‘There you are then. You and I are as heathen as the next.’

Gussy got to her feet. ‘It’s amazing how things can play on the mind. Especially when you’ve got no one telling you how silly you are.’

Father nodded and moved her out of the room and along the hallway.

‘You won’t tell anyone about this?’ she said.

Father opened the front door. ‘No. Just between us.’

She started to go, then pulled back. ‘By the way,’ and she tapped the side of her nose, ‘that girl, Moriah, claims to be a saint.’

Father frowned for a moment. Moriah who? Then he remembered. ‘Ah, well,’ he said. ‘The follies of youth.’

Gussy left.

When he shut the door he leaned against it for a moment, with his fingers to his lips. Well, this was exciting. Animal sacrifice. Who would have thought this lot could concoct that? As he told Gussy, he wasn’t worried about it. But it certainly changed his perspective on the conversation with old Charlie, the devil. Mind you, if Father didn’t get on top of this Charlie might find himself in a spot of trouble. The rest of the town was much more inclined to react precisely the way Gussy did. Charlie was very foolish to have announced his intentions like that and remarkably fortunate that she came to him. The last thing he wanted to be dealing with was any sort of mass hysteria. Better nip this in the bud as soon as possible.

Not that he was going to try and prevent it. Charlie would see soon enough that slaughtering animals was better for food than to make the world a little closer to the way he wanted it. People always thought that they believed in the result or outcome of religious ceremony, when most often what they believed in was the ceremony itself: the
trance, the words, the joined hands, the bent head, the bits and bobs that were eaten or drunk or nailed on the wall.

No, people didn’t really believe in the outcome of pagan rituals, they believed in the dance. Still, hats off to old Charlie for trying. It would make things a little livelier for him for a bit too when word got around. Nothing like controversy to stir the spirit. In fact, Father clapped his hands together, he might have just found his thesis topic: *Baal Returns: Paganism in Outback Australia*

Father finally left the front door to go and have a sherry. He wanted to sit up for a bit and savour it all.
Volume Two — Exegesis

*Altaring the Literary Landscape:*
An Exploration of Literary Techniques for the Representation of Human Sacrifice

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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MA Crim. (1st Class)

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Portfolio of Design and Social Context

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Cassandra Austin

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Thank you my friend.
Man is born to believe. And if no church comes forward with its title-deeds of truth, sustained by a tradition of sacred ages and by the conviction of countless generations to guide him, he will find altars and idols in his own heart and imagination.

Benjamin Disraeli
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to Literary Representations of Human Sacrifice

From the 17th to 19th centuries—following the recent encounters with tribal societies such as the American Indians, as well as civilisations of vast and ancient sophistication like the Chinese and the Hindu—an entire school of Christian scholars were galvanised into categorising newly emerging religio-mythic beliefs in the hope of finding a single key throughout; a single key that would unite the unconscious and conscious human impulses across culture and time.

For some of the more eccentric scholars, the ‘key to mythologies’ turned out to be phallic worship¹ (shades of Freud avant la lettre), for others it was universal solar worship.² But in the case of proper Christian scholars, the kind that still fundamentally dominated all schools of European learning from the middle ages until quite recently, that key could only be one thing: Jesus Christ.

All the foreign myths and rituals were seen as intimations and foretellings of the One True Saviour and the one true religion. The enterprise to reclaim all of human history for Christ, in effect—matched with the expansion of knowledge that accompanied

¹ ‘I have drawn up the following sketch of phallic worship, … the most ancient of the superstitions of the human race, [in] that it has prevailed more or less among all known people in ancient times, and that it has been handed down even to a very late and Christian period.’ Westropp and Wake, “Ancient Symbol Worship,” a paper presented to the Anthropological Society of London, April 5th, 1870, unpaginated.
² ‘All mythologies find their explanation in this starry language, and every religion is founded upon the movements of our solar system. The rise and fall of empires and races of men are written in its pages.’ Burgoyne, The Light of Egypt, Volume 11, Introduction.
the expansion of empire—is the background to Joseph Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890). An encyclopedic tome, *The Golden Bough* explored the mythic commonalities between cultures and societies by virtue of their taboos, magic, legends, folklore, tribal lore, divinities, rituals and religious beliefs and activities.

However, Frazer neatly reversed the Christian scholars: finding that instead of the myriad forms of worship and belief being intimations of the one true Christ, it is Christian belief that is the copy, the mangled survivor of these more ancient beliefs.

According to Frazer’s analysis, Jesus Christ’s sacrifice was an echo of ancient customs derived from a single originary myth: a cult of fertility involving the worship and periodic sacrifice of a sacred king-figure, surrogate for a solar deity, who ‘died’ at harvest time, only to be reincarnated every spring. The key threaded throughout the mythologies of the ages was human sacrifice.

Frazer found that across all cultures and ages peoples practised, pretended to practice and ultimately ritualised human sacrifice. Evidence now suggests it was carried out by the early Romans, the Aztec/Mexicas, the Celts, the Norsemen, the Chinese—particularly under the Shang and Zhou Dynasties—and the practice of ‘Nara bali’ still occurred monthly in India into the late eighteen hundreds (with recent revivals in the past decade).

Frazer’s analysis and the demonstration of the pervasiveness of human sacrifice across time and cultures directly influenced many of the 20th Century’s most prominent

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3 Benjamin and others, *The Quest for the Wicker Man*, 20.
thinkers, theorists (from Freud and Wittgenstein to Bataille and Girard) and writers (from T.S. Eliot to Joseph Conrad). In fact, the motif of human sacrifice may be one of the most enduring features of classical, biblical and canonical texts of English literature. Represented in sources as varied as Greek tragedy, the Bible, the oral storytelling and poetry of Norse paganism and common nursery rhymes, human sacrifice, as a theme, has also seeded itself into folktales, plays, epics, ballads, novels and scripture.

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6 According to Vickery (94) Freud’s early work *Totem and Taboo* explicitly drew upon *The Golden Bough*, and although Freud’s development of the concept of the Oedipal complex resulted in a different advancement for the role of totemic figures, Freud himself acknowledged that the ‘chief literary sources’ for his studies were Frazer’s anthropological works.
7 Even though Wittgenstein criticised Frazer’s theoretical analysis, he kept notebooks of reflections on *The Golden Bough* (Vickery, 101).
8 See Bataille’s *The Theory of Religion*, *The Accursed Share*.
9 Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* are seminal anthropological texts dealing with human sacrifice as a key organising principle of society and culture.
11 *The Heart of Darkness* is considered the *exemplar par excellence* of literary novels dealing with human sacrifice.
12 Interestingly, vast disjunctions exist between these real world acts and their literary representations (Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice*, 6), despite the fact that comparisons invariably depend upon the same historiographic accounts—and unfortunately it is outside the scope of this exegesis to ‘compare and contrast’ the historical data with the literary versions. There is also contention about the actual numbers of sacrificial victims; many of the deaths and corpses ascribed to this ritualistic action may not have been killed under such circumstances since archaeologists and anthropologists find it difficult to separate murders, executions and sacrifices (See Green, *Dying for the Gods*).
This exegesis concerns itself with the fictional accounts of human sacrifice, and explores the way representations of human sacrifice differ in form and meaning across genre and literary texts.

1.2 Brief Survey of Existing Scholarship

There are a number of scholarly accounts of the theme across biblical literature: for instance, Hugo Grotius’ *De Satisfactione Christi* (1617), Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and Jon Levenson’s *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (1993). However, the existing study focuses more on the meaning of human sacrifice within the religious or historical context and, the current exegesis is interested in the literary techniques behind the representation of the act in literature.¹⁴

There are a few critical studies concerned with representational device: Derek Hughes’ *Culture and Sacrifice: Ritual Death in Literature and Opera* asserts that contemporary representations of human sacrifice are a reaction to the residue of barbarism remaining in an author’s culture, although this analysis still privileges meaning over technique. Thomas Cousineau’s *Ritual Unbound*, examines a group of modernist literary novels that demonstrate ‘vestiges of primitive sacrifice rituals’.¹⁵ This analysis, while considering technique—for example, rhetorical strategy and prose style—

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¹⁴ In one of the more famous studies (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*), Erich Auerbach considers the Hebrew narrative of the Binding of Isaac, along with Homer’s description of Odysseus’s scar, as a means of articulating his two models for the representation of reality in literature. The representation of the sacrifice itself is a secondary consideration.

¹⁵ Cousineau, front pages.
understands sacrifice in relation to the anthropological symbolic. Cousineau argues that modernist novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and *To the Lighthouse*, recognising that a narrator is prone to become victim of a social sacrificial ritual, precisely resist this. Similarly, Michiel Heyns’ *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1995) and Andrew Mozina’s *Joseph Conrad and the Art of Sacrifice* (2001) concern themselves with the way realist fiction reinforces existing social (victimary) structures through techniques of representation—analysis given flesh (primarily) by Rene Girard’s anthropological scape-goating theories.

In other words, besides Hughes’ 2007 work, none of these textual analyses focuses on the literal depiction of human sacrifice, only on the symbolic. Hughes contends that this representational shift is indicative of the gradual decline of religious belief beginning with the Romantic period. However, there are plenty of contemporary texts that do depict the act literally: genre texts—which perhaps suggests that analyses of representations between types of text will be more indicative of representational difference than analysis across time periods.

Furthermore, only Hughes’ work and Susan Mizruchi’s *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (1998) attempt to locate the represented sacrifice within a religious context. Yet given that the word ‘sacrifice’ originates from the Latin and means ‘to make holy’, representational reference to the religious seems purely logical. According to Shuger (*The Renaissance Bible*, 131) this definition also works conversely: because of the etymological connection preserved both in Latin

16 Hughes, 151.
18 The perception of a supernatural recipient is precisely what distinguishes sacrifice from other types of ritual killings. (See Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*.)
(sacer/sacrificare) and Greek (hieron/hiereion), that which is sacred is sacrificed. It would also be rare to find, in the limited accepted archeological and anthropological confirmations of actual human sacrifice, instances where the idea of the supernatural was not included. Thus a human sacrifice is the killing of a human being for the direct purposes of appeasing, propitiating, evoking or announcing a god/s (even where the term god/s remains ‘fluid’).19

Are texts characterising the sacrificial activity without reference to gods or an afterworld merely portraying ritual20 killings, not human sacrifices? Or, has human sacrifice simply been divested of its traditional religious meaning and invested with sociological meaning for the purposes of literature? Alternatively, do ‘holiness’ and ‘the sacred’ in relation to sacrifice have to refer to traditional gods, or can these be replaced with the modern ‘symbolic’ gods of fame, art or money?

Of the larger scale scholarly works, Grotius’ De Satisfactione Christi (1617) and Frazer’s The Golden Bough (1890) are at once the most exemplary, and the most illustrative of these questions. Evidence for the era in which each was written,21 Grotius’ analysis differs from Frazer’s in that it effects to believe in the efficacy of human sacrifice supernaturally (Shuger, 84); while Frazer’s analysis categorises the mythic existence of the act and theorises about its religious origins without judgment or acceptance of the beliefs inherent to it.

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20 Although we now commonly use the word ritual when referring to activities undertaken repetitiously i.e. the morning coffee ritual, etymologically it is derived from the Latin rite refers to religious ceremony. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary
21 Grotius writes in a period where belief remains the bedrock of all scholarship, while Frazer writes at the beginning of the peak of unbelief, the threshold of the Modern.
It is the contention of this exegesis that the chief difference between two great chroniclers of human sacrifice—that of the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice—will find parallel in the technical differences of representing, and in the meaning of, human sacrifice between literary and genre texts. Formal representational differences across these types of text is expected, but I propose that the meanings of human sacrifice shall be equally as divergent.

1.3 Exegetical Method

This exegesis focuses on the identification of literary techniques for representing human sacrifice in twentieth century literature. These different literary techniques will be analysed for difference in meaning and form: primarily synchronically (within a given period between ‘High’ and ‘Low’ or ‘popular’ and ‘literary’ fictions), with a secondary focus on the diachronic (modern and post-modern texts and beyond). Essentially, a literary treatment of human sacrifice will be contrasted with the horror genre treatment.

If ‘literary’ fiction is often classified as such because of its ‘ideology of subjectivity’ or individuality, adherence to realism, and its preference for ‘the play of language’, then ‘horror’ genre fiction might be largely defined in opposition: an

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22 It is helpful to define the linguistic ‘horror’ as opposed to ‘terror’. Terror, considered a defining characteristic of Gothic fiction (Punter, 13) (along with apprehension, confinement, and the claustrophobic pressure of the past), comes from the Latin terrere and means to frighten. Horror, belonging to horror fiction and coming from the Latin horrere, means to bristle or shiver. The former is an imaginative state, the latter a visceral one. Since the literature being discussed does not include Gothic fiction, this exegesis concerns itself with the viscera of ‘horror’.

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‘ideology of connectivity’ that privileges plot over ‘the play of language’, and that while presenting its fictive world as realistically as possible, sees no contradiction in finding the literal monster or supernatural presence lurking there also.23

Both these types of fiction employ ‘intertextual’ devices, or, a ‘range of processes by which a text invokes another’.24 However, using Fowler’s definition of genre ‘modes’ as a signal, or series of signals within the text: ‘a characteristic motif … a formula; a rhetorical proportion or quality’,25 only ‘genre’ fiction provides a predictive element to the reading experience based on these signals that, while not being definitive, are still of such quantity or quality as to enforce or reinforce reader assumptions. As a result, the meanings within a genre novel ‘never belong to it alone’.26

In other words, the literary text is at least self-sufficient, a complete set of meanings, despite remaining part of a literary ‘conversation’. On the other hand, any individual genre text is, in a sense, fundamentally incomplete when isolated from its genre;27 its completed meaning depends on the genre.

Therefore, in the course of the analysis of texts focusing on human sacrifice as subject matter, we can use a single representative literary text28 but require multiple genre texts.

23 Neale, Genre, 9.
25 Fowler, Kinds of Literature, 107.
26 Frow, 49.
27 This is not to suggest that a horror genre novel can’t be understood as a stand-alone text, just that the meaning of a single text occurs in its relation to the entire genre.
28 The exegesis will also draw upon examples from other literary texts representing human sacrifice: namely—Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Peter Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go.
The one literary text considered in detail is Don DeLillo’s *The Names* (1982)—a postmodern novel that is widely considered to have been his breakthrough novel. Also included are six texts categorised as falling within the ‘horror genre’. Birkhead defines the horror genre as a twentieth century development following the crossing of two pre-existing genres: ‘the marvellous of old story’, meaning the epic, with ‘the natural of modern novels’, meaning a form of realism.²⁹

The six horror genre texts all present particular types of horror: H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Festival” (1923), for instance, works within the rules of a subgenre called ‘cosmic horror’. Cosmic horror proposes that horror itself is evidence that the world is evil and malignant. Thomas Tyron’s novel *Harvest Home* (1973) is ‘atavistic’ horror—concerned with the devolution of humans taking part in archaic rites and rituals, which have uncannily survived into the modern world. Ted Klein’s best-selling novel *The Ceremonies* (1984) is a combination of cosmic and atavistic horror.

Considered ‘post-modern horror’, Stephen King’s texts draw upon all the sub-generic traditions within the horror genre. He is also the champion of homegrown horror; not the exotica of the European Dracula, but the horrific found in the familiar world and ordinary landscape of America. His short story *Children of the Corn* (1976) is a prime example of this intention. While King’s voice is American folksy, his English equivalent might be Ramsey Campbell’s understated sophistication. Campbell’s *The Nameless* (1981) is similarly aware of the entire horror tradition, similarly focused on the local landscape, and also tends to reject the vampiric, ghoulish and pulp clichés of the horror

genre; it is the modern world that horrifies, as much as any monster. Hardy and Shaffer’s novel *The Wicker Man* (1978) is a novelisation of a film focusing on a wide variety of pagan beliefs and superstitions.

A number of different paradigms offer themselves as methods for analysis of literary form and content; most obviously, the two related schema are the French *recit/histoire* and the Russian Formalist *fabula/sujet*. These pairings are more commonly understood in English as the ‘diegesis’: that which corresponds to the events (real or imagined) that the story actually conveys, and the ‘narrative’: that which refers to the ways in which the story is told (in what order, by whom etc.).

The component these systems fail to make explicit is that which signifies the relation between the text and reader. The act of splitting the events of a story from the telling of the story creates an absence—and that absence signifies the relationship between the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ as it were, of the tale. Some of the differences between the texts under consideration may fall into this arena—which is why the current analysis is structured according to Frow’s tripartite schema of the formal, rhetorical and thematic.

While the ‘formal’ and the ‘thematic’ correspond to the ways in which the story is told and the events conveyed by the story respectively, the ‘rhetorical’ refers to the way textual relations between senders and receivers of messages are organised.

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31 Walsh, “Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory”, 593.
32 Frow, 74.
1.4  Link Between the Creative Project and Exegesis

The following analysis will provide technical clues to the depiction of human sacrifice within fiction, and illuminate where my work, *The Bridge*, in its handling of the same subject matter, might do well to embrace or reject these same devices. Studying both the literary and the horror genre depictions of human sacrifice, would allow an understanding the respective representational strengths and limitations: such knowledge would assist me in the writing of a novel that would attend to the symbolic resonance of the literary, without losing the visceral ‘readerly’ (in Barthes’ term) pleasure and excitement of the genres.
Chapter 2: The Formal

The Formal refers to ‘the organisation of the material properties of language … the degree of complexity of sentences’, the specification of ‘certain types of tone and certain effects of verisimilitude’, and even ‘a certain kind of subject matter’ that ‘corresponds to these stylistic choices’.33

The Names34 can be categorised as postmodern literature owing to its self-referentiality, fragmentation, paradox, and ‘distrust in the meta-narrative’.35 In particular, the Frazerian meta-narrative of human sacrifice is reduced to the local element and essentially disintegrated within DeLillo’s text. However, the emphasis on the descriptive poetry of landscape, what we might call ‘thought-scape’, and the privileging of the linguistic particular, provide the hallmarks of the novel’s style. Its neo-baroque syntax: a deeply poetic rhythmic composition, and its linguistic ‘particularism’—by which I mean its use of ‘precise, exacting’ word choice—is what lends the novel its distinction. The language swings between attending to the minutiae and then its potential abstracted implication:

Moments kept coming back to me, precise textures, the brand names of cigarettes, the old guitarist’s

33 Frow, 74.
34 Synopsis: the protagonist, James Axton, a risk analyst, travels the Mideast region collecting information for a company that provides big corporations with ‘political insurance’. The plot revolves around his relationship with his wife and son, who live on an Aegean island, and through them with two men: Owen Brademas, an intellectual archaeologist leading the dig where Axton’s wife works, and Frank Volterra, an avant-garde filmmaker. These three men develop an obsession about a cult that sacrifices or murders frail/disabled men and women when they wander into a location whose initials match those of their own names.
35 Lyotard, Introduction: The Postmodern Condition, xxiv-xxv.

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eyes, his seamed brown hand, and what the Bordens said, and who plucked a grape from the wet bunch, and where people sat, and how we rearranged ourselves around the table as the evening passed through its own solid objects to become what it is now. (225)

From the specific ‘seamed brown hand’ to the abstracted understanding of an evening passing through ‘its own solid objects’, *The Names* particularises the fictive world and therefore its meaning. The word colour, rhythms and silences, are indicative of a text that reveres, as much as it attempts to play with the metafictive aspect of, language.

This style might be compared with pointillist painting. The gradually accruing dots of paintwork call attention to the surface of the work at the same time as allowing us to see through it, see the picture—consequently making us aware of the act of perception itself.  

Similarly, DeLillo calls attention to the language, the words, and even and especially the act of reading.

In direct contrast, language in the horror genre text is focused on what will keep the action moving and the reader engaged with the moving action: the language thus aspires to be a clear window, and the words (or the brush strokes) are more or less invisible. The reader, transparently transported directly to the represented reality of the story, does not attend to the individual words, but to the whole greater than the sum of its parts. If there is particularism here, it occurs in the ‘uncanny’ juxtaposition of verb and

36 The real point of pointillism and impressionism perhaps being to paint not scenes, but to represent the act of seeing.
37 In all of the horror genre texts chosen for inclusion, the basic premise is that a stranger—male generally, otherwise a couple or small family—visits or moves into a remote community which has cut ties with the modern world, and there unearths the practising of an archaic ritual that culminates in human sacrifice. The individual novel synopses are footnoted at the first mention of each text.
noun:

Workmen were disemboweling white Georgian houses to make room for apartments. Helen lived at the end of the side street ... She came to the door before Judy could ring, her hands pink as a dummy’s with rubber gloves.

(Campbell, *The Nameless*38 1981: 63)

The confusion between the animate and inanimate: where the buildings are disemboweled like bodies and thus animate, and the hands are like a dummy’s thus inanimate, is a classic example of the ‘uncanny’.39 Campbell’s word-pictures impart a worldview of underlying cosmic horror, a Gnostic horror, even in a moment as classically banal as a move from an urban exterior to a woman washing dishes. Instead of admiring words or phrases, the reader is experiencing an unease.

The language in the horror genre text also privileges the necessary and the concrete. This preference for the ‘regular’ at the level of language means there is less conflict with the ‘unreal’ at the level of subject matter; everything within the novel—both text and subject matter—are matter of fact and a matter of fact. Somewhat ironically, this often commits the horror genre text to realist tropes in a way the literary text is free to dismiss. For example, the horror genre novel dealing with human sacrifice cannot afford the linguistic self-reflexivity inherent in *The Names*, as reader focus on language might result in a break with content.

38 Synopsis: A young girl goes missing and is believed dead until the girl’s mother receives a phone call—from her daughter. The woman tracks her daughter to a cult engaged in human sacrifice.

The formal emphasis on language to create *The Names* is echoed within the fictive world where the multiple languages spoken, wordplay, pattern-making with the alphabet, and the matching of letters by the cult are set against the figures, accounting data, statistics and risk calculations carried out by Axton, so that the reader is made aware of the gap, or the mystery, between the signifier and the signified:

‘What do we have? Names, letters, sounds, derivations, transliterations. We approach nameforms warily. Such secret power. When the name is itself secret, the power and influence are magnified.’ (210)

‘We have a complex grading system. Prison statistics weighed against the number of foreign workers … Have the generals’ salaries been doubled recently. This year’s cotton crop or winter wheat yield. Payments made to the clergy’ (33–34)

This tension between the beauty of language as a form and its formal failure to adequately or accurately represent is not exclusive to *The Names*, but it is more prominent, indeed is more a function of the meaning of the text when considering the literary as opposed to the genre.

Because the fictive world in the horror genre texts studied might be compromised by literary playfulness between text and narrative, drawing attention to the conceits of form risks drawing attention to the conceits of content—a jeopardy heightened where the supernatural is concerned. Therefore, for example, the order of the ‘story-time’ and the
‘discourse time’\textsuperscript{40} is kept as close together as possible. Techniques typical of representing discourse time, techniques typical in literary fiction—digression and flashback—are largely absented, or used sparingly in these horror genre texts.

Additionally, as opposed to a literary text, it is possible to identify two stylistic conventions most often utilised in the six horror genre texts analysed:

a) Omniscient narrators. Omniscience allows a reader to know what the protagonists cannot: that their decisions, or lack of them, are only leading them closer to death. This stylistic choice ratchets up tension for the reader.

b) Third person perspective. A first person perspective precludes suspense about the narrator’s possible death and since anyone might die (or be resurrected) in the horror novel, suspense about who will die (or live) and how, is a primary narrative drive.

\section*{2.1 Off-stage/On-stage Action}

Walter Burkert has argued that ritual sacrifice (of goats and other animals) in ancient Greece gave birth to Greek tragedy.\textsuperscript{41} This link between sacrifice and theatre is appropriate given that one of the dilemmas faced by texts dealing with representations of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{40} By ‘story-time’ I mean ‘the time sequence of plot events’, and by ‘discourse time’ I mean ‘the time of the presentation of those events’ in the text (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do”, 122).

\textsuperscript{41} Evidence for which includes the fact that the word’s origin is Greek: tragoidia, contracted from trag(o)-aoidi = ‘goat song’ from tragos = ‘goat’ and aeidein = ‘to sing’ (Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual”, 88, 93). Thus the meaning of ‘tragedy’ refers to the tragic song sung by a goat before being led to the altar for sacrifice to Dionysus (Pizzato, \textit{Theatres of Human Sacrifice}), an occurrence before a theatrical performance. More recent work considers the governing spatial paradigm of tragedy to be ‘the ritual of a circle of community around a surrogate altar’ (Wiles, \textit{Tragedy in Athens}).
\end{footnotesize}
human sacrifice is whether or not to have the act ‘on-stage’ or ‘off-stage’. Adapted for a text, ‘on-stage’ simply means the event is directly reported to the reader, while ‘off-stage’ means the text displaces the report of the event one or more degrees. While there is only one way of being ‘on-stage’ (directly bringing the action to reader perception unmediated by any but the author herself), there are an almost unlimited number of ways of putting the action ‘off-stage’.

Just as occurs within Greek tragedies dealing with this subject matter, literary texts—*Heart of Darkness, Hawksmoor, Never Let Me Go* and *The Names*—locate the human sacrifice off-stage. In *The Names* the reader learns the details of the event not through the narrator’s direct involvement or even recollection, but as the protagonist learns it: as part of a secondhand retelling by someone else who was present. Even when a secondary character, Owen Brademas, has the chance to witness a human sacrifice in person, he chooses not to; finding that directly looking would amount to a form of barbarism (an effect purposefully cultivated in the genre text) whereas merely knowing about it does not (308).

Dramatically, this off-stage action is anticlimactic. Receiving information second-hand, even if told as though not second-hand (interior monologue provided for the reader as well as speech acts), removes the events from the reader. *The Names* brings this choice to reader attention:

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42 See Pizzato, *Theatres of human Sacrifice.*
43 To further the point, Donna Tartt’s cross-over literary thriller *The Secret History* has the human sacrifice off-stage in the literary style, and the murder on-stage in the genre style. I am unable to find an example of a literary text dealing with human sacrifice that does not locate the actual killing off-stage.
'When the storyteller interrupts his narrative to consider things, to weigh events and characters … to examine methodically, the mob grows impatient, then angry, crying out together, “Show us their faces, tell us what they said!”’ (276)

Brademas says this as preface to his story within the text; at the beginning of his recounting of the sacrifice he traveled to be near—making a distinction between the crude appetites of ‘the mob’, who want the information directly, and the presumably higher sensibilities of the reader who is receiving it secondhand.44

By having Brademas suggest that the events are being submerged by the surrounding commentary, DeLillo is reminding the reader how a narrative structures the diegesis—how the telling structures the tale.45 This self-conscious device not only asks the reader to reflect on his or her sensibilities in relation to art, it also, and paradoxically, serves the illusion of reality—particularly in relation to receiving the images of the sacrifice:

‘We have not talked about the sound, the hammers, a damp noise, the way she crumpled, how soft it was … Or how long it took, we have not talked about this. Or how we hit harder because we could not stand the sound. How Emmerich used the cleft end of the hammer. Anything to change the sound.’ (210–211)

44 DeLillo makes a similar distinction between images and words: ‘A picture is like the masses: a multitude of impressions. A book on the other hand, with its linear advance of words and characters seems to be connected to individual identity… Somehow pictures always lead to people as masses. Books belong to individuals.’ (Desalm, “Masses, Power and the Elegance of Sentences”, http://perival.com/delillo/desalm_interview.html, unpaginated.)
45 The logical referent—both formally and thematically—is Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Embedding Marlow’s narrative in a wider frame, Conrad attempted to gain ‘realism’ by creating the illusion of a seamless set of tellers and receivers of story, of which the reader is only one.
The effect of this embedded retelling is, in fact, far more horrific than the ‘on-stage’ representations of human sacrifice in the horror genre text. This retelling combines reflective interpretation with the description of action—a far more powerful tool for representing verisimilitude than just the latter.

Retelling as an interpretation of action retains the physicality while softening the context: we are only given a glimpse. But what a powerful glimpse: the process by which someone is killed with a blunt instrument takes time: hands, arms must be repeatedly raised, and the sacrificers need to catch their breath. But there is also frenzy, because the repulsive nature of the act demands an overextension of intent. To slow the blow is to give the mind a chance to intervene. And it must be done as a group because the will is strengthened by the mere fact of seeing others act. The mode of ‘retelling’ means the sacrificial act is received as chillingly believable.

In comparison, little is subtle, silent, omitted or ‘off-stage’ in the horror genre texts. In particular, the human sacrifice/s is front and centre stage:

Tamar sprang forward… A silver crescent gleamed in her hand; she raised the sharpened sickle and … in one swift movement she slashed it across the exposed throat. His roar became a wild bellow, then turned to a gurgle; a torrent of red appeared … They bent him back further and came with a cup and bowl to catch the precious liquid


[^46]: *Harvest Home* is the story of a New York couple, Ned and Beth Constantine, with a difficult teenager daughter who move to a tiny village called Cornwall Combe, in New England. The narrator, Ned, grows suspicious about the clinging of the villagers to the ‘old ways’ and eventually uncovers the secrets of the Harvest Festival: human sacrifices to a pagan god to ensure a prosperous corn harvest. But, in a complication, his wife and

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Here, the detailed specificity does not enhance plausibility but grotesquery. Here the individual genre text is concerned with the intentions of the genre as a whole: to be horrifying. But the particularism that would establish the violence as actually occurring is sacrificed to the explicitness: the gestures are exaggerated, the violence does not tire anyone, there are no mistakes made, no one wonders what to do with the body afterwards.

In the same way that sexual explicitness—again without tiring bodies or unpleasant sounds or smells—is a defining part of the pleasure of a pornographic text, the detailing of the horror—traumatised flesh, a demon’s red eyes—is a defining part of the pleasure achieved in the reading of the horror text. In this way, the literal but not realistic depiction of all\textsuperscript{47} verges on the theatrical. This theatricality is not to suggest that the action becomes farce: the narrative drive, the tradition of this subject matter and the potential consequence within the fictional world are all too strong for that, but it does suggest that ‘staging’ the action signals that the horror is explicitly intended for public consumption. Even within the fictive worlds of the horror genre text, both the overtly horrific sacrificial rites, as well as the seemingly insignificant preparations, are executed in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} For instance, \textit{The Nameless} includes representation of cobweb material that effectively substitutes for a god’s ears.

\textsuperscript{48} The same holds true even for the most allegorical of human sacrifice texts: Shirley Jackson’s short story \textit{The Lottery}.

\textsuperscript{47} For instance, \textit{The Nameless} includes representation of cobweb material that effectively substitutes for a god’s ears.

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When the ‘Old One’ in *The Ceremonies* takes Carol on an outing to, unbeknownst to her, enact certain rites—rites that might potentially be disrupted by something as simple as a ladybird (312) or blue handkerchief (315)—they are executed at an amusement park. The reader is privy to ceremonial dance, imbibing, sex acts, kidnapping, the donning of particular garb, singing or chanting, calculation of moon cycles, visions, the use of familiars and so on, as forms of preparation.

These public displays, of even the smallest gesture, may well indicate what the horror genre has inherited from Greek tragedy. Discussion of the sacrificial ritual as ‘performative art’ (see Wiles 1997 or Pizzato 2005) is beyond the scope of this analysis, however, the effect of the theatrical in the horror genre, namely the cathartic effect, is discussed in chapter three.

What we are left with, having analysed the form of the literary and horror genre texts is stylistic choice based on intended effect. Perhaps the ultimate goal of both is the same—to create a certain unease in the reader—however, the methods are directly opposed: the literary text creates its symbolic action at the level of language itself, while the genre fiction uses language to create its symbolic action.

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49 Synopsis: a college lecturer isolated in the countryside and working on a thesis about horror literature, gradually realises that genuine supernatural horror—that threatens the entire world—is taking place around him.

The literary text does not represent the sacrifice directly, but asks the reader to contemplate it, while the horror genre text places it centre stage and demands that the reader envisage it.

Ironically, the literary text, by forcing the reader to ‘over-hear’ instead of ‘see’, makes the act more believable: the hammers, the damp noise etc. The horror genre text on the other hand, by moving the reader past the words to the fictive world depicted, creates a sense of physical repugnance and existential disgust, and even promotes a confusion between the fictive world and the real one. However, while the textual form works to ratchet up the tension, the direct representation of a human sacrifice results in a theatrical rather than believable event.
Chapter 3: The Rhetorical

The rhetorical ‘organises relations of power and solidarity between speakers (or their textual representatives), and organizes the kinds of semantic intention they bring to it.’

The distance, between the event and the telling about the event—created by the tendency of a literary text to use framing and embedded narrative—opens up a space into which multiple meanings may be inserted. For instance, by opening up a space around the sacrificial action, metaphor is privileged and this speaks to the relationship of the textual content with the reader. Thus, the point of the sacrifice in The Names may have less to do with the characters in the fictive world, and more to do with an effect on the reader and with what the text gestures at; that which is ‘beyond the written word, outside the textual mode of being’.

The achievement of this gesturing ‘beyond’ the text occurs via a Socratic dialogue, a dialogue that underlies the structure of The Names; the text engages the reader in a debate about the evolution of the sacred.

Firstly, the reader is made intimately aware of historiographic accounts of human sacrifice and their various meanings via the inclusion of real world accounts of human sacrifice:

‘When the king returns to Jordan after a trip abroad, two camels and a bull are slaughtered at the airport.’

(138)

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51 Frow, 75.
52 Gallagher and Greenblatt, Practicing New Historicism, 23.

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'James and I talked about the finds in central Crete, human sacrifice, the Minoan site. Is it possible these people are carrying out some latter-day version? You remember the Pylos tablet, Owen. Linear B. A plea for divine intercession. A list of sacrifices that included ten humans. Could this murder be a latter-day plea to the gods?' (116)

Secondly, it is repeatedly refuted that this is what the cultists in *The Names* are doing:

> [The cult members] ‘weren’t repeating ancient customs, they weren’t influenced by the symbolism of holy books or barren places, they weren’t making a plea to Egyptian or Minoan gods, or a sacrifice, or a gesture to prevent catastrophe’ (170–71)

These killers are apparently not sacrificers. There are no gods being propitiated; the religious element is wrung from the act. And yet neither are the cultists serial killers: they are not ‘mass communicators, working outward from some private screen, conscious of an audience they might agreeably excite’ (171). In fact, there is no precedent: ‘There is nothing in the literature, there is nothing in the folklore’ (171).

Thirdly, it is proposed that the type of killing depicted in *The Names* is a contemporary activity that engenders its own purpose: Brademas, the leader of the archeological dig, believes that the cult members are engaged in something outside the typical: that there is ‘a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation’ (171).

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54 If such a word as ‘typical’ can be used in conjunction with sacrificial killings.
The ‘program’ isn’t ‘senseless’, isn’t ‘casual’, isn’t ‘done for thrills’ (81), rather, the cult is ‘… a story about how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern’ (80).

The modernist and post-modernist preoccupation with pattern-making often occurs at the expense of linear narrative drive: the form becomes waves of patterns rather than a steady narrative ‘pulse’. In *The Names* the tension between language and meaning that appears to have dominated the construction or creation of the text, and the mystery that provides the obsession for the cult and Brademas, Axton and Volterra within the text, can only be understood as ‘otherworldly’.

When Brademas claims to be giving up ‘the pans of indigo, the coloring for paint, those trays of brilliant powders and dyes’ in favour of ‘only [their] names’ (275), he is at once privileging the signifier over the signified—no accident in a novel called *The Names*—and perhaps more interestingly, he is rejecting materialism. Hence, and fourthly, we arrive at the point of the contemporary sacrifice: Art.

George Bataille proposes that work and routine—or, the ordinary—are man’s denial of death, while the eruption of crisis, specifically in the form of religious ritual such as human sacrifice brings man into contact with the sacred. DeLillo gives flesh to this supposition by having Brademas claim that the cult members in *The Names* have made the means of denying death equivalent to death:

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55 It is worth noting that DeLillo is defining his text as literary despite the subject matter precisely by disavowing the desire to depict the things and pointing the reader towards language at its most concrete: only the names of things.

56 ‘… work and the fear of dying are interdependent …’ (*The Theory of Religion*, 51).

57 ‘… the offered victim is itself the divinity’ (*The Theory of Religion*, 82).
‘These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death.’ (308)

And then perhaps, in parallel with Burkert’s ‘sacrifice created theatre’ thesis, it is the telling of these killings, the interpretation, that provides man with his modern sacred: Art.

The Socratic dialogue formally begins via the sacrificial actions of the cultists. It is they who ‘recognise’ (or devise/create) the abecedarian pattern that determines the next victim for their program of producing death. When the cultists debate how they will be best known or represented: in a film or a book, they understand that having killed, having created, it is precisely this act and not themselves that will live on. They will now die. Their sacrifices, representing the creative act at its most brutal, fundamental and passionate, are ‘[s]omething to outlast us. Something to contain the pattern’ (212).

Brademas takes up his part of the dialogue by choosing not the lived experience, not the creating, but its witnessing; the interpretation of the experience—its telling. He did not lift a weapon, but can take all the appropriate ‘names’ to his room as though he did. And so the distinction between the event and the telling of the event: the diegesis (the cultists) and the narrative (Brademas’ work) is outlined.

Axton, the narrator, the final voice in the dialogue, is the reader of both the tale and its telling. He pieces together the clues that unlock the secret of the victim creation: ‘Initials, names, places … Jebel Amman / James Axton’ (158). He demands that Brademas make his knowledge public: ‘Show us … tell us’ (300). And once he has consumed it, once he has the ‘life-strength’ (309) that Art offers, he can go home and
make a better life for himself.

The position of the reader is like a silent witness to the debate: not the act itself, but the act-become-debate, because this is the means by which the human sacrificial intention (connection with the sacred) has been contemporaneously transmuted. Perhaps in the literary text dealing with human sacrifice, it is the ritual of reading itself that is the ritual of the sacred.

In comparison with the more cognitive intent of the literary novel, perhaps the fundamental rhetorical intention at work in the horror genre novel is, quite simply, to engender a sense of horror in the reader. While there are numerous examples of the way the horror genre text also foregrounds the breakdown of language itself, these moments have less to do with what is outside the text, than with what simply cannot be expressed. Thus, in the horror genre text, ‘beyond the written word’ is precisely the moment of maximum horror when the narrator goes mad, or when the Other appears:

‘It’s voodoo, I tell you ... that spotted snake ...
’Sblood, thou stinkard, I’ll learn ye how to jest
... wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? ... Dia ad
aghaidh’s ad adann ... Ungl ... mørk’

(“The Rats in the Walls”, 1923: 44–45)

Here Lovecraft’s narrator begins to descend back through languages, through old English and Latin to Aramaic, before being unable to speak at all: the wordlessness part of the ultimate horror. In this sense, horror is not only an emotion arising in response to a possible monstrosity, but an enduring feature of being: ‘a basic mood and orientation, or
**Stimmung**, with respect to existence and human sacrifice directly invokes mortality, the horror of non-being.

However, a separation must be made between the literary recollection of horrific events; real world horror such as the tsunami of 2005 or the 9/11 tragedies, and horror that forms the subject within the horror genre novel. For this purpose, Noel Carroll has coined the word ‘art-horror’.

Art-horror has both an external world focus: confronting the Other poses issues for the reader about the nature of the self, and an internal textual focus: depending on the monster depicted, the survival of humans as a species may be at stake. The authors of the texts under discussion utilise these foci to grand effect: forced to face the reality of Mother Earth’s desire for blood, the narrator of *Harvest Home* partially submits to the sensuality of the rites—damning himself via the pleasures that successfully allow the women sacrificers to lure and ultimately sacrifice each successive Harvest Lord. Stephen King enjoys taking his readers by surprise (for instance, killing his main protagonist in *Children of the Corn*) suggesting that accrued knowledge about monsters and

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58 Santilli, “Culture, Evil and Horror”, 3.
59 Art-horror is simultaneously the reaction the distinct genre evokes, and, the defining of the genre that the reaction provokes (Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 27). In a tripartite definition, Carroll finds that a) art-horror provokes, or ought to provoke horror; an emotional state of ‘physically felt agitation’, and that b) the emotion of horror is generated by beliefs, thoughts, or judgments about a particular kind of object, and that c) the object is both dangerously threatening and ‘impure’ (27-28). Therefore, horror texts question the nature of human existence ‘in a manner organic to the genre’ (Shaw, “A Humean Definition of Horror”, 10-11).
60 Synopsis: An unhappily married couple driving in rural Nebraska run over the body of a dead boy. They take the body to Gatlin, a small, isolated town where, too late, they learn that the town’s children embrace a bloody pseudo-Christian cult of an evil being that lurks in the cornfields. Both are sacrificed to the corn god.
commensurate human sacrificial rites is not enough to save the human race. While in *The Nameless*, Ramsay Campbell plays upon the reader’s hope that a mother’s cultist daughter is calling her for help and not to lure her to become a sacrifice.

**Perhaps, in this way the theatricality of the Formal becomes purposeful in the Rhetorical; while the actual scenes of horror are stylistically ‘unreal’, the cumulative effect works powerfully to overwhelm the senses and engender an intense state of fear.**

Carroll theorises that the central paradox of the pleasure a reader takes in ‘art-horror’ comes not from the emotion, nor from the monster/monstrous and its attendant problematics, but from the ‘narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged’ (181). What Carroll terms the ‘ratiocinative pleasure’ of art-horror (184) results from the methodical reasoning that leads to the ‘monster/monstrous’ being successfully identified and confronted; this cognitive satisfaction pleasurably harnesses and subordinates the feeling of horror.

**On the other hand, Shaw proposes that the primary source of pleasure is the profound ambivalence with which a reader responds to the monster/monstrous. This ambivalence, which recognises the self in the Other, which wants to know and fears it shouldn’t, which is excited precisely by the danger, and which invites the monster/monstrous in while fearing ‘impurity’ in the Greek sense of contagion, is precisely characterised by evoked emotion:**

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61 In fact, it could be argued that the horror genre text is founded on the notion that knowledge of an ‘unknown’ (monster/monstrous) not only doesn’t set one free–it marks one as the next victim.
The Freudian stress on ambivalence embraces both horns of the paradox: our conscious mind is disgusted by the monster while our id would love to rampage, rape, pillage and destroy with the kind of power monsters wield.62

Aristotle described the value of tragedy ‘through pity and terror effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions’:63 the pity and terror being feeling states roused in the audience, and ‘catharsis’ referring to instruction about emotional states that leads to the purging or cleansing of these states, coming from ritual.64 Art that concentrates on the emotional response of the audience, such as the art-horror of the genre text, is considered to offer catharsis.65

However, in Poetics, Aristotle indicates that if the representation of the action in a text is badly structured it will lead to ‘shock’ and ‘revulsion’: literally ‘dirtiness’.66 The incorrect structure of a work of art refers to the suitability of the outcome as per the actions: thus it is proper for Oedipus to feel guilty and pluck out his eyes following his actions, despite his ignorance. So ‘dirtiness’ refers to the manner in which an audience may be polluted by art, rather than properly instructed, if the work is not correctly structured.67

Hence, the horror in art-horror needs to be properly contained by the ratiocinative structure through which the reader discovers the horror, comes to understand it and in a sense control it—those same horrific events, if not placed into this ‘complex-discovery

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63 Janko, Aristotle Poetics, 7.
64 Janko, 200.
66 Janko, 200.
67 Janko, From Catharsis, 342.
plot’, would evoke mere revulsion—the equivalent to the Aristotelian ‘dirtiness.’ 68

Interestingly, when the horror genre remains consistent with Aristotle’s definition of proper art, it is often considered moralistic, ‘inherently reactionary and deeply conservative’ 69 with teenagers punished for extra-marital sex; the monster/monstrous receiving the necessary come-uppance (most of the time); and clear demarcation between good and evil (unlike many other genres). However, the subject of human sacrifice adds an interesting dimension to this understanding of ‘dirtiness’ versus ‘cleansing’ via art.

According to Shuger, in New Testament Greek, to ‘wash’ signifies sacrificial purification or cleaning something with blood; demonstrated in Hebrews 9:22 ‘and almost all things are by the law purged … with blood’, and 1 John 1:7 ‘the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth (emundat) us from all sin’. 70 Shuger shows that the literal sense of cleansing is ritual rather than hygienic, and then concludes that in both passages ‘the original Greek word for this sort of blood bath is katharsis’. 71 72

If purgation or a release for sin or defilement is achieved by washing with

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68 Aristotle also indicates that too great a stress on terror makes the work inferior also (Janko, 342). Certain types of art-horror, such as torture pornography, which evoke a real sense of disgust and panic in the reader, do so precisely because they lack, either purposefully, or through lack of craft, the containing structure for their horrors.

69 Odell and le Blanc, “Sex and Death in the Horror Film”.

70 Shuger, 128.

71 She is not alone in this analysis: Jonathan Lear contends that when Aristotle refers to katharsis he is preponderantly using it as a term for menstrual discharge (“Katharsis”, 315).

72 One needs to be careful here, because the Aristotelian catharsis of pity and fear does not refer to blood sacrifice. However, Shuger (129) notes that the Aristotelian term for the telos (purpose/goal/meaning) of tragedy and an ordinary Greek term for ritual sacrifice, including the sacrifice of Christ, are identical. Aristotle never claimed that the catharsis of pity and fear was the tragic telos, yet Else (Aristotle’s Poetics, 439) demonstrates that virtually all prior commentators on the Poetics understood it in this sense.
blood—"blood is purified through blood"—then the horror genre text dealing with the literal depiction of human sacrifice might offer a symbolic as well as emotional catharsis for readers. To engage with a horror genre text handling human sacrifice is potentially to relieve oneself not only of terror, but also of ‘sin’.

This analysis suggests a level of textual self-reflexivity similar to that found within the literary text—except that the horror text does this less with language than with content. Certainly the texts perverting Christian versions of sacrifice by suggesting that the act, rather than saving the world, will precisely result in its damnation are engaged in just that. But the self-reflexivity extends beyond the bounds of the fictive world to the reader and the real world.

The horror genre text focuses on the relationship of the killing to myth, and then on the symbolism of this killing for the reader. Worded differently, if there is a particular pleasure in sympathising or identifying with naïve victims potentially about to meet their demise, there is a particular pleasurable horror in the repeated reading about death. And if, pace Plato, acquiring knowledge is not a process of putting information into empty minds, but of assisting people to realise that which they already know, it can be no surprise that the rhetorical cues of the horror genre text handling human sacrifice ritualise the rediscovery of the reader’s sense of mortality. Thus, vis a vis Carroll, the reader places the greatest horror, his or her own death, into the containing structure of the narrative.

Furthermore, this repetition—of narrative model and handling of subject matter—

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73 Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, 56.
74 The endless showing and viewing of the 9/11 tragedy indicates that this fascination is precisely bound up with repetition.
is what grants the horror genre novel its memorial meta-textual status. It is because readers bring expectations of predictability to the horror genre that instances of ‘variation, repetition, rectification and modification’ are perceived, and then, it is because of the ‘participative’ relation between readers and texts, that the horror genre itself can be considered ‘one single, continuous text’. Thus it could be argued that the meaning of the human sacrifice: the ritualistic enactment of death, is also the meaning of the genre.

The rhetorical cues for the horror genre reader apply directly to his/her experience of the subject matter within the text, while the rhetorical cues for the reader of the literary text point toward the experience of the text as the subject matter. While both texts deal with the sacred, the literary text eschews the human sacrifice as one of the oldest forms of worship in favour of worship of Art, while the horror genre text perverts the traditional sacred by using the human sacrifice to call into being the horrific Other.

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Chapter 4: The Thematic

The thematic content refers to ‘kinds of action, the kinds of actors’ who perform them, and the significance that accrues to the actions and actors.’

4.1 The Characterisation of Belief in the Efficacy of Human Sacrifice

By definition, the function of human or animal sacrifice, whether to propitiate, honour, avoid attention of, or elevate a human being up to, divinity, involves a supernatural being: god/s.

However, in The Names, the cult is ‘not ancient’ (149); the killings are precisely not based on ritualistic traditions and so the gods are divorced from the proceedings, implying a corollary with more a typical murder:

‘[S]omething keeps me from thinking they would accept a higher being … And where’s the ritual in their sacrifice? Old man hammered to death. No sign of ritual. What god could they invent who might accept such a sacrifice, the death of a mental defective? A street mugging in effect.’ (116)

The act itself is transformed into a pseudo-experiment:

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77 The characters are discussed in the conclusion since there is little significant variation in their presentation between types of text.
78 Frow, 76.
Emmerich [cult member]: ‘Let’s face it, the most interesting thing we do is kill. Only a death can complete the program’ (293)

The end result being that religion, religious belief and gods are all mocked—

‘[T]hese smoking lamps, these dark sinuous images. This is gilded theatre, what we see here. We’re almost off the map.’ (24)

Other literary texts handling this subject matter do the same: belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice is a function of either ignorance of alternatives, of an intelligent mind mired in the mentation of its day or of a complicated set of secular rationalisations that substitute for religion. Religious ritual is simply theatre, and gilded theatre at that.

Belief, in these novels, is ‘there be dragons’ territory. Gallagher and Greenblatt attribute this doubt to the character of the modernist novel per se:

The truism that the social is not ‘natural’, but is instead made according to particular desires and interests, is rehearsed in reading novels, an activity requiring that we help fabricate a ‘world’ (which we know is not The World) for the purpose of achieving specific narrative pleasures. Novels may therefore be said to activate a fundamental practice of modern ideology—acquiescence without belief, crediting without credulousness (169)

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79 cf Heart of Darkness.
80 cf Hawksmoor.
81 ‘Madness has a structure. We might say madness is all structure. We might say structure is inherent in madness. There is not one without the other.’ (The Names 1982: 210).
DeLillo made discrete, and yet compatible, the secularisation of his narrator\(^{82}\) and the narrator’s world, and the possible religious rituals of sacrifice.\(^ {83}\) It is not that *The Names* cleaves the act from the sacred entirely (to whit, see chapter three), but rather that the relationship between the existence of a god/s and the act is severed: *The Names* suggests that the purpose of human sacrifice is to create meaning and that there are new ways to find meaning and new meanings to be found.

The only way through (as well as into) this paradox is language:

> ‘They found a man whose initials matched the first letter of each word in a particular place-name. They either led him to this place or waited for him to wander there on his own. Then they killed him.’ (pp168–9)

Wittgenstein suggested that to speak of language, in itself a language game, is ‘a form of life’.\(^ {84}\) Ironically, in *The Names*, the language game is utilised as a means of selecting who shall die. The ‘arbitrary’\(^ {85}\) abecedarian method of sacrifice selection in *The Names* is very close to the kind of language game employed by certain modernist writers: from Mallarmé to the Surrealists (including Bataille) and ultimately to the Oulipo and Perec’s

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\(^{82}\) We were doubters, I might have told him … It was one of the many things Kathryn and I agreed on, rockbound doubt (92).

\(^{83}\) ‘Wherever you will find empty land, there are men who try to get closer to God. They will be poor, they will take little food, they will go away from women. They will be Christian monks, they will be Sufis who dress with wool shirts, who repeat the holy words from the Koran, who dance and spin. Visions are real. God is involved with living men… Closer to God, always in mind to remember God. Dkihr allah.’ (149)

\(^{84}\) Ricoeur, “Narrative Time”, 169.

\(^{85}\) ‘Arbitrariness’ itself is a thematic concern of modernism and the Literary (See de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*), as opposed to the Genre. DeLillo is purposefully acknowledging his own literary tradition within the ritualistic tradition being created in *The Names*. 

*C. Austin — novel extract & exegesis* 203
novel, *A Void* (1994), composed without the letter ‘e’. How else to understand the
deliberate reversal of Plato’s insistence that philosophers take not as the point of
departure the words, but the things,86 when Brademas precisely describes leaving behind
the things—‘the red scarves worn as turbans’, ‘the food stalls’, ‘those trays of brilliant
powders and dyes’—to exist in a room with ‘only the names’? (275)

By reminding the reader of real world name-power—Egyptians engraving enemy
names on pottery which when smashed slit the enemy throat (150)—while playing with
fairytale ‘name’ mythology—a cult with an unknown name about to take a life is a
modern Rumpelstiltskin—*The Names* seems to be playing with the ‘linguistic turn’87 in
the human sciences and the primacy of language in modern and post-modern philosophy.
More pertinently, it could be seen as inscribing a mythology of language into itself that
borders on the theological, or more literally, God-talk.

In the beginning may be the word, the logos, but it is a word without referent. A
signifier without any signified—à la Derrida’s ‘There is nothing outside of the text’.88
This suggests that the sign does not allow the experience of the being/thing and instead
language is both the form and content of meaning.89

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86 There must be some way to examine things directly, rather than via their names, and
this direct method of investigating reality will be in every way superior. (Keller, “An
Interpretation of Plato’s Cratylus”, 439a, 301.)
87 See Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn*.
88 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.
89 In DeLillo’s take on the words *Toyota Celica*: ‘There’s something nearly mystical
about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. It’s computer mysticism.
Words that are computer generated to be used on products that might be sold anywhere
from Japan to Denmark—words devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages. And
when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the words
acquire a chantlike quality.’ (Begley, “Don DeLillo”, 281.)

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But in many religious traditions from Tibetan Buddhism to Western Monotheism, power lies in the knowledge of names and the use of names. Historico-critico theologians draw a distinction between God’s immanence, or literal presence—known as the ‘Glory Theology’ of cultic/priestly literature, and His transcendence—known as the ‘Names Theology’ of Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic history.\(^90\) It is argued that after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the actual Ark, emphasis shifted from Glory Theology’s burning bushes as indicator and container of God’s actual presence, to Names Theology’s powerful and unspeakable Name of a no longer present God.

The Names is intimately aware of this distinction and suggests, that though (pace Nietzsche) God may be dead, His name is anything but. In fact, His name retains the power of life and death. While God may be dead to the human sacrifice ritual in The Names, and the search for meaning characterised by nihilism, the form of meaning, the forms of attempting to transcribe meaning, while imperfect, may be all we have. Although not actually demonstrating a capacity to believe, The Names asserts itself, text, as a substitute means and end.\(^91\)

In opposition to this, in the horror genre text, the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of the human sacrifice is far more traditional. As Green notes when referring to real world human sacrifices, ‘benefit and reciprocity lie at the very roots of sacrificial

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\(^91\) We might compare this to the way that the ‘existential’ theology of major figures like Karl Barth attempted to come to grips with the palpable sense of Godlessness, or God-absence in the century of Auschwitz—by focusing on the sheer unknowability and imperceptibility, if not actual unimaginability of God: an idea which goes back at least to Rudolph Otto’s The Idea of the Holy. This seminal text speaks to the nearly horrific sense of awe evoked by the unimaginable God and influenced creative writers on both sides of the above divide: from Eliot to Lovecraft, from C.S. Lewis to Ramsey Campbell.
ritual’. Essentially, humans give to the god, so the god will give back—or refrain from doing so, depending on the activity. Milbank suggests that the existence of ‘gods or ancestors to whom one sends things via the operation of death’ may be the only ‘sense’ that can be made of sacrifice. Where to find better evidence of this than in the horror novel, the rhetoric of which is ‘demonstrably theological in nature’?  

Thus, in the horror genre texts studied, all human sacrifices are executed to propitiate a god: three gods will grant a good harvest, two gods will bring a different, dark order to the world, and one is a largely unknown, malevolent presence simply bringing death. Genre horror exists in a world where the angel never stayed Abraham’s hand, or, put differently, contrary to the literary text, which we have associated with the Names Theology predicated on the absence of God, the horror genre text directs the reader back to the Glory Theology, predicated on a palpably present Deity; human sacrifice in these texts speaks directly to the supernatural and the religious.  

It is worth noticing that this is precisely the promise of the Church; that the Eucharist delivers the recipient directly back to the pre-exilic Temple to encounter the actual presence of the Divine and not just His name, via the symbolic cannibalistic re-enactment of a divine/human sacrifice. It is not a coincidence that the horror genre sometimes seems a blasphemous parody of this, since a number of historians trace the horror genre origins back to the anti-Catholic propaganda of the 18th and 19th centuries.

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92 Green, Dying for the Gods, 20.
94 Sage, Horror Fiction, xvi.
95 cf. Children of the Corn and Harvest Home.
96 cf. The Festival and The Ceremonies.
97 cf. The Nameless.
See for example, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, perhaps the first gothic horror novel.

The meaning of the human sacrifice in the horror genre text therefore is symbolically literal. The ritual—the active symbol—at once evokes the god and reveals its relationship to the human. There is no fear of presenting material evidence of these gods, since the point is belief, not plausibility. To that end the horror genre is prepared to push the boundaries of vraisemblance in its attempt to bring the God or gods palpably before the reader:

> It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge, bulking up to the sky … something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs. Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.  
> *(Children of the Corn 2002: 212)*

And what gods these are! Gone are the joyful, lusty, fickle Pagan gods. Gone is the radical, loving Jesus of the New Testament. Instead, these are the bad old gods of the Old Testament. The hungry, angry gods of Babylon and Caanan. The horror genre is just as subversive of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the post-Frazer literary tradition; not because it believes in no god, but rather because it believes in bad gods, gods characterised by their inversion of morality. Stephen King’s version of the new god is a red-eyed demon. In *The Ceremonies* the god is described as ‘obscene’ and Lovecraft’s god in *The Festival* inverts the traditional ‘Yule’ or Christmas celebration and orders a “mass” sacrifice. And, of course, these gods insist on a regular diet of human blood.

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99 Synopsis: a young man returns to his father’s ancient sea town in respect of a festival held to honour his ancestors and their rites every hundred years. But the festival, a Yuletide inversion of Christmas involving a mass sacrifice, results in his near insanity.

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Irrespective of whether the religious farmers or the ignorant city boy in *The Ceremonies* will manage to put a stop to this sacrifice, it will occur again—as soon as the conditions are right. In *The Festival*, the sacrificing occurs every hundred years, in *Harvest Home* every seven years, and in *The Children of the Corn* the sacrificing is annual. The villagers in *The Wicker Man* are emphatic that if the sacrifice of Sergeant Howie doesn’t bring the anticipated harvest, next year Lord SummerIsle will be sacrificed instead, and, in *The Nameless*, the ‘offerings’ are ongoing, required constantly.

The precise intertextual differences between these depicted rituals may not matter. The ritual surrounding the sacrifice is an ‘idea of ritual’. The human sacrifice presented is an ‘idea of human sacrifice’. In other words, since horror genre representations do not mimic the few details of real world sacrifice available to us, the representations offered are like Plato’s shadows playing against the cave wall: the point for the horror genre reader is not to distinguish between the real/unreal, but to accept the meaning via a play upon the likeness of real.

As far as the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice is concerned, the literary reader is not asked to believe that a human sacrifice will produce Art. However, since human sacrifice in *The Names* metaphorically represents both the atavism of religious belief and its potential transformation into the worship of Art, as a symbolic event it can still be efficacious. Although within the text the sacrificial ‘program’ does not deny death, DeLillo suggests that metaphorically the sacrifices—because of the pattern-created Art—manage to achieve just this.

While the reader is also not asked to believe that a literal human sacrifice will
resurrect a god in the horror genre text, s/he is expected to experience the protagonist’s belief. For the horror genre texts, the question is simplified in its literalisation: to ask a reader to accept the implausible is impossible, so the protagonist must come from the rationalist perspective, but in order to give the reader the effect of belief, the protagonist is forced to participate in the world of believers, forced to the altar—leaving no alternative but to respond.

The literary text uses human sacrifice precisely to ‘theologise’ and ‘aesthetisize’ unbelief, while the horror genre aims at allowing the post-enlightenment, skeptical reader the opportunity to experience belief at its most horrifically tangible.
Chapter 5: Conclusions for the Case Studies

Analytical reading of a representative literary text and six horror genre texts led to the compilation of a list of formal techniques used to depict the act of human sacrifice in the prose style. Striking differences were found in the handling of this subject matter across the literature, both in terms of formal device (for instance, on-stage vs. off-stage action) and diegetic and thematic technique within the narrative content (for example, the meaning of the sacrifice).

Following a section on the similarities between all texts, graphic representation of the differences is presented below, along with specific conclusions for The Bridge in chapter six—the creative part of this MA—that arose as a result of the investigation into the case studies.

5.1 Similarities

Despite the commensurate stylistic differences, there are several elements similar to all the texts: specific setting, narrative modelling and characteristics of those sacrificed and sacrificing.

5.1.1 Specific Setting

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100 It must be stressed that the differences so listed are indicative only of those literary and horror genre texts dealing with human sacrifice: not of the differences between literary or horror genre texts in general.
Treatment of human sacrifice in both literary and horror genre fiction deals with the event within a contemporary, industrialised fictive world. However, since rituals of human sacrifice are problematised by twenty-first century technological and communication advances, the actual killings occur in a village, village-like setting or other remote context.

The rationale for this remote, rural setting within the fictive world seems straightforward: the unpopulated landscape offers less chance for discovery and interruption, as well as affording the sacrificers more opportunity and space to organise tools, altars, rites and burial procedures. Authorial rationale for the remote, rural setting is somewhat more complex.

Given the considerable emphasis *The Names* places on the sophistication and intelligence of the cultists, placing the sacrifices in rurality seems almost expedient. However the nature of the particular rurality in *The Names* is critical: a) the middle-Eastern desert setting reminds the reader of Golgotha, Mt Ararat, the hills of Moriah—all those sacrificial events were surrounded by the desert too, and b) it perversely, serves to suggest a barrenness—perhaps of spirituality; those gods are no longer present in this desert.

Furthermore and particularly in the horror genre text, a remote setting serves to remove the activity from the modern, and presumably civilized, psyche. Rurality reads as primitivism in all its permutations: the animal in the human is released, and sacrificers endowed with intelligence and sophistication shall be overcome with curiosity, passion and base instinct.

Essentially, through the use of the rural, the texts substitute space for time. If the
text is not set in the same times or places that factually performed human sacrifice—China during the Shang dynasty or Aztec Mexico, for example—then creating a space ‘away’: from population, from technology etc, evokes a similar effect. In this way does the psychogeography of all the texts override the temporalities.

5.1.2 Narrative Modelling

The literary and horror genre texts both draw upon a narrative model of ‘ratiocinative pleasure’. Here, both the structure of the text and some of the pleasure of reading it are derived precisely from the narrator or protagonist methodically piecing together the sense of threat and then, in various ways, seeking to contain it.

In the horror genre text, ‘a search for that discourse, that special knowledge … will enable the human characters to … control that which simultaneously embodies and causes its “trouble”’. As a result of the search for that knowledge, investigators in the horror genre text have their eyes blinded, their tongues cut out, become servants or puppets, or are killed. There are exceptions to this: yet those investigators (or readers) who manage to escape are still scarred for life.

In both types of text, the narrative model unites this ratiocination with tragedy—to engender both the protagonists’ and the readers’ desire to ‘discover’. While there is some discrepancy in what follows the discovery—literary texts ponder, while horror genre texts seek to subvert the tragedy—the narrative model is essentially

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101 Carroll, 184.
102 Neale, 22.
103 ‘It is the act of reprisal, the repetition of imitative acts of violence, that characterizes tragic plotting’ (Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 50).

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the same.

The minor difference in narrative modeling concerns the goal. While survival is the goal of the horror genre protagonists on this journey, comprehension is the sole goal for the characters in the literary text: if this act is who the human being is,\(^{104}\) then let us see and in some way understand or rationalise.

5.1.3 The Sacrificed/Sacrificers

Since ritual depends on a prior event that it simultaneously imitates and recreates, the ritual is itself a substitution. The nature of sacrifice may precisely be ‘the ability to believe that something can take the place of something else on the altar’.\(^{105}\) To this end, the victims in both the literary and genre texts are infinitely substitutable. The defining attribute for selection—innocence,\(^{106}\) virginity,\(^{107}\) age,\(^{108}\) familial connection\(^{109}\), sex\(^{110}\) and random initial matching\(^{111}\)—is privileged over the character him/herself.

A slight discrepancy exists in the voice given the victims: in the literary text the victims do not represent, they are simply human beings—this fact, plus the abecedarian specificity, is the only reason for their deaths and the reader cannot identify nor even

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\(^{104}\) For there are no gods demanding such activity.
\(^{106}\) An attribute of the victim across all the texts.
\(^{107}\) cf. The Ceremonies and The Wicker Man.
\(^{108}\) cf. Children of the Corn.
\(^{109}\) cf. The Festival and The Nameless.
\(^{110}\) cf. Harvest Home.
\(^{111}\) cf. The Names.
really sympathise with them;\textsuperscript{112} in the genre text the victims are often given a point of view—even if this simply confirms how ignorant they are of the signs and portents that signal their sacrificial suitability.\textsuperscript{113} However, because these victims are known to us, as readers, we see that they are like us, that they might very well be us.

All texts perform the sacrifice via a collective of sacrificers.\textsuperscript{114} According to Girard, this fact is explained by his sacrificial-scapegoating theory: the collective seizes upon an innocent, arbitrary victim to enact the violence as a means of not turning on each other.\textsuperscript{115} However, given that none of the textual human sacrifices originate with violent impulses \textit{between antagonists}, it is Bataille’s theory about the disruption to the ‘primacy of utility’\textsuperscript{116} that makes more sense of this unanimity between the texts. Bataille refers to the contrived order of the profane ordinary or ‘world of works’\textsuperscript{117} that a small collective works to inject chaos into—via the violence of human sacrifice. This type of intrusion cannot be affected by a lone individual.

As well as operating in groups, the sacrificers in both types of texts are fundamentalists. This is sacred work that cannot afford to admit to error or doubt: not in the literary text because this would be to invite meaningless of existence, nor in the horror genre text because to be wrong is to be condemned to mortality.

However, the sacrificers in the \textit{The Names} are ‘educated’ and set apart from ‘the stocking strangler, the gunman with sleepy eyes’ by their killings—considered ‘so

\textsuperscript{112} The same applies to other literary texts dealing with human sacrifice: \textit{Heart of Darkness} and \textit{Hawksmoor}.
\textsuperscript{113} cf. \textit{The Wicker Man}, \textit{Children of the Corn}, \textit{The Nameless}, \textit{The Festival}.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{The Ceremonies} perverts this somewhat, by introducing each of the sacrificers at separate points of the ritual and it thus seems as though they are acting independently.
\textsuperscript{115} Girard, \textit{Things Hidden}, 24.
\textsuperscript{116} Bataille, 60.
\textsuperscript{117} Bataille, 89.
striking in design’ that the physical act itself is ‘overlooked’ and the victims become mere ‘elements in the pattern’ (171).

The sacrificers in the horror genre texts are intelligent only in relation to the ritual: they often function as serfs or servants to a god, whom they hope to resurrect or honour, but with whom they invariably fail to have direct contact,¹¹⁸ and their speech acts are kept to a minimum, generally focusing either on luring the victim or imparting key mythological percepts to the protagonists, who, if they could understand, would know what was going to happen far sooner than they do.

This minor difference in presentation is a clue as to how the reader should interprete the cult’s actions in the literary text—the most significant ancillary feature of the cult is that it is nameless: the reader is also nameless. While the reader is not asked to take on the position of sacrificer in the literary text, he is asked to try and understand, to comprehend, to fathom. He is not asked to identify with the victims at all.¹¹⁹

In the horror genre text, while the reader is placed closest to the protagonists, s/he is at least given opportunity to sympathise, even if not identify, with the victim. Thus the horror.

¹¹⁸ Presumably, this would place the reader in dialogue or other close contact with the god also, and that might stretch credulity, whereas mere knowledge about, and appearance of the god does not.
¹¹⁹ Not in The Heart of Darkness and Hawksmoor either.

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5.2 **Differences**

The table below sets out the main differences between the types of text in their representation—meaning and form—of human sacrifice.

5.2.1 **Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Text</th>
<th>Horror Genre Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-stage action</td>
<td>On-stage action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded narration</td>
<td>Direct narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typically first person</td>
<td>Typically third person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language as subject matter</td>
<td>Language serving plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileges the particular</td>
<td>Privileges the necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetorical Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socratic dialogue about Art/Being</td>
<td>Provocation of horror: cathartic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thematic Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No participation or witness to sacrifice</td>
<td>Direct participation in sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual is idiosyncratic (like text itself)</td>
<td>Ritual is contextualised by genre conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacious symbolically, not literally</td>
<td>Efficacious for fictive world and in creating ‘horror of being’ for reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence for reader</td>
<td>Fictive world change for character and cognitive dissonance for reader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2.2 Discussion

Both traditions, the literary and the horror genre, are rooted in a mythological history and a historiography. That is, they both have antecedents in mythological tales of actual human sacrifice, in the anthropological interpretation of such sacrifices, as well as in the consequent range of fictive writing.

Within this entire history of writings about human sacrifice, the act is inextricably twinned with religion, deities, worship or an afterlife. Yet only the horror genre text represents it as a dramatic act that invites a dark supernatural order into the world: the literary text endeavours to deal with human sacrifice from the point of secularist symbolism. There is no doubt that the perception of human sacrifice fundamentally differs between these types of text, and this difference of perception hinges on the act of belief.

While the literary text attempts to bleach the religious element from the representation of the human sacrifice—demonstrating an underlying nihilism, ambiguity, and proliferation of possible meanings, the horror genre text glories in the (sac)religious element—demonstrating an underlying gnosticism.

All of the texts make a distinction between rational man and his logical, post-Enlightenment patterns of thinking and the man swayed by superstition. Belief, religious

belief, in post-modern times is often conflated with primitivism. Difference in the handling of belief between the literary and horror genre texts mirrors the anthropological debate over Captain James Cook’s death.\textsuperscript{121} To whit, \textit{The Names} finds belief in myth and magic integral to ritual in native ‘tribal’ communities and deems this primitive thinking—making sure the reader does not confuse this type of belief with the more sophisticated belief systems of the cultists, nor indeed with those of the text itself; whereas, the horror genre texts assume individuals involved in such activities know well the difference between reality and myth and either make a conscious decision to believe or are forced to believe when confronted with the supernatural power.

The literary text wants the reader to believe in the fictive world presented in order to make a wider point about human nature; therefore events that a supposed majority of rational people would not accept as ‘reality’ must not prevail—even if the presentation of the reality itself occurs in ways that do not strive to achieve mimesis: i.e. the postmodern style of fragmentation. The way the text achieves this verisimilitude is by privileging language.

The attention paid to language can culminate in such a way as to make meaning secondary to effect. States of being and/or material objects are described so uniquely that the reader lifts the phrases out of the meaning context, to remark on their beauty or aptness.\textsuperscript{122} This begins the process of worship that becomes both the subject and meaning

\textsuperscript{121} Gananath Obeyesekere argued that Marshall Sahlins had fallen prey to anthropological ethnocentricism and that the Hawaiians who killed Cook were not primitives deluded by their pre-logical myths into apotheosizing a white stranger—there were alternative, more rational explanations for the murder; Sahlins argued that it was ethnocentric \textit{not} to allow that these beliefs prevailed, and that all Obeyesekere had achieved was to endow them with the instrumental, empiricist rationality of the West (Li, “Marshall Sahlins”, 205-6).

\textsuperscript{122} Don DeLillo himself does this: ‘I like to see the words, the sentences, as they take

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of the text.

In direct opposition, the horror text is built on the ‘redemptive failure of language’:\textsuperscript{123} a disaffirmation of creativity. Language in the horror genre text privileges the literal and metaphysical absence—of surety, of distinction between the real and unreal, the known and unknown. Superfluity and possibility are supplanted by the necessary\textsuperscript{124} and the concrete. If the descriptor matters—“blue” rather than “white”—that is what is expressed. If the colour or height or intention does not matter—and by matter, I mean work for the engine of the plot—then it will be omitted. Hence the horror genre has come to be identified with language that simply and directly provokes dread and terror. Language has become “transparent”, going largely unnoticed except as a container for meaning. Unlike for the literary text, the characterisation of belief is not inherent in the language of the horror genre text.

This discrepancy between the texts is furthered by the presentation of the sacrifice. Literary texts do not represent the act on-stage. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the space between the event and its telling serves to make the killings more ‘believable’. The act is reported journalistically—factually, secondhand, the way most shocking television news is handed on. The reader is unable to question small details that might disrupt plausibility; and, the technique aligns the reader with the narrator whom we must trust to voice our disbelief, disapproval and disgust, and who then turns these thoughts shape. It’s an aesthetic issue: when I work I have a sculptor’s sense of the shape of the words I’m making.’ Nadotti, “An Interview with Don DeLillo”, 89.\textsuperscript{123} Salomon, Mazes of the Serpent, 86.\textsuperscript{124} The exception to this is H.P. Lovecraft; his language is dense and florid. However, his language is so detailed—so adverbial and adjectival—for all objects, characters and states of emotion that the lack of particularity is precisely the same as for the other horror genre texts.

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into a philosophical understanding—either of the nature of man or the senselessness of all other activity when death is the ultimate outcome regardless.

In the horror genre text the human sacrifice is graphically depicted. However, whether it is a sickle across the throat or a demon between the legs, the enactment is quite unbelievable. The details provided conjure up the activity perfectly, but separate the readers’ seeing from believing. Precisely because these events are mythic, legendary rituals, they are therefore outside the known; they cannot be verified by reportage technique—else that too would take on an un-real quality. The horror genre reader is asked to believe in the world depicted, he is not asked to believe in its literal interpretation. Put differently, the horror genre reader accepts the narrative—in fact specifically craves this in choosing this type of text—but does not experience the interpretation, does not experience the diegesis, as real. Death then, can be experienced over and over again.

In other words, the literary text creates a space for the metaphor to blossom, while the genre text wants the reader to stay at the point of the event, to experience terror over insight.

Further to this, while the literary texts ask for belief in the fictive world created, and, achieve this by removing elements, such as the supernatural, that might not be accepted by a ‘rationalist’, it also judges human sacrifice as an antiquated, redundant perversion. Mizruchi states that ‘sacrifice, whether actual or alleged, [is] a token of authentic belief: where there is sacrifice, there is faith’,¹²⁵ however, the literary text finds only an act, only pretence. In fact, it establishes its own authenticity—its sacred position

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as Art—by denying the authenticity of its subject matter—the outdated, unethical and ultimately pointless, human sacrifice.

The ‘evidence’ that human sacrificing did literally take place—the archeological, biblical and folkloric evidence—only confirms historical belief systems as being different from modern ones: the meta-narrative does not suggest something innate or intrinsic about the truth of the world, it only speaks about preferences for the arrangement of that truth.

This nihilism wrings the blood from the act of human sacrifice in the literary text: the act has become almost purely metaphoric. Codifying and contextualising the act to whitewash its historical context, so that it becomes just an action within literature, suggests that another act could have been portrayed instead. And yet this is not accurate, because the human sacrifice depends upon ritualisation of activity in discovery of the Other, and it is this process that The Names is interested in. The use of the human sacrifice ritual by the literary text is a metaphoric means of reflecting either on Being or on evidence of Being: Art.

While other literary texts such as Heart of Darkness locate the new meaning for human sacrifice in ‘being’, finding that the attributions of primitivism reside within the heart of man himself and not his socio-cultural surroundings, The Names uses the human sacrifice to debate about the creation of meaning: is it in the action, in the interpretation of that action, or in the receiving of the interpretation? The Names engenders a debate

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126 This is as opposed to anthropological reality where the devolution of human sacrifice as any kind of act, let alone ritualistic, is far more complicated and predicated on legal, moral, political and religio-social reasons.

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about meaning in the art of the text, in language, in the god-games played via the creation of a fictive world.

Despite the fact that it is framed by nihilism, *The Names* uses the human sacrifice to find an alternate sacred in art. The sacrificial deaths in the literary text concern the creation of Art. *The Names* is a Socratic debate about the transubstantiation of a belief in god (and the associated requirements) into a belief in Art. For DeLillo, it is the man-made logos that is the End and the Beginning.

For the horror genre text, the subservience of form to content, and the blatant, theatrical use of the human sacrifice subject, suggests that the meaning of the human sacrifice is located in the primacy of the act itself. Genre fiction—especially in relation to this subject matter—is in a sense prelapsarian art; it doesn't recognise a split or fall into a world where symbol is opposed to action. Instead, horror genre texts remain closer to their tragic and mythological roots, defiantly remaining in a place where the symbol *is* action.

The action then creates a feeling state, invites catharsis. And not with the characters as such, but with the event, with the terror and awesome power of the human sacrifice. While, the literary texts, heavily influenced by historical context, represent human sacrifice in various forms of symbolic religious charade, the horror genre texts have tended to ignore developments of understanding in real world depictions of human sacrifice, and focus instead on the relationship of the killing to the myth, then on the myth to its reception by an audience. This is theatre. The ultimate meaning is in the effect therefore, not in the objects (the language) that create that effect.
The horror genre text wants the reader to surrender to the effect of the fictive world presented; to accept that a monster/monstrous symbolises the precise horror that the experience of the novel promises. While the horror genre text also demonstrates a distrust of the classical teachings, or the classical God, it still believes in ‘a’ god, or ‘godlike’ thing. Thus instead of deciding that the character of man shall come under question now that the main moral compass is defunct, these texts question the character of the God—drawing upon the Gnostic\textsuperscript{127} heresy that the god in charge of the human world is evil.

By inverting what is commonly understood to be good or proper, what the horror genre text attempts to effect with its depiction of human sacrifice is, quite simply, Reason. ‘[E]xtreme horror keeps reason awake’.\textsuperscript{128} It can only do this by violent appeal to the irrational. A literary experiential rupture of Bataille’s ‘profane’ ordinary. \textit{Sacred horror}.

The action in these texts is a study in the energy it takes to mount an offensive against the rational and the secular. For the genre novel per se belief is the horror, is the fantasy, is the science fiction—is the \textit{energeia} behind the narrative. The point of releasing the sacred energy is to become one with something greater: a god, and it is belief that elevates the depiction of human sacrifice above a straightforward murder. Besides a classic sympathy, it is belief that creates the condition necessary for cartharsis—or cognitive dissonance.

\textsuperscript{127} Gnosticism might be described as a doctrine of heresy; it is Manichean, it views matter—the nature and the body—as inherently evil. It solves the problem of evil by postulating two relatively equal divine powers in eternal struggle, rather than orthodoxy’s view of a single benevolent divinity for whom evil is an artifact or by-product of His great good gift–free will.

\textsuperscript{128} Bataille’s logic of sacrifice, according to Jean-Luc Nancy (“The Unsacrificeable”, 32).
However, the reader doesn’t actually have to believe in the monstrous god depicted however, in order to experience the effect of characters acting on their beliefs. By using a rational, skeptical protagonist, the horror genre text ensures the reader sufficiently identifies. And by relying on the fact that the reader already knows the conventional codes, the text works to engender thoughts such as ‘Don’t go in there’ or ‘Don’t do that’—thoughts which immediately place the reader beyond skepticism. In fact, the choice of the horror genre text as reading matter itself already confirms a belief in the ‘horror of being’ these texts provoke.

Where form becomes as important as content for the horror genre text is the climax. Despite the link between ‘blood purifying blood’ and the human sacrifice ritual, cartharsis occurs not with the choice of subject matter per se, but with its handling: perhaps unexpectedly, art-horror is an experience of safety and conservatism. Readers engage with terror from a comfortable chair. The fact that the reader is not really in danger turns the stress/arousal (palpitations, dry mouth, panic grip) into a sought after sensation.\(^\text{129}\) The curtain opens, the text reveals itself, but more often than not, the terror will be bested by curtain fall. If one were \textit{really} in danger, the terror would not be pleasurable.

Hence the rhetorical relationship between the horror genre novel and its reader is considered one primarily of cognition:\(^\text{130}\) an exercise in methodically recognising and containing the monstrous. However, as Shaw argued, feelings about the monster/monstrous are ambivalent.\(^\text{131}\) Pleasure is not entirely predicated on destruction of

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\(^{129}\) Pinedo, \textit{Recreational Terror}, 39.

\(^{130}\) Carroll, \textit{The Philosophy of Horror}.

\(^{131}\) Shaw, “A Humean Definition of Horror”.

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the monster/monstrous, and repugnance is not always subsumed by the sense of closure (indeed, closure is not always provided). The cathexis that horror engenders, by creating and sustaining almost unbearable emotions, leaves the reader drained, exhausted. It is not surprising therefore that this may be followed by cognitive dissonance in the form of ‘numinous rage’ or psychological despair.132 Despite choosing the text, the reader is unsure whether the violence contained within is ‘purifying’ (necessary and cleansing) or ‘impure’133 (unnecessary and contagious) in the Aristolean sense. Reading is a form of participating, and may well lead to a contagion that lingers after the completion of the narrative. Form is thus important in bringing the reader to that experience.

In contrast, in the literary text, the content is the form. The reader is involved as witness to the creative act and participant in the Socratic debate about what constitutes Art; after all, there is no god created who does not need his worshippers, his doubters, or his sacrificers. The communication with the reader therefore, the rhetorical intent, is one of reflexivity. It is also essentially cerebral.

Without the possibility of the human sacrifice nightmare being literal, or at the very least, destructive within the fictive world, there is no real fear on the part of the characters or the reader. There is no suspense created around whether the cult will strike again, or whether any of the main protagonists will be at risk. There is little emotional pleasure or release for the reader of The Names in the process of Axton deciding to live closer to his soon to be ex-wife and son. Even the link between the contemporary and ancient sacrifices—evidence of which turns up at the archeological dig—and therefore

132 Manlove, Modern Fantasy: Five Studies, 9.
133 Girard suggests that the inability to determine whether a violent act is pure or impure is a consequence of ‘sacrificial crisis’: the loss of sacrificial rites that would distinguish a necessary and contained violence from random bloodshed (Violence and the Sacred, 51).
reader engagement with a history of other witnesses, or other readers, is nullified. Despite
the subject matter, the reader is left not with a murky feeling in the pit of the stomach, but
instead with a puzzle about human nature, about the character of man. The question of
belief engendered for the reader of the literary text extends out beyond the text.

There is no doubt that the horror texts achieve the aim of generating feelings of
horror—precisely because of the tension created between belief and the need to act
irrespective of belief. In contrast, the denouement in *The Names* restores normalcy; what
another believes does not have to bear on one’s own beliefs.

Whereas for the literary texts the element of consequence rests with the reader—
how does one symbolically make sense of this violent act?—there is no sense to be made
of the event in the horror genre text: it simply is. The reader does not even ask how this
textual depiction speaks to belief, the reading is the acceptance of this. The act of reading
itself a substitution.

In other words, as the act of substituting is the essence of the sacrificial, in the
secular realm where literature, high and low, replaces religion and mythology,¹³⁴ the final
substitution may well be the reader for the believer.

5.2.3 *The Art of Sacrifice – Two Modes*

In the end, attempting to distinguish the difference between how a literary text treats the
theme of human sacrifice and how a genre text treats the same material may not only
illuminate alternative methods for depicting this particular motif, but also reveal

¹³⁴ Bataille finds that since Romanticism, Literature has tended to ‘lay a discreet claim to
the heritage of religion’ (*Literature and Evil*, 25).
something about each modes of fiction themselves. It points away from a merely
evaluative understanding of the differences (‘Low’ vs. ‘High’ literature) towards a deeper
understanding of each modes’ continuing vitality, even necessity.

However, perhaps we could think about the contrasts in the following way:
imagine an art museum, a ‘temple of art’ like the Louvre, for example. Down a marble
corridor filled with light we stand before an exquisite medieval altarpiece, or Renaissance
Pietà. In this hushed sanctum where the piece is viewed, we cannot help but be awed and
brought close to the transcendent. But not through the religious belief that created the
object, nor through the image of divinity itself—but instead, through the new religion of
Art. The “prayer” made before this displaced altar may well be a simple intake of breath:
Aesthetics, 135 and this aisthesis might be a proper metaphor for a literary text’s approach
to the theme of human sacrifice.

The genre text, on the other hand, might be imagined as a cult—a small hardy
church of true believers, a Jehovah’s Witnesses cell awaiting Judgment day, or gospel
singing Pentecostals. This cult is not concerned with the intake of human breath of
aesthesis, 136 but with the out-going divine breath, which the Bible calls ‘Ruach’, which in
Greek is ‘Pneuma’, and in Latin is the Spiritus. For the genre text, this subject matter, the
human sacrifice, is still understood in its original conception: the ritual itself is still a
verb, an action with the traditional intention and anticipated outcome.

135 The word ‘aesthetics’ is derived from the Greek ‘I perceive’, but this, in turn,
originates from the Greek ‘I gasp, breathe in’: hence might aesthetics be understood as an
action of perception—the rapid draw of breath. See Onians, Origins of European
Thought, 74-75.
136 See Heidegger’s essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”.

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At its best, the horror genre text dealing with human sacrifice might actually take the reader to the Promised Land of real emotion, terror, pity, even that rare thing—true Catharsis. While the literary text, for all its knowledge and artistry, its aesthetic and cultural capital, leaves the reader standing like Moses, overlooking a place he can never go himself, but must instead, for better and for worse, experience purely symbolically.
Chapter 6: Lessons for *The Bridge* 137

The literary text raises a primarily intellectual and conceptual approach to human sacrifice, while the horror genre text raises a fundamentally visceral, experiential approach. However, *The Bridge*, while incorporating the viscera of the horror genre and the ideation of the literary, focuses on the evocation of an emotional, or heartfelt, response, from the reader.

6.1 *The Formal*

Since my intention is to explore faith in its literal as well as symbolic senses, the human sacrifice is on-stage, carried out by sacrificers who must come to believe in the efficacy of offering a life in exchange for supernatural assistance:

Shane grinned. Will held his peace and that worked because Shane finally bent down and pressed the blade to the pig’s massive neck.

‘Pray,’ he said.

Will said nothing.

‘If I’m going to do this, you’re going to do the other part.’

‘I’ve never prayed in my life.’

The younger man rested the knife on his jean leg and looked up at him. ‘Offer it up. Jesus, Will, just try.’ (211)

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137 Synopsis: The seven main characters who narrate *The Bridge* will be forced to decide what they believe when it is proposed that the reason a newly built bridge has now twice fallen down is because a human sacrifice has not been made to it.
Each sacrifice–effigy, pig and finally young woman–foreshadows the next, introducing the characters (and therefore the reader) to the idea of bloodshed for supernatural purpose. The failure of the second sacrifice of the pig to make the bridge stand should complicate the link between blood rites and propitiation of gods; however, there is a certain logic to the suggestion that it failed only because the offering wasn’t large enough. The third sacrifice of Moriah, then, instead of becoming less likely, becomes imperative.

The irrational logic for such human behaviour is what has been explicitly relegated to, and exploited within, the genres. However, *The Bridge* takes this irrationality and combines it with literary techniques relating to verisimilitude resulting in a renewed focus on characterisation: specifically, attention to thought processes and the disjunction between what is said and what is done. One of the strongest techniques in *The Names* was the embedded narrative, which combined reflection with the interpretation of action. This afforded an increased realism and decreased the likelihood of a reader questioning the interpretation.

*The Bridge* has not utilized the embedded narrative, because as a text it is committed to forcing the reader to witness directly what the characters choose to do. However, the same ‘reflection upon interpretation of action’ shall be employed in the characters’ interior monologues:

> There was something sickening inside him. A worm. Like in that poem, burrowing about in his rose. Sometimes it caused a terrible stomach-ache and sometimes, to his great shame, it caused tears. (42)
There are other formal techniques found in the literary treatment of human sacrifice incorporated into *The Bridge*: the emphasis on description, and, the inclusion of a denouement which ensures that the text does not end at the point of the successful or failed enactment of the sacrifice. Formal techniques indicative of the ‘horror’ genre text included in *The Bridge* are its plot-driven structure, the serious treatment of the possibility of supernatural forces within the thematic organisation of the novel, and, the sense of horror created by the human sacrifice.

6.2 *The Rhetorical*

The intention behind *The Bridge* is to explore the implications of the power of belief. If, as Saint Paul says: ‘Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’, then *The Bridge* is interested in the effects on the substantial and visible world of such faith. This inspiration became literal when I realised the text was not going to include a god per se.

Most human sacrifice in either the fictive world, or the real world mythology, utilises a god. Deity’s need for a human life is paganism *par excellence*, and the god portrayed, the ‘genius loci’ or the spirit of the place, is a local god. This is illustrated in children’s stories such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* where a ‘troll’ must be propitiated in order for the billy goats to cross the bridge.

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138 The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews 11:1.
139 For example, Huitzilopochtli, the god of sun and warfare for the Aztecs.
140 Asbjørnsen and Moe, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. 
However, there are examples across folkloric legend, archaeological findings, and present day lore surrounding collapses of major 19th and 20th century bridges that particularise bridges as an exceptional building structure with regard to human death (accidental and intentional; the collection of evidence includes bridge foundations as ‘tombs’, and bridge towers and spans as structures used for suicides)—all without mentioning a specific god.

In the nursery rhyme *London Bridge is Broken Down*, while it is clear that an immured human sacrifice will watch the bridge all night to ensure it does not fall, there is no mention of a god. While this may be because the very act of building means man has become god—for example, ‘Clements the Mason’ and other similar European legends and ballads give poetry to the belief that if man ‘assumes the function of God and turns creator’, his co-creator, for the right price, will be the devil (de Witt 1997: 60)—it is...

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141 The most well-known of which would be ‘The Bridge to Arta’; versions in various forms—prose, poetry and ballad—in multiple languages: Hebrew, Greek, Albanian, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Hungarian (Shai, “A Kurdish Jewish Variant”).

142 See Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*.

143 For example: David Pilkington in his article “One Bridge Doesn’t Fit All” states that ‘Bridges should be cared for in the way we treat works to which we have an emotional attachment as well as a physical need’ (*The New York Times*, Saturday, August 18, 2007: A23). See also, “With A Moan and A Groan, West Gate Bridge Brings Back Those Haunting Memories”, *The Age*, 16 October, 2004: 5, and “Bridge Danger Probe”, *The Northcote Leader*, Melbourne, 17 November, 2004: 1.


146 A famous legend about twelve masons commissioned to build a castle (where this castle is built depends on the nationality of the story-teller), but they can make no progress. One day they decide to perform a ritual sacrifice by killing the first wife who arrives to the building site; her blood would be mixed with the mortar to assure success. It is Clements’ wife who arrives first and is killed (de Witt Niles, “Lamkin: The Motivation of Horror”).
also because in these earlier texts not only the existence of God, but the existence of an entire network of supernatural entities, is taken for granted. This is opposed to the modern texts where the absence of a deity is just that—a representation of absence.

Either way, the point is that the god doesn’t have to be depicted in order for the presence of the supernatural to exist. Given the intention to focus on belief, on that which has no materiality, literal images of a bridge god such as those found in the horror genre text were not desirable. The advent of human sacrifice in *The Bridge* attempts to metaphorically concretise the process (and consequence) of acquiring faith, so the thematic questions do not concern the reality of efficacy of belief, but its morality.

6.3 *The Thematic*

As with both the literary and genre texts, several people carry out the sacrifice in *The Bridge*. And while the victim is an innocent and virginal—up until last minute attempts to save her—she is not naïve: having some interest in martyrdom and some experience of being tormented. She is also not an arbitrary choice: legend having it that someone close to the master bridge-builder should be selected for sacrifice. The tension in the text is created precisely because the advocates, the dissenters and the victim’s perspectives are all known and are all in opposition.

In *The Bridge* the ritualistic process is more a matter of convincing the characters of the need for the human sacrifice, than of trying to recreate what such an event looks

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147 See C.S. Lewis’ *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* for an attempt to reconstruct precisely this worldview, which lasted until Modernity.
148 de Witt Niles, 58.
like. The characters, and the reader, have to be slowly cajoled into accepting a version of reality that falls outside the lived existence:

‘Just tell me what the dues are, Charlie.’
‘Blood.’
‘Sorry?’
Silence.
‘Come on, Charlie. You tell me about the hundreds of other men sitting before you, and I’m supposed to believe you’ve told them they have to offer blood dues?’
Charlie nodded.
Will took in a long breath. ‘Well, that’s all very interesting.’ He hoped his voice sounded as sarcastic as he intended. ‘I’ve never heard of this before and I’ve been in construction for over 25 years.’
Charlie fixed a lightless eye on him. ‘Doing renovations. Building on top of other people’s foundations. Including your office complexes. Have you ever built something on land that hasn’t had any sort of structure on it?’
‘Course I have. Vacant lots. All kinds of things.’
Charlie smiled. ‘Vacant lots,’ he repeated. ‘Vacant lots in the city are not so vacant.’ His eyes were like black prunes. But the smile didn’t leave his mouth. (166)

The horror genre texts do not concern themselves with having to convince their characters to carry out human sacrifices: those who believe it is necessary simply do it, those who do not, try to prevent it. The convincing undertaken in *The Bridge* may be a result of its cross-over status: the insistence that people could get so carried away places the form close to the horror genre, however, the rational, secularist approach to the sacrifice in *The Bridge* speaks more to lived contemporary ‘realism’ than to backwater, religious atavism.

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Thematically, the text follows the horror tradition of subversion: Moriah’s death enables the bridge’s resurrection and the supernatural, far from inciting mystical contemplation, introduces a ‘nasty surprise’. However, the overall effect of the novel is to induce the same philosophical ruminations inherent in the literary text’s handling of this subject matter.

Overall Conclusion

Whether the sacred exists in the medium of art/language—as proposed via the modernist or post-modernist literary text’s handling of human sacrifice—or whether it exists in the more traditional form of gods to whom the sacrifice must be made—as presented via the horror genre text—the reliance on belief/faith in the Other was an important key for the writing of *The Bridge*, as well for the questions posed at the beginning of this exegesis.

Importantly, I was able to understand what presenting a human sacrifice would mean for the relationship the text would have with the reader. To place the act ‘on-stage’ was to insist that it had meaning in and of itself—and yet I need the sacrifice to be an actual event in the fictive world, not simply symbolic or a metaphor. Making the act literal risked making it mere spectacle, so because of the research undertaken in the exegesis, I realised I would have to contrive to keep the sacrifice on-stage by showing it only in glimpses. I would take DeLillo’s powerful interpretative retelling, and create a

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149 Salomon, 74.
similar effect by having the characters narrating that section of the novel, look away and look back interstitially.

Furthermore, in order to represent a believable human sacrifice within a fictive contemporary, realist world required enormous work at the level of characterisation. The characters had to be convinced that this act was necessary and efficacious: a journey paralleled by the reader who had to be convinced that the characters believed. This exploration of faith was intended to leave the reader in T.S. Eliot’s territory—‘After such knowledge, what forgiveness?’ 150

150 Eliot, 38.
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Volume Two — Exegesis

Altaring the Literary Landscape:
An Exploration of Literary Techniques
for the Representation of Human Sacrifice

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Cassandra Austin

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    Thank you my friend.
Man is born to believe. And if no church comes forward with its title-deeds of truth, sustained by a tradition of sacred ages and by the conviction of countless generations to guide him, he will find altars and idols in his own heart and imagination.

Benjamin Disraeli
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to Literary Representations of Human Sacrifice

From the 17th to 19th centuries—following the recent encounters with tribal societies such as the American Indians, as well as civilisations of vast and ancient sophistication like the Chinese and the Hindu—an entire school of Christian scholars were galvanised into categorising newly emerging religio-mythic beliefs in the hope of finding a single key throughout; a single key that would unite the unconscious and conscious human impulses across culture and time.

For some of the more eccentric scholars, the ‘key to mythologies’ turned out to be phallic worship1 (shades of Freud avant la lettre), for others it was universal solar worship.2 But in the case of proper Christian scholars, the kind that still fundamentally dominated all schools of European learning from the middle ages until quite recently, that key could only be one thing: Jesus Christ.

All the foreign myths and rituals were seen as intimations and foretellings of the One True Saviour and the one true religion. The enterprise to reclaim all of human history for Christ, in effect—matched with the expansion of knowledge that accompanied

1 ‘I have drawn up the following sketch of phallic worship, … the most ancient of the superstitions of the human race, [in] that it has prevailed more or less among all known people in ancient times, and that it has been handed down even to a very late and Christian period.’ Westropp and Wake, “Ancient Symbol Worship,” a paper presented to the Anthropological Society of London, April 5th, 1870, unpaginated.

2 ‘All mythologies find their explanation in this starry language, and every religion is founded upon the movements of our solar system. The rise and fall of empires and races of men are written in its pages.’ Burgoyne, The Light of Egypt, Volume 11, Introduction.
the expansion of empire—is the background to Joseph Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890). An encyclopedic tome, *The Golden Bough* explored the mythic commonalities between cultures and societies by virtue of their taboos, magic, legends, folklore, tribal lore, divinities, rituals and religious beliefs and activities.

However, Frazer neatly reversed the Christian scholars: finding that instead of the myriad forms of worship and belief being intimations of the one true Christ, it is Christian belief that is the copy, the mangled survivor of these more ancient beliefs.

According to Frazer’s analysis, Jesus Christ’s sacrifice was an echo of ancient customs derived from a single originary myth: a cult of fertility involving the worship and periodic sacrifice of a sacred king-figure, surrogate for a solar deity, who ‘died’ at harvest time, only to be reincarnated every spring. The key threaded throughout the mythologies of the ages was *human sacrifice*.

Frazer found that across all cultures and ages peoples practised, pretended to practice and ultimately ritualised human sacrifice. Evidence now suggests it was carried out by the early Romans, the Aztec/Mexicas, the Celts, the Norsemen, the Chinese—particularly under the Shang and Zhou Dynasties—and the practice of ‘Nara bali’ still occurred monthly in India into the late eighteen hundreds (with recent revivals in the past decade).

Frazer’s analysis and the demonstration of the pervasiveness of human sacrifice across time and cultures directly influenced many of the 20th Century’s most prominent

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3 Benjamin and others, *The Quest for the Wicker Man*, 20.
thinkers, theorists (from Freud and Wittgenstein to Bataille and Girard) and writers (from T.S. Eliot to Joseph Conrad). In fact, the motif of human sacrifice may be one of the most enduring features of classical, biblical and canonical texts of English literature. Represented in sources as varied as Greek tragedy, the Bible, the oral storytelling and poetry of Norse paganism and common nursery rhymes, human sacrifice, as a theme, has also seeded itself into folktales, plays, epics, ballads, novels and scripture.

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6 According to Vickery (94) Freud’s early work *Totem and Taboo* explicitly drew upon *The Golden Bough*, and although Freud’s development of the concept of the Oedipal complex resulted in a different advancement for the role of totemic figures, Freud himself acknowledged that the ‘chief literary sources’ for his studies were Frazer’s anthropological works.
7 Even though Wittgenstein criticised Frazer’s theoretical analysis, he kept notebooks of reflections on *The Golden Bough* (Vickery, 101).
8 See Bataille’s *The Theory of Religion*, *The Accursed Share*.
9 Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* are seminal anthropological texts dealing with human sacrifice as a key organising principle of society and culture.
11 *The Heart of Darkness* is considered the exemplar par excellence of literary novels dealing with human sacrifice.
12 Interestingly, vast disjunctions exist between these real world acts and their literary representations (Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice*, 6), despite the fact that comparisons invariably depend upon the same historiographic accounts—and unfortunately it is outside the scope of this exegesis to ‘compare and contrast’ the historical data with the literary versions. There is also contention about the actual numbers of sacrificial victims; many of the deaths and corpses ascribed to this ritualistic action may not have been killed under such circumstances since archaeologists and anthropologists find it difficult to separate murders, executions and sacrifices (See Green, *Dying for the Gods*).
This exegesis concerns itself with the fictional accounts of human sacrifice, and explores the way representations of human sacrifice differ in form and meaning across genre and literary texts.

1.2 Brief Survey of Existing Scholarship

There are a number of scholarly accounts of the theme across biblical literature: for instance, Hugo Grotius’ *De Satisfactione Christi* (1617), Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and Jon Levenson’s *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (1993). However, the existing study focuses more on the meaning of human sacrifice within the religious or historical context and, the current exegesis is interested in the literary techniques behind the representation of the act in literature.¹⁴

There are a few critical studies concerned with representational device: Derek Hughes’ *Culture and Sacrifice: Ritual Death in Literature and Opera* asserts that contemporary representations of human sacrifice are a reaction to the residue of barbarism remaining in an author’s culture, although this analysis still privileges meaning over technique. Thomas Cousineau’s *Ritual Unbound*, examines a group of modernist literary novels that demonstrate ‘vestiges of primitive sacrifice rituals’.¹⁵ This analysis, while considering technique—for example, rhetorical strategy and prose style—

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¹⁴ In one of the more famous studies (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*), Erich Auerbach considers the Hebrew narrative of the Binding of Isaac, along with Homer's description of Odysseus's scar, as a means of articulating his two models for the representation of reality in literature. The representation of the sacrifice itself is a secondary consideration.

¹⁵ Cousineau, front pages.
understands sacrifice in relation to the anthropological symbolic. Cousineau argues that modernist novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and *To the Lighthouse*, recognising that a narrator is prone to become victim of a social sacrificial ritual, precisely resist this. Similarly, Michiel Heyns’ *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1995) and Andrew Mozina’s *Joseph Conrad and the Art of Sacrifice* (2001) concern themselves with the way realist fiction reinforces existing social (victimary) structures through techniques of representation—analysis given flesh (primarily) by Rene Girard’s anthropological scape-goating theories.

In other words, besides Hughes’ 2007 work, none of these textual analyses focuses on the literal depiction of human sacrifice, only on the symbolic. Hughes contends that this representational shift is indicative of the gradual decline of religious belief beginning with the Romantic period. However, there are plenty of contemporary texts that do depict the act literally: genre texts—which perhaps suggests that analyses of representations between types of text will be more indicative of representational difference than analysis across time periods.

Furthermore, only Hughes’ work and Susan Mizruchi’s *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (1998) attempt to locate the represented sacrifice within a religious context. Yet given that the word ‘sacrifice’ originates from the Latin and means ‘to make holy’, representational reference to the religious seems purely logical. According to Shuger (*The Renaissance Bible*, 131) this definition also works conversely: because of the etymological connection preserved both in Latin

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16 Hughes, 151.
18 The perception of a supernatural recipient is precisely what distinguishes sacrifice from other types of ritual killings. (See Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece.*)
(sacer/sacrificare) and Greek (hieron/hiereion), that which is sacred is sacrificed. It would also be rare to find, in the limited accepted archeological and anthropological confirmations of actual human sacrifice, instances where the idea of the supernatural was not included. Thus a human sacrifice is the killing of a human being for the direct purposes of appeasing, propitiating, evoking or announcing a god/s (even where the term god/s remains ‘fluid’).19

Are texts characterising the sacrificial activity without reference to gods or an afterworld merely portraying ritual20 killings, not human sacrifices? Or, has human sacrifice simply been divested of its traditional religious meaning and invested with sociological meaning for the purposes of literature? Alternatively, do ‘holiness’ and ‘the sacred’ in relation to sacrifice have to refer to traditional gods, or can these be replaced with the modern ‘symbolic’ gods of fame, art or money?

Of the larger scale scholarly works, Grotius’ De Satisfactione Christi (1617) and Frazer’s The Golden Bough (1890) are at once the most exemplary, and the most illustrative of these questions. Evidence for the era in which each was written,21 Grotius’ analysis differs from Frazer’s in that it effects to believe in the efficacy of human sacrifice supernaturally (Shuger, 84); while Frazer’s analysis categorises the mythic existence of the act and theorises about its religious origins without judgment or acceptance of the beliefs inherent to it.

20 Although we now commonly use the word ritual when referring to activities undertaken repetitiously i.e. the morning coffee ritual, etymologically it is derived from the Latin rite refers to religious ceremony. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary
21 Grotius writes in a period where belief remains the bedrock of all scholarship, while Frazer writes at the beginning of the peak of unbelief, the threshold of the Modern.
It is the contention of this exegesis that the chief difference between two great chroniclers of human sacrifice—that of the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice—will find parallel in the technical differences of representing, and in the meaning of, human sacrifice between literary and genre texts. Formal representational differences across these types of text is expected, but I propose that the meanings of human sacrifice shall be equally as divergent.

1.3 Exegetical Method

This exegesis focuses on the identification of literary techniques for representing human sacrifice in twentieth century literature. These different literary techniques will be analysed for difference in meaning and form: primarily synchronically (within a given period between ‘High’ and ‘Low’ or ‘popular’ and ‘literary’ fictions), with a secondary focus on the diachronic (modern and post-modern texts and beyond). Essentially, a literary treatment of human sacrifice will be contrasted with the horror genre treatment.

If ‘literary’ fiction is often classified as such because of its ‘ideology of subjectivity’ or individuality, adherence to realism, and its preference for ‘the play of language’, then ‘horror’ genre fiction might be largely defined in opposition: an

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22 It is helpful to define the linguistic ‘horror’ as opposed to ‘terror’. Terror, considered a defining characteristic of Gothic fiction (Punter, 13) (along with apprehension, confinement, and the claustrophobic pressure of the past), comes from the Latin terrere and means to frighten. Horror, belonging to horror fiction and coming from the Latin horrere, means to bristle or shiver. The former is an imaginative state, the latter a visceral one. Since the literature being discussed does not include Gothic fiction, this exegesis concerns itself with the viscera of ‘horror’.
‘ideology of connectivity’ that privileges plot over ‘the play of language’, and that while presenting its fictive world as realistically as possible, sees no contradiction in finding the literal monster or supernatural presence lurking there also.\textsuperscript{23}

Both these types of fiction employ ‘intertextual’ devices, or, a ‘range of processes by which a text invokes another’.\textsuperscript{24} However, using Fowler’s definition of genre ‘modes’ as a signal, or series of signals within the text: ‘a characteristic motif … a formula; a rhetorical proportion or quality’,\textsuperscript{25} only ‘genre’ fiction provides a predictive element to the reading experience based on these signals that, while not being definitive, are still of such quantity or quality as to enforce or reinforce reader assumptions. As a result, the meanings within a genre novel ‘never belong to it alone’.\textsuperscript{26}

In other words, the literary text is at least self-sufficient, a complete set of meanings, despite remaining part of a literary ‘conversation’. On the other hand, any individual genre text is, in a sense, fundamentally incomplete when isolated from its genre;\textsuperscript{27} its \textit{completed} meaning depends on the genre.

Therefore, in the course of the analysis of texts focusing on human sacrifice as subject matter, we can use a single representative literary text\textsuperscript{28} but require multiple genre texts.

\textsuperscript{23} Neale, \textit{Genre}, 9.
\textsuperscript{25} Fowler, \textit{Kinds of Literature}, 107.
\textsuperscript{26} Frow, 49.
\textsuperscript{27} This is not to suggest that a horror genre novel can’t be understood as a stand-alone text, just that the meaning of a single text occurs in its relation to the entire genre.
\textsuperscript{28} The exegesis will also draw upon examples from other literary texts representing human sacrifice: namely—Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness}, Peter Ackroyd’s \textit{Hawksmoor}, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s \textit{Never Let Me Go}. 
The one literary text considered in detail is Don DeLillo’s *The Names* (1982)—a postmodern novel that is widely considered to have been his breakthrough novel. Also included are six texts categorised as falling within the ‘horror genre’. Birkhead defines the horror genre as a twentieth century development following the crossing of two pre-existing genres: ‘the marvellous of old story’, meaning the epic, with ‘the natural of modern novels’, meaning a form of realism.\(^{29}\)

The six horror genre texts all present particular types of horror: H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Festival” (1923), for instance, works within the rules of a subgenre called ‘cosmic horror’. Cosmic horror proposes that horror itself is evidence that the world is evil and malignant. Thomas Tyron’s novel *Harvest Home* (1973) is ‘atavistic’ horror—concerned with the devolution of humans taking part in archaic rites and rituals, which have uncannily survived into the modern world. Ted Klein’s best-selling novel *The Ceremonies* (1984) is a combination of cosmic and atavistic horror.

Considered ‘post-modern horror’, Stephen King’s texts draw upon all the sub-generic traditions within the horror genre. He is also the champion of homegrown horror; not the exotica of the European Dracula, but the horrific found in the familiar world and ordinary landscape of America. His short story *Children of the Corn* (1976) is a prime example of this intention. While King’s voice is American folksy, his English equivalent might be Ramsey Campbell’s understated sophistication. Campbell’s *The Nameless* (1981) is similarly aware of the entire horror tradition, similarly focused on the local landscape, and also tends to reject the vampiric, ghoulish and pulp clichés of the horror

\(^{29}\) Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror*, vii.
genre; it is the modern world that horrifies, as much as any monster.\footnote{Sullivan, \textit{Lost Souls}, 395.} Hardy and Shaffer’s novel \textit{The Wicker Man} (1978) is a novelisation of a film focusing on a wide variety of pagan beliefs and superstitions.

A number of different paradigms offer themselves as methods for analysis of literary form and content; most obviously, the two related schema are the French \textit{recit/histoire} and the Russian Formalist \textit{fabula/sujet}. These pairings are more commonly understood in English as the ‘diegesis’: that which corresponds to the events (real or imagined) that the story actually conveys, and the ‘narrative’: that which refers to the ways in which the story is told (in what order, by whom etc).\footnote{Walsh, “Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory”, 593.}

The component these systems fail to make explicit is that which signifies the relation between the text and reader. The act of splitting the events of a story from the telling of the story creates an absence—and that absence signifies the relationship between the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ as it were, of the tale. Some of the differences between the texts under consideration may fall into this arena—which is why the current analysis is structured according to Frow’s tripartite schema of the formal, rhetorical and thematic.

While the ‘formal’ and the ‘thematic’ correspond to the ways in which the story is told and the events conveyed by the story respectively, the ‘rhetorical’ refers to the way textual relations between senders and receivers of messages are organised.\footnote{Frow, 74.}
1.4 Link Between the Creative Project and Exegesis

The following analysis will provide technical clues to the depiction of human sacrifice within fiction, and illuminate where my work, The Bridge, in its handling of the same subject matter, might do well to embrace or reject these same devices. Studying both the literary and the horror genre depictions of human sacrifice, would allow an understanding the respective representational strengths and limitations: such knowledge would assist me in the writing of a novel that would attend to the symbolic resonance of the literary, without losing the visceral ‘readerly’ (in Barthes’ term) pleasure and excitement of the genres.
Chapter 2: The Formal

*The Formal refers to ‘the organisation of the material properties of language … the degree of complexity of sentences’, the specification of ‘certain types of tone and certain effects of verisimilitude’, and even ‘a certain kind of subject matter’ that ‘corresponds to these stylistic choices’.*

*The Names* can be categorised as postmodern literature owing to its self-referentiality, fragmentation, paradox, and ‘distrust in the meta-narrative’. In particular, the Frazerian meta-narrative of human sacrifice is reduced to the local element and essentially disintegrated within DeLillo’s text. However, the emphasis on the descriptive poetry of landscape, what we might call ‘thought-scape’, and the privileging of the linguistic particular, provide the hallmarks of the novel’s style. Its neo-baroque syntax: a deeply poetic rhythmic composition, and its linguistic ‘particularism’—by which I mean its use of ‘precise, exacting’ word choice—is what lends the novel its distinction. The language swings between attending to the minutiae and then its potential abstracted implication:

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Moments kept coming back to me, precise textures, the brand names of cigarettes, the old guitarist’s
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33 Frow, 74.
34 Synopsis: the protagonist, James Axton, a risk analyst, travels the Mideast region collecting information for a company that provides big corporations with ‘political insurance’. The plot revolves around his relationship with his wife and son, who live on an Aegean island, and through them with two men: Owen Brademas, an intellectual archaeologist leading the dig where Axton’s wife works, and Frank Volterra, an avant-garde filmmaker. These three men develop an obsession about a cult that sacrifices or murders frail/disabled men and women when they wander into a location whose initials match those of their own names.
35 Lyotard, Introduction: The Postmodern Condition, xxiv-xxv.
eyes, his seamed brown hand, and what the Bordens said, and who plucked a grape from the wet bunch, and where people sat, and how we rearranged ourselves around the table as the evening passed through its own solid objects to become what it is now. (225)

From the specific ‘seamed brown hand’ to the abstracted understanding of an evening passing through ‘its own solid objects’, The Names particularises the fictive world and therefore its meaning. The word colour, rhythms and silences, are indicative of a text that reveres, as much as it attempts to play with the metafictive aspect of, language.

This style might be compared with pointillist painting. The gradually accruing dots of paintwork call attention to the surface of the work at the same time as allowing us to see through it, see the picture—consequently making us aware of the act of perception itself.36 Similarly, DeLillo calls attention to the language, the words, and even and especially the act of reading.

In direct contrast, language in the horror genre text37 is focused on what will keep the action moving and the reader engaged with the moving action: the language thus aspires to be a clear window, and the words (or the brush strokes) are more or less invisible. The reader, transparently transported directly to the represented reality of the story, does not attend to the individual words, but to the whole greater than the sum of its parts. If there is particularism here, it occurs in the ‘uncanny’ juxtaposition of verb and

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36 The real point of pointillism and impressionism perhaps being to paint not scenes, but to represent the act of seeing.
37 In all of the horror genre texts chosen for inclusion, the basic premise is that a stranger—male generally, otherwise a couple or small family—visits or moves into a remote community which has cut ties with the modern world, and there unearths the practising of an archaic ritual that culminates in human sacrifice. The individual novel synopses are footnoted at the first mention of each text.
noun:

Workmen were disemboweling white Georgian houses to make room for apartments. Helen lived at the end of the side street … She came to the door before Judy could ring, her hands pink as a dummy’s with rubber gloves.

(Campbell, The Nameless\textsuperscript{38} 1981: 63)

The confusion between the animate and inanimate: where the buildings are disemboweled like bodies and thus animate, and the hands are like a dummy’s thus inanimate, is a classic example of the ‘uncanny’.\textsuperscript{39} Campbell’s word-pictures impart a worldview of underlying cosmic horror, a Gnostic horror, even in a moment as classically banal as a move from an urban exterior to a woman washing dishes. Instead of admiring words or phrases, the reader is experiencing an unease.

The language in the horror genre text also privileges the necessary and the concrete. This preference for the ‘regular’ at the level of language means there is less conflict with the ‘unreal’ at the level of subject matter; everything within the novel—both text and subject matter—are matter of fact and a matter of fact. Somewhat ironically, this often commits the horror genre text to realist tropes in a way the literary text is free to dismiss. For example, the horror genre novel dealing with human sacrifice cannot afford the linguistic self-reflexivity inherent in The Names, as reader focus on language might result in a break with content.

\textsuperscript{38} Synopsis: A young girl goes missing and is believed dead until the girl’s mother receives a phone call—from her daughter. The woman tracks her daughter to a cult engaged in human sacrifice.

\textsuperscript{39} Freud, The “Uncanny”, 141.
The formal emphasis on language to create *The Names* is echoed within the fictive world where the multiple languages spoken, wordplay, pattern-making with the alphabet, and the matching of letters by the cult are set against the figures, accounting data, statistics and risk calculations carried out by Axton, so that the reader is made aware of the gap, or the mystery, between the signifier and the signified:

‘What do we have? Names, letters, sounds, derivations, transliterations. We approach nameforms warily. Such secret power. When the name is itself secret, the power and influence are magnified.’ (210)

‘We have a complex grading system. Prison statistics weighed against the number of foreign workers … Have the generals’ salaries been doubled recently. This year’s cotton crop or winter wheat yield. Payments made to the clergy’ (33–34)

This tension between the beauty of language as a form and its formal failure to adequately or accurately represent is not exclusive to *The Names*, but it is more prominent, indeed is more a function of the meaning of the text when considering the literary as opposed to the genre.

Because the fictive world in the horror genre texts studied might be compromised by literary playfulness between text and narrative, drawing attention to the conceits of form risks drawing attention to the conceits of content—a jeopardy heightened where the supernatural is concerned. Therefore, for example, the order of the ‘story-time’ and the
‘discourse time’ is kept as close together as possible. Techniques typical of representing discourse time, techniques typical in literary fiction—digression and flashback—are largely absented, or used sparingly in these horror genre texts.

Additionally, as opposed to a literary text, it is possible to identify two stylistic conventions most often utilised in the six horror genre texts analysed:

a) Omniscient narrators. Omniscience allows a reader to know what the protagonists cannot: that their decisions, or lack of them, are only leading them closer to death. This stylistic choice ratchets up tension for the reader.

b) Third person perspective. A first person perspective precludes suspense about the narrator’s possible death and since anyone might die (or be resurrected) in the horror novel, suspense about who will die (or live) and how, is a primary narrative drive.

2.1 Off-stage/On-stage Action

Walter Burkert has argued that ritual sacrifice (of goats and other animals) in ancient Greece gave birth to Greek tragedy. This link between sacrifice and theatre is appropriate given that one of the dilemmas faced by texts dealing with representations of

40 By ‘story-time’ I mean ‘the time sequence of plot events’, and by ‘discourse time’ I mean ‘the time of the presentation of those events’ in the text (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do”, 122).
41 Evidence for which includes the fact that the word’s origin is Greek: tragoidia, contracted from trag(o)-aoidi = ‘goat song’ from tragos = ‘goat’ and aeidein = ‘to sing’ (Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual”, 88, 93). Thus the meaning of ‘tragedy’ refers to the tragic song sung by a goat before being led to the altar for sacrifice to Dionysis (Pizzato, Theatres of Human Sacrifice), an occurrence before a theatrical performance. More recent work considers the governing spatial paradigm of tragedy to be ‘the ritual of a circle of community around a surrogate altar’ (Wiles, Tragedy in Athens).
human sacrifice is whether or not to have the act ‘on-stage’ or ‘off-stage’. Adapted for a text, ‘on-stage’ simply means the event is directly reported to the reader, while ‘off-stage’ means the text displaces the report of the event one or more degrees. While there is only one way of being ‘on-stage’ (directly bringing the action to reader perception unmediated by any but the author herself), there are an almost unlimited number of ways of putting the action ‘off-stage’.

Just as occurs within Greek tragedies dealing with this subject matter,42 literary texts—Heart of Darkness, Hawksmoor, Never Let Me Go and The Names—locate the human sacrifice off-stage.43 In The Names the reader learns the details of the event not through the narrator’s direct involvement or even recollection, but as the protagonist learns it: as part of a secondhand retelling by someone else who was present. Even when a secondary character, Owen Brademas, has the chance to witness a human sacrifice in person, he chooses not to; finding that directly looking would amount to a form of barbarism (an effect purposefully cultivated in the genre text) whereas merely knowing about it does not (308).

Dramatically, this off-stage action is anticlimactic. Receiving information second-hand, even if told as though not second-hand (interior monologue provided for the reader as well as speech acts), removes the events from the reader. The Names brings this choice to reader attention:

42 See Pizzato, Theatres of human Sacrifice.
43 To further the point, Donna Tartt’s cross-over literary thriller The Secret History has the human sacrifice off-stage in the literary style, and the murder on-stage in the genre style. I am unable to find an example of a literary text dealing with human sacrifice that does not locate the actual killing off-stage.
'When the storyteller interrupts his narrative to consider things, to weigh events and characters ... to examine methodically, the mob grows impatient, then angry, crying out together, “Show us their faces, tell us what they said!”’ (276)

Brademas says this as preface to his story within the text; at the beginning of his recounting of the sacrifice he traveled to be near—making a distinction between the crude appetites of ‘the mob’, who want the information directly, and the presumably higher sensibilities of the reader who is receiving it secondhand.44

By having Brademas suggest that the events are being submerged by the surrounding commentary, DeLillo is reminding the reader how a narrative structures the diegesis—how the telling structures the tale.45 This self-conscious device not only asks the reader to reflect on his or her sensibilities in relation to art, it also, and paradoxically, serves the illusion of reality—particularly in relation to receiving the images of the sacrifice:

‘We have not talked about the sound, the hammers, a damp noise, the way she crumpled, how soft it was ... Or how long it took, we have not talked about this. Or how we hit harder because we could not stand the sound. How Emmerich used the cleft end of the hammer. Anything to change the sound.’ (210–211)

44 DeLillo makes a similar distinction between images and words: ‘A picture is like the masses: a multitude of impressions. A book on the other hand, with its linear advance of words and characters seems to be connected to individual identity... Somehow pictures always lead to people as masses. Books belong to individuals.’ (Desalm, “Masses, Power and the Elegance of Sentences”, http://perival.com/delillo/desalm_interview.html, unpaginated.)

45 The logical referent—both formally and thematically—is Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Embedding Marlow’s narrative in a wider frame, Conrad attempted to gain ‘realism’ by creating the illusion of a seamless set of tellers and receivers of story, of which the reader is only one.
The effect of this embedded retelling is, in fact, far more horrific than the ‘on-stage’ representations of human sacrifice in the horror genre text. This retelling combines reflective interpretation with the description of action—a far more powerful tool for representing verisimilitude than just the latter.

Retelling as an interpretation of action retains the physicality while softening the context: we are only given a glimpse. But what a powerful glimpse: the process by which someone is killed with a blunt instrument takes time: hands, arms must be repeatedly raised, and the sacrificers need to catch their breath. But there is also frenzy, because the repulsive nature of the act demands an overextension of intent. To slow the blow is to give the mind a chance to intervene. And it must be done as a group because the will is strengthened by the mere fact of seeing others act. The mode of ‘retelling’ means the sacrificial act is received as chillingly believable.

In comparison, little is subtle, silent, omitted or ‘off-stage’ in the horror genre texts. In particular, the human sacrifice/s is front and centre stage:

Tamar sprang forward… A silver crescent gleamed in her hand; she raised the sharpened sickle and … in one swift movement she slashed it across the exposed throat. His roar became a wild bellow, then turned to a gurgle; a torrent of red appeared … They bent him back further and came with a cup and bowl to catch the precious liquid

(Harvest Home\textsuperscript{46} 1973: 395)

\textsuperscript{46} Harvest Home is the story of a New York couple, Ned and Beth Constantine, with a difficult teenager daughter who move to a tiny village called Cornwall Combe, in New England. The narrator, Ned, grows suspicious about the clinging of the villagers to the ‘old ways’ and eventually uncovers the secrets of the Harvest Festival: human sacrifices to a pagan god to ensure a prosperous corn harvest. But, in a complication, his wife and
Here, the detailed specificity does not enhance plausibility but grotesquery. Here the individual genre text is concerned with the intentions of the genre as a whole: to be horrifying. But the particularism that would establish the violence as actually occurring is sacrificed to the explicitness: the gestures are exaggerated, the violence does not tire anyone, there are no mistakes made, no one wonders what to do with the body afterwards.

In the same way that sexual explicitness—again without tiring bodies or unpleasant sounds or smells—is a defining part of the pleasure of a pornographic text, the detailing of the horror—traumatised flesh, a demon’s red eyes—is a defining part of the pleasure achieved in the reading of the horror text. In this way, the literal but not realistic depiction of all\textsuperscript{47} verges on the theatrical.

This theatricality is not to suggest that the action becomes farce: the narrative drive, the tradition of this subject matter and the potential consequence within the fictional world are all too strong for that, but it does suggest that ‘staging’ the action signals that the horror is explicitly intended for public consumption. Even within the fictive worlds of the horror genre text, both the overtly horrific sacrificial rites, as well as the seemingly insignificant preparations, are executed in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{48}

daughter are deeply involved in the festival and he is punished for witnessing matriarchal fertility rites.

\textsuperscript{47} For instance, \textit{The Nameless} includes representation of cobweb material that effectively substitutes for a god’s ears.

\textsuperscript{48} The same holds true even for the most allegorical of human sacrifice texts: Shirley Jackson’s short story \textit{The Lottery}. 
When the ‘Old One’ in *The Ceremonies*\(^{49}\) takes Carol on an outing to, unbeknownst to her, enact certain rites—rites that might potentially be disrupted by something as simple as a ladybird (312) or blue handkerchief (315)—they are executed at an amusement park. The reader is privy to ceremonial dance, imbibing, sex acts, kidnapping, the donning of particular garb, singing or chanting, calculation of moon cycles, visions, the use of familiars and so on, as forms of preparation.

These public displays, of even the smallest gesture, may well indicate what the horror genre has inherited from Greek tragedy.\(^{50}\) Discussion of the sacrificial ritual as ‘performative art’ (see Wiles 1997 or Pizzato 2005) is beyond the scope of this analysis, however, the *effect* of the theatrical in the horror genre, namely the cathartic effect, is discussed in chapter three.

What we are left with, having analysed the form of the literary and horror genre texts is stylistic choice based on intended effect. Perhaps the ultimate goal of both is the same—to create a certain unease in the reader—however, the methods are directly opposed: the literary text creates its symbolic action at the level of language itself, while the genre fiction uses language to create its symbolic action.

The literary text does not represent the sacrifice directly, but asks the reader to contemplate it, while the horror genre text places it centre stage and demands that the reader envisage it.

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\(^{49}\) Synopsis: a college lecturer isolated in the countryside and working on a thesis about horror literature, gradually realises that genuine supernatural horror—that threatens the entire world—is taking place around him.

\(^{50}\) See Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual”; Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*; and, Sourvinou-Inwood, *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*. 
Ironically, the literary text, by forcing the reader to ‘over-hear’ instead of ‘see’, makes the act more believable: the hammers, the damp noise etc. The horror genre text on the other hand, by moving the reader past the words to the fictive world depicted, creates a sense of physical repugnance and existential disgust, and even promotes a confusion between the fictive world and the real one. However, while the textual form works to ratchet up the tension, the direct representation of a human sacrifice results in a theatrical rather than believable event.
Chapter 3: The Rhetorical

_The rhetorical ‘organises relations of power and solidarity between speakers (or their textual representatives), and organizes the kinds of semantic intention they bring to it._”51

The distance, between the event and the telling about the event—created by the tendency of a literary text to use framing and embedded narrative—opens up a space into which multiple meanings may be inserted. For instance, by opening up a space around the sacrificial action, metaphor is privileged and this speaks to the relationship of the textual content with the reader. Thus, the point of the sacrifice in _The Names_ may have less to do with the characters in the fictive world, and more to do with an effect on the reader and with what the text gestures at; that which is ‘beyond the written word, outside the textual mode of being’.52

The achievement of this gesturing ‘beyond’ the text occurs via a Socratic dialogue, a dialogue that underlies the structure of _The Names_; the text engages the reader in a debate about the evolution of the sacred.

Firstly, the reader is made intimately aware of historiographic accounts of human sacrifice and their various meanings via the inclusion of real world accounts of human sacrifice:

‘When the king returns to Jordan after a trip abroad, two camels and a bull are slaughtered at the airport.’ (138)

51 _Frow_, 75.
'James and I talked about the finds in central Crete, human sacrifice, the Minoan site. Is it possible these people are carrying out some latter-day version? You remember the Pylos tablet, Owen. Linear B. A plea for divine intercession. A list of sacrifices that included ten humans. Could this murder be a latter-day plea to the gods?’ (116)

Secondly, it is repeatedly refuted that this is what the cultists in *The Names* are doing:

[The cult members] ‘weren’t repeating ancient customs, they weren’t influenced by the symbolism of holy books or barren places, they weren’t making a plea to Egyptian or Minoan gods, or a sacrifice, or a gesture to prevent catastrophe’ (170–71)

These killers are apparently not sacrificers. There are no gods being propitiated; the religious element is wrung from the act. And yet neither are the cultists serial killers: they are not ‘mass communicators, working outward from some private screen, conscious of an audience they might agreeably excite’ (171). In fact, there is no precedent: ‘There is nothing in the literature, there is nothing in the folklore’ (171).

Thirdly, it is proposed that the type of killing depicted in *The Names* is a contemporary activity that engenders its own purpose: Brademas, the leader of the archeological dig, believes that the cult members are engaged in something outside the typical: that there is ‘a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation’ (171). The ‘program’ isn’t ‘senseless’, isn’t ‘casual’, isn’t ‘done for thrills’ (81), rather, the cult

54 If such a word as ‘typical’ can be used in conjunction with sacrificial killings.
is ‘… a story about how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern’ (80).

The modernist and post-modernist preoccupation with pattern-making often occurs at the expense of linear narrative drive: the form becomes waves of patterns rather than a steady narrative ‘pulse’. In The Names the tension between language and meaning that appears to have dominated the construction or creation of the text, and the mystery that provides the obsession for the cult and Brademas, Axton and Volterra within the text, can only be understood as ‘otherworldly’.

When Brademas claims to be giving up ‘the pans of indigo, the coloring for paint, those trays of brilliant powders and dyes’ in favour of ‘only [their] names’ (275), he is at once privileging the signifier over the signified—no accident in a novel called The Names—and perhaps more interestingly, he is rejecting materialism. Hence, and fourthly, we arrive at the point of the contemporary sacrifice: Art.

George Bataille proposes that work and routine—or, the ordinary—are man’s denial of death, while the eruption of crisis, specifically in the form of religious ritual such as human sacrifice brings man into contact with the sacred. DeLillo gives flesh to this supposition by having Brademas claim that the cult members in The Names have made the means of denying death equivalent to death:

‘These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the

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55 It is worth noting that DeLillo is defining his text as literary despite the subject matter precisely by disavowing the desire to depict the things and pointing the reader towards language at its most concrete: only the names of things.
56 ‘… work and the fear of dying are interdependent …’ (The Theory of Religion, 51).
57 ‘… the offered victim is itself the divinity’ (The Theory of Religion, 82).
terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death.’ (308)

And then perhaps, in parallel with Burkert’s ‘sacrifice created theatre’ thesis, it is the telling of these killings, the interpretation, that provides man with his modern sacred: Art.

The Socratic dialogue formally begins via the sacrificial actions of the cultists. It is they who ‘recognise’ (or devise/create) the abecedarian pattern that determines the next victim for their program of producing death. When the cultists debate how they will be best known or represented: in a film or a book, they understand that having killed, having created, it is precisely this act and not themselves that will live on. They will now die. Their sacrifices, representing the creative act at its most brutal, fundamental and passionate, are ‘[s]omething to outlast us. Something to contain the pattern’ (212).

Brademas takes up his part of the dialogue by choosing not the lived experience, not the creating, but its witnessing; the interpretation of the experience—it’s telling. He did not lift a weapon, but can take all the appropriate ‘names’ to his room as though he did. And so the distinction between the event and the telling of the event: the diegesis (the cultists) and the narrative (Brademas’ work) is outlined.

Axton, the narrator, the final voice in the dialogue, is the reader of both the tale and its telling. He pieces together the clues that unlock the secret of the victim creation: ‘Initials, names, places … Jebel Amman / James Axton’ (158). He demands that Brademas make his knowledge public: ‘Show us … tell us’ (300). And once he has consumed it, once he has the ‘life-strength’ (309) that Art offers, he can go home and make a better life for himself.

The position of the reader is like a silent witness to the debate: not the act itself,
but the act-become-debate, because this is the means by which the human sacrificial intention (connection with the sacred) has been contemporaneously transmuted. Perhaps in the literary text dealing with human sacrifice, it is the ritual of reading itself that is the ritual of the sacred.

In comparison with the more cognitive intent of the literary novel, perhaps the fundamental rhetorical intention at work in the horror genre novel is, quite simply, to engender a sense of horror in the reader. While there are numerous examples of the way the horror genre text also foregrounds the breakdown of language itself, these moments have less to do with what is outside the text, than with what simply cannot be expressed. Thus, in the horror genre text, ‘beyond the written word’ is precisely the moment of maximum horror when the narrator goes mad, or when the Other appears:

‘It’s voodoo, I tell you … that spotted snake …
‘Sblood, thou stinkard, I’ll learn ye how to gust …
wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? … Dia ad
aghaidh’s ad aodann … Ungl … rrrlh’

(“The Rats in the Walls”, 1923: 44–45)

Here Lovecraft’s narrator begins to descend back through languages, through old English and Latin to Aramaic, before being unable to speak at all: the wordlessness part of the ultimate horror. In this sense, horror is not only an emotion arising in response to a possible monstrosity, but an enduring feature of being: ‘a basic mood and orientation, or Stimmung, with respect to existence’ and, human sacrifice directly invokes mortality, the horror of non-being.

However, a separation must be made between the literary recollection of horrific

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58 Santilli, “Culture, Evil and Horror”, 3.
events; real world horror such as the tsunami of 2005 or the 9/11 tragedies, and horror that forms the subject within the horror genre novel. For this purpose, Noel Carroll has coined the word ‘art-horror’.59

Art-horror has both an external world focus: confronting the Other poses issues for the reader about the nature of the self, and an internal textual focus: depending on the monster depicted, the survival of humans as a species may be at stake. The authors of the texts under discussion utilise these foci to grand effect: forced to face the reality of Mother Earth’s desire for blood, the narrator of *Harvest Home* partially submits to the sensuality of the rites—damning himself via the pleasures that successfully allow the women sacrificers to lure and ultimately sacrifice each successive Harvest Lord. Stephen King enjoys taking his readers by surprise (for instance, killing his main protagonist in *Children of the Corn*)60 suggesting that accrued knowledge about monsters and commensurate human sacrificial rites is not enough to save the human race.61 While in *The Nameless*, Ramsay Campbell plays upon the reader’s hope that a mother’s cultist daughter is calling her for help and not to lure her to become a sacrifice.

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59 Art-horror is simultaneously the reaction the distinct genre evokes, and, the defining of the genre that the reaction provokes (Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 27). In a tripartite definition, Carroll finds that a) art-horror provokes, or ought to provoke horror; an emotional state of ‘physically felt agitation’, and that b) the emotion of horror is generated by beliefs, thoughts, or judgments about a particular kind of object, and that c) the object is both dangerously threatening and ‘impure’ (27-28). Therefore, horror texts question the nature of human existence ‘in a manner organic to the genre’ (Shaw, “A Humean Definition of Horror”, 10-11).

60 Synopsis: An unhappily married couple driving in rural Nebraska run over the body of a dead boy. They take the body to Gatlin, a small, isolated town where, too late, they learn that the town’s children embrace a bloody pseudo-Christian cult of an evil being that lurks in the cornfields. Both are sacrificed to the corn god.

61 In fact, it could be argued that the horror genre text is founded on the notion that knowledge of an ‘unknown’ (monster/monstrous) not only doesn’t set one free— it marks one as the next victim.
Perhaps, in this way the theatricality of the Formal becomes purposeful in the Rhetorical; while the actual scenes of horror are stylistically ‘unreal’, the cumulative effect works powerfully to overwhelm the senses and engender an intense state of fear.

Carroll theorises that the central paradox of the pleasure a reader takes in ‘art-horror’ comes not from the emotion, nor from the monster/monstrous and its attendant problematics, but from the ‘narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged’ (181). What Carroll terms the ‘ratiocinative pleasure’ of art-horror (184) results from the methodical reasoning that leads to the ‘monster/monstrous’ being successfully identified and confronted; this cognitive satisfaction pleasurably harnesses and subordinates the feeling of horror.

On the other hand, Shaw proposes that the primary source of pleasure is the profound ambivalence with which a reader responds to the monster/monstrous. This ambivalence, which recognises the self in the Other, which wants to know and fears it shouldn’t, which is excited precisely by the danger, and which invites the monster/monstrous in while fearing ‘impurity’ in the Greek sense of contagion, is precisely characterised by evoked emotion:

> The Freudian stress on ambivalence embraces both horns of the paradox: our conscious mind is disgusted by the monster while our id would love to rampage, rape, pillage and destroy with the kind of power monsters wield.62

Aristotle described the value of tragedy ‘through pity and terror effecting the proper

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catharsis of these emotions': the pity and terror being feeling states roused in the audience, and ‘catharsis’ referring to instruction about emotional states that leads to the purging or cleansing of these states, coming from ritual. Art that concentrates on the emotional response of the audience, such as the art-horror of the genre text, is considered to offer catharsis.

However, in *Poetics*, Aristotle indicates that if the representation of the action in a text is badly structured it will lead to ‘shock’ and ‘revulsion’: literally ‘dirtiness’. The incorrect structure of a work of art refers to the suitability of the outcome as per the actions: thus it is proper for Oedipus to feel guilty and pluck out his eyes following his actions, despite his ignorance. So ‘dirtiness’ refers to the manner in which an audience may be polluted by art, rather than properly instructed, if the work is not correctly structured.

Hence, the horror in art-horror needs to be properly contained by the ratiocinative structure through which the reader discovers the horror, comes to understand it and in a sense control it—those same horrific events, if not placed into this ‘complex-discovery plot’, would evoke mere revulsion—the equivalent to the Aristotelian ‘dirtiness’.

Interestingly, when the horror genre remains consistent with Aristotle’s definition of proper art, it is often considered moralistic, ‘inherently reactionary and deeply

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64 Janko, 200.
66 Janko, 200.
67 Janko, *From Catharsis*, 342.
68 Aristotle also indicates that too great a stress on terror makes the work inferior also (Janko, 342). Certain types of art-horror, such as torture pornography, which evoke a real sense of disgust and panic in the reader, do so precisely because they lack, either purposefully, or through lack of craft, the containing structure for their horrors.
conservative’ with teenagers punished for extra-marital sex; the monster/monstrous receiving the necessary come-uppance (most of the time); and clear demarcation between good and evil (unlike many other genres). However, the subject of human sacrifice adds an interesting dimension to this understanding of ‘dirtiness’ versus ‘cleansing’ via art.

According to Shuger, in New Testament Greek, to ‘wash’ signifies sacrificial purification or cleaning something with blood; demonstrated in Hebrews 9:22 ‘and almost all things are by the law purged … with blood’, and 1 John 1:7 ‘the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth (emundat) us from all sin’. Shuger shows that the literal sense of cleansing is ritual rather than hygienic, and then concludes that in both passages ‘the original Greek word for this sort of blood bath is katharsis’.  

If purgation or a release for sin or defilement is achieved by washing with blood—‘blood is purified through blood’—then the horror genre text dealing with the literal depiction of human sacrifice might offer a symbolic as well as emotional catharsis for readers. To engage with a horror genre text handling human sacrifice is potentially to relieve oneself not only of terror, but also of ‘sin’.

This analysis suggests a level of textual self-reflexivity similar to that found

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69 Odell and le Blanc, “Sex and Death in the Horror Film”.
70 Shuger, 128.
71 She is not alone in this analysis: Jonathan Lear contends that when Aristotle refers to katharsis he is preponderantly using it as a term for menstrual discharge (“Katharsis”, 315).
72 One needs to be careful here, because the Aristotelian catharsis of pity and fear does not refer to blood sacrifice. However, Shuger (129) notes that the Aristotelian term for the telos (purpose/goal/meaning) of tragedy and an ordinary Greek term for ritual sacrifice, including the sacrifice of Christ, are identical. Aristotle never claimed that the catharsis of pity and fear was the tragic telos, yet Else (Aristotle’s Poetics, 439) demonstrates that virtually all prior commentators on the Poetics understood it in this sense.
73 Burkert, The Orientalizing Revolution, 56.
within the literary text—except that the horror text does this less with language than with
content. Certainly the texts perverting Christian versions of sacrifice by suggesting that
the act, rather than saving the world, will precisely result in its damnation are engaged in
just that. But the self-reflexivity extends beyond the bounds of the fictive world to the
reader and the real world.

The horror genre text focuses on the relationship of the killing to myth, and then
on the symbolism of this killing for the reader. Worded differently, if there is a particular
pleasure in sympathising or identifying with naïve victims potentially about to meet their
demise, there is a particular pleasurable horror in the repeated reading about death.74
And if, pace Plato, acquiring knowledge is not a process of putting information into empty
minds, but of assisting people to realise that which they already know, it can be no
surprise that the rhetorical cues of the horror genre text handling human sacrifice ritualise
the rediscovery of the reader’s sense of mortality. Thus, vis a vis Carroll, the reader
places the greatest horror, his or her own death, into the containing structure of the
narrative.

Furthermore, this repetition—of narrative model and handling of subject matter—
is what grants the horror genre novel its memorial meta-textual status. It is because
readers bring expectations of predictability to the horror genre that instances of
‘variation, repetition, rectification and modification’ are perceived, 75 and then, it is
because of the ‘participative’ relation76 between readers and texts, that the horror genre
itself can be considered ‘one single, continuous text’. Thus it could be argued that the

74 The endless showing and viewing of the 9/11 tragedy indicates that this fascination is
precisely bound up with repetition.
75 Leutrat, Le Western, quoted in Neale, Genre, 51.
meaning of the human sacrifice: the ritualistic enactment of death, is also the meaning of the genre.

The rhetorical cues for the horror genre reader apply directly to his/her experience of the subject matter within the text, while the rhetorical cues for the reader of the literary text point toward the experience of the text as the subject matter. While both texts deal with the sacred, the literary text eschews the human sacrifice as one of the oldest forms of worship in favour of worship of Art, while the horror genre text perverts the traditional sacred by using the human sacrifice to call into being the horrific Other.
Chapter 4: The Thematic

The thematic content refers to ‘kinds of action, the kinds of actors\textsuperscript{77} who perform them, and the significance that accrues to the actions and actors’.\textsuperscript{78}

4.1 The Characterisation of Belief in the Efficacy of Human Sacrifice

By definition, the function of human or animal sacrifice, whether to propitiate, honour, avoid attention of, or elevate a human being up to, divinity, involves a supernatural being: god/s.

However, in The Names, the cult is ‘not ancient’ (149); the killings are precisely not based on ritualistic traditions and so the gods are divorced from the proceedings, implying a corollary with more a typical murder:

‘[S]omething keeps me from thinking they would accept a higher being … And where’s the ritual in their sacrifice? Old man hammered to death. No sign of ritual. What god could they invent who might accept such a sacrifice, the death of a mental defective? A street mugging in effect.’ (116)

The act itself is transformed into a pseudo-experiment:

\textsuperscript{77} The characters are discussed in the conclusion since there is little significant variation in their presentation between types of text.

\textsuperscript{78} Frow, 76.
Emmerich [cult member]: ‘Let’s face it, the most interesting thing we do is kill. Only a death can complete the program’ (293)

The end result being that religion, religious belief and gods are all mocked—

‘[T]hese smoking lamps, these dark sinuous images. This is gilded theatre, what we see here. We’re almost off the map.’ (24)

Other literary texts handling this subject matter do the same: belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice is a function of either ignorance of alternatives, of an intelligent mind mired in the mentation of its day or of a complicated set of secular rationalisations that substitute for religion. Religious ritual is simply theatre, and gilded theatre at that.

Belief, in these novels, is ‘there be dragons’ territory. Gallagher and Greenblatt attribute this doubt to the character of the modernist novel per se:

The truism that the social is not ‘natural’, but is instead made according to particular desires and interests, is rehearsed in reading novels, an activity requiring that we help fabricate a ‘world’ (which we know is not The World) for the purpose of achieving specific narrative pleasures. Novels may therefore be said to activate a fundamental practice of modern ideology—acquiescence without belief, crediting without credulousness (169)

79 cf *Heart of Darkness*.
80 cf *Hawksmoor*.
81 ‘Madness has a structure. We might say madness is all structure. We might say structure is inherent in madness. There is not one without the other.’ (*The Names* 1982: 210).
DeLillo made discrete, and yet compatible, the secularisation of his narrator\(^8^2\) and the narrator’s world, and the possible religious rituals of sacrifice.\(^8^3\) It is not that *The Names* cleaves the act from the sacred entirely (to whit, see chapter three), but rather that the relationship between the existence of a god/s and the act is severed: *The Names* suggests that the purpose of human sacrifice is to create meaning and that there are new ways to find meaning and new meanings to be found.

The only way through (as well as into) this paradox is language:

> ‘They found a man whose initials matched the first letter of each word in a particular place-name. They either led him to this place or waited for him to wander there on his own. Then they killed him.’ (pp168–9)

Wittgenstein suggested that to speak of language, in itself a language game, is ‘a form of life’.\(^8^4\) Ironically, in *The Names*, the language game is utilised as a means of selecting who shall die. The ‘arbitrary’\(^8^5\) abecedarian method of sacrifice selection in *The Names* is very close to the kind of language game employed by certain modernist writers: from Mallarmé to the Surrealists (including Bataille) and ultimately to the Oulipo and Perec’s

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\(^8^2\) We were doubters, I might have told him … It was one of the many things Kathryn and I agreed on, rockbound doubt (92).

\(^8^3\) ‘Wherever you will find empty land, there are men who try to get closer to God. They will be poor, they will take little food, they will go away from women. They will be Christian monks, they will be Sufis who dress with wool shirts, who repeat the holy words from the Koran, who dance and spin. Visions are real. God is involved with living men… Closer to God, always in mind to remember God. Dkihr allah.’ (149)

\(^8^4\) Ricoeur, “Narrative Time”, 169.

\(^8^5\) ‘Arbitrariness’ itself is a thematic concern of modernism and the Literary (See de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*), as opposed to the Genre. DeLillo is purposefully acknowledging his own literary tradition within the ritualistic tradition being created in *The Names*. 
novel, A Void (1994), composed without the letter ‘e’. How else to understand the deliberate reversal of Plato’s insistence that philosophers take not as the point of departure the words, but the things,\(^\text{86}\) when Brademas precisely describes leaving behind the things—‘the red scarves worn as turbans’, ‘the food stalls’, ‘those trays of brilliant powders and dyes’—to exist in a room with ‘only the names’? (275)

By reminding the reader of real world name-power—Egyptians engraving enemy names on pottery which when smashed slit the enemy throat (150) —while playing with fairytale ‘name’ mythology—a cult with an unknown name about to take a life is a modern Rumpelstiltskin—The Names seems to be playing with the ‘linguistic turn’\(^\text{87}\) in the human sciences and the primacy of language in modern and post-modern philosophy. More pertinently, it could be seen as inscribing a mythology of language into itself that borders on the theological, or more literally, God-talk.

In the beginning may be the word, the logos, but it is a word without referent. A signifier without any signified—à la Derrida’s ‘There is nothing outside of the text’.\(^\text{88}\) This suggests that the sign does not allow the experience of the being/thing and instead language is both the form and content of meaning.\(^\text{89}\)

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\(^\text{86}\) There must be some way to examine things directly, rather than via their names, and this direct method of investigating reality will be in every way superior. (Keller, “An Interpretation of Plato’s Cratylus”, 439a, 301.)

\(^\text{87}\) See Rorty, The Linguistic Turn.

\(^\text{88}\) Derrida, Of Grammatology, 158.

\(^\text{89}\) In DeLillo’s take on the words Toyota Celica: ‘There’s something nearly mystical about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. It’s computer mysticism. Words that are computer generated to be used on products that might be sold anywhere from Japan to Denmark—words devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages. And when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the words acquire a chantlike quality.’ (Begley, “Don DeLillo”, 281.)
But in many religious traditions from Tibetan Buddhism to Western Monotheism, power lies in the knowledge of names and the use of names. Historico-critico theologians draw a distinction between God’s immanence, or literal presence—known as the ‘Glory Theology’ of cultic/priestly literature, and His transcendence—known as the ‘Names Theology’ of Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic history. It is argued that after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the actual Ark, emphasis shifted from Glory Theology’s burning bushes as indicator and container of God’s actual presence, to Names Theology’s powerful and unspeakable Name of a no longer present God.

*The Names* is intimately aware of this distinction and suggests, that though (pace Nietzsche) God may be dead, His name is anything but. In fact, His name retains the power of life and death. While God may be dead to the human sacrifice ritual in *The Names*, and the search for meaning characterised by nihilism, the form of meaning, the forms of attempting to transcribe meaning, while imperfect, may be all we have. Although not actually demonstrating a capacity to believe, *The Names* asserts itself, text, as a substitute means and end.

In opposition to this, in the horror genre text, the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of the human sacrifice is far more traditional. As Green notes when referring to real world human sacrifices, ‘benefit and reciprocity lie at the very roots of sacrificial

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91 We might compare this to the way that the ‘existential’ theology of major figures like Karl Barth attempted to come to grips with the palpable sense of Godlessness, or God-absence in the century of Auschwitz—by focusing on the sheer unknowability and imperceptibility, if not actual unimagineability of God: an idea which goes back at least to Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*. This seminal text speaks to the nearly horrific sense of awe evoked by the unimaginable God and influenced creative writers on both sides of the above divide: from Eliot to Lovecraft, from C.S. Lewis to Ramsey Campbell.
ritual’. Essentially, humans give to the god, so the god will give back—or refrain from doing so, depending on the activity. Milbank suggests that the existence of ‘gods or ancestors to whom one sends things via the operation of death’ may be the only ‘sense’ that can be made of sacrifice. Where to find better evidence of this than in the horror novel, the rhetoric of which is ‘demonstrably theological in nature’?

Thus, in the horror genre texts studied, all human sacrifices are executed to propitiate a god: three gods will grant a good harvest, two gods will bring a different, dark order to the world, and one is a largely unknown, malevolent presence simply bringing death. Genre horror exists in a world where the angel never stayed Abraham’s hand, or, put differently, contrary to the literary text, which we have associated with the Names Theology predicated on the absence of God, the horror genre text directs the reader back to the Glory Theology, predicated on a palpably present Deity; human sacrifice in these texts speaks directly to the supernatural and the religious.

It is worth noticing that this is precisely the promise of the Church; that the Eucharist delivers the recipient directly back to the pre-exilic Temple to encounter the actual presence of the Divine and not just His name, via the symbolic cannibalistic re-enactment of a divine/human sacrifice. It is not a coincidence that the horror genre sometimes seems a blasphemous parody of this, since a number of historians trace the horror genre origins back to the anti-Catholic propaganda of the 18th and 19th centuries.

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94 Sage, *Horror Fiction*, xvi.
95 cf. *Children of the Corn* and *Harvest Home*.
96 cf. *The Festival* and *The Ceremonies*.
97 cf. *The Nameless*. 
98
See for example, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, perhaps the first gothic horror novel.

The meaning of the human sacrifice in the horror genre text therefore is symbolically literal. The ritual—the active symbol—at once evokes the god and reveals its relationship to the human. There is no fear of presenting material evidence of these gods, since the point is belief, not plausibility. To that end the horror genre is prepared to push the boundaries of vraisemblance in its attempt to bring the God or gods palpably before the reader:

> It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge, bulking up to the sky … something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs. Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.

*(Children of the Corn 2002: 212)*

And what gods these are! Gone are the joyful, lusty, fickle Pagan gods. Gone is the radical, loving Jesus of the New Testament. Instead, these are the bad old gods of the Old Testament. The hungry, angry gods of Babylon and Caanan. The horror genre is just as subversive of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the post-Frazer literary tradition; not because it believes in no god, but rather because it believes in bad gods, gods characterised by their inversion of morality. Stephen King’s version of the new god is a red-eyed demon. In *The Ceremonies* the god is described as ‘obscene’ and Lovecraft’s god in *The Festival*\(^99\) inverts the traditional ‘Yule’ or Christmas celebration and orders a “mass” sacrifice. And, of course, these gods insist on a regular diet of human blood.

\(^{99}\) Synopsis: a young man returns to his father’s ancient sea town in respect of a festival held to honour his ancestors and their rites every hundred years. But the festival, a Yuletide inversion of Christmas involving a mass sacrifice, results in his near insanity.
Irrespective of whether the religious farmers or the ignorant city boy in *The Ceremonies* will manage to put a stop to this sacrifice, it will occur again—as soon as the conditions are right. In *The Festival*, the sacrificing occurs every hundred years, in *Harvest Home* every seven years, and in *The Children of the Corn* the sacrificing is annual. The villagers in *The Wicker Man* are emphatic that if the sacrifice of Sergeant Howie doesn’t bring the anticipated harvest, next year Lord SummerIsle will be sacrificed instead, and, in *The Nameless*, the ‘offerings’ are ongoing, required constantly.

The precise intertextual differences between these depicted rituals may not matter. The ritual surrounding the sacrifice is an ‘idea of ritual’. The human sacrifice presented is an ‘idea of human sacrifice’. In other words, since horror genre representations do not mimic the few details of real world sacrifice available to us, the representations offered are like Plato’s shadows playing against the cave wall: the point for the horror genre reader is not to distinguish between the real/unreal, but to accept the meaning via a play upon the likeness of real.

As far as the characterisation of belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice is concerned, the literary reader is not asked to believe that a human sacrifice will produce Art. However, since human sacrifice in *The Names* metaphorically represents both the atavism of religious belief and its potential transformation into the worship of Art, as a symbolic event it can still be efficacious. Although within the text the sacrificial ‘program’ does not deny death, DeLillo suggests that metaphorically the sacrifices—because of the pattern-created Art—manage to achieve just this.

While the reader is also not asked to believe that a literal human sacrifice will
resurrect a god in the horror genre text, s/he is expected to experience the protagonist’s belief. For the horror genre texts, the question is simplified in its literalisation: to ask a reader to accept the implausible is impossible, so the protagonist must come from the rationalist perspective, but in order to give the reader the effect of belief, the protagonist is forced to participate in the world of believers, forced to the altar—leaving no alternative but to respond.

The literary text uses human sacrifice precisely to ‘theologise’ and ‘aesthetisize’ unbelief, while the horror genre aims at allowing the post-enlightenment, skeptical reader the opportunity to experience belief at its most horrifically tangible.
Chapter 5: Conclusions for the Case Studies

Analytical reading of a representative literary text and six horror genre texts led to the compilation of a list of formal techniques used to depict the act of human sacrifice in the prose style. Striking differences were found in the handling of this subject matter across the literature, both in terms of formal device (for instance, on-stage vs. off-stage action) and diegetic and thematic technique within the narrative content (for example, the meaning of the sacrifice).

Following a section on the similarities between all texts, graphic representation of the differences\(^{100}\) is presented below, along with specific conclusions for *The Bridge* in chapter six—the creative part of this MA—that arose as a result of the investigation into the case studies.

5.1 Similarities

Despite the commensurate stylistic differences, there are several elements similar to all the texts: specific setting, narrative modelling and characteristics of those sacrificed and sacrificing.

5.1.1 Specific Setting

\(^{100}\) It must be stressed that the differences so listed are indicative only of those literary and horror genre texts dealing with human sacrifice: not of the differences between literary or horror genre texts in general.
Treatment of human sacrifice in both literary and horror genre fiction deals with the event within a contemporary, industrialised fictive world. However, since rituals of human sacrifice are problematised by twenty-first century technological and communication advances, the actual killings occur in a village, village-like setting or other remote context.

The rationale for this remote, rural setting within the fictive world seems straightforward: the unpopulated landscape offers less chance for discovery and interruption, as well as affording the sacrificers more opportunity and space to organise tools, altars, rites and burial procedures. Authorial rationale for the remote, rural setting is somewhat more complex.

Given the considerable emphasis *The Names* places on the sophistication and intelligence of the cultists, placing the sacrifices in rurality seems almost expedient. However the nature of the particular rurality in *The Names* is critical: a) the middle-Eastern desert setting reminds the reader of Golgotha, Mt Ararat, the hills of Moriah—all those sacrificial events were surrounded by the desert too, and b) it perversely, serves to suggest a barrenness—perhaps of spirituality; those gods are no longer present in this desert.

Furthermore and particularly in the horror genre text, a remote setting serves to remove the activity from the modern, and presumably civilized, psyche. Rurality reads as primitivism in all its permutations: the animal in the human is released, and sacrificers endowed with intelligence and sophistication shall be overcome with curiosity, passion and base instinct.

Essentially, through the use of the rural, the texts substitute space for time. If the
text is not set in the same times or places that factually performed human sacrifice—
China during the Shang dynasty or Aztec Mexico, for example—then creating a space
‘away’: from population, from technology etc, evokes a similar effect. In this way does
the psychogeography of all the texts override the temporalities.

5.1.2 Narrative Modelling

The literary and horror genre texts both draw upon a narrative model of ‘ratiocinative
pleasure’. Here, both the structure of the text and some of the pleasure of reading it are
derived precisely from the narrator or protagonist methodically piecing together the sense
of threat and then, in various ways, seeking to contain it.

In the horror genre text, ‘a search for that discourse, that special knowledge …
will enable the human characters to … control that which simultaneously embodies and
causes its “trouble”’. As a result of the search for that knowledge, investigators in the
horror genre text have their eyes blinded, their tongues cut out, become servants or
puppets, or are killed. There are exceptions to this: yet those investigators (or readers)
who manage to escape are still scarred for life.

In both types of text, the narrative model unites this ratiocination with
tragedy—to engender both the protagonists’ and the readers’ desire to ‘discover’.
While there is some discrepancy in what follows the discovery—literary texts ponder,
while horror genre texts seek to subvert the tragedy—the narrative model is essentially

101 Carroll, 184.
102 Neale, 22.
103 ‘It is the act of reprisal, the repetition of imitative acts of violence, that characterizes
tragic plotting’ (Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 50).
the same.

The minor difference in narrative modeling concerns the goal. While survival is the goal of the horror genre protagonists on this journey, comprehension is the sole goal for the characters in the literary text: if this act is who the human being is,\textsuperscript{104} then let us see and in some way understand or rationalise.

5.1.3  The Sacrificed/Sacrificers

Since ritual depends on a prior event that it simultaneously imitates and recreates, the ritual is itself a substitution. The nature of sacrifice may precisely be ‘the ability to believe that something can take the place of something else on the altar’.\textsuperscript{105} To this end, the victims in both the literary and genre texts are infinitely substitutable. The defining attribute for selection—innocence,\textsuperscript{106} virginity,\textsuperscript{107} age,\textsuperscript{108} familial connection\textsuperscript{109}, sex\textsuperscript{110} and random initial matching\textsuperscript{111}—is privileged over the character him/herself.

A slight discrepancy exists in the voice given the victims: in the literary text the victims do not represent, they are simply human beings—this fact, plus the abecedarian specificity, is the only reason for their deaths and the reader cannot identify nor even

\textsuperscript{104} For there are no gods demanding such activity.
\textsuperscript{105} Racaut, “Sacrifice, Society and Religion”, 59.
\textsuperscript{106} An attribute of the victim across all the texts.
\textsuperscript{107} cf. The Ceremonies and The Wicker Man.
\textsuperscript{108} cf. Children of the Corn.
\textsuperscript{109} cf. The Festival and The Nameless.
\textsuperscript{110} cf. Harvest Home.
\textsuperscript{111} cf. The Names.
really sympathise with them;\textsuperscript{112} in the genre text the victims are often given a point of view—even if this simply confirms how ignorant they are of the signs and portents that signal their sacrificial suitability.\textsuperscript{113} However, because these victims are known to us, as readers, we see that they are like us, that they might very well be us.

All texts perform the sacrifice via a collective of sacrificers.\textsuperscript{114} According to Girard, this fact is explained by his sacrificial-scapegoating theory: the collective seizes upon an innocent, arbitrary victim to enact the violence as a means of not turning on each other.\textsuperscript{115} However, given that none of the textual human sacrifices originate with violent impulses between antagonists, it is Bataille’s theory about the disruption to the ‘primacy of utility’\textsuperscript{116} that makes more sense of this unanimity between the texts. Bataille refers to the contrived order of the profane ordinary or ‘world of works’\textsuperscript{117} that a small collective works to inject chaos into—via the violence of human sacrifice. This type of intrusion cannot be affected by a lone individual.

As well as operating in groups, the sacrificers in both types of texts are fundamentalists. This is sacred work that cannot afford to admit to error or doubt: not in the literary text because this would be to invite meaningless of existence, nor in the horror genre text because to be wrong is to be condemned to mortality.

However, the sacrificers in the \textit{The Names} are ‘educated’ and set apart from ‘the stocking strangler, the gunman with sleepy eyes’ by their killings—considered ‘so

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} The same applies to other literary texts dealing with human sacrifice: \textit{Heart of Darkness} and \textit{Hawksmoor}.
\item \textsuperscript{113} cf. \textit{The Wicker Man, Children of the Corn, The Nameless, The Festival}.
\item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{The Ceremonies} perverts this somewhat, by introducing each of the sacrificers at separate points of the ritual and it thus seems as though they are acting independently.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Girard, \textit{Things Hidden}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Bataille, 60.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Bataille, 89.
\end{itemize}
striking in design’ that the physical act itself is ‘overlooked’ and the victims become mere ‘elements in the pattern’ (171).

The sacrificers in the horror genre texts are intelligent only in relation to the ritual: they often function as serfs or servants to a god, whom they hope to resurrect or honour, but with whom they invariably fail to have direct contact, and their speech acts are kept to a minimum, generally focusing either on luring the victim or imparting key mythological percepts to the protagonists, who, if they could understand, would know what was going to happen far sooner than they do.

This minor difference in presentation is a clue as to how the reader should interprete the cult’s actions in the literary text—the most significant ancillary feature of the cult is that it is nameless: the reader is also nameless. While the reader is not asked to take on the position of sacrificer in the literary text, he is asked to try and understand, to comprehend, to fathom. He is not asked to identify with the victims at all.

In the horror genre text, while the reader is placed closest to the protagonists, s/he is at least given opportunity to sympathise, even if not identify, with the victim. Thus the horror.

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118 Presumably, this would place the reader in dialogue or other close contact with the god also, and that might stretch credulity, whereas mere knowledge about, and appearance of the god does not.

119 Not in The Heart of Darkness and Hawksmoor either.
5.2 Differences

The table below sets out the main differences between the types of text in their representation—meaning and form—of human sacrifice.

5.2.1 Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Text</th>
<th>Horror Genre Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal Features</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Off-stage action</td>
<td>On-stage action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded narration</td>
<td>Direct narration</td>
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<td>Typically third person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language as subject matter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privileges the particular</td>
<td>Privileges the necessary</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetorical Features</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Socratic dialogue about Art/Being</td>
<td>Provocation of horror: cathartic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thematic Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No participation or witness to sacrifice</td>
<td>Direct participation in sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual is idiosyncratic (like text itself)</td>
<td>Ritual is contextualised by genre conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacious symbolically, not literally</td>
<td>Efficacious for fictive world and in creating ‘horror of being’ for reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence for reader</td>
<td>Fictive world change for character and cognitive dissonance for reader</td>
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</table>
5.2.2 Discussion

Both traditions, the literary and the horror genre, are rooted in a mythological history and a historiography. That is, they both have antecedents in mythological tales of actual human sacrifice, in the anthropological interpretation of such sacrifices,\(^ {120}\) as well as in the consequent range of fictive writing.

Within this entire history of writings about human sacrifice, the act is inextricably twinned with religion, deities, worship or an afterlife. Yet only the horror genre text represents it as a dramatic act that invites a dark supernatural order into the world: the literary text endeavours to deal with human sacrifice from the point of secularist symbolism. There is no doubt that the perception of human sacrifice fundamentally differs between these types of text, and this difference of perception hinges on the act of belief.

While the literary text attempts to bleach the religious element from the representation of the human sacrifice—demonstrating an underlying nihilism, ambiguity, and proliferation of possible meanings, the horror genre text glories in the (sac)religious element—demonstrating an underlying gnosticism.

All of the texts make a distinction between rational man and his logical, post-Enlightenment patterns of thinking and the man swayed by superstition. Belief, religious

belief, in post-modern times is often conflated with primitivism. Difference in the handling of belief between the literary and horror genre texts mirrors the anthropological debate over Captain James Cook’s death.\textsuperscript{121} To whit, \textit{The Names} finds belief in myth and magic integral to ritual in native ‘tribal’ communities and deems this primitive thinking—making sure the reader does not confuse this type of belief with the more sophisticated belief systems of the cultists, nor indeed with those of the text itself; whereas, the horror genre texts assume individuals involved in such activities know well the difference between reality and myth and either make a conscious decision to believe or are forced to believe when confronted with the supernatural power.

The literary text wants the reader to believe in the fictive world presented in order to make a wider point about human nature; therefore events that a supposed majority of rational people would not accept as ‘reality’ must not prevail—even if the presentation of the reality itself occurs in ways that do not strive to achieve mimesis: i.e. the postmodern style of fragmentation. The way the text achieves this verisimilitude is by privileging language.

The attention paid to language can culminate in such a way as to make meaning secondary to effect. States of being and/or material objects are described so uniquely that the reader lifts the phrases out of the meaning context, to remark on their beauty or aptness.\textsuperscript{122} This begins the process of worship that becomes both the subject and meaning

\textsuperscript{121} Gananath Obeyesekere argued that Marshall Sahlins had fallen prey to anthropological ethnocentricism and that the Hawaiians who killed Cook were not primitives deluded by their pre-logical myths into apotheosizing a white stranger—there were alternative, more rational explanations for the murder; Sahlins argued that it was ethnocentric \textit{not} to allow that these beliefs prevailed, and that all Obeyesekere had achieved was to endow them with the instrumental, empiricist rationality of the West (Li, “Marshall Sahlins”, 205-6).

\textsuperscript{122} Don DeLillo himself does this: ‘I like to see the words, the sentences, as they take
of the text.

In direct opposition, the horror text is built on the ‘redemptive failure of language’: a disaffirmation of creativity. Language in the horror genre text privileges the literal and metaphysical absence—of surety, of distinction between the real and unreal, the known and unknown. Superfluity and possibility are supplanted by the necessary and the concrete. If the descriptor matters—“blue” rather than “white”—that is what is expressed. If the colour or height or intention does not matter—and by matter, I mean work for the engine of the plot—then it will be omitted. Hence the horror genre has come to be identified with language that simply and directly provokes dread and terror. Language has become “transparent”, going largely unnoticed except as a container for meaning. Unlike for the literary text, the characterisation of belief is not inherent in the language of the horror genre text.

This discrepancy between the texts is furthered by the presentation of the sacrifice. Literary texts do not represent the act on-stage. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the space between the event and its telling serves to make the killings more ‘believable’. The act is reported journalistically—factually, secondhand, the way most shocking television news is handed on. The reader is unable to question small details that might disrupt plausibility; and, the technique aligns the reader with the narrator whom we must trust to voice our disbelief, disapproval and disgust, and who then turns these thoughts shape. It's an aesthetic issue: when I work I have a sculptor's sense of the shape of the words I'm making.' Nadotti, “An Interview with Don DeLillo”, 89.
123 Salomon, Mazes of the Serpent, 86.
124 The exception to this is H.P. Lovecraft; his language is dense and florid. However, his language is so detailed—so adverbial and adjectival—for all objects, characters and states of emotion that the lack of particularity is precisely the same as for the other horror genre texts.
into a philosophical understanding—either of the nature of man or the senselessness of all other activity when death is the ultimate outcome regardless.

In the horror genre text the human sacrifice is graphically depicted. However, whether it is a sickle across the throat or a demon between the legs, the enactment is quite unbelievable. The details provided conjure up the activity perfectly, but separate the readers’ seeing from believing. Precisely because these events are mythic, legendary rituals, they are therefore outside the known; they cannot be verified by reportage technique—else that too would take on an un-real quality. The horror genre reader is asked to believe in the world depicted, he is not asked to believe in its literal interpretation. Put differently, the horror genre reader accepts the narrative—in fact specifically craves this in choosing this type of text—but does not experience the interpretation, does not experience the diegesis, as real. Death then, can be experienced over and over again.

In other words, the literary text creates a space for the metaphor to blossom, while the genre text wants the reader to stay at the point of the event, to experience terror over insight.

Further to this, while the literary texts ask for belief in the fictive world created, and, achieve this by removing elements, such as the supernatural, that might not be accepted by a ‘rationalist’, it also judges human sacrifice as an antiquated, redundant perversion. Mizruchi states that ‘sacrifice, whether actual or alleged, [is] a token of authentic belief: where there is sacrifice, there is faith’,¹²⁵ however, the literary text finds only an act, only pretence. In fact, it establishes its own authenticity—its sacred position

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as Art—by denying the authenticity of its subject matter—the outdated, unethical and ultimately pointless, human sacrifice.

The ‘evidence’ that human sacrificing did literally take place—the archeological, biblical and folkloric evidence—only confirms historical belief systems as being different from modern ones: the meta-narrative does not suggest something innate or intrinsic about the truth of the world, it only speaks about preferences for the arrangement of that truth.

This nihilism wrings the blood from the act of human sacrifice in the literary text: the act has become almost purely metaphoric. Codifying and contextualising the act to whitewash its historical context, so that it becomes just an action within literature, suggests that another act could have been portrayed instead. And yet this is not accurate, because the human sacrifice depends upon ritualisation of activity in discovery of the Other, and it is this process that *The Names* is interested in. The use of the human sacrifice ritual by the literary text is a metaphoric means of reflecting either on Being or on evidence of Being: Art.

While other literary texts such as *Heart of Darkness* locate the new meaning for human sacrifice in ‘being’, finding that the attributions of primitivism reside within the heart of man himself and not his socio-cultural surroundings, *The Names* uses the human sacrifice to debate about the creation of meaning: is it in the action, in the interpretation of that action, or in the receiving of the interpretation? *The Names* engenders a debate

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126 This is as opposed to anthropological reality where the devolution of human sacrifice as any kind of act, let alone ritualistic, is far more complicated and predicated on legal, moral, political and religio-social reasons.
about meaning in the art of the text, in language, in the god-games played via the creation of a fictive world.

Despite the fact that it is framed by nihilism, *The Names* uses the human sacrifice to find an alternate sacred in art. The sacrificial deaths in the literary text concern the creation of Art. *The Names* is a Socratic debate about the transubstantiation of a belief in god (and the associated requirements) into a belief in Art. For DeLillo, it is the man-made logos that is the End and the Beginning.

For the horror genre text, the subservience of form to content, and the blatant, theatrical use of the human sacrifice subject, suggests that the meaning of the human sacrifice is located in the primacy of the act itself. Genre fiction—especially in relation to this subject matter—is in a sense prelapsarian art; it doesn't recognise a split or fall into a world where symbol is opposed to action. Instead, horror genre texts remain closer to their tragic and mythological roots, defiantly remaining in a place where the symbol *is* action.

The action then creates a feeling state, invites catharsis. And not with the characters as such, but with the event, with the terror and awesome power of the human sacrifice. While, the literary texts, heavily influenced by historical context, represent human sacrifice in various forms of symbolic religious charade, the horror genre texts have tended to ignore developments of understanding in real world depictions of human sacrifice, and focus instead on the relationship of the killing to the myth, then on the myth to its reception by an audience. This is theatre. The ultimate meaning is in the effect therefore, not in the objects (the language) that create that effect.

The horror genre text wants the reader to surrender to the effect of the fictive
world presented; to accept that a monster/monstrous symbolises the precise horror that
the experience of the novel promises. While the horror genre text also demonstrates a
distrust of the classical teachings, or the classical God, it still believes in ‘a’ god, or
‘godlike’ thing. Thus instead of deciding that the character of man shall come under
question now that the main moral compass is defunct, these texts question the character
of the God—drawing upon the Gnostic\textsuperscript{127} heresy that the god in charge of the human
world is evil.

By inverting what is commonly understood to be good or proper, what the horror
genre text attempts to effect with its depiction of human sacrifice is, quite simply,
Reason. ‘[E]xtreme horror keeps reason awake’.\textsuperscript{128} It can only do this by violent appeal to
the irrational. A literary experiential rupture of Bataille’s ‘profane’ ordinary. \textit{Sacred
horror}.

The action in these texts is a study in the energy it takes to mount an offensive
against the rational and the secular. For the genre novel per \textit{se} belief is the horror, is the
fantasy, is the science fiction—is the \textit{energeia} behind the narrative. The point of
releasing the sacred energy is to become one with something greater: a god, and it is
belief that elevates the depiction of human sacrifice above a straightforward murder.
Besides a classic sympathy, it is belief that creates the condition necessary for
cartharsis—or cognitive dissonance.

However, the reader doesn’t actually have to believe in the monstrous god

\textsuperscript{127} Gnosticism might be described as a doctrine of heresy; it is Manichean, it views
matter—the nature and the body—as inherently evil. It solves the problem of evil by
postulating two relatively equal divine powers in eternal struggle, rather than orthodoxy’s
view of a single benevolent divinity for whom evil is an artifact or by-product of His
great good gift–free will.

\textsuperscript{128} Bataille’s logic of sacrifice, according to Jean-Luc Nancy (“The Unsacrificeable”, 32).
depicted however, in order to experience the effect of characters acting on their beliefs. By using a rational, skeptical protagonist, the horror genre text ensures the reader sufficiently identifies. And by relying on the fact that the reader already knows the conventional codes, the text works to engender thoughts such as ‘Don’t go in there’ or ‘Don’t do that’—thoughts which immediately place the reader beyond skepticism. In fact, the choice of the horror genre text as reading matter itself already confirms a belief in the ‘horror of being’ these texts provoke.

Where form becomes as important as content for the horror genre text is the climax. Despite the link between ‘blood purifying blood’ and the human sacrifice ritual, cartharsis occurs not with the choice of subject matter per se, but with its handling: perhaps unexpectedly, art-horror is an experience of safety and conservatism. Readers engage with terror from a comfortable chair. The fact that the reader is not really in danger turns the stress/arousal (palpitations, dry mouth, panic grip) into a sought after sensation.129 The curtain opens, the text reveals itself, but more often than not, the terror will be bested by curtain fall. If one were really in danger, the terror would not be pleasurable.

Hence the rhetorical relationship between the horror genre novel and its reader is considered one primarily of cognition:130 an exercise in methodically recognising and containing the monstrous. However, as Shaw argued, feelings about the monster/monstrous are ambivalent.131 Pleasure is not entirely predicated on destruction of the monster/monstrous, and repugnance is not always subsumed by the sense of closure

130 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*.
131 Shaw, “A Humean Definition of Horror”.
(indeed, closure is not always provided). The cathexis that horror engenders, by creating and sustaining almost unbearable emotions, leaves the reader drained, exhausted. It is not surprising therefore that this may be followed by cognitive dissonance in the form of ‘numinous rage’ or psychological despair.\textsuperscript{132} Despite choosing the text, the reader is unsure whether the violence contained within is ‘purifying’ (necessary and cleansing) or ‘impure’\textsuperscript{133} (unnecessary and contagious) in the Aristolean sense. Reading is a form of participating, and may well lead to a contagion that lingers after the completion of the narrative. Form is thus important in bringing the reader to that experience.

In contrast, in the literary text, the content \textit{is} the form. The reader is involved as witness to the creative act and participant in the Socratic debate about what constitutes Art; after all, there is no god created who does not need his worshippers, his doubters, or his sacrificers. The communication with the reader therefore, the rhetorical intent, is one of reflexivity. It is also essentially cerebral.

Without the possibility of the human sacrifice nightmare being literal, or at the very least, destructive \textit{within the fictive world}, there is no real fear on the part of the characters or the reader. There is no suspense created around whether the cult will strike again, or whether any of the main protagonists will be at risk. There is little emotional pleasure or release for the reader of \textit{The Names} in the process of Axton deciding to live closer to his soon to be ex-wife and son. Even the link between the contemporary and ancient sacrifices—evidence of which turns up at the archeological dig—and therefore reader engagement with a history of other witnesses, or other readers, is nullified. Despite

\textsuperscript{132} Manlove, \textit{Modern Fantasy: Five Studies}, 9.
\textsuperscript{133} Girard suggests that the inability to determine whether a violent act is pure or impure is a consequence of ‘sacrificial crisis’: the loss of sacrificial rites that would distinguish a necessary and contained violence from random bloodshed (\textit{Violence and the Sacred}, 51).
the subject matter, the reader is left not with a murky feeling in the pit of the stomach, but instead with a puzzle about human nature, about the character of man. The question of belief engendered for the reader of the literary text extends out beyond the text.

There is no doubt that the horror texts achieve the aim of generating feelings of horror—precisely because of the tension created between belief and the need to act irrespective of belief. In contrast, the denouement in *The Names* restores normalcy; what another believes does not have to bear on one’s own beliefs.

Whereas for the literary texts the element of consequence rests with the reader—how does one symbolically make sense of this violent act?—there is no sense to be made of the event in the horror genre text: it simply is. The reader does not even ask how this textual depiction speaks to belief, the reading is the acceptance of this. The act of reading itself a substitution.

In other words, as the act of substituting is the essence of the sacrificial, in the secular realm where literature, high and low, replaces religion and mythology, the final substitution may well be the reader for the believer.

5.2.3  *The Art of Sacrifice – Two Modes*

In the end, attempting to distinguish the difference between how a literary text treats the theme of human sacrifice and how a genre text treats the same material may not only illuminate alternative methods for depicting this particular motif, but also reveal something about each modes of fiction themselves. It points away from a merely

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134 Bataille finds that since Romanticism, Literature has tended to ‘lay a discreet claim to the heritage of religion’ (*Literature and Evil*, 25).
evaluative understanding of the differences (‘Low’ vs. ‘High’ literature) towards a deeper understanding of each modes’ continuing vitality, even necessity.

However, perhaps we could think about the contrasts in the following way: imagine an art museum, a ‘temple of art’ like the Louvre, for example. Down a marble corridor filled with light we stand before an exquisite medieval altarpiece, or Renaissance Pietà. In this hushed sanctum where the piece is viewed, we cannot help but be awed and brought close to the transcendent. But not through the religious belief that created the object, nor through the image of divinity itself—but instead, through the new religion of Art. The “prayer” made before this displaced altar may well be a simple intake of breath: Aesthetics,135 and this aisthesis might be a proper metaphor for a literary text’s approach to the theme of human sacrifice.

The genre text, on the other hand, might be imagined as a cult—a small hardy church of true believers, a Jehovah’s Witnesses cell awaiting Judgment day, or gospel singing Pentecostals. This cult is not concerned with the intake of human breath of aisthesis,136 but with the out-going divine breath, which the Bible calls ‘Ruach’, which in Greek is ‘Pneuma’, and in Latin is the Spiritus. For the genre text, this subject matter, the human sacrifice, is still understood in its original conception: the ritual itself is still a verb, an action with the traditional intention and anticipated outcome.

At its best, the horror genre text dealing with human sacrifice might actually take the reader to the Promised Land of real emotion, terror, pity, even that rare thing—true

135 The word ‘aesthetics’ is derived from the Greek ‘I perceive’, but this, in turn, originates from the Greek ‘I gasp, breathe in’: hence might aesthetics be understood as an action of perception—the rapid draw of breath. See Onians, Origins of European Thought, 74-75.
136 See Heidegger’s essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”.

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Catharsis. While the literary text, for all its knowledge and artistry, its aesthetic and cultural capital, leaves the reader standing like Moses, overlooking a place he can never go himself, but must instead, for better and for worse, experience purely symbolically.
Chapter 6: Lessons for *The Bridge*\(^{137}\)

The literary text raises a primarily intellectual and conceptual approach to human sacrifice, while the horror genre text raises a fundamentally visceral, experiential approach. However, *The Bridge*, while incorporating the viscera of the horror genre and the ideation of the literary, focuses on the evocation of an emotional, or heartfelt, response, from the reader.

6.1 *The Formal*

Since my intention is to explore faith in its literal as well as symbolic senses, the human sacrifice is on-stage, carried out by sacrificers who must come to believe in the efficacy of offering a life in exchange for supernatural assistance:

Shane grinned. Will held his peace and that worked because Shane finally bent down and pressed the blade to the pig’s massive neck. ‘Pray,’ he said. Will said nothing. ‘If I’m going to do this, you’re going to do the other part.’ ‘I’ve never prayed in my life.’ The younger man rested the knife on his jean leg and looked up at him. ‘Offer it up. Jesus, Will, just try.’ (211)

\(^{137}\) Synopsis: The seven main characters who narrate *The Bridge* will be forced to decide what they believe when it is proposed that the reason a newly built bridge has now twice fallen down is because a human sacrifice has not been made to it.
Each sacrifice—effigy, pig and finally young woman—foreshadows the next, introducing the characters (and therefore the reader) to the idea of bloodshed for supernatural purpose. The failure of the second sacrifice of the pig to make the bridge stand should complicate the link between blood rites and propitiation of gods; however, there is a certain logic to the suggestion that it failed only because the offering wasn’t large enough. The third sacrifice of Moriah, then, instead of becoming less likely, becomes imperative.

The irrational logic for such human behaviour is what has been explicitly relegated to, and exploited within, the genres. However, *The Bridge* takes this irrationality and combines it with literary techniques relating to verisimilitude resulting in a renewed focus on characterisation: specifically, attention to thought processes and the disjunction between what is said and what is done. One of the strongest techniques in *The Names* was the embedded narrative, which combined reflection with the interpretation of action. This afforded an increased realism and decreased the likelihood of a reader questioning the interpretation.

*The Bridge* has not utilized the embedded narrative, because as a text it is committed to forcing the reader to witness directly what the characters choose to do. However, the same ‘reflection upon interpretation of action’ shall be employed in the characters’ interior monologues:

There was something sickening inside him. A worm. Like in that poem, burrowing about in his rose. Sometimes it caused a terrible stomach-ache and sometimes, to his great shame, it caused tears. (42)
There are other formal techniques found in the literary treatment of human sacrifice incorporated into *The Bridge*: the emphasis on description, and, the inclusion of a denouement which ensures that the text does not end at the point of the successful or failed enactment of the sacrifice. Formal techniques indicative of the ‘horror’ genre text included in *The Bridge* are its plot-driven structure, the serious treatment of the possibility of supernatural forces within the thematic organisation of the novel, and, the sense of horror created by the human sacrifice.

6.2  *The Rhetorical*

The intention behind *The Bridge* is to explore the implications of the power of belief. If, as Saint Paul says: ‘Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’, 138 then *The Bridge* is interested in the effects on the substantial and visible world of such faith. This inspiration became literal when I realised the text was not going to include a god per se.

Most human sacrifice in either the fictive world, or the real world mythology, utilises a god. 139 Deity’s need for a human life is paganism *par excellence*, and the god portrayed, the ‘genius loci’ or the spirit of the place, is a local god. This is illustrated in children’s stories such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* where a ‘troll’ must be propitiated in order for the billy goats to cross the bridge.140

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138 The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews 11:1.
139 For example, Huitzilopochtli, the god of sun and warfare for the Aztecs.
140 Asbjørnsen and Moe, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. 
However, there are examples across folkloric legend,\textsuperscript{141} archaeological findings,\textsuperscript{142} and present day lore surrounding collapses of major 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century bridges\textsuperscript{143} that particularise bridges as an exceptional building structure with regard to human death (accidental and intentional; the collection of evidence includes bridge foundations as ‘tombs’, and bridge towers and spans as structures used for suicides)\textsuperscript{144}—all without mentioning a specific god.

In the nursery rhyme \textit{London Bridge is Broken Down}, while it is clear that an immured human sacrifice will watch the bridge all night to ensure it does not fall, there is no mention of a god.\textsuperscript{145} While this may be because the very act of building means man has become god—for example, ‘Clements the Mason’\textsuperscript{146} and other similar European legends and ballads give poetry to the belief that if man ‘assumes the function of God and turns creator’, his co-creator, for the right price, will be the devil (de Witt 1997: 60)—it is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{141} The most well-known of which would be ‘The Bridge to Arta’; versions in various forms—prose, poetry and ballad—in multiple languages: Hebrew, Greek, Albanian, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Hungarian (Shai, “A Kurdish Jewish Variant”).
\item \textsuperscript{142} See Carrasco, \textit{City of Sacrifice}.
\item \textsuperscript{143} For example: David Pilkington in his article “One Bridge Doesn’t Fit All” states that ‘Bridges should be cared for in the way we treat works to which we have an emotional attachment as well as a physical need’ (\textit{The New York Times}, Saturday, August 18, 2007: A23). See also, “With A Moan and A Groan, West Gate Bridge Brings Back Those Haunting Memories”, \textit{The Age}, 16 October, 2004: 5, and “Bridge Danger Probe”, \textit{The Northcote Leader}, Melbourne, 17 November, 2004: 1.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Opie and Opie, \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes}, 270-76.
\item \textsuperscript{146} A famous legend about twelve masons commissioned to build a castle (where this castle is built depends on the nationality of the story-teller), but they can make no progress. One day they decide to perform a ritual sacrifice by killing the first wife who arrives to the building site; her blood would be mixed with the mortar to assure success. It is Clements’ wife who arrives first and is killed (de Witt Niles, “Lamkin: The Motivation of Horror”).
\end{itemize}
also because in these earlier texts not only the existence of God, but the existence of an entire network of supernatural entities, is taken for granted. This is opposed to the modern texts where the absence of a deity is just that—a representation of absence.

Either way, the point is that the god doesn’t have to be depicted in order for the presence of the supernatural to exist. Given the intention to focus on belief, on that which has no materiality, literal images of a bridge god such as those found in the horror genre text were not desirable. The advent of human sacrifice in The Bridge attempts to metaphorically concretise the process (and consequence) of acquiring faith, so the thematic questions do not concern the reality of efficacy of belief, but its morality.

6.3 The Thematic

As with both the literary and genre texts, several people carry out the sacrifice in The Bridge. And while the victim is an innocent and virginal—up until last minute attempts to save her—she is not naïve: having some interest in martyrdom and some experience of being tormented. She is also not an arbitrary choice: legend having it that someone close to the master bridge-builder should be selected for sacrifice. The tension in the text is created precisely because the advocates, the dissenters and the victim’s perspectives are all known and are all in opposition.

In The Bridge the ritualistic process is more a matter of convincing the characters of the need for the human sacrifice, than of trying to recreate what such an event looks

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147 See C.S. Lewis’ The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature for an attempt to reconstruct precisely this worldview, which lasted until Modernity.
148 de Witt Niles, 58.
The characters, and the reader, have to be slowly cajoled into accepting a version of reality that falls outside the lived existence:

‘Just tell me what the dues are, Charlie.’
‘Blood.’
‘Sorry?’
Silence.
‘Come on, Charlie. You tell me about the hundreds of other men sitting before you, and I’m supposed to believe you’ve told them they have to offer blood dues?’
Charlie nodded.
Will took in a long breath. ‘Well, that’s all very interesting.’ He hoped his voice sounded as sarcastic as he intended. ‘I’ve never heard of this before and I’ve been in construction for over 25 years.’
Charlie fixed a lightless eye on him. ‘Doing renovations. Building on top of other people’s foundations. Including your office complexes. Have you ever built something on land that hasn’t had any sort of structure on it?’
‘Course I have. Vacant lots. All kinds of things.’
Charlie smiled. ‘Vacant lots,’ he repeated. ‘Vacant lots in the city are not so vacant.’ His eyes were like black prunes. But the smile didn’t leave his mouth. (166)

The horror genre texts do not concern themselves with having to convince their characters to carry out human sacrifices: those who believe it is necessary simply do it, those who do not, try to prevent it. The convincing undertaken in The Bridge may be a result of its cross-over status: the insistence that people could get so carried away places the form close to the horror genre, however, the rational, secularist approach to the sacrifice in The Bridge speaks more to lived contemporary ‘realism’ than to backwater, religious atavism.
Thematically, the text follows the horror tradition of subversion: Moriah’s death enables the bridge’s resurrection and the supernatural, far from inciting mystical contemplation, introduces a ‘nasty surprise’.\textsuperscript{149} However, the overall effect of the novel is to induce the same philosophical ruminations inherent in the literary text’s handling of this subject matter.

**Overall Conclusion**

Whether the sacred exists in the medium of art/language—as proposed via the modernist or post-modernist literary text’s handling of human sacrifice—or whether it exists in the more traditional form of gods to whom the sacrifice must be made—as presented via the horror genre text—the reliance on belief/faith in the Other was an important key for the writing of *The Bridge*, as well for the questions posed at the beginning of this exegesis.

Importantly, I was able to understand what presenting a human sacrifice would mean for the relationship the text would have with the reader. To place the act ‘on-stage’ was to insist that it had meaning in and of itself—and yet I need the sacrifice to be an actual event in the fictive world, not simply symbolic or a metaphor. Making the act literal risked making it mere spectacle, so because of the research undertaken in the exegesis, I realised I would have to contrive to keep the sacrifice on-stage by showing it only in glimpses. I would take DeLillo’s powerful interpretative retelling, and create a

\textsuperscript{149} Salomon, 74.
similar effect by having the characters narrating that section of the novel, look away and look back interstitially.

Furthermore, in order to represent a believable human sacrifice within a fictive contemporary, realist world required enormous work at the level of characterisation. The characters had to be convinced that this act was necessary and efficacious: a journey paralleled by the reader who had to be convinced that the characters believed. This exploration of faith was intended to leave the reader in T.S. Eliot’s territory—‘After such knowledge, what forgiveness?’\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{150} Eliot, 38.
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Volume One — Extract from a Novel

The Bridge
A novel extract submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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The collapse began with a groan. The metal groaned. And then squealed as it began to shift. A moan followed by an ear-splitting screech: the distress of mortally tortured steel. The legs swayed to one side, crashing under the deep-V of weight created from the buckling concrete span, and, as that all thundered earthward, red soil exploded up into the air and then took its time billowing gently down, covering the wreckage.

The girders had travelled all the way from Melbourne. The “BlueScope” logo stamped on the underside of the long bars that rammed the dry ground. It made a hell of a racket at 3am.

People on the south side of the divided town of L— had been sleeping and some of them, when asked to describe it the following day, said that it sounded as though a plane had crashed. Those on the north side of the town were too far away to hear much. Maybe a baby woke: maybe his parents thought he was teething.

But those on the south side of L— got out of their beds that night. They didn’t bother with dressing gowns because there was just too much noise for that, and they opened their doors and stepped out. A parade of cotton t-shirts, faded nightgowns and bare feet.

Outside the dark air winked quietly back. Nothing now. Big squeal of metal and then completely quiet. Didn’t fool the people though. They knew exactly where to look. Down the dead riverbed. Down in the chasm. People on either side of the banks craned their necks.
Someone called the policeman—just the one for this side of town—and he came. Even without the additional circus of the sirens, it was exciting to see the blue and red lights spilling intermittent colour over the wreckage.

The policeman, and the man who called him—balding, dressed scantily in only his shorts—made the journey down to the ruin. There were calls to watch out and be careful. After all, the whole thing had collapsed only moments before. But the two men picked their way amongst the debris, torches highlighting sharp angles of concrete and bits of metal slammed into the earth for the spectators.

It occasioned a lot of yelling. Arguments about leaving the exploring for the morning proper. But then some of the evidence might have disappeared. What evidence. Well, animals might shift something. It was mostly good-natured badgering. They weren’t supposed to be getting excited about the failure of the bridge, especially since there would be no rain, no water, ever, to mosey along underneath it, but then isn’t that just human nature? Something like this made the adrenalin rush whether you thought it appropriate or not.

About an hour later, people began to tire of the unchanging sculpture. They left in little troupes of three or four, and finally the policeman and his self-important attendant left also. Although when the latter went back inside he didn’t turn his lights out. Didn’t know why, just didn’t want to.

So no one saw it that night. Flung off to one side of the dark metal shafts. The pull of the girders from the embankments had pitched it like so much chaff, but failed to pin it, to crush it. It lay unblinking, intact, waiting.

But no one saw it until the following morning.
Part One:

Three Weeks
'Can you fix it?'

‘What did you do?’

‘I didn’t do anything, that’s the problem, isn’t it?’

‘You got a half-wit in. Let him mess around.’

‘You’re not the only man for the job.’

‘Social call then this, is it?’

‘No. All right. You’re the only man for the job.’

Silence.

‘Can you fix it?’

‘Screwing around. You can’t screw around with this.’

Silence.

‘Cheaper was he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘No. No. Hell. Can you fix it?’

‘What did he do?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Anyone else see anything?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know anything except that whatever he did with it, didn’t work.’

‘Whatever he did with what?’

‘With the—with the thing. I don’t know what you do with it. I thought he could find out.’

Silence.

‘Look. Can you fix this or not?’

‘He still around?’

‘Who?’
The Bridge

‘The half-wit.’

‘I don’t know. Probably. He lives there.’

‘He what?’

‘You heard.’

Silence.

‘For God’s sake, can you fix it?’

‘I’ll get back to you.’

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The Bridge

Tuesday 10\textsuperscript{th} February

Shane

He had not even sat himself up properly in bed before he had his first cigarette. Camels. He and Sarah used to smoke together, and it didn’t lessen the pleasure just because she wasn’t around to do it with him anymore. After a few searing sucks he stubbed out the butt on the jam jar lid he kept specially for the occasion, then half-heartedly pulled at his cock. But ended up just scratching.

He should have said no. What use was the money now anyway? Buy him a one-way ticket to no-wheres-ville. He wasn’t going to relocate. Mining, construction—that was all he knew. Money didn’t change the way your brain worked. It was easy money though. Dead easy. He blinked a couple of times. Looked around the bedroom.

There wasn’t much in it besides him—an old dresser he’d swept clean with one arm about eleven months ago and a fancy chair he didn’t dare sit on—so he got up and opened the window. Tipped out the ashen remains from the jam jar lid, then padded to the bathroom for a piss.

His reflection stared all eye-sockets from the tiny mirror. Sarah had always complained about that mirror. Pathetic, she’d called it. Could barely see herself in it because she was too short and even when she had heels on there wasn’t enough silvered glass to see her whole hairdo. She hated the bathroom and on their wedding night he’d recklessly promised to tear the whole thing down and rebuild it. A real renovation too: not some half-arsed replace-the-front-of-the-cabinets job.

And so he had finally gotten around to it. The half-arsed version anyway. He’d freshly scoured the water-stains in the bath until they were a lighter brown; the once curled corners of linoleum strained at the nails he’d hammered down; and brand spanking new
shower tiles—each one an exact replica of the factory-minted original—sat flush with the base, just like they were supposed to. Didn’t feel like he hoped it would.

He wandered into the kitchen, unwilling to sit since he hadn’t pulled on any jocks yet, checked the kettle’s weight, flicked the switch and went to stand at the sink. The flimsy-flamsy lace curtains he’d taken down hunched like a cowering pup on the bench top. Another remnant. He looked out through the bare glass.

The sun was already strong: nothing to make shadows with in his yard it would just bake the plain earth. He and Sarah had cooked an egg outside once, by the sun. He’d said something about her wearing a hat. She had shocking white skin that was always pinking and peeling because she refused to wear a hat. She argued back—almost without thinking they’d been on the subject for so many months—didn’t have a hat face, she said. What are you supposed to say to that? Female logic; no logic. Then she’d topped it off by taunting that they never went anywhere to get burned anyway and he’d made the remark about the heat frying her brain like an egg. Nonsense, she’d said and typical bloody-mindedness, took an egg, marched outside and cracked it open on the slab of concrete that he was planning to extend all around the house as verandah foundation.

He charged out after her to watch. It took ten minutes, but it cooked beautifully. She ate it then. Right off the concrete. Slopped it up with her fingers and ate it. Grinning at him. Best damned brain she’d ever eaten she said tartly, and he’d picked her up and carried her right into the bedroom. Didn’t change her mind about the hat though. Her stubbornness made an absolute idiot of her. Made him want to smack her and made him marry her.

He pushed away from the bench, cup of instant in hand, and kicked the back door open. Bluey immediately bounded up against his naked thigh. Left scratch marks. Shane cursed as he snapped his fingers, then, when she’d come to heel, he kicked her hard. She laid her ears low and scooted around behind him, yelping. Lesson learned. Beautiful mongrel of Queensland Blue and Kelpie cross. A bit mangy looking with half an ear taken by a pitbull. Lost his money on that one.
Standing back against the weatherboard, he turned his feet turned to one side to avoid the slightest touch of direct sun. Even this weaker early morning variety. He copped a lot of flak for that. Big girl, they called him. Behind his back—no one would say it to his face. But he didn’t have those facial lines that looked as though they’d been cut in with a pocketknife, so sharp and fine.

His phone rang and he sniffed and threw out the dregs of his coffee, pockmarking the dust. He wanted to let it go. But it jiggered his insides and he couldn’t let it go after all. Flywire door whacking behind him, he walked back into the house. Poked around in the living room to find the receiver. Lit his second cigarette. When Pete started talking Shane laughed. Not thinking.

‘Fuck you, you bastard. Bit early for that crap.’ He drew on his cigarette, listened a bit longer. ‘Bullshit.’

He stood a while in the living room after he’d hung up. Got the shakes. First thing he thought was that the money wasn’t looking that easy now. Second thing was that he pretty much failed at everything he turned a hand to. Third thing was that he’d been set up somehow. Big Patsie.

He took the ute and kept glancing in the rear view mirror to see his dog on the tray, grinning away, tongue tasting the air. Shane shifted on his seat; the underside of his thighs wet with perspiration already. Another cigarette on his bottom lip. He shut his eyes briefly and dragged fit to set fire to a lung.

When he leaned his head over the bank, he thanked god he’d gone to see what had happened straight after the phone call. “Sheila” was lying a fair distance from the main rubble. But she was completely exposed. Completely untouched.

He used his wrist to wipe away the accumulated sweat from his forehead and sidled down the embankment. Boots skidding in the dryness. One minute to look around, then he
started dragging the wooden structure back up the embankment, bum in the air, work boots struggling to get purchase. A couple of times he had to rest, bitten fingernails just barely hanging on beneath the crude head. He slowed down. Grunted as his back took the weight. Finally pushed her up and over the rise.

She wasn’t touched. Carved teeth—they’d taken him ages and bits were splintering off. Eyes he’d just hollowed out. He’d even glued some knots of rope on for the hair. Not that he knew what a proper effigy looked like, even was before the call. He just ran with his imagination.

Bluey got a proper chance to sniff at her, tried to cock a leg over her.

‘Get out of it, you mongrel bloody dog.’

Shane lifted his Akubra to let some air circulate then rolled Sheila along, using the sudden forward momentum to frighten his animal away. Laboured a bit getting the wooden lump up and into his ute tray. Bluey urinated on her immediately. Shane was too buggered to do much more than roll his eyes.

They stopped off at a milk bar. Little place run by some Turks who used paint to handwrite about the shop’s wares on the brickwork outside. The blue and red advertising slanted unevenly, boasting about pide and kebaps and ladie’s thigh meatballs. Shane loved that “thigh meatballs” sign—not that he’d ever try some. Didn’t much like new food. He bought his regular packet of Camels and a chocolate Big M. He sat in the cabin of his ute to avoid the sun and drank the milk in between sucking on his cigarette.

He wouldn’t return the money. It was a crazy idea anyway. That’s why he’d liked it, but it was a crazy idea. When the ute throttled into life he put his hand out to thump the rooftop: made Bluey bark like mad.
The Bridge

Moriah

The sun was still low in the sky—streaking under the blind and across the bedroom wall—when she woke. And she woke because her father’s voice hammered against the walls.

‘Damned right! Of course, it’s possible!’

Moriah closed her eyes. The flare of sunlight made a moving white blob against her eyelids and after a moment she realised her heart was pounding. Her father’s voice even louder.

‘Well, it’s an inanimate object, for god’s sake. No. I understand. Shock. Hard feelings.’

She held the pillow over her ear for a few seconds, then threw it off. Pulling on her dressing gown, she opened the bedroom door. Squatted down at the top of the stairs and looked at her toes. At the nails that needed cutting. They were ugly toes. Toad toes. Made more unattractive as her weight splayed them even further. Her father hung up on the “possible” conversation and immediately called someone else.

‘Don’t touch it. I want to see it. I don’t care—leave it!’

Moriah rocked on her heels to watch the blood rush back into her toes. She should go downstairs. Or have a shower and get ready for school. When she heard him hang up the phone, only to dial yet another number, she sighed and went to undress in the bathroom.

She avoided her reflection.

Standing in the shower she let the temperature get too hot. The sluicing water was just short of stinging and she bent her head because she was tall and the shower rose wasn’t. She looked down. For a long while. This was her favourite position in the shower. Not doing anything—just standing still and watching the water run in rivulets down her stomach and legs.

‘Moriah, are you still in there?’

She didn’t answer. Just inspected the red skin on her stomach and arms.
‘Fifteen minutes,’ he shouted.

By the time she found her royal purple socks and sandals, her father had yelled another two times, and by the time she had wound her damp hair into tight braids the way her father liked, she had practised what to say to him.

‘Did something happen, dad?’
‘Where’s your bag?’
She pulled it from its slump under the worn Laminex table.
‘Get an apple and a banana, and I’ll meet you in the car.’
She hadn’t even brushed her teeth yet.
‘I guessed about the bridge,’ she told the empty kitchen.

The apples had brown bruises on them because he never checked at the supermarket. The bananas looked okay though and she took three.

There was no news radio in the car. This morning was too serious for that.

‘Did you want to check my spelling?’
He gave her a sharp look. ‘Don’t get ahead of yourself. Whatever you heard this morning has to be confirmed first. After all, they turned me down before. Don’t want to get ahead of ourselves.’
He slapped the dashboard. Happy. Loud.
Moriah peeled the skin of the first banana halfway and saw a yellow flower with a penis in the centre. She bit it quickly.
‘I’m going to take you to the corner of High St and you can walk or take the tram down to Rushall Station, all right?’
She nodded but he wasn’t looking.

A little while later he leaned across and opened her door. As she struggled out, he patted her head.
‘Bye.’
She wanted to bark at him in return for the head pat, but she stood watching the car surf traffic a while, then sat at the tram stop to eat the second banana. Now she had
sticky bits of yellow-white banana on her fingers. She wiped them on her skirt and then she had banana on her skirt.

Along the footpath, in front of all the houses that adults were allowed to stay in all day if they wanted, it was easier to breathe. Moriah pretended to look at a watch she didn’t have as she walked up the hill. It was a slope really, because her father said Melbourne didn’t have proper hills. But it felt like a hill when you walked up it. She had long noticed that there was a difference between the way the world looked and the way the world felt.

She tried not to hunch her shoulders as she walked, but it was habit now. She was ‘too big, too big’. She had only been three-years-old the first time she heard it. The boy on the other end of the see-saw insisted she would send him into the sky if she was allowed to sit. ‘Too big, too big’. It had advantages now though—people thinking she was older.

The redbrick cathedral loomed ahead, spire poking the sky. St Joseph’s Church, the sign said. She memorized it. By the time she reached it her hair was sticky on the back of her neck. She raised her plaits a few times to cool off, then slunk inside.

At first, all she could make out were some tiny points of flame down near the altar. She crept blindly along the back wall, then down the side of the dark and cavernous space—making her way towards the confessional. Sometimes the door to the little room creaked, today it didn’t. Slipping in silently, bag lowered to her feet, she blinked rapidly, impatient for her pupils to dilate in the weak light. It was a low watt light. Her father said people used them for mood. The tiny globe perched high above her head and the illumination fell on her hair and spilled down over her shoulders. By the time it reached her arms and fingers it was quite faint.

She liked to come and sit. Think about whether God existed. If so, he was a bit like her mother—there was hardly any proof of her existence either.
Her back settled against the wall. It was hardly a room. More like being inside a coffin. Tall and narrow and dark. But then it had a seat and didn’t smell of dirt. In fact, it smelt of perfume. An ugly rose scent that reminded Moriah of the aerosol air-freshener her father bought for the toilet.

Her fingers prodded at the third piece of fruit as she tried to decide whether she could put up with the mixed smell of yellowed skin and sickly rose-petal if she ate it. Her stomach growled encouragingly.
Father Nott pulled the car up far too close to the embankment edge and Gussy immediately told him to back off to the tree line. Tree line. Three scraggily eucalypts hardly qualified—still they were a major landmark in a world without trees and last thing any of the men wanted was another complication, so she’d tapped on Father’s shoulder until he backed up.

She eased her way out of the car, using her free hand to keep her floral housedress pulled down over her knees. She’d sat in back. Her legs were playing up. Besides which, she needed the room. She’d also put the food on the front seat, so Kelly, the hairdresser with the bad hair, was forced to sit in the back too. Father Nott had to play chauffeur.

Kelly was soon out. Opening up the containers of food after Gussy instructed her to set them all on the boot of Father’s car. The men had already broken for lunch. Were picking at their half-eaten drooping sandwiches and bruised fruit. They eyed the potato salad, crumbed cutlets, shepherd’s pie and cinnamon scrolls.

‘Eat as much as you like.’

Gussy raised her chin and smiled at Father. He picked up a plate that Gussy immediately took from his hand.

‘You wait for others to get theirs first.’

A priest was a waste of a man.

‘Do you know what happened yet?’

A couple of the men spat into the dust.

Pete, one of the labourers on the bridge, finally cleared his throat. ‘No.’

‘Ah,’ said Father Nott.

‘We’ve been told to just clear away anything that doesn’t require machinery. Tag it and bag it,’ continued Pete. ‘They’re getting inspectors in.’

‘Who ordered that?’ Gussy wanted to know.

He pointed to the other side of the river.
The Bridge

‘Well, where are they then? Why aren’t they helping? Where’s Robert?’
The men looked away. Was again Pete who finally spoke. ‘He’s done a runner.’
‘You’re joking.’ Gussy started laughing. ‘Told you he wasn’t fit for the job. This,’
her accusing finger jiggled the curtain of flesh hanging along her upper arm, ‘this was
obviously something he did then.’

Pete shrugged.

Bloody male loyalty—they wouldn’t turn against a fellow male come hell or high
water.

‘What about the north side?’
‘I dunno, Gussy. It’s too soon to say. They’re going through government to
arrange the inspection.’

Gussy raised an eyebrow. Would have liked to pursue the conversation further.
But Kelly had set sights on Adam and began swinging her hair around her shoulders a bit.
Several of the men were watching.

‘Fair go, girl,’ interrupted Gussy. ‘You’ll get neck-ache.’

There was laughter and Kelly had murder on her face.

Gussy helped herself to some cutlet. She wished she could save Father Nott the trouble of
searching for something to take the slight away. One thing you could always count on in
a man was the desire to rescue an ailing woman. Sure enough Adam stepped up to the
mark to talk to Kelly—wouldn’t have had the gumption if he hadn’t perceived an injury.
Not that Gussy would get credit from Kelly for setting that up. Too dim-witted. All those
the hair dyes.

Gussy shifted weight from one leg to the other. If Kelly was smart she’d direct attention
away from herself now and onto the important work that Adam was undertaking. But no,
the young hairdresser kept the conversation on herself.

‘Pride comes before a fall,’ said Gussy—loudly.

‘Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18,’
corrected Father Nott.
Gussy smiled tolerantly.
‘Thanks for this,’ said Pete, indicating the food.
‘Don’t you worry. This’ll all come out with the rain,’ offered Father.
‘They’re getting a city construction company in,’ Pete said.
‘Ah, good. That’ll take some pressure off.’
‘And how are we paying for it?’ Gussy demanded.
Pete shrugged.
‘Typical.’

Another half hour of eating and Pete clapped his hands together.
‘Back to it then.’
‘We should get away.’ Father Nott brushed remnants of bread roll from his garb.
‘Yes, you don’t want us women in your hair,’ Gussy said.
Father Nott set his mouth but made no comment.
Gussy called to Kelly for help getting into the car. The young woman was a bit rough. Wedged her blood-mottled leg against the seat.
‘Sorry.’
Gussy said nothing.

Father Nott talked all the way back to the north-side town centre. Making up for Kelly’s silence and Gussy’s lack of interest. They dropped Kelly in front of the Split Endz yellow neon sign. Father made a comment about how the younger woman had graciously given up her lunch hour—at which Gussy burst into laughter—and Kelly slammed the car door.

‘It’s as though they can’t hear anything,’ said Gussy.
‘Sorry?’
‘Slamming car doors. She’s a comely looking girl for the moment, I’ll give her that. But she tries my patience with her youthfulness.’
Father Nott looked into the rear vision mirror. ‘We were all young once.’
Gussy turned her neck to look out the window and didn’t speak another word until the car was idling in front of her house.

‘You coming in for a cuppa, Father?’

‘I’m afraid duty calls.’

She opened the door and hefted a leg out. ‘I wouldn’t know what duties a priest out here could possibly have, Father. Except for helping his parishioners. I appreciate very much your lift for me and Kelly out to see the bridge. I notice she didn’t thank you for it.’

‘Are you right there?’

She slammed her car door as best she was able and walked the few paces to her front gate. The mailbox lid squealed for lack of oil revealing an empty space. She let it drop and then walked up the few steps and inside. It was a large house for one person. She’d traded up in the number of bedrooms each time one of her husbands had died, so this house had three. And was brick.

She wandered on through the passageway to the kitchen. Swished some warm water around in the kettle and tipped it out. Drought didn’t mean she had to have awful tea. She put the kettle on to boil and sat back down at the table. Hand propping up her head.
Will

Will looked on as Jim unbuttoned his expensive-looking suit jacket and opened a small notebook. The CEO would have been a handsome man: had the kind of rugged face that Will admired, except that it had been encased in plastic. Hazard of the job. His posture behind the makeshift lectern—arms crossed, legs apart—suggested he was ready for combat, but his face was unreadable behind the permanent grin that he used to face the press corps. Will felt his adrenalin surge just looking at the man.

‘London Bridge,’ Jim said. ‘Oklahoma Bridge. Kinzua Viaduct—which was once touted as the Eighth Wonder of the World. West Gate Bridge. Princeton Street Bridge. Entre-os-Rios Bridge. Tacoma Narrow Bridge. Tasman Bridge. Minneapolis Bridge. Bogantungan Bridge which is just up the road in case you’ve never heard of it.’

Then he stood quietly. Evidently waiting for the journalists to make something of the list. When that didn’t happen he trumpeted on: ‘The West Gate came down in?’

‘1970,’ someone shouted.

‘Because of?’

No one answered, so Jim continued. ‘A combination of causes—design faults, construction mistakes, poor communication between the consulting engineers and so on. My point is?’

A lot of pens at the ready now.

The grin widened. ‘My point is that it happens all the time. Bridges come down here and overseas.’

‘Not typically the day after they’re completed!’

Some scattered laughter.

Jim held up his hands. ‘Granted. But that simply pinpoints where we’ve got our work cut out for us.’

‘Do you know the cause of the collapse yet?’

‘Our site investigators are analysing it now. No conclusions yet. The design was sound. Materials were first-rate. Construction looked solid.’
Some dissension from the journalists now. ‘It fell down.’
And another: ‘It’s not normal. There must be something wrong with the—.’

Jim sighed, as though he had a right to be impatient. ‘It’s a basic beam design. It’s probably the most straightforward form for a bridge that exists. The vanilla of bridges, it’s called. If you’d done your homework you’d know it’s not remotely original.’

‘Then it had to be put together incorrectly.’

‘There’s simply no evidence yet. Fatigue cracking is the highest priority problem with steel. This steel hadn’t the chance to fatigue. Slump tests for the concrete were spot on before fabrication. We’re looking into embrittlement in heat-affected areas—the welds—but we’re not expecting to find anything there either.’

Will looked around at the scribbling hands, tape-recorders held aloft.

Jim continued. ‘Bridges fall, people. That’s what you need to print in your papers. Go and research past collapses and write them up. Show the public how normal it is.’

Will bowed his head towards his crossed arms. The journalists hammered away.

‘Normal. Isn’t this just government unwilling to admit to a failure?’

‘I’m standing in front of you right now admitting to a failure. Next task is to get on with rebuilding.’

‘What? Just blithely go ahead with the project at taxpayer expense?’

‘Blithely. Lovely word. But I wonder if you would put that same question to the institution of marriage? Almost one half of marriages fail, but that doesn’t stop either participant from trying again—sometimes several times over.’

Will looked up at the laughter, but the journalist retorted. ‘Not with the same partner. Why is the government continuing on with a company that couldn’t get it up—so to speak?’

Jim smiled appreciatively. ‘The chances of marital success don’t get any higher for having a new partner, do they? The Quebec bridge failed twice—and is standing now. But then I’m sure you all already know that having done your homework on bridge construction. Besides we’ve attached a different foreman, different construction team.’
A young man from the Herald-Sun raised his hand. ‘Sounds a bit like rearranging chairs on the Titanic. Your company is the one responsible for the collapse. Letting you employ a new foreman seems superfluous.’

Jim smiled. All those teeth. Even Will had to admit he looked confident. ‘If you get your car serviced and two weeks later something goes wrong, you take it back to the same garage.’

‘First marriage and now car servicing. Do you honestly think the public is going to buy this?’

‘I think the public has enough good sense to know that if some one does something wrong, they have to keep going until they get it right. Any more questions?’

‘What’s your relationship with Abrahamson Construction?’

Jim focused on the young woman asking the question seated in the front row. ‘I presume you’re now casting aspersion on the tendering process? All the documents are on the public record. Feel free to peruse them.’

‘That wasn’t my question.’

Jim rolled his eyes. ‘Do I know anyone in Abrahamson’s personally? I do. Is the person I know a drinking buddy? No. Do we play golf? No. Do we even particularly like each other? Not really. Question answered?’

‘Why can’t we contact him personally for comment?’

Jim snorted. ‘That’s not the way these things are done and you know it. Give me a break.’

‘When will this next attempt be concluded?’

Jim looked at his watch, then fiddled with the leather band while he answered. ‘I don’t have the answer to that. Let me get back to you.’

He held up his hands and journalists and photographers immediately began packing away their notebooks and camera equipment before filing from the room. None of them gave Will a second glance, but he kept his place. Jim had seen him.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’
Will wasn’t surprised at the question. Just the ferocity with which it was delivered. ‘I wanted to see for myself.’

‘If they had known, if any one of them had taken the time to look at your bloody boots it would have been all over. I can’t stop them from talking to you if you show up at a damned press conference, Will. Jesus Christ!’

‘Settle down, mate. What’s the problem?’

Will watched as Jim visibly forced himself to rotate his shoulders, open and shut his balled up hands. ‘I don’t want a word from you or your crew about what happened. No need to rubbish the man gone before you. Journalists are sharks: all they think about is the kill.’ He pulled up his trousers around the belt. ‘A collapse is a complicated business.’

Will felt himself nodding. Reassuring the man.
‘We’re officially suspecting it was a failure of “materials”, all right?’ Jim said.
‘The inspectors have said that?’
‘No. Of course they bloody haven’t. They’re weeks away from a decision. But the public needs something in the meantime and a suspicion of materials is logical.’

Will ruminated on that.
‘Look, we won’t announce which company supplied what.’
‘But they’ll find out.’
Jim nodded. ‘Fine.’
‘Jim, I want the site cordoned off—I want to look at it myself.’

The CEO narrowed his eyes. ‘All right. But to be perfectly “off-the-record” with you, I don’t care about why it happened, I just want you on top of how it will be rebuilt.’

Despite himself, Will couldn’t stem his pride. Abrahamson Construction was in charge of its first bridge build.

Jim laughed. At ease now. ‘You know, I told my wife I was going to let you build and she said she suspected I was doing something illicit. I could see on her face that she wanted to ask further questions, but she raised her newspaper again instead. Aren’t
women goddamn nosy? So you and I went to high school together—as far as I know there’s no law against us working together as well."

Will smiled but didn’t meet Jim’s eyes. At high school they’d barely spoken. He’d actually wondered whether Jim even remembered him from those days at Kensington Community High School. Before Jim had gone off to Monash University. Before Will had taken an apprenticeship. Not that he had anything to be ashamed of. He played football for the school. Didn’t excel, but didn’t disgrace himself.

He was just about to suggest a cup of coffee, when Jim spoke again.

‘Now listen, the government wants cross-bracing.’

Will took a second, then said, ‘For this bridge?’

Jim looked at him as though he was an idiot.

‘You’ve already approved a design. You can’t just add stiffeners if that’s not what’s called for. It won’t make your bridge any stronger at this point.’

‘They want it.’

‘You haven’t allowed for it.’

‘Allow for it.’ Jim looked at his watch. ‘Citizens of L— pay taxes, Will.’

Will said nothing.

‘A bridge—for the good citizens to easily get from the north to the south or the south to the north of L—, without having to circumnavigate—was part of the local party platform. The government contracts out to me. You meet the tender requirements. They want a bridge with cross-braces, they get a bridge with cross-bracing.’

Will cleared his throat. ‘And the budget?’

Jim played Cheshire cat.

‘If you want to add cross-bracing the budget has to expand.’

Jim sniffed.

Will steadied his voice. ‘I need the new budget faxed through this afternoon. And if it rains—.’
Jim interrupted. ‘Let’s not do this arse backwards; I’ll send you the new plans, you get your newly anticipated costs to me. All right?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Shit.’ He straightened his tie and then buttoned his suit jacket. ‘I’m counting on you, Will.’ Then he was gone.

Will smiled. He could be counted on. His bridge wasn’t going to fall down. He’d sleep on-site with the thing and damned well prop it up himself if he had to.
She knew why the bridge fell down: how anything had the energy to be upright was beyond her understanding. Besides which, L— was a town of losers. Not the north side where Greg was from. But the south side limped along in the north side’s shadow. That’s why he’d moved to Sydney: to stop dragging her south-side arse around. Janice could barely drag herself around at present. She was due right now. This day. This instant, if she had anything to do with it. But apparently she didn’t. Apparently, it was still the amphibian growing inside her that called all the shots. The amphibian and the south-side of L—.

She tried not to make connections. They didn’t often see reptiles in the veterinarian surgery, but she knew too much. That was the problem. Her work life crowded her pregnancy. The whole evolution of the human inside the womb—from amoeba to lizard to wombat to baby—was too animal. Janice turned her head away from the screen.

‘Your amniotic fluid is 7.5.’

‘That’s on the low end, right? It won’t get lower, will it?’

‘Not before you go into labour.’ The sonographer was being reassuring. It wasn’t her responsibility to give bad news. To cope with women breaking down in the little cubicle. The room was too small for emotion.

‘Daddy will be excited to see this.’ She placed a grainy ultrasound picture on Janice’s stomach. ‘It’s the side of the head.’

Janice took a deep breath. ‘I found “daddy” screwing someone else in our bedroom,’ she said.

‘Oh my god. I’m sorry.’ The sonographer turned around to face her.

‘I threw a book into the room—scared the living heck out of them.’

They both laughed. The woman asked, ‘He still with her?’

Janice shrugged. ‘I didn’t even see her leave. She tiptoed out of the house and later wrote me a note apologising.’
‘Pathetic.’

‘Apparently sex in the car was hurting her back. And you know what my boyfriend said when he finally had the balls to come and talk to me?’

The woman shook her head.

‘He said, “I told you you were too good for me”.’

The woman reached over to pat her wrist. ‘Good riddance to bad rubbish. Now you take this picture to put up on your fridge so you can see the little miracle coming and I’ll leave you to get dressed.’

Janice didn’t reply to that. Nor did she get up. The picture—black background with grey-green sound waves etching shapelessness—didn’t move her much. The *in utero* forehead bulged. She studied it for a long minute. If she hadn’t ample stomach as evidence, she could almost refuse to believe it was inside her. It. She didn’t know the sex—caught up in her sister’s insistence that the surprise made the delivery bearable. But that left it an “it”.

Her bunched rag of skirt had to be forced to stretch over her hips.

‘I’m going to put a question mark beside your next appointment,’ smiled the receptionist. ‘I think you’ll go.’

Janice popped the ultrasound picture into the glove compartment of her car. It would get hot in there and the edges would curl up. It was not going up on the fridge. It should be sent to Greg. But his move to Sydney had been as clear as his words when she said she was going ahead with the surprise pregnancy. ‘It’s not mine as far as I’m concerned. And it’s your decision to keep it, not mine, so as far as I’m concerned it’s not mine.’

She’d told him he was repeating himself.

Janice sniffed. She needed an ice cream cone. It might not be high forties, but it was still so hot even the leaves on L—’s three trees had given up: they hung down like parched tongues. She made her way. Stopping to lean on bins and public benches. Stopping just to cope with the hot air going into her lungs. It was hard to believe that each breath was
keeping her alive rather than slowly suffocating her. Janice put a hand to her midriff, wherever her midriff was, trying to lift the baby up a little. Take some pressure off her back.

It was the image of herself that kept her moving forward. She wouldn’t give in to the devil-may-care attitude that hovered around pregnant women. It went along with the pained expression and lowered expectations. Stretchmarks brought it on. She had them. ‘Tiger scratches’. Her sister told her it was fanciful giving stretchmarks a name and handed her a tube of Vitamin E cream. Janice used it, but still imagined that she might one day tell her son or daughter that a tiger had mauled her, and that she had run and run to keep him or her safe inside. She pulled a face as she rounded another corner. You weren’t allowed to tell children things like that. It would come up in therapy sessions later in life, apparently.

By the time she reached the milk bar there was a small queue. Good: she had time to look at the selection of ice creams. Honeycomb with actual pieces of the golden sugar, or coconut or passionfruit with the pips, or chocolate or banana.

‘Hello, love. Any day now?’
She nodded, too red in the face to reply.
‘You want to come out the back and sit down? You’re looking a bit overheated.’ The man’s eyebrows were meeting with concern. She shook her head no, and pointed to the chocolate. She could feel her ankles throbbing. She should have a glass of water and raise her feet. Should have driven the few measly blocks. Janice barely made it out of the shop without crying.

But she held her head up high, noting that they’d given her extra because of her belly. She had to lick it fast because the hot wind sent little brown fingers dripping down the cone. It was delicious and cold and refreshing, and just as she was loving it she licked it too hard and the whole mound of chocolate fell from the cone onto the ground. Brown flecks splashing her ankles. She wanted to kick it.
The Bridge

A few passers-by offered consoling grins and she knew she was supposed to throw her hands in the air. Que sera sera. She frowned. It was a five-dollar ice cream and now it was splattered. Uneaten. She didn’t have the money for uneaten ice creams and she turned back the way she came.

She would post the ultrasound up to Greg whether he wanted it or not.
In the spartan room—plain pine bed, desk, chair and shelving with a bare wooden cross hanging above the bed—Father Nott took off his chasuble and hung it up immediately. Then off with the stole and cinture: folding the former into a neat square, and the latter into a tidy loop to put away in his open shelving.

His belly expanded in delight at the lack of cinture. He kept this symbol of chastity on the tight side. A constant nag of his vows. He put a hand under his shirt to rub at the indentations. Even when he changed from clothes to singlet and pyjama shorts, he didn’t look at his flesh. Sheer habit.

It was all habit. He didn’t have to wear the chasuble outside of the mass, but he preferred to set himself apart a little. He could admit to some vanity—that was the only way to make sure it didn’t best him.

Peeling back a worn blue sheet, he hopped into the single bed. It had just gone eight o’clock. He settled himself and then reached under the pillow for his rosary beads. Finding them safely housed, he let them alone.

Out with the teeth. Just the top set softly plopping into the glass of water. He rubbed his tongue over the gums. A little sore. Dentures were a necessary evil. His cheeks dropped in now. and to clear his throat, or cough, he had first to blow his cheeks out—so they wouldn’t catch between his bottom teeth and upper gums. Sometimes, like this evening, he had to blow out his cheeks a few times because his mouth was dry and everything stuck.

Now, he had his pen and pad and all the time in the world. For a couple of hours. And those hours needed to be dedicated to a thesis topic. The sooner he decided on something, the sooner he could get on with it. A conversation on paper. A means of joining the great historical Conversation via his own research and thought—there in black and white. Free
to be consumed again and again. The subject was Theology in Contemporary Australia—but what was his topic?

Perhaps he should write about parish life in rural Australia. His supervisor had told him to be as specific as possible. Meditating on the importance of the gold, mining and precious metals index, he wrote: *Through the Eye of a Needle: Camels, Opals and Doing Well versus Doing Good*. Then he wrote ‘*An Opal Beyond Price’; The Mystical Body of Christ and Social Relations in the Mining Communities of the Australian Outback.*

He sucked on the end of his pen. There was always the weather. Never ending griping about weather—which, in his short experience, varied between a couple of years of drought and then six months of milder drought. He wrote: *The Fire Next Time: Eschatology and Climatology in the Outback*. He laughed. Wrote: *Hot Enough for You? Reflections on Holy Saturday and the Harrowing of Hell in Outback Australia.*

And then there was the tourist trade—the need for and dislike of the tourist: *The Good Samaritan and Other Tourists* or *We Need You But We Hate to Need You: God, Tourists and the Outback Australian*.

Or perhaps he should write about the disappearing outback priest. He wrote: *Bunyips, Outback Priests and Other Mythical Creatures*, then crossed it out. Wrote: *Fishing for Loaves: The Crisis of Clerical Recruitment in Outback Australia*.

Not bad. A beginning. The problem was that none of the topics interested him. Or were remotely original. Who cared if a rich man had less chance of entering heaven than a camel passing through the eye of a needle when the choice was poverty? Hell on earth was an old topic. Hating to need God was done to death in any Jewish thesis, and the dropping number of priests wasn’t exclusive to the outback. Father Nott tore out the page, crumpled it and threw it over the foot of the bed.
If he were honest about what interested him, he should write something about the bridge. About how a symbol of bringing together would alienate him from where he wanted to be. Because if it didn’t work, and he couldn’t see why it wouldn’t ultimately, so didn’t feel traitorous just having the thoughts—man-made structures collapsed and were rebuilt all over the world—but if it didn’t work and the south side of L— dwindled the way they all expected it would, with people selling up and overdrafts finally being cancelled, if it didn’t work, he would be sent back to the city. And he did want to be in the city.

There was nothing wrong with the outback. Per se. He didn’t feel the blazing heat anymore and he quite enjoyed the wildlife that wasn’t killed by the dogs and had some capacity to interact: parrots. He had a lot of time to himself, which meant ample opportunity to read everything he’d always said it was going to take him another lifetime to get to. But, the conversation, the conversation. He accepted that admitting his need for what he considered ‘literary’ or ‘highbrow’ was a sign of his own failure, not anyone else’s. That he was not above his fellow man—not any one of them. That his pride would get the better of him if he wasn’t careful. That he needed to extend his areas of interest.

He knew all this, and yet. It was inconceivable to him to imagine passing the rest of his days out here. He looked up at the ceiling. A bright, white, low-hung ceiling. Like the ceiling of so many other new prefabricated houses out here. Out here. It was a test. It was a powerful test of his faith and his purpose and his sense of self and his sanity. It was not a test he felt he was going to pass. Between the slights of a misanthropic widow and the general disregard of the rest of the south-siders, between his relegation to town chauffeur and the reluctance of anyone—anyone—to call upon him with any suggestion of religious need, Father Nott felt impossibly sandwiched. He couldn’t begin to imagine how to build a community around the Lord in L—. It simply wasn’t possible.

As a young man he may have taken up the mantle with gusto. May have needed to fail spectacularly before he could see what at 52 years of age was unfortunately manifestly obvious: the south-siders of L— didn’t want him in their town. At first he thought it was outsider syndrome or that he was suffering from a general homesickness for city life. And
there was no doubting that either of those truths ran right alongside the larger reality. But after several months had passed Father was forced to admit that apathy played less a role than disdain.

His dress, his creed, his carriage, his intentions, his tools—all of it seemed a positive annoyance to the south-siders. His mass was regularly attended by precisely three: a lonely bag-lady—no other word for it, she lived in the street and was having no truck with charity—a Turkish woman, who made it perfectly clear that she was being heretical just by attending so he wasn’t to speak to her, and a farmer. Father Nott hadn’t the heart to ask him his story.

It wasn’t that any of the non-attending south-siders ever said anything to him. Except for Gussy, who while she drove him to distraction, Father Nott at least credited with a type of Tourette’s Syndrome honesty. She made his days more difficult, but she didn’t trouble his soul. The rest of them simply pretended not to know what he wanted. Ignored his station. A truly humbling experience to have people ignore your vocation not because they disliked those religious, or the religious cleric in particular, but because they honestly felt you useless.

He was tempted to pray for them and he was tempted not to pray for them. He couldn’t decide which they would dislike more and yes, he did want to know.

The word for how he felt was ineffectual.

Perhaps that was what he should write about—*The Male Nipple: An Australian Priest in the Outback*.

Father Nott put the light out.
Old Charlie slunk around the embankment, looking down at the site, concentrating less on the steel carcass and more on how well his legs were doing in their attempt to keep him up. Wasn’t like it was the first he’d ever seen; he’d been working on bridges for centuries. They went up, they came down. Depending. He watched his left knee rise, foot forward and down, then the other knee. Other foot. Now he had the hang of it.

This collapse was quick though. Maybe too quick. What additional mistakes had been made by the crew to cause this? Or maybe he needed to look up the history of the land here; maybe there were some extra Aboriginal forces he hadn’t factored in. He tapped the side of his skull to make a mental note.

Only a few bridges fell as the builders removed the scaffolding—solving their own problems with minimal effort. Others, like the Tasman Bridge, took a longer time. A grin creased old Charlie’s face as he wondered whether the correct word would be ‘ruminated’. A bridge ‘ruminating’ before it fell.

He lurched despite himself and then almost overcorrected. Slower. Slower foot up and down. He looked into the chasm at the wreck of the bridge. It looked like a giant praying mantis, legs drawn up in dry death. It looked like a steel cairn left by giants. It looked like ruin. More head-tapping. Was it too soon to be a proper fall? He spat.

The thought distressed him, and, because that’s where the gold was—in distress—he pressed it further. Could this metal mess simply be a problem with the differential calculations, instead of the actual want of a bridge? Man-made mistake instead of the gods’? If so, if that was so with this wreck, then his performance wasn’t required yet. Goodnight ladies, goodnight.

It was possible. It was possible that this was just a bungle. Most bridge forms were a reflection of engineering attempts to marshall the twin systems of force and load into a
recognisable pattern. A bridge cut from the air on the basis of physics. Built from the forces up. Did anyone understand that? There was a dark beauty in it. The invisible shaping the visible. The cart before the horse.

Old Charlie hid behind a tree, prised a hip flask from his coat pocket and tipped his head back to drink. At the same time, he opened up the front of his pants and let what went in, come out. It took a minute. Age creeping up. He shook himself with one hand and capped the flask lid against the tree with the other. Ambidextrous gibbon.

By the time he re-emerged, the only person in sight was the moon. Big see-all. Wreathed by birds swooping at insects. Charlie shook his head as though ridding it of the tides, then began the walk back to the rental house.

It was a long way. He kept his head down and seemed almost to sniff at the ground, so low his back was, so thrust forward his shoulders. His hands jutted out to prevent a fall as his boot caught the edge of the bitumen. Humans beings tarred everywhere like dogs pissing—only dogs had sense enough to make their marks less permanent. Dogs, like other animals, like very few humans, understood that if you did anything permanent to the land there were consequences. Stake your claim, let others know the lie of your land, but leave the dirt, the soil, the red and brown and black guts of it be what it was.

Charlie stopped, steadied himself and spat. Then wiped his mouth along his jacket sleeve, looking around. Destitution behind the brick veneer, behind the weatherboard, behind the concrete and MDF. Look at how they were abusing their relationship to the land. Manipulating it so it would support housing estates. Turning concrete into a coffin for live soil. Growing things out of season. Men dug deep into the earth to house their cars. Erected scrapers that punched the sky to hold their computers. They distressed the ratio of productive land to resting land. It was all short-sighted. Foundations would sink. Grass would force its way up through concrete. Unseasonal produce was merely pesticide in the shape of apples and potatoes.
He dragged his gaze across the warmly-lit windows, across the parked cars with their ticking, cooling motors, across the shapes that were losing definition in the dark. People inside these houses woke continuously from their sleep and blamed stress or coffee. They suffered daily ailments they tried to cure with television, yoga and alcohol. He faltered onwards. Not that old Charlie had a harsh word to say about alcohol. No, no. He used alcohol in the same way: to block out the cries. His hands reached up automatically to cover his ears. He could hear the earth when he remembered: when the day was over and there were no man-made distractions. His jacket weighed as heavily as a dead man on his shoulders when he heard the earth.

The land demanded a relationship with the people and the point was not to have to force the heart of it. If the heart was in tune with wants then everything would be all right. But if you had to insist or manipulate or superphosphate, then perhaps you should look at why you were in the relationship in the first place. A bridge, whole span, came down in Tasmania only a couple of years ago and were any of them learning the lesson? Steel arms and legs made too mechanically. The only intention behind that bridge was to get from one side of nowhere to the other.

Charlie raised his arms in an attempt to keep his jacket on. He pretended to be reaching up to the heavens when really his mind was far below. He had no knowledge of the sky. His whole life was dedicated to the land. The land and the parasites on it. If people weren’t working with it then they were parasites on it. Whining mosquitoes. Starved of nutrients, thin and grasping until—proboscis plugged into flesh—they could suck all they needed. Then they bloated.

There was nothing noble about human beings. He included himself. Lowering his tired arms, he stopped. He was as weak, as conniving, as desperate as the worst of them. No matter how he schooled himself, he lived according to their laws, their strictures, their excesses. He was ashamed of himself on a daily basis.

The rental house was dead in front of him now.
Charlie pushed open the front door and stopped, caught by surprise at the waiting individual. Not that he locked the door—you couldn’t keep out what ailed the soul. But nonetheless, he hadn’t invited anyone in. He stood stockstill: he hadn’t been seen yet. Shook a finger at it. A silent warning. But the Tarbaby he don’t say nothing. Charlie walked closer, a fist raised, and that’s when he realised it was one of his masks. Propped up on a coat that he’d hung.

So he laughed loud. Dropped his hands to his knees and opened his mouth with the forced gale. Got to laugh to show that it meant nothing. Pity, in some ways, the inanimate hadn’t worked on the bridge. Never did though.

He looked down at all the masks and doll-like artefacts hanging from his open suitcase, blackened by the dim light. Some were properly nailed down—kept them together—others swung loosely by hair or shreds of clothing. They were always changing between the animate and the inanimate and sometimes he caught them. He had to blink to bring them back into mask form. This kind of recognisable puppetry was evil. No doubt about it. But the way Charlie always figured, it was better to be able to see and point at what was evil than to not know where it was.

He propped himself against a wall and used the toes of one boot to stand on the heel of the other. Shucked it off. Then he bent and pulled the first one off. Shoeless he rose suddenly, and laughed as he fell backwards as he’d known he would. His head hit the floorboards and wiped the grin from his mouth and he had to hang on so as not to fall off the floor into somewhere else. He didn’t know where; he’d never let himself go yet.

It took him an hour-long minute to slowly push himself into a sitting position. He could pick out the shapes in the room quite clearly now. The pieces of rental furniture that he couldn’t disguise with his own life. It was just him—that was the problem. He couldn’t find a mate in either world. White women wanted a man who worked and the gins wanted someone who wasn’t going to bring unnecessary aggravation. He had tried telling
a couple of them that it was necessary; that if he didn’t rouse-about with words men
would destroy everything. But they left him alone after that.

They were right to. There was something sickening inside him. A worm. Like in that
poem burrowing about in his rose. Sometimes it caused a terrible stomach-ache and
sometimes, to his great shame, it caused tears. He didn’t seem to have control over them.
They came like the rain wouldn’t. Ah well, at least he knew it. Most sick men had no idea
they were sick.

There was disgust in the air now. Thick disgust and old Charlie couldn’t work out where
it was coming from. His muscles slackened so quickly, let him go so violently, that
Charlie thought he would fall even from off his sitting bones. But his body remembered
what to do and so he just leaned precariously forward. Looked down at his boots, sitting
akimbo a little ways away.

He sat like this for a while—unused marionette—and when the image came to him he
flung his head back to deny it. His head went too far and if he tried to bring it forward he
knew he would retch. He closed his eyes. He forced his eyes open again. Heard a mutter
of disgust. Had to keep concentrating on himself. On his heavy mouth. The house
thumped and he tried to find an explanation, but it was too much and Charlie let his head
fall forward, let his mouth open, let the drink out.

Then everything went black. Inside and out.

It was later, much later that, beckoned by the electronic mutterings of the fridge, old
Charlie pulled himself back into a stand and made his way to the kitchen. He opened the
fridge door and fetched himself a long neck bottle. The small circle of tin lid smacked
expertly against the handle, then skittered across the floorboards. His foot would find that
later.

Leaning his head back, way back, he thrust his tongue into the neck of the bottle to drink.
Moriah

It didn’t hurt as long as she didn’t move her head to the right. They’d stapled her hair to the desk so unevenly—on the right, staples clamped the hair down close to her ear, and on the left, the staples were further back, leaving wriggle room. They’d sat her on the chair and ground her forehead straight down into the desk—perfectly symmetrically placed. And still they fucked up the stapling. Pathetic. If they were going to torment her, better to do it so she couldn’t move her head at all.

The condensation prickled. There were pinpricks of sweat or heated breath all over her face. Her hair didn’t help because it was thick. A ropey thick curtain trapping the air around her face. By the time she got herself out of this she was going to have bright red cheeks.

She eased the desk lid up, which forced her to stand crouched over, then she turned her face to the left, which released the pinch of the closer staples and increased the pull of the further ones. Her breath wasn’t hot against her face now, but her mouth was up against her hair. She used her fingers to snake into the small space of open desk she’d created. Searching. She’d be free in half an hour, she guessed. If they’d done it properly she’d have had to call for help.

Moriah hated things half-way. That’s why she wore fake glasses. If she was going to be the one picked on, may as well fit the image. Her father told her that looking through plain glass would hurt her eyes, but he also thought the glasses were some kind of fashion statement, so she ignored him.

She wished she was tough enough to just wrench her head up. Jerk the staples out. But she had images of bits of scalp coming away, so she continued feeling around in the desk. What for, she wasn’t quite sure. It wasn’t as though she kept a pair of scissors in there.
Pencil case. Geography textbook—she could tell because it was one of the subjects she liked and when she liked a book she dog-eared the picture pages. Her fingers spidered around her collection of stick pins: the ones she kept at school were generally boring—anzac pins with the sun rising, at least she thought it was the sun, and cancer donation pins shaped like ribbons, and a couple of flame pins her father had given her, she didn’t know what they symbolised—they were all good to stick her fingers into whenever she had the urge.

Her neck ached a bit at the forced position and she slowly scraped her head back along the desk to manoeuvre her forehead straight down again. Concentrating too hard on what she was doing meant she didn’t realise until too late that she’d drooled, and her chin dragged through it. Now she had the heat of her breath again, plus the sticky wetness. But she also had a pin in her hand.

She pulled it free of the cavity beneath the desk and sat down on her chair again. That was some relief: her thigh muscles had cramped. She took a minute to decide which staple to go for—chose one that was closest to her right ear—and used her fingertips to ease the pin beneath the staple. Levering the pin end against the desk, she pushed. The pin immediately bent.

‘Fuck.’

Moriah didn’t typically like swearing. It was mostly lazy. But she was hot, she had a headache coming on, and if she didn’t sort herself out in the next ten minutes she would have to deal with the added humiliation of kids coming in for a class. She flicked the stick pin away and tried to tear at the staples with her fingernails. No go.

She smiled at herself in the little hairy room of heat. This was the situation she had always dreamed of: a situation, not of her own making, in fact, a situation specifically put
upon her by others, designed to test her fortitude. She might crumble, or she might prove larger than her tormentors.

Yes, the cretins who bullied her had done other things: painted her textbook pages black—joke was on them, since textbooks were all but useless to her, the words worming across the page—planted a stink-bomb in her locker, and hung signs on her back. So original. To this day she didn’t know what the signs said—some people laughed, a few told her she had the signs there—but she just crumpled the paper up instead of trying to read them. The point was, she hadn’t needed much guts to cope with anything they’d done before. This was different. Stapling her hair, effectively her head, to a desk, was different.

Could she hack it? She smiled again. The real question, the question she was avoiding asking, was whether or not she could be like a saint.

Moriah hated the saints. She had long decided that they weren’t stoic: they were idiots. There was one—she had done some painstaking research, just to assure herself that they were fools—who sat upon a pillar, lived up on that pillar eating, sleeping, and all the rest of it, for something like 50 days. Until he had a sign from the lord to come down. Who knows what the sign was. And one of the St Anthonys had supposedly managed to get a school of fish to stop and listen to his preaching—heads above water. Yeah, right.

There were a whole lot of illnesses and pustilences and tortures inflicted on the saints that seemed to go away soon enough and if there was another thing Moriah hated it was a faker. Girls at school said Moriah was a faker—when she wore a bandage and didn’t have to take PE. She had wound the bandage so tight, her whole foot pulsed and when she finally was excused and she took the bandage off, her foot looked like a great, white, pulsing slug. She wasn’t faking: she hated PE. Another hate.

She fossicked in her desk again—this time keeping her legs dead straight and hunching over more, so as not to put the strain on her front thigh muscles. It still hurt though.
Finally, finally, she found her weapon—a biro. The tip would be strong enough to prise the staples out. Sitting again, she found the staple she wanted and tried to place the tip of the biro beneath it. No luck. The nib was too big: the staple whammed flat into the desk. She had more luck with one of the further staples on the left, but tears came to her eyes when her fingers nimbly informed her that it was the only staple not punched in properly.

The bell rang.

She ran her hand crazy inside the desk. She did have scissors: craft scissors. She wanted to pitch them across the room. The stupid plastic-coated blades were too thick to wedge beneath the staples. Her head hurt. Her legs ached. She sat down again, scissors in hand.

Her father was going to build, rebuild, a bridge. And she was going too. Way away. Way away in the outback. Woop-woop. It didn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter out there. Who was going to see her? No one, that’s who. Besides, it would probably annoy her father, and since that’s the only reason he even noticed her anymore, why not?

She opened the mouth of the scissors and started shearing through the sections of hair pinned to the desk.
Shane

He drew on his cigarette and locked the back door. Time to get out. Shrugging himself into a leather jacket, he washed up and headed off to the Terminus on the north side. It was his favourite after-hours watering hole. Even as he was still coming through the door, running his fingers through his unwashed hair, Shane felt that he was going to get lucky. Sometimes you could just tell.

He mock-saluted a couple of mates near the pool table and took himself straight to the bar. Olivia was working. A tall woman with cropped blond hair and large tits.

‘What’ll it be, stranger?’

‘Bitters, thanks, Liv. Looks like you’re in for a night.’ Shane leaned against the bar, surveying a reasonably full room for mid-week.

‘No. None of the hard-core drinkers. You’re all working stiffs.’

He hesitated, then pushed away. He’d tried chatting up Olivia before and she hadn’t given an inch. Icy professionalism or a bull dyke, he guessed—unwilling to really let it cross his mind that she just might not be interested in him. Either way there was no sense ploughing barren fields.

He swung over to nudge an elbow during a crucial shot. Watched as the white drove straight for the pocket.

‘You’re a fucking arse, Mannis. You owe me a beer for that.’ The irate was a rough-looking lad with dead straight brown hair and almost no eyebrows. His opponent laughed and hi-fived Shane, who raised his shoulder and eyebrow in a supposed imitation of innocence. Then he dropped the act and sat, drawing on his beer.

‘Heard you’re not worth your pay-packet, mate: that bridge you were working’s already come down.’

Shane whipped around to face his accuser, but there was laughter and he forced a grin to his own mouth. Every damned time someone mentioned the bridge his back went up. Time to let it go.
‘What’d you do, Mannis? Build it with mud?’ This from Trevor, Trev, for short.
‘No, we thought we’d try your brains, dickhead.’ But it wasn’t a witty comeback and they looked at him expectantly. ‘I dunno, do I? They’re getting inspectors in.‘
He’d been alarmed to hear that at first. But he hadn’t done anything wrong. Just laid a hunk of carved wood on it. And now that wood was burned up. No proof of anything. They could bring the inspectors if they liked.
‘Inspectors—that’s serious, mate.’
‘Nah. Paper-pushers.’
‘From where? North side or bloody Coober Pedy?’
‘Coober Pedy. Sending in government officials.’
Shane pretended to go mincing about. Stood up and used his shirtsleeve to wipe off a barstool. Sat back on his stool pretty and posh, and used a straw in his beer. The small group exploded with laughter.

The talk shifted and while his mates had their eyes on the green felt, Shane had his on a piece of red at the bar. He hitched up his jeans and went to try it on.
‘We know each other, right?’
‘Not tonight.’ She didn’t even look at him. Just took her drink from Olivia and left.

Trev gave him the thumbs up and Shane returned a two-fingered salute. Then Trev pointed further up the bar to another woman Olivia was serving. She was blonde, which almost made Shane head back in the opposite direction, but then she turned so he could see her profile and it was so instantly different to the one etched in his heart that he roused himself and went to lean on the bar beside her.
‘We know each other, right?’
Olivia rolled her eyes. ‘Watch this one,’ she said and put the woman’s drink down. It was some sort of girly drink: sickly green colour and straw to match. ‘Six fifty.’
‘Ouch,’ said Shane.
‘Too expensive for you?’ The nameless woman waited for her change.
‘Maybe,’ Shane played along. ‘I’m game to find out.’
‘I’m here with friends,’ she said.

‘Great, and I know some guys are into that, but I’m strictly a one-woman-at-a-time kind of man myself.’

She laughed and Shane felt the flow of blood. Knew he’d been right at the door.

Kelly was her name. She got excited as soon as he told her his name was Shane and she squinted at him a minute, then launched into a recollection of them meeting at a barbeque a year or so back. It sparked nothing for Shane, and Kelly couldn’t provide details beyond her insistence that he’d been the only one brave enough to stick his head underneath the homemade barbeque for long enough to light the gas. Shane shook his head admiringly and tried to bring the action to mind. He half-heartedly suggested that it was idiocy not bravery, but the possibility of them having met before suggested a kind of safety that didn’t usually accompany a bar pick-up and that pleased them both.

Shane ambled over to meet her friends—making sure to be polite and chatty and trying to make them laugh—while keeping his eye on Kelly. She had a cute way of flicking her hair back over her shoulder, even though it was barely shoulder length. And she shot him a couple of appreciative glances and seemed—unbelievably—to be a little concerned about whether he thought her friends were nice.

He excused himself for a moment when the conversation turned around to Latin American singers and walked back over to the pool table to pick up his jacket and receive the necessary accolades.

‘So much for the game, you dick.’

Shane shrugged. ‘I could use a couple of good wingmen.’

Several heads craned to check out the women.

‘One of them’s all right,’ offered Shane.

‘Piss off, you prick.’

Shane smiled and bowed his head a little. ‘Learn from the master.’ Then he turned and walked back to join the women—leaving behind four mates pleased he’d managed to hit paydirt.
Shane eased back onto the bar stool next to Kelly and began inserting mention of his house—which by the way wasn’t far from here—into the talk. It may have been that, or it may have been the rapid imbibing, or the laughing, or something as random as an accidental touch on her back, that meant that they, Kelly and Shane, found themselves in his bedroom, two hours later—disrobing. Or rather, he was taking her clothes off as she lay giggling on the bed.

He’d cranked up the stereo because it drowned out a host of sounds that they weren’t intimate enough to cope with yet, and besides she’d mentioned that she liked The Boss, so that was a no-brainer. At the moment though he was wishing he was a mite soberer. She was wriggling seductively underneath his ministrations—but that was making it difficult to get anywhere. Finally he threw himself on the bed beside her and half-yelled—although against the strains of Born in the USA it was a whisper—that she take her own jeans off. She pouted a little too much for her face and then suddenly acquiesced and Shane hopped out of his clothes in a second. Warm flesh.

Kelly then yelled that she was getting goosebumps being on top of the covers, so he ripped them out from beneath her. Sent her sprawling across the bed, laughing hysterically. He wore the doona as a giant cape and laid himself directly on top of her. Stopping up her mouth with his. She returned the kisses and wrapped her legs and arms around him—which was lovely but left him completely unable to move. He pulled himself upwards to turn down the music and she clung to him a moment before letting go and falling back onto the bed. Now that his limbs were free he took one of her arms and pinned it above her head.

‘Well, hello.’

He kissed down the side of her neck to her left breast. She had a giggling fit and nearly gave him a black eye in her elbowed attempt to move him away. So Shane lay down on his back beside her and waited. It didn’t take long.
The Bridge

‘What’s the matter, baby?’ Kelly clambered up onto her side and stared down at him. A flop of hair kept falling into her eyes even as she repeatedly pushed it away and it made Shane smile.

‘Find out for yourself.’

She cocked an eyebrow at him and bent to kiss his chest. Her tongue was wet and warm and her breath came hot. He closed his eyes, anticipating her hand on his cock; she could hardly keep hold of it he was so ready.

He flung her back over and laid himself on top of her—sending his fingers down to find out whether she was at all ready for him.

Then she said, ‘Shane Blackstone, I want you inside me.’

He almost managed to ignore it. He was almost too far gone to let something as little as an incorrect last name get in the way. But even if his mind worked furiously to pretend, his body immediately packed it in.

Kelly held his limpness in her hand. ‘What’s the matter, baby?’

He scowled and rolled off her.

‘It doesn’t matter. We can wait.’

‘My last name’s not Blackstone.’

She narrowed her eyes, squinting to understand. Or squinting, he now saw, to try and see him a little better.

‘It’s Mannis. Shane Mannis.’

Kelly giggled and put a hand to her mouth, then with some dim semblance of how that must appear, dropped her hand and tried to shrug. But it didn’t work because her next words were: ‘You’re that guy whose wife—?’

Shane closed his eyes. ‘Jesus fucking Christ.’

‘Sorry. Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.’ She reached out to put a hand, a cold hand, on the flat of his stomach. ‘I just mean that I do know you, that’s all. I just got confused.’ When he didn’t reply she said, ‘Well, what’s my last name, smarty?’

‘Piccoli.’
She lay down beside him, wrapping a leg and arm across his body.

‘Stop staring at me,’ he said.

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘No.’

‘Well, are we going to do anything?’

He ignored her.

She started to withdraw her leg, but he grabbed it, so she lifted her arm—and right out of the blue—began to stroke his forehead. And for some unknown reason that completely did him in. Tears in his eyes. Out of nowhere. To hide his embarrassment he clung to her. His wiry frame wrapped around her tiny body. That just made it worse. He buried his face in her armpit, clutching her waist and hips as the few hot tears came. She let him. She rested her chin on top of his head and ran her fingers through his hair. Telling him it was all right.

But it wasn’t all right. He felt spent and he was gripping breasts and hips and they did nothing for him. He had thought he was ready for something different and instead the evening had ended with him blubering. Another fucking failure. He gritted his teeth and pushed his head into her.

‘Hey,’ she said. Surprised.

But it felt good and he kept pushing. Grinding his forehead into her chest now. She scrambled to get away from him, sit up, and he held her a moment, pinned her down with his head, his hands. Enjoying the hurting. Then he let her go.

She sat up properly. Got out from under the doona.

‘Oh, shit, Kelly.’

She marched over to the door and switched on the light and they both blinked against the sudden onslaught. She was soon picking up her clothes and trying to make them fit over her body.

‘I’m sorry, all right?’

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The Bridge

She wasn’t responding and he got out of bed. Followed her from item to item, trying to touch her, but she kept ducking and weaving. Finally he just sat on the bed and watched her. Bruce was still going. Faint.

To push her feet into her shoes, Kelly sat on the edge of the bed. Shane didn’t try to touch her even though she was right beside him.

‘Please don’t go.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Kelly.’

She finished tying up her laces and turned to look at him. Her mascara had run, but it only made her brown eyes more prominent, and bed hair suited her.

‘It’s all right,’ she said.

He hung his head.

‘It’s not your fault.’

He screwed his face up, willing her to shut up. Shut up. Shut the fuck up.

She patted his arm. Which made him teary all over again and now he really didn’t want her to go because when she left there was only going to be him. Him and the bed. The dead wife’s bed. He gripped Kelly’s legs as she stood.

‘I can cook a mean breakfast. Eggs, bacon, tomatoes.’

She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled her legs from his embrace. But every time she made to walk, he grabbed her again.

‘Please don’t go.’

‘I have to get up early.’

‘I’m such a dickhead.’

She didn’t say anything, which was awful. At least she could have denied it. Then even Springsteen stopped. And then she stepped away from him, walked out of the room with her handbag over her shoulder.

He followed her to the front door, trying desperately to think of something to say to salvage things.

‘Bye,’ she said.
The Bridge

‘See you at the pub, hey?’
‘Yeah.’

And then she was out the front gate and in her car and down the street and gone.
He stayed leaning on the door frame. Watching the moths flicker under the street light.
Janice

F--k. F--k. F--k.
F--k. F--k. F--k.
F--k. F--k. F--k.
Can’t do this.
Can’t.
F--k.
Oh, God.
Oh, God.
Oh f--k.
F--k. F--k. F--k.

‘You’re doing really well.’
‘I’m not.’
‘You are.’
Shut up.
‘Just keep going.’
‘Don’t want to.’
‘You’re doing really well.’

Oh, no, no, no.
F--k.
Oh, f--k.
Oh, no. Oh, god. F--k.
Make it stop. Oh god.
God, god, god, no.
No.
No.
Oh, god.

‘They want to check your dilation.’
‘No.’
‘They’re going to.’
‘No.’
‘She doesn’t want you to. Just breathe, babe. Try to relax as much as you can.’

Oh, no. No, not this.
No, god, no, god, no.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
God, no, please, no.
Oh god. Oh god.
No. No.
No.
No.

‘Get up on the bed.’
‘No.’
‘Janice, they have to check you. They think you’re ready to push. They have to check and see whether you’re dilated enough.’
‘I’m not pushing.’
‘She says she’s not pushing.’

Oh, god. Oh, god. Please no.
No, not. No.
Fuck.
No. No. No.
No. No. No.
‘Come on. I’ll help you onto the bed.’
‘No.’
‘That’s it. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.’
‘No.’
‘It’s all right.’
‘Don’t!’
‘You’re ten centimetres, Jannie—you can push.’
‘I want an epidural.’
‘What?’
‘Now. I want it now.’

Now. Please. I can’t.
I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.
No. God, no.
God. Oh, god. God.
No. No. I can’t. No.
Now.

‘Get it now.’
‘I already asked and you’re too far along.’
‘No, I’m not.’
‘You’re doing really well. Just keep going. Push again.’
‘I want an epidural. I mean it. I mean it, Layla. Please. Get it.’
‘She really wants it.’
‘Please.’
‘Please.’
Please. Please. Please.

Just please. Oh, god, please. Please.

Please. I can’t. I can’t. No.


Please. Please. Please.

No, please. No. No.

God, no. Please. No.

Please. No.

‘Please.’

‘No, babe. They can’t. You’re right here. Baby’s right here. Just keep pushing.’

‘No.’

‘Yes, it’s all over then. Just push it out.’

‘No. No. No. NO. NO. NO. Oh GOD. NO. NO. PLEASE, NO. PLEASE,

PLEASE, PLEASE, NO. NO.NO.NO. GOD. GOD. GOD. I CAN’T. NO.

PLEASE. FUCK. FUCK. NO. GOD. NO. NO, GOD. FUCK. PLEASE. PLEASE.

PLEASE.’

‘Janice—I can see the head, the hair.’

‘FUCKING GOD. NO. PLEASE. NO. FUCK, FUCK, FUCK. STOP. NO. NO.

NO. JUST STOP. PLEASE. PLEASE GOD STOP. PLEASE. PLEASE.

PLEASE.’

‘Oh. Oh Janice, you’re nearly there—head’s out. HEAD’S OUT!’

‘OH OH OH OH NONONO GOD FUCKING STOP PLEASE GOD STOP

NONONO OH I CAN’T I CANT LORD I CAN’T I CAN’T I CANT NO STOP’

‘It’s a girl, Jannie! A little girl. Dark hair like what’s his name.’
The Bridge

Saturday 14th February

Will

The single track of railway stretched ahead and behind without a curve: no chance anymore to see the hot, shining rails ribboning into infinity. The view, as it had done for hours, constituted a dome of washed blue sky looming impossibly high over the scrub of ghostly green saltbush. Dull colours simply coping with heat. The fading landscape was relieved only by the red soil—a rich ochre at first startling, now commonplace. Will couldn’t smell or feel it yet, but he watched the dust rise in small eddies as the train rushed along the track and knew he would become intimate with it.

Twenty-three hours into the train trip and he had become adept at spotting the few anomalies in the largely unchanging landscape: the spine-like leaves and yellow fluffy balls of the dwarf acacia jutting inches from the ground, the eagles that the crackling headphones had droned about, and even a piece of paper or a faded cigarette packet blown miles away from where it was carelessly dropped.

Coming out of this reverie, he again picked up the heavy documentation resting on his knee. *West Gate Bridge Royal Commission*. Most of the knowledge within did not interest him. Jim was correct in saying that the L—bridge design was unoriginal: it was also completely unlike the West Gate Bridge. Will only studied the document for a better understanding of the way steel behaved under stress.

The L—bridge was a beam design which meant that forces ran in a straightforward way, axially along each bar. Choice of material had been straightforward: 50-ksi, low-carbon high performance steel—chosen for strength and weldability—within prefabricated concrete. Strong and resilient. Steel was easy to improve, which made its quality controllable and its behaviour amenable to simple analysis. Steel also had a frank linear strain behaviour. Overstressed, it yielded, but kept right on working; just shedding load
into other components. Its structural forgiveness was very high. Made it very attractive for bridge-building.

The government wanted function, not expression. They weren’t ruling out any applied forms, but they weren’t paying for them either. The L— bridge was a workhorse. Will already imagined that the flaw in the previous bridge had to do with the handling of the raw materials in the particular climate that was the Australian outback. His job was going to be convincing the government that it needn’t react hysterically to the collapse by insisting on cross-bracing, when he could improve the ductility of the steel piers by using inner cruciform plates.

Getting it right would take an encyclopedic knowledge of steel and plain engineering precision. Running water, Jupiter’s pull on its moon Ion, or the strains of an object under load could all be mapped by differential calculation. Show how a system, a rate of change, would behave under certain circumstances and predict, ergo. But the end result was something other than mere building.

Some bridges lent grandeur, others longevity. At the very least a bridge offered a type of dignity and gravitas: men were here. The land, the weather, nature itself had been forced to conform to man’s needs. It could not be any different for L—. Just the thought of what it would mean to create an object that would last hundreds, even thousands of years, filled Will with purpose.

He allowed himself a clenched fist. A triumphant fist. Then he ran his fingers through the unruly brown carpet of his hair, excited again. He could feel his blood coursing. The stirring of an erection. He didn’t look down at himself, not wanting to encourage by observation, but there was no escaping his sudden sense of aliveness. A lifetime of work and reputation on the line and the old man stood to attention. His face flushed too—half embarrassment, half pleasure. So long. Too long. He turned his whole body towards the window, his arm bracing him as he leaned towards the rushing infinity of view. He waited, counting down the seconds until the blood began disgorging.
When he was satisfied he had himself under control, he turned away from the window and spoke.

‘That way,’ he pointed north, ‘the Nullarbor is unexplored. They estimate 100,000 square kilometres of plain.’

His daughter didn’t respond at first. She was refitting plugs into her ears and didn’t like his facts, he’d forgotten. He looked insistently at her. At her self-imposed haircut: some of it dangling around her face, some of it so short as to stick up. It was another railing against the world, much like the fake glasses.

She took up almost as much of her seat as he did: tall girl. Not fat, but chubby. Puppy fat. He knew she was enjoying this—out of school at the start of the year. She was a truant. He’d had more phone calls about it than he knew what to do with: but as he’d said to her teachers—at each of the schools—if she wasn’t coming home that was his problem, but her not coming to school was their problem.

‘You said Alice Springs was that way.’

He shifted forward eagerly at her statement. ‘It is. But to the west of Alice Springs, no one knows. Could be anything.’

‘Not pirates,’ she said.

‘No, but—.’

‘Not sky scrapers.’

‘Obviously not. Okay, not anything, Moriah. But something. Put it that way: there could be something there.’

She sniffed and resumed fitting her earplugs. He sat back again. Shoved the heavy report into his bag.

So much he wanted to tell her, tell someone, about this journey. Limestone. The Nullarbor Plain was the largest single piece of limestone on the earth. And men had buried themselves in the sand to escape the heat. There were cave-owls in the various nooks and crannies beneath the limestone—because there were very few trees: *null abor*. 
And the whole thing was once under the sea. But it wasn’t only the environment he wanted to talk about: there was something strange about a bridge designed to span a chasm between two halves of a town, and yet never see water run underneath.

He had read up about the area: the mining boom, the lack of water for keeping down the dust during the mining process, the sudden housing problems. None of that interested him. It was the inferiority complex the town suffered in being located only an hour or so away from the famous and thriving Coober Pedy that intrigued him. He harboured a belief that the bridge would help the township, and he was astute enough to see that hoping it would help the township was merely a way of disguising the ways in which he imagined it was going to help him. A construction company that built bridges had work cut out forever.

Moriah didn’t seem able to perceive any of what was going on for him. Her only questions had been along the lines of electricity, the internet and desert cults. Her excitement purely a result of the freedom she thought this trip would entail. Not that leaving her behind was an option. But there was something about the way she had spread her few belongings out in the cabin, something about her blithe ordering of the most expensive meal on offer last night, that irked him.

He’d wanted them to take two upright seats, but was advised against it. He could do it, but his secretary had insisted that Moriah wouldn’t manage over 24 hours of a single seat, so they were booked into a Red Kangaroo sleepers cabin. As far as he could tell the main advantage to booking a class even higher—something inanely titled Gold Kangaroo—was a lot of jetsam: certificates, stick pins and complimentary toilet bags. Not that anything was complimentary: he would have paid an extra $500 for the minor privileges. And Moriah didn’t care about things like that. Which was why he couldn’t say anything about the $40 steak she ordered: she didn’t behave as though she felt entitled and she didn’t order it to annoy him and that was the problem; he didn’t know why she did it. He didn’t know why daughter did anything she did anymore.
The Bridge

He watched as she painstakingly contrived to shift the angle of her body so that even her peripheral vision wouldn’t detect his movement. Her ears clogged with digital music. And she had her eyes glued to that book on saints. He’d flicked through it—just to make sure. Of something. He didn’t know what. She knew religion disturbed him, which was precisely why she was into it. He tried to be nonchalant, but she hated reading at the best of times, so it was difficult to see how to otherwise interpret her insistence. Did she actually believe in a god? It had never occurred to him to ask.

Reaching across, he pulled out one of her earplugs.

‘Are you ready?’

She swept her hands wide. An adolescent gesture that he knew indicated that she thought he was blind. Her case was packed. Her hat lay in her lap. What more could he want, for goodness sakes. But he didn’t mean it literally, and even as he tried to find words, the train started to drop its speed. She quickly stood to press her face against the glass, searching for a station, or for something resembling a station.

‘They’re just letting us down.’

She looked back at him uncomprehendingly, pulled out her earplugs.

‘We’re going to walk a mile or two before we get picked up.’

‘Yeah right, dad. That’s illegal—you can’t just drop people off a train.’

He lifted their suitcases down from the rack, pleased at their reasonable weight. He had stressed to Moriah that she should pack lightly.

‘Dad?’

He didn’t reply. Just hunted around his seat for any bits of rubbish to stuff in the tiny plastic bag meant to accommodate such need.

‘Dad, you’re in a suit.’

‘I have an impression to make.’

‘You don’t even know which way to go. We’ll get lost. And no one will miss us. We’ll die.’ Her voice was becoming shrill with panic.

Without intending to, he smiled at her. ‘I doubt it.’

The train had finally come to a complete halt and a knock at their compartment door now had his daughter close to tears.
The Bridge

‘Just coming,’ Will yelled. He leaned over to his daughter, ‘I know what I’m doing.’

Off the train, standing in the blazing heat of a setting desert sun, he smiled at the picture the two of them made: a middle-aged man in a suit, and his equally tall daughter in jeans and t-shirt, both pulling suitcases along in the thick red dirt. Walking north.
He was sitting on the toilet. Likely to be a while. He knew. He knew. He didn’t water his body. But this was often the best place to simply give in to the demands. His brain was always clammering for more time and this was the place. Yes, sir. Charlie had his feet up on some blocks in front of him: best way to shit—changed the ‘s’ pipe into a straight line. Or was that what raising the legs did for women in childbirth? All his knowledge getting gabbled.

That’s why he’d been looked over. Faithful service for fifty odd years, then a couple of slips—nothing significant: a couple of enquiries into accidents—and suddenly the call goes to somebody else. This was how the elderly felt and he wasn’t old. Nearing sixty. Nearing. Not even there yet and most guessed him to be around fifty. He had a strong barrel chest only just starting to sink all pigeon-like, and his legs were as veiny and tight as they had since his early thirties.

In the city his mistakes might come home to roost. OHS regulations; badges of authorisation; walkie-talkies to speed communication: he couldn’t just come and go. But out here there were so many blow-ins he’d barely raise an eyebrow. Funny how a smaller population meant he’d be better camouflaged.

But it was true that he couldn’t do it all himself anymore. That much was true. And that hurt. A man’s pride was his downfall. Couldn’t help wanting the body to keep up, to shed its dereliction like a snake shedding skin. Instead it pissed its own strength away. And it couldn’t even do that without stopping and starting anymore.

Still, brains would out over brawn ninety-nine percent of the time. First thing he’d done after arriving was get to what functioned as a hospital out here. Really just a combination doctor’s surgery and recuperative rooms. He learnt quick smart that for anything serious, the south-siders trekked over to the north side. So, no easy access. On the other hand, he
guessed there were some paperwork nightmares with that system, and people might just slip through the cracks. It would just take a little engineering.

There were no old folks’ homes though: people went elsewhere to retire, to rest, to die. Septuagenarians liked moist heat and there was none of that on offer without the sea. Climate here too harsh to while away time in: can’t grow grass, then no lawn bowls. The lack of oldies struck off a lot of options. Then again, there were easier pickings. Old folk liked to fight: too stubborn to accept what was coming. He shifted a little on the toilet seat. No sense fighting.

He’d heard there was one just born, of course. Felt it first though. Felt it in his gut. It was a small bridge, no need to get carried away then. Trick was to only use what you needed—nature abhorred a vacuum apparently.

For the moment he wasn’t worried about the orchestration. Don’t start trying to jump through hoops until you can see them properly. That was the problem with training someone up: they would always be wanting to get to it. Whole damned world was getting to be that way. Well, getting to it had failed, and now they really had to line those hoops up. Do some testing. Only thing old Charlie could think of. No point having the bridge come down again. Best to lay things out and find out what it demanded.

Still, even before he could get to the hoops, he had to get to the upstart. Find out how his mind was hanging: can’t put together an effigy and then just walk away because the bridge fell. Some part of him had to be churning away. Now it might be that this young fellow’s mind would just keep going until it made itself stiff—like cement. Or it might be that this particular mind put the knowledge in a suitcase out the back, letting it fester and mould, until coming across it again all surprised.

His feet were beginning to ache sitting propped up like Jacky. He eased them down. Leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, hands holding each other. Looked like he was listening hard to whatever the doorframe had to say. He looked down the white hallway.
White signalled brand new. Paint thinner still perfuming the rooms. Old Charlie preferred a darker colour, but beggars can’t be choosers.

He was a young buck himself when he’d been introduced. Barely fifteen. That miraculous age when the body is still revving up to peak and what the mind doesn’t know really doesn’t matter. Hormonal soup. He’d been plucked from ignorance and shown the way the world worked: who owed what and why. There was no nice way to receive knowledge; Adam and Eve sure found that out. Not that old Charlie would have said he’d been kicked from paradise, but he accepted the snake in the drink around about that time. Then set to working out the see-saw of forces: his own versus the universe’s. Course, after a while he came to see that they could marry each other like top and bottom teeth: effective force was created by bringing the two together.

He’d lit out for the territories then. Left the blackfellas camp and gone and got himself an engineering degree. Hardest thing he’d ever had to do—stick to the rules of the every day. Write this down here. Rote learn these equations. Only fun he had was with the experimentation: mocking up trials to show how water behaved in areas of heavy salination; how two metals created an electric current; and, of course, how to keep a bridge standing according to mechanical theory.

Long way behind him now. It all lay in front of someone else. Perhaps he could enjoy role of teacher for a while. Get an acolyte going. A student. An amateur. He hung his head, watching the blood pool in his hands. He wasn’t an amateur anymore. Not that he didn’t do it for love—he did, he did—but he depended too much on the money. For the booze. And just thinking about it, he stood, and, leaving his pants down around his ankles, set off down the hallway for a drink. He could always come back.
The Bridge

Sunday 15th February

Gussy

Completely different in her day, not that she’d say anything to Janice, but all this sterilisation and nurses fussing and all the rest of it—you’d think someone was dying. Not that Gussy had ever subjected herself to the torment of childbearing, but she’d been around and seen a thing or two and honestly, anyone would think it had never been done before with the way they carried on nowadays.

Mind you, Janice looked completely washed out, pale as pastry and word was she had stitches up the whazoo, poor thing. All of which was why Gussy had come to give her some good news. Babies were supposed to be good news, but Janice hadn’t so much as glanced at her child in the whole half hour that Gussy had been sitting here, and frankly, Gussy just wasn’t the kind to coo over newborns with funny shaped heads and waxy, old man faces. The little tyke was keeping nice and quiet, so better to let it be.

Not that Janice was talking to her. Janice hadn’t responded to anything in the half hour Gussy had been there. Hadn’t touched her sandwich—devilled hams and eggs—not the ripening fruit basket, very expensive out here, and not the prune juice that Gussy noticed had been specially delivered. Obviously some problems below.

‘So I have some news for you, love.’ She petted Janice’s hand.

No response.

‘You have a neighbour. A new neighbour.’

The young woman’s eyes turned to meet her own.

‘I thought you might be pleased. It’s a man.’ She watched as Janice tried to smile.

It didn’t look like a smile really. More a friendly grimace. ‘Are you all right?’

Janice’s eyes welled up.

‘Dear me. Do you want me to ring for a nurse?’

A small shake of head.
‘Are you in pain?’ Another shake.
‘Just exhausted, I imagine. Still, once you get her home—.’

Janice finally looked over towards the infant crib. Then back at Gussy.
‘Probably seems like a huge responsibility.’
Janice’s eyes seemed to grow larger, darker.
‘The man who has moved in—not that anyone has spoken to him much yet, and you know they walked in from the train? Not all the way of course, but a substantial distance, wants his head read, fancy doing that to his daughter—anyway, that’s what I was getting to: he has a daughter. So he’ll be able to suggest all kinds of things to you. You want to let him know that you’d like some advice. Men love giving advice.’

Janice had sunk back into her pillows. Head turned off to the side again. Gussy wracked her brains as to how to resurrect her again.
‘He’s the foreman. For the bridge.’
Nothing.
‘He’s quite good looking.’

Janice’s head turned again and Gussy couldn’t help but smile.
‘There you are. I was beginning to think we’d lost you for good. He’s got wavy hair. Very thick. Doesn’t look like he’ll be losing it either, which, in my day, was as good as saying you’d have your own teeth for life.’ She paused. ‘I don’t know how things are back home, but I’ll bet my bottom dollar that if he’s bringing his teenage daughter all the way out to the sticks, there isn’t much going on. If you get my meaning. Not that I’m suggesting anything too much. You have your hands full and he’ll be pushing you-know-what up hill to get the town on his side after blowing in here to take over the bridge project. But that daughter of his, well she might need a friend, and you might need a babysitter.’

Now she had her. Janice was at last actually paying attention. Gussy smiled broadly, thoroughly impressed with herself.

‘So what are you calling her?’
Janice cleared her throat before speaking. ‘Deidre.’

‘Well, I’ve heard of that before. So nice you’ve chosen a name that isn’t some play on spelling or something modern and ugly.’

Janice dropped her gaze and lightly fingered the sheet edging. ‘It means “sorrowful”.’

‘Does it?’ Gussy frowned. ‘Well. A family name, is it?’

No reply.

‘It’s all fancy nonsense assigning meaning to names anyway.’

The wan figure made no further comment on the matter.

Gussy took up her knitting again. A throw, she was working on. In sensible browns and creams. She would send it to her niece in Melbourne—got cold enough there. She didn’t knit as a hobby. Wasn’t old enough for that sort of nonsense. No, she knitted to keep her hands busy so that her mind was free to wander as it would. People made all kinds of mistakes thinking that keeping the body occupied meant the mind would quiet. It sharpened, was what it did.

‘Have you heard from him then? From Sydney?’

‘No.’

‘Hasn’t been time really, has there?’

She pretended to be examining a dropped stitch, but kept an eye on Janice all the while. If it were possible the woman had paled. Everybody knew about Janice’s situation. What Greg was doing in L— in the first place was the issue. He had no business being here and attaching someone to himself. He never had been a small town fellow. His nose was too big.

‘He won’t contact me either way.’

‘Probably best. Stir up trouble if he did.’

Tears again.

‘She’s a quiet little thing, isn’t she?’
They both looked over to the crib. Gussy watching as Janice tried to smile. Love wasn’t going to come easy here. Deidre was going to have to work hard. Still there were plenty of young ones worse off—only had to turn on the television to see that.

‘Your mum coming out here?’
‘She doesn’t like the heat.’
‘That’s right. Why she left, wasn’t it? I can understand that. I end most nights with my feet in the bath. It’s even harder to endure with thighs like mine.’
‘Layla will take me home.’
‘You mean “Take us home”.’
Janice didn’t respond.
‘Us. You said “me”. You’ll have to get used to saying “us” now.’

Janice shifted in the bed. Stitches hurting probably.
Father Nott stood at the altar, finishing up the Sunday service with the parish news. It had been a poor turn out. As anticipated. He drew a deep breath and read through the list of community news items printed on the back of his typed newsletter. The parish couldn’t afford to make copies of it, so he pinned it up to the corkboard after the service. But his parishioners never read it: they gave him the news to type out in the first place. It was all a bit silly.

When he finally stepped out from behind the pulpit, he noticed what should have been seen earlier, what would have occasioned an entirely different train of thought during the service: there was a new parishioner, a girl, in the very back pew. And she was kneeling—must have been kneeling the whole time—in fact, she actually appeared to be praying.

He forced himself to smile and make the necessary remarks to the two familiar faces in attendance today, enjoying restraining himself as the weathered skin pressed itself into his hands and the sun-bleached eyes gazed all around the small church without once alighting on his face. And it was all the more pleasurable because she was waiting for him.

‘Welcome.’ He held out his hand, which she twisted gently away from as though trying not to offend. He softened his voice. ‘I’m Father Nott, and you are?’

‘Moriah.’

‘And how would you like a cup of tea, Moriah?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Don’t you drink tea?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, let’s find out.’
He turned and lead the way back towards the altar, but turned off to the right side into the vestry. He shrugged off his outer garments, then turned on the electric kettle. Moriah stood in the doorway, evidently unsure about entering the small room. She had strangled her hair with some kind of scarf and bits of curly black fringe were working their way loose. It softened the glasses.

He popped a couple of shortbreads on her saucer and whistled as he waited to pour out their tea. ‘Now how do you have it? With milk and sugar?’

She shrugged again and he decided for her.

‘Come in, I won’t bite.’

‘Where’s your confessional?’

‘My what? My confessional? Well, I don’t have one out here. Are you wanting to confess?’

She blinked wordlessly at him and he had a sudden sinking sensation in his chest: perhaps she was half-witted.

‘What are you reading there?’

From underneath her armpit she pulled out a book on saints. Held the cover up for him to read. He fumbled around in his pant pockets and then, from his breastpocket, pulled out his glasses—yellow glass—and glanced at the title.

‘Well, I’ve never read it myself, but I’ve heard it’s good.’ He looked over the book jacket at her and Moriah shrank away. He took the yellow glasses off and winked.

‘Look a bit like an alien species, don’t I?’

She didn’t answer.

‘I can’t read without them.’

‘I can’t read.’

Her face and neck crimsoned. Possibly hadn’t meant to admit it. But his heart sunk further at the admission. She couldn’t read. At her age. Whatever that was.
Still, he was good at putting on a neutral face and he sipped at his tea, pronouncing it too hot. Moriah put the book on the table and took a biscuit. He watched as it crumbled in her fingers and she quickly shoved it into her mouth.

‘Funny thing to carry a book when you can’t read.’

‘I can read a little bit.’

‘Why the saints then? Why read about the saints?’

She shrugged. ‘The stories are weird. Funny.’

‘Are you a religious?’

She stared at him a long moment. ‘I don’t know.’

Father Nott put a hand over his mouth and stared back at her. Maybe she was a religious. Maybe she was going to be interesting after all. He watched her pick up her cup of tea and sniff it.

‘Haven’t you had tea before.’

‘No.’

‘Why ever not? Have you been living on the moon?’

‘Dad only drinks coffee.’

‘What poverty!’

She bristled. Tread gently around dad then.

‘Try it.’

‘No, thanks.’

He’d offended her.

He picked up his own cup and sucked up a large mouthful, burning his tongue.

‘I can never wait. No patience my dear mother always said and she was right. Are you a solitary soul then, Moriah? Like me. Have you got any brothers or sisters?’

‘No.’

‘That’s it then. You’re just like me.’ He grinned at her. And when she didn’t smile back he fussed about with the teaspoon, realising with some surprise that he was trying to think of something to say.

‘Should I ask about your favourite saint then?’
‘I don’t like any of them.’
‘Not a one? And why is that?’
‘Fakers.’
He frowned.
‘You asked,’ she said.
‘I did indeed.’ He was pleased to concede. Pleased she had enough nous to make him. ‘But I hardly think you can fake martyrdom.’
She squirmed in her chair. Nodded.
One all.

He pursed his lips. ‘Now I’m going to ask you another question, Moriah, and it goes something like this—how does a girl who knows the meaning of the word “martyrdom” not know how to read?’
She stiffened, although her eyes didn’t leave his.
‘Didn’t anyone teach you how?’
She rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve had a tutor.’
Father’s eyebrows rose. ‘Oh well then, I’m barking up the wrong tree. You should keep at it though. How on earth are you going to know about the Word of the Lord, if you can’t read the scriptures?’
She looked at him, this time warily. And he couldn’t determine whether she was defensive about not reading or ignorant of what he meant by the Word of the Lord. Either way, perhaps he’d had enough of the religious.
He held up both his hands. ‘I’m a nosy parker. Another fault of mine. I’m riddled with them. So you say to me “Father Nott, mind your own business”.’
He was pleased to see the corners of her mouth turn up.

He sipped at his tea and finding it the right temperature drained the lot in one go.
‘Well, Moriah, I’ve got a parish to see to.’
She immediately stood.
He smiled at her. ‘You’re a tall girl, aren’t you? Like me. I bet you’ll have problems finding a good bed when you get older. How old are you?’ Before she could
answer, he pointed his index finger at her. ‘Now don’t you answer that. Don’t you answer any of my questions unless you want to.’

‘It’s okay. I’m thirteen.’

‘Good. Now I’m going to think on the matter of you reading and you can think on it and maybe next time we meet one of us will have come up with something. All right?’

Moriah collected her book as he stood.

‘Goodbye then.’ He offered her a hand to shake and this time she took it.
'Well, I’ve got things in my sights.’
‘That’s all I need to know.’
‘I still haven’t met your interloper—that’s next on my list.’
‘Okay. Well—.’
‘I won’t bite.’
‘I’m not worried about that.’
‘You’re worried about the abdication.’
‘Sorry?’
‘You’re worried about whether he’ll roll over.’
‘Something like that.’
‘Or whether I won’t.’
‘I didn’t say that.’
‘Maybe there can be two kings.’

Silence.

‘I’m not buying it either.’
‘I’m sure you’ll work it out.’
‘Are you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Confident in me again. Wind blows mighty fickle where you come from.’
‘Was there anything else?’
‘No.’
‘Good. Okay. Well—.’

‘Want me off the line, do you?’

‘Jesus. You want to know why I didn’t call you—this is why. Dealing with you is like dealing with my teenage fucking son. You’re a pain in the arse.’

‘Won’t slip quietly into that good night.’
‘How about we leave it as is—straight up? How about you just do your job with none of the bullshit and none of the threats. Okay?’
Silence.

‘Charlie?’
‘I hear you.’

‘Good. Let’s just get on with it. I’m big enough to admit I made a mistake. I hope you’re big enough not to rub my nose it in every fucking phone call.’
Silence.

‘Charlie?’
‘I hear you.’
The Bridge

Monday 16\textsuperscript{th} February

Will

The two steel legs were wrenched sideways, halted in their plummet to the creek only by the twisted length of span. There were holes gouged in the banks on either side where the railing and span had been pulled out from the concrete stabilisers. It didn’t look as though the centre section of the span—the weakest part—had collapsed first. Although that would have been logical, even typical, if previous collapses were anything to judge by. It looked as though someone had violently shoved it over: dragged it out of the earth at either side and smashed it downwards until the steel ached. It looked wrong.

He had been at the site all night. At first just walking around in a daze. It was almost physically impossible, except there it was. By torchlight it looked monstrous—larger in pieces than it would have been complete. All his thoughts about what must have happened were obliterated by the scale.

Will couldn’t help but marvel at the bloody thing. In order for that weight to fall so heavily, so seemingly easily, the steel or concrete must have just given way. It was the only explanation. The sight of it had tamped down his excitement somewhat: after all, someone else had stood where he now was, first envisaging, and then constructing, a bridge. This wreckage was what remained of his attempt.

At 6.30am the inspectors arrived. He introduced himself and got on with it.

‘The steel has to have integrity problems. There’s just no way this could have happened otherwise. There were no compressive stresses. No tensile stresses. There’s just no other explanation.’

The two men fidgeted. Neither of them looked at him. A lot of interest in the ground.
‘This doesn’t make sense, right? Am I right?’
‘We’re completing the structural analysis.’
‘Well, what about a sudden creep, if I can put it that way, because of pre-stressing force in the girder? It only took one eyebut failure for the whole of the Silver Bridge to come down.’
They didn’t answer.
Will held up his hands. ‘Look, I know you don’t want to jump to any conclusions and I know that the last foreman has actually skipped out, but I’ve been down to check the welds myself: and not only is there no shearing, they’re still holding.’ He looked at them expectantly. ‘The damned thing has held together even after falling. In fact, the only problem is that it has fallen.’
‘Can you get the media off-site?’

Will wheeled around to look down at the mangled jut of railings. A photographer with her eye inside a camera stood at the bottom of the chasm, getting what he instinctively knew would be very dramatic shots of the main body of the bridge. Was that where it had failed; a badly calculated load distribution? But the calculated failure load was irrelevant if there was no load and, as far as he knew, they hadn’t allowed anyone on it.

He looked briefly at his watch. Had to remember to call the house they were leasing to wake Moriah up for school. She’d been complaining non-stop since the walk in from the train, and knowing she still had to attend school hadn’t helped her mood. She did try at her work. There was just something about reading that she didn’t get and he couldn’t help her. It hadn’t seemed to matter much until secondary school. But the schools were only bloody concerned with the truanting, of course. He hoped L— might be different. Small school, less chance to bunk off and maybe, some better and personal attention.

He turned to face the bridge again.
‘Doesn’t look as though there’s been any sinking, does there?’ He couldn’t help himself. The combination of never having built one himself before and being handed the opportunity meant he wanted every possible angle on the collapse revealed.
‘There was no wind. There was no snow. It’s not a live load.’

One of the men looked at his watch. ‘If you could get her out of there, and in future make sure the OHS regulations are followed.’

Will’s eyes narrowed. ‘Is this about sabotage?’

‘Mr. Abrahamson, we just want to get on with our job.’

Will nodded and stuck his notebook in his back pocket. He knew they weren’t officially allowed to voice an opinion before releasing their report. And yes, he should have kept any media at bay, but his blood was pumping. He thought he was going to find an obvious fault. Thought that with his experience in construction it would have stuck out like a sore thumb. But the collapse didn’t look like a collapse.

The bridge looked like it had been knocked over on purpose.
They were coming out of a milkbar just to his right. The three of them held hands to cross the road together, running helter-skelter all the way to the other side. They must have been about 16. Maybe 17. He watched as they waited for their chance to enter the School of Air yard without anyone knowing they’d left. Watched until they disappeared into the new brick building. And then he followed them.

He wasn’t thinking about anything much as he followed. Just that he liked the flash of laughter, the apparent naughtiness. Just that he wanted to look at a whole lot of girls. Girls who weren’t old enough to judge him.

He wasn’t entirely unthinking though and he tucked in his shirt and kept to one side of the School of Air frontage. Perched himself on top of a fence and looked at his watch. He could make believe he was waiting for a ride from someone and in the meantime keep half an eye out for the girls. His luck held: must have been lunchtime, or recess, or some other reprieve that allowed them all to come suddenly swirling, slinking around with their painted toenails and exposed legs. Of course it didn’t take them long to spy him.

He scratched the back of his neck and looked down the road for no one. Then he stood and strutted around a little, did some push-ups against the chain-link fence. Which made the girls who were watching him giggle again. He’d forgotten how easy they were to impress at that age. Or perhaps he’d never known. It’s not as though he was any sort of chick-magnet at high school. His personal explanation was that he hadn’t stayed on longer than year nine.

Finally one of them ventured closer.

‘Got a cigarette?’

He looked at her. She was standing in the very corner of the yard. Probably blocking any adult view of him. She was also more well-developed than the others. Taller, larger breasted and wearing enough lip-gloss to wet anything she kissed.
‘You’re a bit young, aren’t you?’

She shrugged and tossed her long reddish hair back over her shoulder. ‘It’s not like I’m addicted or anything.’

He fetched his packet and tapped out a cigarette. Lit it, dragged and then surreptitiously held it out toward her. She took it, sucked mildly, smiled over the unpleasant taste and handed it back.

‘Cool,’ she said.

He nodded.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

‘Shane.’

‘Nice to meet you, Shane. I’m Julie.’ She turned and flounced off. Her waiting girlfriends clutched at her wrists, pulling her towards them to discuss the events. Now the giggling just sounded childish.

Shane sighed and straightened. But before he had a chance to move, another girl ran from the schoolyard and without thinking he again followed. Ran after her.

She hadn’t noticed him and he kept his distance until she sat down on a street bench. Luck again—he would have had to stop following her pretty quickly because she would have noticed. He was a cagey bastard though. Didn’t look at her at first. He checked his cigarette packet. He contemplated something in the distance. Then he sat. And looked.

Young. Younger than the flirt he’d spoken with, although with the headscarf thing she could have been 50—which disappointed him at first. Young and flustered. Doing her best to look relaxed. She had a note from her mother, or an extra curricular activity or a visit to the dentist. But the more he watched her, the less Shane thought she had any legitimate reason to be skipping out.

He had half a mind to scare the pants off her and ask her why she wasn’t in school. Then she looked his way, not quite at him, but enough for him to see her face clearly and his
mind stopped. Sarah’s eyes. Blue, blue, blue. Only this girl’s were even more extraordinary because she had dark lashes and dark hair instead of the blond. Then she looked away. Her face turning a dull red at what must have been his shocked expression. Shane looked away too.

He rearranged his legs out long in front of himself, then shifted them sideways so that she was forced to jerk herself more upright. Even apologise to him. He smiled at her.

‘My fault,’ he said and she blushed deeply. He felt like laughing. God this was easy. ‘You got the day off school?’

She looked furtively around at the passing adults—a woman with shopping bags, a man old enough to be her grandfather—neither were paying attention. Shane stared at her, still smiling.

‘No,’ she finally confided.

His grinned widened and he raised his eyebrows at her. She smiled too. It was difficult to guess her age. She was tall, but she had none of the spark that older girls generally had. But then she was a little podgy around the middle and those glasses weren’t doing her any favours. Perhaps she was just shy. One of those girls that got lost in the shuffle. Be hard to act your age when you were constantly being looked over for the prettier ones.

‘Guess you’re having a day off then?’

She didn’t answer.

Shane stretched his hand along the back of the seat, getting real comfortable. What else could he ask her? He wondered where she was going. Maybe she was meeting her boyfriend. For some reason the idea pleased him and he tried to imagine just what kind of boy it would be. He pictured someone shorter and with bad skin, before it occurred to him that she might be meeting someone older. After all she was brazen enough to bunk off school—what made him think the meet-up would be innocent?

‘What’s your name?’

She stared at him again and he smiled at those eyes.
The Bridge

‘Moriah.’

He held out his hand, took hers and shook it. ‘I’m Shane, Moriah, and I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.’ He looked around again, trying to figure out how to suggest that they converge their paths for the afternoon, when a car drew up in front of them.

‘Hello, Moriah. How are you getting on?’

It was the priest. Shane knew him by sight, hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with him that he could remember. He pretended not to be listening, looked at his watch. Moriah didn’t answer.

‘You supposed to be in school? Or do you want a ride home?’

She shrugged, but stood. Turned to Shane, looked at him a moment and then got into the car.

He shouldn’t have given any more thought to her. She couldn’t be more than sixteen probably. But as he sat, watching the empty schoolyard, he kept seeing those eyes.
Father Nott

Father Nott never rang first: the locals knew exactly when he was due. This client was new though. Had signed up for help as soon as he arrived, but Father knew next to nothing about him. An elderly gentleman. Alone. He rang the number the community centre nurse had given him. No answer. He let it ring out, then hung up and dialled again. A little trick he’d learned over time. The receiver lifted but no one said hello.

‘Charlie Baber?’
‘Yeah?’
‘It’s Father Nott, you signed up for food delivery. I’m on my—.’
‘Yeah,’ interrupted the voice and hung up.

Ten minutes later and Father was repeating his trick, this time on Charlie’s verandah.

‘Hello.’ A fair amount of knocking was required. ‘Hello, Charlie!’

Shuffling inside. The door opened and the wizened man inside instinctively shielded himself from the light of day.

‘Hello, Charlie. How you doing?’
‘Same old.’ He lead Father into his kitchen.
‘Lovely day, isn’t it? I’ve been trying to get into the garden.’
Charlie didn’t seem to have heard.
‘Growing some herbs. They like dry heat. You ought to give it a go.’

Old Charlie squinted at him. ‘I like my food delivered.’

Father laughed. ‘Well, there’s the milk and bread and whatnot, but an extra. Clothing.’

The man looked at him quizzically.

‘Some tourist left some things behind and they’ve been donated to the church. I thought I’d bring something around in case it fit.’ He watched, pleased, as Charlie dipped into the box. Pulled out the purple jacket.
‘It’s scratchy,’ said Charlie.
‘Well, you wear it with something underneath. Not by itself.’
‘No, it’s scratchy on my eyes.’

Father Nott knew that charity came hard to both sides of the fence: the givers and the receivers. ‘Purple is the colour of kings,’ he offered.
‘Pity it’s not cor-du-roy then,’ retorted Charlie. Winked at him. He wandered, in the jacket, down the hallway to the bathroom. ‘Look like bruised fruit in this. King of the eggplants.’

Father chuckled. Pleased at the banter.

‘Feel like a king,’ repeated Charlie as he came back into the kitchen.
‘Splendid,’ said Father.
But Charlie took the jacket off and hung it over Father’s arm. ‘Wrong king,’ he said.
‘I beg your pardon?’
‘I’m not the king, I’m the servant. You play king.’

Now Father could feel his temper rising. He was being made fun of—perhaps his religious beliefs, perhaps his ability to assist—whatever it was, the old man was poking a good sized hole in it and Father didn’t like it in the least.

Charlie had also removed his shirt and was now looking down at his dark blue singlet. It sagged around his paunch. Had a dark, barely discernable mark along the left side. He looked back up at Father and smiled all yellow.

‘This is who I am,’ he said.
‘You’ve made your point.’

The old man’s expressive face softened at Father’s tone. And he nodded. Almost, it seemed, apologetic. But Father knew better than to assume. He watched, silent now, as Charlie put the milk and bread and cereal away. He had a feeling that none of it would be touched, but there was something comforting about their presence in a kitchen.

‘What have you been up to today then?’
'A little of this, a little of that,' Charlie said. Then he looked at Father. Properly. Crooked a finger and invited him into the living area. At first all Father saw were piles of newspapers and magazines, spread higglety-pigglety over the floor. It wasn’t until his eyes began to adjust to the darkened room that he understood there was a system involved: some system of knowledge.

He could see books of nursery rhymes. And engineering books. Video cassettes marked with the word ‘collapse’. The *Journal of Performance of Constructed Facilities* and several other journals beneath it. Opened to specific articles. A small stack of odd-spot clippings beside diaries that were opened and penned in nearly illegible capitalised handwriting. He walked towards the diaries, trying to read upside down, but the capital letters made it hard going.

‘Can’t do cursive,’ said Charlie. ‘Like the devil decides to go on a whirling dervish when I try.’

Father had seen his share of homes like rabbit warrens: people addicted to collecting junk mail, or determined to keep every newspaper since a significant life event. But he sensed a method to this madness and decided to wait Charlie out. He perched himself on the arm of a chair occupied with open-faced encyclopedia entries. He knew all about the longing for an audience and he simply looked at his watch. That did the trick.

‘Haven’t got time for my books, Father? Can’t be bothered with an old man’s ravings?’

‘I’m ready to listen any time you want.’

Old man looked at him distrustfully now and Father knew he wanted a more compliant, more bewildered listener. But it would be better to show Charlie that he had the mettle for a proper dance. Find out what this was really all about.

‘Would you like a beer or a tea?’ Charlie used a sober, low-key voice.

‘No, thank you.’

Charlie bent, gingerly, to pick up the first thing he could find. A book. He shook a fist at the ceiling and then kissed the book before opening it.
‘The words are small,’ he said with a dry, clicking tongue. He thrust the book at Father, failing despite his almighty best to control his now shaking hands. ‘Read the underlined.’

Father cleared his throat. ... we may, he began, illustrate the course which thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads – the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths, drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store. Could we then survey the web of thought from the beginning, we should probably perceive it to be at first a chequer of black and white, a patchwork of true and false notions, hardly tinged as yet by the red thread of religion. But carry your eye further along the fabric and you will remark that, while the black and white chequer still runs through it, there rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain ...

‘That’s quite poetic.’

Old Charlie hitched up his trousers with his wrists, then took the book out of Father’s hands and carefully laid it on a chair arm. Reverent. ‘You know a lot of the Aboriginals were scared of the first white men because they thought we were dead spirits walking.’

‘A fascinating thing—perception.’

‘Why are you here?’

Father looked at him. ‘I’m your parish priest.’

Charlie grinned, his teeth in varying stages of decay. He pointed a lone finger at the ceiling. ‘I know why you’re here. I’ve been told.’ He dropped the finger to land squarely on the book. ‘I know my history.’

Father clasped his fingers together and bent his head while the old man fussed around the floor of the living room, picking up books and newspapers and then putting them down again. Making his selection. The next book Charlie put in front of him was the Oxford
Book of Nursery Rhymes, opened to a particular page. Father obligingly held the book up, but Charlie pushed it out of his hands.

‘Get to that in a minute,’ he said. ‘I’m just trying to get this stuff to soak into the corners of your mind, no need to look at it all directly.’

Of course not, thought Father. To look at any of it directly was to make it disappear. Like dragging vampires out into the sunlight according to that particular mythology. He stifled a yawn.

Charlie held out a splayed book of black and white photographs of a bridge. Brooklyn Bridge, the accompanying text said. Father looked at it carefully, turning the pages.

‘Don’t go supposing that’s more important than the nursery rhymes, Father.’
Father Nott nodded. What on earth was he supposed to say to that?

‘L— bridge is just like that bridge.’

‘A mite smaller, Charlie.’

‘That one took fourteen years to build.’

‘Did it? I hope ours won’t take quite that long.’

‘But, that one was built properly,’ Charlie continued. ‘And it will never come down.’ His voice, sick with age, sang:

\[
\text{London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down.}
\text{London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.}
\]

\[
\text{Build it up with stick and stones, sticks and stones,}
\text{sticks and stones.}
\text{Build it up with sticks and stones, my fair lady.}
\]

Something suddenly dawned on Father Nott. He gestured towards the textual paraphernalia taking over the living area. ‘Is this all about bridges? Is that why you’re here? You follow bridge-building?’
The Bridge

The elderly man suddenly turned towards him and nodded.
Well, well. Father Nott’s eyes narrowed in consideration. A lot more to old Charlie than met the eye. ‘And what exactly is the purpose of all this?’
Charlie tapped the side of his nose again. ‘To be revealed.’
‘When?’
No answer.
‘Do you have any idea why the last bridge fell?’
‘I didn’t do enough.’
Father thought about this for a moment. ‘Are you saying you could have prevented it from falling down?’
Charlie grinned from ear to ear and then bowed low.

‘Have you ever built a bridge, Charlie.’
‘No.’
‘Ah.’
‘But I’ve kept hundreds of them standing.’
‘Well. Well.’ Father stood. ‘I’d better get going then.’
The old man just smiled at him.
The Bridge

Thursday 19th February

Janice

She was crying when she heard the knocking. Well, not crying exactly, but tearing up. Feeling sorry for herself with ‘baby’ and the dreams and being alone and now the savaged chicks.

She’d buried the yellow chicks. She’d been tempted to bag them and sling them in the rubbish to avoid the stink: a smell that suggested they were waiting for some other living thing to eat more of them. But in the end she hadn’t been able to touch them even for a moment, and dumping them outside in the rubbish didn’t seem right. Which was patently ridiculous because there was no set formula for these things, surely.

At work they used an incinerator and it did cross her mind to bag them up for that, but she wouldn’t have been able to take them in until god knows when and there was no way she was going to let them sit in the car boot all that time.

She shuddered. It was some kind of karmic torture that there were chickens buried out near the back fence. Wait until she told her sister. That bloody cat. All teeth. Janice hadn’t been able to do more than kick it, let alone drag it off its kill, because of her stitches. That’s why she’d had to yell for Moriah. She hadn’t had time to get all silly about it either. Just fetched the spade and slowly got on with it.

And ‘baby’ slept through it all. Was still sleeping. Janice was tempted to tiptoe into the room to see whether the small thing was breathing, but she’d been caught out doing that before, and then there were hours of screaming: better to let little beasts lie.

So Janice was drinking her second glass of wine, planning on drinking the bottle, when the knock came. By the time she made her way to the door, wincing from the damned stitches, she was afraid whoever it was might have gone.
‘Sorry to disturb you,’ he said.

She couldn’t see his face properly and she nearly closed the door on him. Then he cleared his throat and she realised he was not one of the men from her dreams.

‘I told your daughter not to tell you.’ She put a hand up to her mouth. ‘Sorry. We haven’t met properly. I’m Janice.’

‘Will Abrahamson,’ he said.

‘Do you want to come in?’ She stepped to one side and invited him with a sweep of her hand.

He accepted reluctantly, it seemed to her.

She slipped slightly on the hallway rug in her hurry to get past him. Wanting to look over the lounge-room to see whether there was anything awkward or personal that she didn’t want him to see—nappies, pads, the bottle of wine. Since the wine was in plain view, she announced, ‘I’m having a forbidden glass of wine, want one?’ She sat, then immediately struggled to stand again in case he did want some wine. But he wasn’t looking at her. He seemed to be inspecting the floor. She waited him out.

‘I just wanted to apologise for what the cat did,’ he said, finally.

‘Your daughter already did.’

He looked at her very briefly, then away again. ‘Can I pay you for the loss of—?’

Janice put a hand up to her throat. ‘Look, do you want a wine? I’m really not in the mood to stop.’

He nodded. Shrugged.

She fetched another glass of the pinot noir, glad she’d not chosen something cheap, and sat it in his hands. They were inexplicably cold and she almost commented on that, but refrained. She didn’t have the energy for small talk. Instead, she allowed herself a good look at him—brown hair mopping his face, square-cut nails on broad fingers, scuffed boots—and couldn’t help a frisson climbing her spine. Just as quickly it dissipated. Here she was in a housecoat, bottle of wine half gone, hair not brushed in days.

‘Look,’ she sighed, ‘the chickens aren’t, weren’t—.’
He drank. When he lowered his glass a small semi-circle of burgundy marked the corner of his mouth.

She took a breath. ‘What I’m trying to say is that I wasn’t keeping them.’

He nodded. Was that all he could do?

‘My sister was going to rear them, but decided she had no room. Well, then she was going to dispose of them and I, I don’t know, I didn’t like that, so I thought I might be able to sell them or something. I agreed to take them before having my own baby—no one tells you what that’s going to be like, do they? But I wasn’t selling the chickens for money, so I’m not saying that because I need you to reimburse me, okay? I just wanted to save them from—.’

He smiled.

She hesitated, unsure. ‘Save them from being killed,’ she finished quietly.

Now he was really grinning.

Suddenly she saw why and she started giggling too, clutching the bottle of wine to herself. ‘I was saving them from certain death.’

He threw back his head, laughing richly, and Janice joined in. They were both laughing hard now. He had to put down his glass and she was holding the bottle of wine and glass away from herself because she was shaking. It was ridiculous because it wasn’t that funny, but somehow, just at that moment it was.

It took a long time to wind down. Finally Janice left her drink on the side table and got up to blow her nose. When she returned they seemed able to look at each other and just smile without it getting out of hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again.

‘Whatever.’ She flapped a hand at him, suddenly all teary again—this time at his concern; so lovely, so unexpected to have a man concerned about anything to do with her. ‘It’s funny. It is and it isn’t. You can’t save things from death. Right?’

He gave her a small smile. ‘What exactly happened?’

Janice spread her hands wide. ‘It must have been during one of the baby’s crying spurts—I can’t hear anything over that. It’s a wonder I can hear my own thoughts.’
chewed at her lip. ‘Anyway, your cat slipped under the piece of cardboard I had sitting on
the cage as a roof. My fault. Look, it really doesn’t matter. I was more worried about
Moriah because I had to call out to her to come and catch—what’s its name?’

‘Moustache.’

‘Right. Anyway,’ she couldn’t help a grimace at the memory, ‘I wouldn’t have let
her see it, but I just couldn’t get him away by myself.’

‘Her.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Moustache is a female.’

Will smiled again, only very briefly, tightly, and Janice shivered—not unpleasantly—but
he seemed grim again. Or not grim exactly, but proper. And before she could help herself
she matched his tone: ‘You know she’ll have to be put down?’

He looked up.

She tried to downplay what she’d just said. ‘I mean, you could keep her locked up
all the time. Obviously. That’s an option. But if not, then the cat has to go because she’s
got a taste for killing.’ She looked down at the floor. ‘At least, that’s how it is in these
parts. They go feral.’ She looked back up at him. Leaned forward. ‘Anyway, I should
organise a meal, a dinner. Welcome you both.’

He cupped the bowl of his wine glass with his big hands. Didn’t reply. She wondered
whether it was possible that this was the same man who minutes ago had been laughing
loudly. ‘Are you all right?’ As soon as the question aired she realised it was a mistake.
She didn’t know why, but things changed again and he stood.

‘A few things on my mind. I’d better go. Thank you for the drink.’

‘I hope you’re not upset that I called Moriah over?’

Will shook his head. ‘Moriah is fine.’

Janice stood too, watching him look for somewhere to rest his half-full glass.

‘The Jensons bought it before leaving,’ she said. ‘Crazy. A cat out here.’

‘Keeping it,’ interrupted Will, as though she hadn’t spoken, ‘was a bit of a
concession since Moriah’s mother—.’ He bent over almost completely and sat the glass
on the wooden floorboards. Then he straightened and looked at her. ‘Thanks for the drink.’

‘Okay.’ Janice could feel all the warmth leaving the room and she couldn’t seem to think of any way to stop it.

Will started walking past the couch towards the hallway. She hurried after him trying not the wince at the stitches, fingers along the wall to keep her balance. ‘Maybe if you just fix your side of the fence? I don’t have any more chicks anyway,’ she added, forcing a light tone into her voice.

He opened the door himself. ‘Goodnight.’

Janice leaned on the open door. Watched him brushing past the two potted lavender bushes at her front gate. Shit. What had gone wrong? She tried to replay the conversation, but couldn’t come up with a reason for what felt weird. Perhaps she was being too sensitive. Tiredness and bad dreams wearing her down. After all, she’d managed to slip that bit about dinner in. “Planting seeds” her mother would have said. Single man with a teenage daughter. Single woman with a baby. It was perfect, wasn’t it?
Moriah

She had only just lifted two plates from the cupboard when she heard her father’s footsteps on the gravel outside. She raced around the table, trying to make sure the placemats and salt and pepper were ready by the time he entered. He said nothing. Just looked at her and then looked away and she knew he was seeing her mother’s eyes.

She wanted to ask about that. Ask whether she was like her mother in any other way, but it was never the right time. Not that she couldn’t remember her mother for herself. Tall. Black hair and tanned skin. Moriah had her eyes and height and hair, but what she wanted to know about was whether she was like her mother. The problem was that if her father said yes that might not be a good thing as far as he was concerned, but if he said no, then it wasn’t a good thing as far as Moriah was concerned. No win.

He went upstairs.

When she told her father what had happened, when he returned from work, his face got rigid. It wasn’t Moustache’s fault. That was just the kind of dumb thing that cats did. They ate their own vomit, didn’t they? He’d gone next door to make amends, only it didn’t look like it had worked, if his expression was anything to judge by. Her father wasn’t great at smoothing things over. He was like her: picked at things until blood came.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the chickens. Miss Harding had tried to stop her from seeing, but she saw all the same. Their heads were almost wrenched from their bodies, left attached only by thin, bloody strings of feathered skin. They had been strewn, flung, and it made Moriah shiver when she thought about it. So much for intestinal-fortitude.

She hadn’t waited to see what Miss Harding would do next and she didn’t offer help either. She just took Moustache and came right home. But she hadn’t been able to get the soft little yellow bodies flowering the gravel out of her mind. All the helpless things got
ruined by the world. She trusted that the meek and mild would inherit something, but she hoped it wasn’t the earth because they wouldn’t last for long.

At a sudden thumping sound she ran to hold the washing machine tight as the cycle wound into its final frenzy. She had already memorised which buttons were for a normal wash and which for a delicate one. Her father thought she was reading and she almost was—once she knew which was the ‘normal’ button, then she could read ‘normal’ quite easily. It was just that if she didn’t know that the word read ‘normal’, then it might look like ‘night’ or ‘option’. Her father still had the idea that she would go to university; it was his lie. She didn’t want more years of study. Didn’t even want a career.

See-through blue-prints and photocopied building elevations were fine. She understood symbols. They made life easier and she copied the arrowed compasses that showed which way was North into her diary. But every picture had documents that went with it. Disclosure documents and contracts, and even the building manuals she was sure would be a series of photographs that showed the steps of how-to, were just paragraph after paragraph of words. Words did not treat her the way they treated other people. For other people they stayed still and for her they swam and made her feel nauseated. Made her mind freeze. She had already decided that working in the supermarket with electronic scanning would be fine.

She left the wildly rocking machine and quietly opened the back door. Moustache’s tail was curled around the wooden post, tip waving. Angry. The poor thing was going mad with the frustration of being tied up and kept using its back leg to scratch at the improvised collar. Moriah bent down to stroke it. And Moustache did that cat thing of raising her back and then bum into the air as Moriah’s hand traveled her body: it was like Moustache was afraid Moriah would leave off petting and wanted to make sure of every last second of touch—even though most of the time Moustache didn’t like to be touched anyway.
Moriah tickled the white patch underneath the cat’s nose and chin; the distinctive marking that suggested her name. It was a bad name because Moriah couldn’t properly call it when she was putting out the food. The cat began to purr. Moriah pushed her away and returned inside to her chores. If she made sure everything else was going well in the house, perhaps the cat wouldn’t matter as much.

She opened the lid on the washing machine and began to transfer the prune-like clothes to a laundry basket—it was better to hang them out at nighttime she was learning: the sun turned everything into cardboard, and temperatures during the night scarcely got below 20 degrees anyway.

The faint peal of an electronic bell sounded, indicating that the microwave oven had finished its job, and she left the clothes in the basket to hang up later. There were some cold lamb chops in the fridge, and she’d cut up some vegetables while the clothes were washing, and set them to microwave. Moriah took out the chops and by the time her father came downstairs again, there were two plates of food waiting. It wasn’t until he walked right past the dining room table that Moriah saw he was wearing gloves.

‘Dad?’

He kicked open the back door and flywire screen with his boot, which made the three-year-old cat startle and hiss. She strained at her leash as he bent to unclip her from the trellis.

‘What are you doing?’ Moriah’s long body pressed against the flywire screen.

Her father held Moustache’s mouth shut with one hand, tucked her body under his arm with the other. ‘Silly bitch,’ he whispered.

‘Dad?’

Moustache frantically scratched at him, wriggling her muzzle trying to get free. But he kept her restrained. Moriah tried to open the door, but her father had a boot keeping it shut.

‘Go upstairs.’
He said coolly, ‘Go upstairs.’

‘No.’

‘Do as you’re told.’

‘No, daddy. Please.’

He turned to face her. His temper rising visibly as the cat’s scrabbling claws bit into his arm. ‘Did you hear me?’

‘Please!’

‘GET UPSTAIRS NOW.’

But Moriah wouldn’t. She only backed away from the door slightly. Her father hung his head for a moment, as though considering, but brought his free hand up to quickly, cleanly, break the animal’s neck. And when he moved Moustache dangled lifelessly from his arms.
Old Charlie

Old Charlie was deep inside the whiskey bottle. Rolling around and gargling the stuff. He could see the horizon in there. The real horizon. The higher astral plane. The spiritual Mecca. It was only possible to achieve that when with the gods, and how did he get to the gods but through the slippery medium of ambrosia.

Inside the bottle and outside the bottle. It hurt his head this lack of spirit level. He couldn’t keep balanced even while he was lying down. He tried to nod, but the floorboard held his cheek.

He could see clear into the bedroom from where he lay. Looking from the dust directly in front of him all the way along the hall to the dragging bedcover fringe. He needed that bedcover. He needed it for later when he got cold. But right now he could see that bedcover for what it was; a means of keeping him chained to his body.

Charlie made a fist of his hand and felt the blood begin to pump at the juncture of arm and shoulder—where the floor was cutting off supply. Body wreaked its own revenge when it felt ignored. He let his hand flop. Those floorboards were as unyielding as a disinterested woman. That made him laugh and then startle at the sound.

He was weak. He would crawl under those bedclothes later. He knew he would. Warmth was like a drug for the body. People made such horrible mistakes. He could feel imaginary tears rolling down his cheeks. People worried about drugs that affected the mind but the drugs, all the drugs that weren’t labelled a drug, they were far worse.

It wasn’t about religion per se. He spoke of gods, thought of the forces as gods, but wasn’t thinking of it in terms of Christ or Shiva or Gaia. Those gods seemed overly concerned with having subjects of one form or another.
The Bridge

He had a pain in his stomach. Flaring like a horn held down.

The Christians flagellated the body as though it poisoned the soul, when it was only a shrivelled casing. Discard it, yes, but treat it well because it helps ease the transition. A man without skin is an uncomfortable man. Hard to think about the gods if you are in pain. Didn’t he know it? Shiva represented evil impulses as though these were discrete from good ones—the floorboards finally let him grin—although the Hindus at least maintained that both principles existed and both were gods. Wise and misguided in the one package. And the Gaia Principle, well, that was formulated by a hippie turned yuppie. Basically a feel-good idea of the karmic principle. Stolen ideas.

Charlie rolled over. He let his bladder release the warm golden urine that quickly became cold golden urine. But it felt more comfortable. Once upon a time he would have thought himself disgusting. Now he knew better. The body had its means of keeping him alive and if he got out of the way it was achieved far more quickly. Economically.

Charlie hawked up enough phlegm in the back of his throat to spit. Religions all stole from each other—that wasn’t the main point. The main point was that most religions didn’t exist if there weren’t followers. That was the first obvious flaw. That’s why men only knew the edges of the truth—truth wasn’t dependent on human consciousness. Human consciousness existed as an extension of it.

He was sobering up, that was the problem. All the thoughts were coming to him like a train on its tracks. There was no jumping off. He was sobering. People had no concept of what sacrifice meant. Add an “s” to laughter and you have slaughter. People ate animal. People wore it. Didn’t give a damn how it was killed for either of those pleasures as long as someone else did it. As long as they didn’t have to see it—oh heavenly Fathers inure us to what we are. Yet when that animal would be used as a gift to the land, people found it repulsive. Primitive.
Charlie had wanted to slap them out of their mindless existence. But he couldn’t do that. People had to come to the realisations themselves. Had to come to realise that they were a small part in a far larger opera. It saddened him though. Saddened the sick worm in his gut. How could they get caught up in the mundanities, the minutiae, the ordinary, when the possibility of something so grand loomed behind the mirror?

That was the problem, of course. The mirror. The self. The reflected gaze. Not the wonder of existence, but the wonder of the self’s existence. See how sober he was getting? Thoughts like darts zipping by his mouth. The glorified human being who inflated with each year of life, until the body started to fail and then the sense of self began to deflate. One against Descartes. Then misery really set in. Feeble, false-toothed, incontinent and fearful.

He didn’t care for human beings but he still cared for human nature. It was a fine line. Not for the person but for the person’s situation. He felt it happening from the inside. His guts twisting themselves into a knot until he spoke up. Not because their wretchedness moved him, but because they were so consumed by it and that consumed him. Fascinated him. They kept their gaze on the tree they were standing under, while the whole forest went up in flames.

Charlie rolled the back of his skull into the floorboards. Didn’t matter how crazy it was, he still thought of all those gods, all that knowledge, against sacks of blood and bone. He had to speak up. Risk their jeering, of course. And his spoken words weren’t going to change anything, of course. The road was well-travelled. It was his weakness that made him speak though. His weakness that opened his mouth.

Why, why, why did he still care? Charlie ground a fist into the floorboards. Rejoicing in the meaty bruised feeling of skin shedding. He licked at the spots of blood. His care wasn’t helping. They would be better off if he didn’t interfere. They disparaged him anyway. Misguided selves looking down on his self. Especially his use of alcohol.
The Bridge

Drop, hard stuff, booze, canned heat, cocktail, firewater, nectar, hooch, intoxicant, liquor, moonshine, oil, palliative, red-eye, rotgut, sauce, spirits, tipple, toddy, intoxicant, brew, callibogus, cup, draft, glass, libation, potion, refreshment, shot, sip, balm, distillate, effusion, elixir, juice, tincture, slug, spot, swig, thirst quencher, toast.

An abacus of names he had stolen from some source long forgotten and yet so few understood its purpose. They preferred to smell of deodorant than sweat. They thought certain materials or certain cut of materials made some clothing Sunday dress and others Saturday field swag. They raised their noses at him and shifted seats if he sat nearby. And they used alcohol to obliterate rather than sink into.

He rolled over on the floor back towards the view of the bed. Back into the cold wet. Those low-life bastards. He shouldn’t be trying to help them save their petty bridge. It was time to try and get warm. He couldn’t feel his fingers anymore and he’d trained himself to get into bed as soon as he realised he was cold. It was difficult to know when he was cold. He just didn’t feel it very much. One for Descartes.

Men thought they were simplifying with all their scheming. They just built larger and more complicated edifices to thought. And what was thought? A series of electrical impulses. So was lightning, epilepsy and the movement between fabric and skin.

A laugh came from his mouth and he laughed again at the shock of the sound. Sounds that had meaning outside language made so much more sense. Those sounds travelled across people. Those sounds were connected to higher planes. Once you learned a language you could never hear those sounds without meaning. It was refreshing to hear a language you couldn’t understand to remind yourself of all the noise signifying nothing.

Charlie tried to sit up. Took all his thought to coordinate and he couldn’t do it. Put one foot over. Pushed from his hand. No strength. Fell again. Cheek stinging from where the floorboards bit. Clearly where he should stay for a while yet. It wasn’t too cold tonight.
How many hours were there until dawn? Six? Five? He couldn't freeze in that time. Maybe get a bit of a cold. Until then he would stay in the mud looking at the stars.
The Bridge

Saturday 20th February

Gussy

‘So you’ve met them both?’

Janice nodded, glanced at Layla. Gussy could see exactly what the look meant—keep your mouth shut. Of course they had been gossiping about Will. Match-making him with Janice.

‘And what’s his daughter like?’ Gussy asked. ‘What did you think?’

Janice shrugged. ‘We barely spoke. There was a problem with the cat and—.’ She stopped speaking and looked at her sister who promptly leaned over and put a hand on her knee.

Gussy mentally sighed. Why she bothered she didn’t know. Well, yes she did: she needed a project. She was bored out of her mind.

‘Well, how is twinkle toes going then?’

Another look between the two.

‘You mean Deidre,’ said Layla.

‘I do,’ said Gussy.

‘Fine,’ said Janice.

‘Well, where is she?’

‘Sleeping,’ they answered simultaneously.

‘She a good sleeper then?’

Janice nodded. But she had very dark circles under her eyes, her skin was looking sallow and she’d definitely lost weight. They had probably just given the little blighter a dose of alcohol or cough mixture, supposed Gussy. About time.

‘And where are your two?’ she enquired of Layla.

‘With their father.’

‘How on earth did you manage that?’

‘Once a week he does it.’ Layla looked at her sister and they both smiled. ‘Then he gets sex.’
They all roared laughing.

And then Janice promptly began weeping. Sobbing. Layla got up wordlessly and lifted the box of tissues closer. Mopped up her sister’s cheeks, pressed a couple into her hand. But Janice didn’t care to stop. She put her head down into her lap and just let go.

Gussy looked at Layla with raised eyebrows, but got nothing back: they were tight these two. Still, it didn’t take a genius to figure out Janice was suffering from a little depression. The house was a horror. Dirty nappies in an open bin. Smell of something rotting—food perhaps. Baby clothes unwashed in a pile near the kitchen door. Janice in a nightgown or whatever it was, clearly not changed for days. Gussy had ignored it, of course. But if the silly woman was going to cry then it could all be counted as evidence.

She reached a hand over to rest on Janice’s knee, just like Layla had done. Only Janice looked at it as though it was a toad and Gussy retracted it.

‘Perhaps you need some help, love.’ She kept her voice nice, even though she was feeling hurt. And annoyed. Who else, besides Moriah-bloody-Poppins Layla was coming to see her? No one as far as Gussy could tell. Janice should be counting her blessings.

‘She needs a man,’ said Layla.

Gussy couldn’t dispute that. In this particular instance she might have liked to say that a man wasn’t going to be an immediate solution, but a man had always been her own immediate solution. No doubt about it.

She missed her men. Separately. They wouldn’t have gotten along at all. She’d purposefully experimented with different types. Geoffrey was a mechanic. Young and nimble with this fingers. Stanley had worked in accounts, in the city. That was possibly the biggest adjustment, and after he died, Gussy came right back to the outback with Wayne. Wayne sold mining equipment. She was hoping that her next husband would be an actual miner because none of her former husbands had any idea about jewellery and she liked it. But there wasn’t a great deal of choice of available men in L.—. Very
provocative. If her health had been better, or admit it, her size a little less, she would have been shopping around in Coober Pedy by now.

She missed sex. Thoroughly, thoroughly missed it. And not all the lovey-dovey stuff, but the actual juice and throttle. Young women didn’t know that one day they would become invisible. You don’t realise how many men are looking at you until they stop, then you realise—the whole blinking lot of them. And they stop all at once. As though a secret letter has done the rounds.

It was devastating. The first day she realised it—she’d still had Wayne—she came home in tears. He’d cooked her up pancakes, their eternal comfort for one another, but that hadn’t helped. She went through a box of Kleenex that afternoon.

It was extremely disappointing to think that she might have to begin living out her romantic life through younger women. They simply didn’t have the pluck to choose well. Although at her age, Gussy had chosen equally as poorly. There was no advantage to the match with Geoffrey besides in the bedroom. She was just lucky a hydraulic lift had failed by the time they were in their early thirties. Gussy made a mental sign of the cross. Not that she wished him anything but well, but they were heading for a divorce and being a widow was much cleaner.

She should advise Janice to start at the other end. It had taken two marriages before Gussy realised that marrying someone considerably older and wealthier was an excellent proposition. Especially since they kept dying on her anyway. Mind you, she could barely conceive of kissing Ed Morgan, the old toothless goat, so could hardly expect that Janice would warm to the idea. Gussy bet the young woman hadn’t done anything more than flirt in her life. She wasn’t silly. Wasn’t spontaneous. Did she even know how to have fun?

She looked at the poor woman bent over double, crying. Clearly not having fun now. Mind you, that was a baby for you. One thing Gussy realised very early on was that her
former girlfriends all extolled the virtues of the baby beforehand, but seemed to spend all their time thereafter griping about how it had irrevocably and unhappily altered their bodies, their marriages and their lives. Lovely things, babies.

‘Buck up, love,’ Gussy said. ‘This is the easy part compared to later.’

Layla shook her head, but Janice, face buried in her hands, started laughing. She looked up at Gussy, half crying, half laughing and asked, ‘Are you helping?’

Gussy spread her hands wide. ‘You’re not the first.’

‘Jannie, never mind her,’ said Layla. ‘You’ve got every right to feel distressed. Gussy has never had kids, she doesn’t know.’

‘Oh meanwhile, it’s obvious that a man would fix everything here.’

‘Shut up.’ Layla livid, turned towards Gussy. ‘She needs to feel that she’s not alone. That’s what a man does. You know that better than anyone—this is the first time in your life you’ve been alone and here you are being a parasite on someone else’s life. So, for god’s sake, shut up.’

Gussy rose up in her chair. Trying to decide whether to storm out or not.

‘Be quiet can you?’ Janice dabbed at her eyes. ‘I’ve got a headache.’ She straightened up. Mopped at her face. Sniffed and tried to smile. ‘I’m just having rushes of hormones, that’s all. And those men coming for the baby. They’re closing in: I can feel them.’ She looked at her sister. ‘And there’s nothing I can do about it.’

Layla petted her hand, but had no reaction otherwise.

‘What’s she talking about?’ asked Gussy.

‘Sssshhhh,’ said Layla.
Monday 23rd February

Shane

The two inspectors handed in their hard hats at the portable office—first using the plastic to bat away the dusty traces of red soil clinging to their jeans. Shane hung around his ute; clearing out McDonald’s wrappers and Big M cartons; fixing the catch on the tray with a piece of wire; killing time. When he was sure they had left, he walked over to the office.

Poking his head inside, he saw the new foreman’s broad back. He withdrew and knocked, then stuck his head around again. Will had half-turned. Didn’t speak.

‘Shane, mate. I’ll be joining your crew. Starting day after tomorrow’s the word.’
Will stood, nodded. Held out his hand and they shook without speaking.
Shane continued, ‘Look, I was just wondering whether you wanted a beer?’
The foreman looked at his watch, which was encouraging.
‘Just one, mate. Just up the road at The Peacock.’
Will turned back to his make-shift desk. Shuffled some papers. It was an interminable wait for Shane, but the man finally nodded.

‘Give me ten.’
‘No worries.’

Shane backed away, his gut suddenly telling him he’d done the wrong thing. He kicked at the back tyre on his vehicle and tried to think of a reason for running out. But nothing came to mind and soon the two men were walking together. Will apologising for having his head elsewhere—running numbers again—and Shane finishing his packet of cigarettes on the way.

It was quiet at The Peacock. It had been yuppified recently; the front section turned into fancy dining and the back bar getting a facelift with new carpets and air-conditioning.
Not to any point: main problem with everything on the south side was lack of population.
They ordered beers, paid for them separately, then sank into some lounge seats. The first five minutes or so were spent silently sipping the cold liquid and things seemed immeasurably the better for it.

Shane tapped a cigarette against a fresh pack, lit and inhaled deeply. ‘So.’

Will said nothing. Eyes unseeing.

Shane sniffed. Nostrils flaring nervously. ‘Any word on what happened?’

The older man’s eyes came into focus. Shane could see the gears turning.

Wondered what was going through that brain before Will finally answered. ‘Not yet.’

Shane nodded. Drank. Relieved. ‘Ah, that’s good.’

Will didn’t respond.

‘Pretty hardcore coming out here to do this. Locals aren’t thrilled job didn’t go local, you know?’

‘Probably fair enough getting someone in given what happened.’

‘Bit bizarre, wasn’t it? I’ve never seen anything like that. The whole structure just giving way altogether. Didn’t look right.’


Shane’s heart hammered. ‘What?’

‘Have you heard anything? Is there any talk about why the, it—? I mean has anyone suggested sabotage?’

‘You’ve got to be joking.’ Tried to keep his voice light.

Will sat back. Looked at his watch. ‘Right.’ Put half his beer away with the next mouthful. ‘Got to go.’ He stood and Shane half-heartedly started to rise too. ‘No, finish your beer.’

Shane nodded and gratefully sank back down again.

‘See you on site.’

Shane saluted, watched Will leave. Man walked too fast. He’d left half his beer behind too. Before Shane could get a hand to it though, bloody bargirl collected it up. Gave him a smile. Jesus. The dregs of his own beer were warmer now. He was ruminating on
whether to get up and order another or just pack it in when an old codger sat in Will’s empty seat. Christ if the bloke didn’t stink.

‘G’day, mate,’ he said without looking. The old fella grinned fit to split his face. His expression falling off slightly as Shane made to stand.

‘Sit,’ he said.

Shane looked down, slightly bemused. ‘Got to go, old man. Things to do.’

‘Saw you talking with Mr Abrahamson. Poor man.’ He laced his arthritic fingers together, didn’t look at Shane. ‘He can’t see what’s under his nose.’

‘Yeah.’ Shane struggled to think of a way to cut loose. ‘I’m off then. Have a good one.’

‘Wouldn’t know an effigy if he fell over one.’

Shane stopped. ‘Sorry?’

The old man squinted up at him as the blood rushed in Shane’s ears.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘What?’ The music had suddenly gone up a couple of decibels and the old man cupped a hand around his ear.

Shane leaned as near to the forest of spiky black hair as he could bear to get. ‘I don’t—.’

‘It didn’t want her.’ The voice was hoarse. ‘Didn’t even touch her. No good.’

Shane willed himself not to go red in the face.

‘Get some animals.’

‘What?’ Jesus that music was loud.

The old man smiled broadly. Yelled, ‘Get some animals. As many as it takes.’

‘What for?’

‘What?’

Shane bent down again. ‘I said, what for?’

Old man continued smiling. ‘We’ll have to do some testing now. Buy me a beer.’

Shane grimaced. ‘Look, mate—.’

The old man fumbled with his wallet. ‘Get us a couple of whiskies.’

Shane could see there was no shortage of cash.
Four neat double-whiskeys later and neither of them had said anything. Shane’s limbs had relaxed again. Head heavily floating.

‘Nowhere else for us, hey?’ the old man yelled suddenly. His voice was like a damaged horn.

‘What?’

This time having to yell over the music got funny. Shane grinned and the old man was seized by a laughing fit and his big rheumy eyes watered. Shane had to wait until the wheezing subsided before the conversation was going again.

‘Neither of us home eating whatever the wife’s cooked.’

‘No.’ Shane sobered a mite.

‘You got no wife,’ said the old man laughing.

Shane’s blood ran cold, and the old man moved suddenly, pulling on the younger man’s arm to draw him closer. ‘Lack of her turned you, didn’t it?’ he yelled, spittle flecking Shane’s face.

‘You fucking arsehole.’ Shane recoiled and with his free hand swung across to try and hit the old man in the face. But he got his shoulder and spilt his whiskey instead.

Old man dropped his empty glass in his lap and held up both hands in front of his face. ‘Go easy. Go easy.’

But Shane was still coming. He put his hands around the old man’s neck. Gave it a throttle. ‘Fucking arsehole!’ he repeated, breathlessly. Only reason he left off was because he was too drunk. His face flushed with the effort and he tried to stand. Tried to work himself out of the low chair. And when he succeeded, he staggered slightly forward.

Old man was coughing. Spluttering. ‘Your effigy was never going to work.’

Shane put a hand out to catch the wall. How did the fucker even know about it?

‘Pissing in the wind. Takes more than that to change the course of things.’

Shane forced himself to hold still, stop the swirling in his head, and when things looked as right as they were going to get, he pushed himself away from the wall.
The old man yelled, ‘I’ll try with Mr Abrahamson, but I’m afraid he might have a tape-measure for a brain.’

Shane didn’t answer, just resumed his efforts to walk straight, keeping the wall as guide.

‘You’re wiser,’ came the voice again.

‘Fuck off,’ said Shane, to himself. ‘Just fuck off, whoever you are.’

‘You get those animals.’

Shane wandered away. Presumably homeward.
Will pushed open the little door on the site’s portable office, scrutinising his team—
dogman, rigger, crane driver, boilermaker, ironworker and the local kid, the labourer,
Shane—standing in a knot on the edge of the chasm. Will was already speaking as he
joined them.

‘First things first. Inspectors are gone—for now.’

He waved a piece of folded paper then shoved it in his back pocket. ‘So, we’re
waiting on lab work before we’ll know what’s what. I don’t want to hear any theories.
Our job is to rebuild, not judge what was done before we arrived. Okay?’ He didn’t wait
for a response. ‘Secondly, we should receive the girders by the end of the week. You’ve
all worked with pre-stressed, prefabricated concrete girders before, but because this is
Abrahamson’s first bridge build and because the previous bridge fell down, I want
double, even triple, checks on everything. I know you’re not typically digging a collapse
up, but I wanted us to look at what happened firsthand. The inspectors’ report, whatever
it finds, is going to be words. I wanted you to have more than just words at hand when
rebuilding. Okay?’

Again he kept talking.

‘Now, the entire new prefabricated structure will have already undergone loading
trials—something ordered this time just because of the collapse—but, and I mean no
disrespect when I say this, those trials were under factory conditions and now that we’re
out here, it doesn’t take much to imagine that they’re not precisely catering to what this
bridge is going to be dealing with.’

He drew breath and his crane driver, Topchian—or TopChick as he was known in
Melbourne—jumped in: ‘What Will’s saying is, “Hello. Welcome aboard. We’re in for a
ride”.’

A few grins.
Will took a moment to nod. He appreciated TopChick’s smoother introduction. His head was elsewhere. ‘You’ve all got your specs. Let me know if anything doesn’t add up. In the meantime, I want the remains of the last bridge completely removed—today if possible.’

Several necks craned around to look. Estimating what was possible.

‘All right?’

TopChick took over: introducing Shane to the others, assigning jobs, getting Stewart to move the crane closer to the edge of the chasm, insisting on the wearing of the glaring orange vests. Then he spun around to Will.

‘Probably not possible to get it all done today.’

‘Why not?’

‘The foundations are still holding.’

Will narrowed his eyes. ‘How in heck did this thing fall down?’

TopChick raised his eyebrows. Shrugged.

‘How long then?’ asked Will.

‘End of tomorrow.’

By smoko, the jackhammers had cleared out the abutment stabilisers on either side of the chasm, and Nick, the boilermaker, was halfway through opening up all the welds so they could lift the sections of steel up separately. A bitch of a job, Nick spent most of smoko soaking his fingers in water. While they had a cup of tea or can of fizz, Will told them they were going to shift the footprint so as not to be directly over the collapse. The limestone and surrounding geology, soft and prone to fault lines, couldn’t be bored into twice, and the revised placement shouldn’t make any difference, since the road leading to either side of the bridge didn’t yet exist.

They were just grinding work-boots into cigarette butts to get going again when Shane leaned over a wheelbarrow and pretended to vomit.

‘You smell something?’
After a short hunt, they found a dead kangaroo tucked into some scrubby roots on the north embankment.

‘Fell,’ said Shane. The younger man was clearly chuffed at being expert in the environment unfamiliar to the older men. ‘Got tangled enough for something to get time to rip it apart.’

The sun had heated up the stomach contents enough to explode, and the high ripe smell was putrid up close. The six of them stood over the dead animal, Stew’s boot fondling the maggotted carcass.

‘Dingo?’ asked Will.

‘Nah. A dog,’ said Shane, taking the opportunity to light up. ‘Savaged, not eaten, mate.’

They booted the eyeless roo onto a hessian bag Frank had retrieved from his ute. Dragged it up and away from the sounds of shovels and good-natured ribbing.

By lunchtime they were ready to lift the sections of steel up and out of the chasm. Will called a halt to the work. Could see that the men were glad of it. Shane didn’t appear fussed one way or the other: kid had his shirtsleeves rolled down and buttoned, and hat and gloves on—and he was the only one not sweating. The others stunk of it.

It was a wretched place to eat lunch: only three scrawny trees offering no shade and the sun heating up the inside of the vehicles. The men scrambled down the embankment to sit in some shade. The talk was of the heat and various accommodation arrangements. But it soon died down as the men realised they had to eat fast if they wanted any food. The incessant flies were making short work of the drying sandwiches, ramming themselves at whatever was on offer no matter how many times they were battered away.

‘Fuck off,’ said Stew finally hurling his bread and corned beef.

His workmates laughed.

‘Go and pick it up,’ said Will, and the laughter stopped.

Stew looked at his boss.

‘Don’t want to bring any animals down here.’

‘Flies’ll have it gone in ten,’ said Shane with his mouth full.
Will turned to look at him. ‘I wasn’t talking to you.’

‘No worries.’ Stew stood and retrieved the sandwich. Then balled it up in his paper bag and sat silently.

But Shane took off up the embankment.

Will relaxed. His crew knew him. Knew that if he gave an order he expected it followed. Shane would work it out.

Now that he was here, now that it wasn’t theoretical, Will had already figured out the way things were for most of the male population in L—: months of nothing, hours of urgency. They were used to running dry, nutrient-bereft soil through their fingers for months on end. Used to staring up at the skies and seeing nothing but a sun so used to blazing it had burned itself white. Used to spending long hours underground dynamiting, or hauling large carriages of dirt to the surface. For them, the bridge was decoration. Getting from South to North twenty minutes quicker wasn’t going to change lives here. Not like it would his. His plans to use the bridge to reconstruct L— weren’t dead, but they were shelved for now. He would keep his head down and his eye on the job.

The afternoon was spent winching the pieces of steel up and out of the chasm. A slow process with Stew driving the crane, Glen and Frank dogging and rigging, and Topchick and Will handling the pieces up on top of the chasm—tagging them as they settled on the back of the truck. Stew would have to reload them onto the train in a couple of days’ time.

Meanwhile, Shane and Nick started the shovelwork around the foundations and pile cap, which, if they weren’t careful, basically involved hitting the shovel into solid concrete — then the reverberation would ring up their arms and into their bodies. Will had done it often enough. Felt like his teeth were going to fall out.

When Will finally went down to check on them, he heard Shane long before he saw him.

‘I watched my poor meatball, all covered in cheese, roll under the table and onto the floor, and then my poor meatball rolled right out the door.’
Shane kept the song up the whole time Will made his way down the embankment, and when Will drew close to them, Shane said, ‘I reckon this wog’s not that into spaghetti, mate.’

‘He’s Greek, not Italian. What are you doing scraping that?’ Will pointed to where Shane’s shovel had etched into the side of the concrete casing. ‘You’ve got to be bloody careful. If the inspectors don’t know that’s post-collapse they might attribute cause to the wrong set of actions.’

Shane reddened. Stepped back to look at what he’d done. ‘It’s just a scratch.’

Will rounded on him. ‘Are you getting what I’m telling you? I want that “scratch” logged. Okay?’

Shane nodded. Sullen.

‘Next time he tries anything stupid, yell out,’ Will glared at Nick now. ‘You’re all accountable for what happens on this site.’

Nick turned his back on Shane and Will started to make his way back up the embankment. He was going to have to rein the kid in hard.
When she hadn’t turned up for a solid week, he was disappointed. He imagined that he hid it well, mostly from himself, but when she finally fronted on Wednesday, late afternoon, he couldn’t stop chuckling. Not that he let her see. Instead he continued flicking through the bible at the lecturn, waiting until she’d walked the entire way up the aisle before looking over his reading glasses to see who was there.

‘You gave me a fright, Moriah,’ he said.

‘I wanted to ask you something.’

He wagged a finger at her. ‘The first thing you need to do when you see someone is greet them. Find out whether they are well, whether they still have time, whether they even remember who you are.’

Moriah slumped against the side of a pew. Silent.

‘Because I used your name you can presume that I remember you.’ Father sniffed and slammed the book shut, still speaking even as he took off for the vestry. ‘But I expect you to say hello to me and show me that you remember me. Come along.’

She trailed after him.

He switched on the jug, then sat, crossing his arms over his rotund stomach.

‘Well, give me a goodly hello.’

‘Hello, Father.’ She sat on the other side of the small table.

‘Hello, my child. How are you?’ Without waiting for her answer, he kept on.

‘Now I ask that because you might have had a terrible day or week or morning and the last thing I want to do is prattle on about nothing if you’re really needing to tell me something.’ He lifted his eyebrows expectantly. It took a few seconds.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Rubbish. You’ve a face as long as a horse’s. But before we get onto that, you need to ask about me. I’ll tell you how I am: I’m as well as can be expected. I won’t tell you about my corns because you’ll have no useful thing to say on the matter.’

‘Do you have time?’
‘What?’ He stopped what he was doing and looked at her face. At her small wry smile. Then he remembered his instructions to her. ‘Very good. Yes, for a damsel in distress, I have time. Now let me stop this infernal kettle from raging and we’ll have a cup of tea and get down to brass tacks.’

When he sat a hot tea in front of her, she looked at it unconvincingly. Again.

‘You’re not going to drink it?’

‘No.’

‘Help yourself to the water in that little fridge there, then.’ He pointed. ‘And next time don’t let me get all the way with making you a tea if you don’t want one. Speak up girl.’

But she didn’t say anything for quite a while. Just sipped at her water and looked around the room. He tried to look at everything as though it were the first time too. Found he couldn’t do it. All the objects already had function and meaning for him.

‘So,’ he said. ‘What’s your question?’

Whatever it was she wasn’t ready to come out with it. He sighed deeply. Heavily. He’d become quite good at that. ‘Come on, come on. There’s no point giving in to black sentiments. The way through is always to fight. “Today I am afflicted exceedingly, but tomorrow I shall break my bonds”. That’s from vespers.’

She said nought.

‘I’ve been thinking about your reading.’ He reached over to the stack of books on the table and plucked off the top one. ‘The Holy Bible.’ He held it out to her. ‘What do you know of the Lord’s story? Anything?’

She made no movement towards the book. ‘I know about Christmas and Easter.’

‘Everyone knows about Christmas presents and Easter eggs. Do you mean you know about the birth and death of Our Lord?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Well, that’s a start. Where did you learn that?’

‘At my last school.’

‘At your last school. What about the School of the Air? Is it any chop on religious studies?’
The Bridge

‘What?’

‘I mean are they trying to teach you some Christian values? Do they talk about the ways of the Lord, or is it all just secular mumbo-jumbo about grief and rainbows?’ He sighed. ‘Don’t bother trying to answer that. It’s a bugbear of mine and there is nothing wrong with teaching you how to handle grief or appreciate rainbows. However, I think you also need the important stuff.’ He peered at her. ‘I think we’ll proceed randomly. I don’t want the Old Testament to scare the be-jesus out of you—.’ He crossed himself. ‘You didn’t hear that. Anyway, I think that you might like some of what Our Lord has to say about coping when bad things happen.’ He thrust the book at her. ‘Come on, come on. Open it at any page.’

She took the book, but shoved it between her thighs. ‘I didn’t come here to read.’

‘I want you to put these on,’ he said, ignoring her and patting his breast pocket, then his trouser pockets and finally standing to retrieve his yellow glasses from over on top of the small bar fridge. He handed them to her.

Moriah wiped her fingers on her shirt, took off her glasses, then put his on.

‘Go on then, lass.’

She pulled out the book and opened it. Put her finger down along the sentence and tried to read across. ‘Try at loneliness picture—.’

‘You’re just making it up.’

Her face burned. She unhooked the little wire glasses and handed them back. ‘I already told you, I can’t read.’

‘I’ve got one more idea and if that doesn’t work, then we’ll call it quits.’ He put the glasses in his shirt pocket. ‘But before I forget, you had a question.’

She raised her chin and looked at him. ‘I want to know whether you think animals go to heaven?’

‘An oldy, but a goody. What do you think?’

‘I want to know what you think.’
He nodded. Pleased all over again at her spunk. ‘All right. I don’t know, Moriah. I honestly don’t know. But if St Francis is up there,’ he pointed at the ceiling, ‘you can bet there are animals up there too. Can I ask why you want to know?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that puts paid to conversation, doesn’t it?’

He took the opportunity to reach around behind the stack of books. One of the books toppled over the table edge as he drew out a sheet of plastic. A sheet of clear blue.

‘Try again,’ he said.

She held the sheet gingerly. Evidently unsure what to do with it.

‘Just lay it over the page, ducks. Gone on, if this fails, it’ll be the last you see of it, but for now humour me.’

Moriah laid the sheet over the splayed page and tried again. Very slowly she read:

‘Therefore I will be—.’

‘Unto.’

‘Unto—.’ She stopped again.

‘Unto Ephriam, yes.’ He closed his eyes briefly. Lovely to be read to.

‘As a moth—.’ She winced.

And he winced along with her. ‘What’s wrong now?’

‘The words.’

‘Nothing wrong with what you’ve read so far.’

‘Moth?’

He nodded. ‘That’s right. There are moths in the House of the Lord, although, on this particular occasion he may be using them as a curse. You’re doing very well. Just as I hoped. Let me pick a passage for you in case that one was just dumb luck.’

He dragged the book back across the table, wet his index finger and thumb with his tongue, then flicked through the thin pages. Finally locating what he wanted. ‘Try this.’

‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but I shall not pass away.’

‘Good.’
But Moriah kept reading—her voice getting louder and more excited. ‘But of that day and that hour neth, neath, knew, knowing—.’ She looked at him for help.

He put his glasses on and peered. ‘Knoweth. Finish the sentence if you like.’

If she liked—the girl clearly couldn’t wait. ‘But my words shall not pass away,’ she read. ‘My words shall not pass away.’

‘Moriah, I wondered, I actually—for me—hoped so: you’ve got a form of dyslexia.’

He beamed from ear to ear, but her pleased expression disappeared. ‘It’s not life threatening for goodness sakes. I’ve got it too. It’s just some circuitry problem in the brain’s wiring. Makes us more unique.’ He held up the blue sheet of plastic. ‘But with the help of some blue-tinted glasses, you’ll be right as rain.’

‘No.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

She looked away. Clearly bristling.

‘Good gracious girl, there is nothing predictable about you, is there? Now what’s the problem? You clearly don’t need your glasses for anything, speaking of faking,’ he wagged a finger at her, ‘so you can just have a pair of blue glass spectacles made for reading.’

But Moriah said nothing.

He clicked his tongue. Disappointed. He had expected some jubilation. ‘We don’t have to call it anything, I suppose. You can just get the glasses and put your fingers in your ears if someone remarks.’

‘I’ll use the blue sheet.’

‘You can’t carry one of those around everywhere.’

‘I’ll cut it into something smaller.’

‘Pride. Dear me. Gets us every time. You’re not going to be stubborn, I hope?’

Anyway, what about writing?’

Her face froze.

He held up his hands. ‘I’m not going to say anything more but I think blue glasses might be of more assistance than the blue plastic sheet when you’re doing that.’
‘No.’

‘Let’s not argue about it now, shall we? My eyes are tired.’ How exhausting it was having a pupil with a mind of her own. And to think that earlier he’d been fretting about seeing her. ‘I’d like it very much if you could read a bit more.’ He pointed a finger idly at the page.

‘And what I say un-toe—.’

‘Unto.’

Slowly, slowly, she read, ‘And what I say unto you I say unto all, watch.’
Shane

‘Fair go, mate.’ Shane had his safety hat tucked under one arm. He kept his voice low so that no one else could hear what was going on—but it didn’t matter; it was about to be bloody obvious.

‘No hangovers. No injuries. No time for it.’ Will didn’t even bother looking up from the figures he had in front of him.

‘My work’s fine.’

‘You’re slow. Frank’s had to tell you three times to get out of the way of the signalman.’

Shane sneaked a look back around at Frank. Frank and his stomach hanging over the front of his jeans. He was watching the lift of the vertical piles they’d pulled from the ground. Didn’t seem to be interested in anyone or anything else. That’s how it was though: Frank playing nanny.

‘Look I had a few last night. Sixteen hours ago or something. I’m as sober as a judge.’

Will took a moment to answer—muttering about costs. Then he looked up, found Shane’s face. ‘Take two hours off, drink a boat of coffee, then come and see me.’

Shane dropped his helmet at Will’s feet and slunk off behind the office. Someone called out his name, but he pretended not to notice. It didn’t hurt anything too badly except his pride and his back pocket. He’d be docked pay. Maybe he wouldn’t come back?

First port of call would be the 7/11 for some aspirin, then he was free to do whatever he liked. But sitting in his ute fifteen minutes later, nursing some sickly lemon soft-drink between his thighs, with an unopened pie on the dashboard, Shane wondered what he did like. He had tied one on at home last night, and given the noise it created on-site it didn’t seem immediately sensible to light out for the territories and do the same again this
The Bridge

afternoon. He looked at his thumbs resting on top of the steering wheel, then down at the can of soft drink between his thighs. In the end it was the memory of blue eyes that got him thinking about taking a walk and he hopped out of his ute with the pie pincered between his fingers—still too hot to properly hold.

Waves of heat beat his shoulders and face, and he had to stop and let a silver semi-trailer go and the displaced air and engine heat slapped him silly. He started thinking about going for a swim. His boots were making his feet sweat, and he tugged off his shirt and tucked it into the back of his jeans. Long time since he’d felt sunrays directly against his torso.

He looked down along the planes of his chest and stomach. It was all tightly packed and he sucked his stomach in and then contorted his upper body to make his muscles pop. The paper around the pie crinkled each time he sucked in and let go. He sniggered and looked away because the white skin hurt his eyes. Maybe he should get a little tan going. Maybe he should be like all those other men. But another couple of minutes of the sun on his back and he shrugged himself into his shirt. Not stupid enough to sunburn.

He waited until the start of lunch hour. Like last time. As luck would have it she was bunking off again. Only it wasn’t luck was it? His chest puffed up as she crossed the road, her face all lit up at seeing him, and he said, ‘Hello, lovely.’

She got flustered. Wouldn’t look properly at him. Walked over to the bench, the same bench where they met, and sat. Shane frowned until he worked it out: she was scared. He thought quickly and backed away.

‘If you don’t want to have lunch with me, it’s no skin off my nose.’

She floundered like a fish newly brought to bank and Shane cast an eye over the schoolground.

‘Teacher see you skiving off?’

‘I can go anyway. It’s only a half-day.’

‘What’s got you spooked then? Girlfriends? Bit jealous?’
She didn’t deny it and Shane settled comfortably onto the heels of his work boots.

‘I’ve got one hour, or less now that we’ve been gas-bagging. And you’ve got a decision to make. Come with me and tell me about whatever it is shied you off me. Or live the rest of your life wondering.’

He smiled. He’d always been a little cocky around women, but there was something else stirring inside him now.

‘Come on, Moriah. I like you, all right? If that’s a crime you’d best run away now.’

She finally giggled and he relaxed even more. Started to walk off, then looked over his shoulder and winked at her. She looked around. Followed. He led them towards the chasm. Much further around than the bridge site, but he couldn’t escape its pull. He hadn’t thought much about it before, even though he’d grown up with it. Maybe it was getting bigger.

He sat on the dry dirt, dangling his legs over the shoulder of the embankment. The pie he had purchased from the milk-bar was well and truly cold by the time they got settled. He didn’t notice. He was more interested in the combination of Moriah’s eyes, Moriah’s legs, and what was cycling around his brain.

Moriah unwrapped a dying salad roll. She didn’t look very eager about it.

‘Want some of this?’ he offered.

‘No, thanks.’

‘So you can talk then.’

She shrugged.

‘Jesus. Come on, are you going to relax or what?’

‘I shouldn’t see you.’

Shane cocked an eyebrow and finished the last of his pie. Mouth still full, he said, ‘Well shut your eyes then.’ But that didn’t go over well, so he swallowed quickly and tried again. ‘Who says you shouldn’t?’

‘Somebody at school.’
‘Well, your friend just doesn’t like that I like you. That’s all.’

‘She’s not my friend.’

Shane frowned and then his face cleared and he winked. ‘She’s a little older than you, isn’t she?’

Moriah nodded.

‘She’s a bitch. Am I right?’

Moriah shrugged. ‘I don’t really know her that well.’

‘Honey, you don’t need to know her.’

She blushed and Shane thrilled at the sight. He could barely contain himself. She was so young and innocent. He tried to think of a way of asking whether she’d ever been kissed. Couldn’t. He sniffed. ‘Am I right?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe? Jeez, that’s not much encouragement. Tell me what she said.’

The brazen girl he’d given the cigarette to had backed Moriah into the lockers and asked whether or not she’d ended up speaking with him after he’d run after her. Women—you couldn’t get anything past them. Moriah didn’t answer any questions at first, but then this girl—Julie, he recalled—wanted to know was she deaf, so she answered.

‘And what did you say?’

She shrugged.

He let it go, but he wanted to shake that shug out of her.

‘She said that she’d watch out if she were me.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Shane. ‘Why’s that?’

‘They said you’re probably a pervert.’

Shane spat out his mouthful of pie and hooted with laughter. ‘That’s harsh. They don’t even know me. What happened next?’

Moriah dropped her head down, voice quieter. ‘They said he probably can’t get a woman his own age so he’s robbing the cradle.’

‘It’s not like we’re getting married or anything.’

His mood darkened and her face reddened. She bit into her roll again and Shane looked at the dark hair falling in clumps on either side of her face. It wasn’t a pretty face.
But you forgot that when she looked at you with those eyes. He shivered. He felt infectious and couldn’t stop himself from looking down to make sure it wasn’t flooding from his pores. He looked at her again. She was eating so slowly, so calmly. It slowed his blood.

‘Do you get what I’m saying?’

She didn’t answer, dropped her hands with the roll, into her lap.

‘I didn’t chose this. It chose me. And it chose you.’

Her face turned up to his. ‘Okay.’

He grinned out one side of his mouth.

Unexpectedly, Moriah laughed. It was a great laugh. Sort of musical, but not shy. A bold one.

‘What?’ he said.

‘She said I should knee you in the balls.’ She kept laughing.

He joined in. Throwing his hands in the air, protesting. ‘I haven’t so much as touched you with a little finger, have I?’

She shook her head.

‘You can report me, first time I do, if you like.’ He looked at her as solemnly as he could manage. Then grinned. ‘Do we have a deal?’

‘Yes.’

She had pretty teeth. He lit up and offered her a drag. She refused it and he smiled. Nodded his head. Good.

I’m getting marks on my legs,’ she said after a bit and turned a solid thigh to show him how the stones were marking up her skin. White, white skin. Confirmed his decision to let his body turn brown. In contrast. Man and woman. All these changes. He started to unbutton his shirt and she immediately stuck her hands between her legs and tightened her thighs. He chuckled and prodded her with his elbow so she’d get out of the way and he could lay the shirt down for her to sit on. But she didn’t just move to one side, she stood up. Two long legs near his shoulder. She was just asking to be climbed.

He patted his shirt. ‘To save your skin, dopey.’
‘Oh.’ She sat back down but now she was cautious and made sure she wasn’t touching his naked torso.

He sighed. Jesus. Did he have the patience for a virgin? He plucked a sprig of saltbush from the ground and tickled her under the chin with it. She tucked her chin down to her shoulder, trapping the weed, and reached out, unthinkingly, to push him away. He grabbed her hands, pinning them to his chest and watching her face as she registered his speeding heart.

When she looked up at him, maybe openly, maybe even wanting a kiss, he instead let her hands go. Her face fell and he hid his smile. Now she was disappointed. Now she’d been made to feel as though she was rejected. He had the power. Had he done this to Sarah? He didn’t know. Couldn’t remember. Maybe he had, but he’d never thought about it like this. Perhaps that was because he and Sarah were the same age and being with Moriah, it was like he could read how she would respond. He knew beforehand.

He put an arm around her. ‘I want to take you to dinner.’ He could feel her heart now, knocking itself out. She wouldn’t look at him. He tried to put a finger under her chin, but she giggled and lifted her shoulder so her head wouldn’t move around toward him. So he thought for a second and abruptly let her go. It disconcerted her again. She didn’t know what to do if she wasn’t resisting him. He looked at his watch.

‘Better get going.’

Moriah sprung up. Pulling her dress down at the back as she bent to pick up their litter. He swiped his shirt from the ground, not putting it on. He just stood and stretched. Yawned.

‘I don’t have time to walk you anywhere. Probably better if I don’t anyway.’

‘I guess.’

‘I’ll see you around.’ His tone was cruel and he watched her wilt. Looked at his watch again. ‘So long, Marianne.’
She wasn’t moving. Probably didn’t know the song—thought he’d gotten her name wrong. And her waiting for him, wanting him to say something nice, moved him and he reached out to stroke her cheek. She smiled and her eyes were on him and he felt her look and it was like some kind of drug coursing through him.

‘Got to go, sweetheart. The foreman on the bridge construction is a cunt and I’m his punching bag.’

He put a hand to the back of her neck and pulled her forehead to him. Kissed it and then pushed away. Turned around quickly and began walking.

He missed seeing her sudden hot tears.
It was too hot to still be wandering around outside, but that’s precisely what she was doing. It was either that or sit inside doing homework and now that Moustache was dead she didn’t like being in the house by herself. Having words nailed to the page with the blue plastic was great, and she could have gone back to the School of Air library, but the novelty of the school had worn off. Using headphones and listening to a staticky radio, even without teachers, got boring after a while. And it was just like any other school: rules, rules and more rules. Besides, Moriah wanted to think about Shane.

She had not had a boyfriend yet. Most boys her own age were hopeless. Interested in guns and wars and video games. They didn’t know how to speak to her and she had nothing to say to them. She towered over them too. The older ones, boys her Melbourne classmates professed love for, were creepy. Bad skin and lots of spray-on deodorant. They had plenty to say to her, only she didn’t want to hear it.

Shane wasn’t like that. He was a man. She liked the smell of him. Of his sweat. It made her feel crazy funny inside just thinking about the fact that she liked the smell of him. It had never happened before. And he drove a car. And he wanted to take her to dinner. There was a black spot hovering around when she thought about what he called her father. But she wasn’t talking to her father at the moment anyway. Not after Moustache.

God, it was hot. Her clothes stuck to her skin and her thighs rubbed together causing a heat rash. Between her fingers, where she’d picked up a handful of dirt sitting beside Shane, it was getting itchy and the dirt darkened with her sweat. She wished she had brought more than the one dress—she was going to have to wash it tonight. And she should have worn a hat.

There wasn’t anything to look at in this place anyway. It was all just houses without any lawns. Without fences. Without trees. Gravel and red everywhere, and even that looked tired and hot. She needed a drink. Stopping to rest against a fence, she watched as a fat
lady came walking down the road exactly where Moriah had just come. As the lady got slowly closer Moriah could hear her breathing. Moriah knew she was overweight herself, but this lady was big. The sun must be killing her. Squashing the breath out of her.

When she reached the same fence Moriah was resting on, the lady leaned against the gate to push it open. Moriah immediately straightened up. She hadn’t meant to choose this house or anything. But the lady used a finger to ask her to come over. Moriah didn’t want to, but she did anyway.

‘Come inside or you’ll fry.’

It took her a while to say it, but the lady didn’t wait for a reply. She just took off up toward the front door. Moriah followed. Didn’t think about it. Continued not thinking about it until she was seated in a cool kitchen, with an ice drink in her hand, and then, all of a sudden she felt very foolish. She would never have just walked into somebody’s house in Melbourne. Never followed them in just because they invited her and it was a hot day. Not even a day as hot as this.

Neither she nor the woman were speaking yet. They smiled at each other a little. But it was even too hot to do much of that. When the woman did speak it was only to scold her anyway.

‘Don’t you ever let me catch you out walking without a hat and drink again.’

Moriah sipped. Lime cordial. The liquid slipped around her dry mouth. Just the best thing she had ever tasted. She ignored the woman. She was quite good at ignoring adults. They were all like instruction booklets. Nothing interesting ever came out of their mouths. But she was grateful for the drink.

‘Thanks,’ Moriah finally said.

‘I should think so.’

Moriah nodded a little. Conceding. She might have fainted or something, although she was pretty close to the rental house.
She watched as the woman drained her glass in one go. Even the ice. She just crushed it between her teeth, sucked on the last bits.

Moriah tried to bite the ice but she didn’t like the feeling between her teeth.

‘Here, don’t you go trying to bite ice. I’ve been doing it for years. Your teeth are young yet.’

Moriah obligingly sucked. She would practise biting when she got home.

‘So who are you when you’re at home?’

She didn’t quite understand what the woman was asking, so she said nothing.

‘Hello? I said who are you?’

Why did adults always think they could demand things of her? They never did that to other adults. Off the cuff and maybe trying to be funny, she said, ‘I’m a saint.’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘I’m a saint. You know, I perform miracles. All that stuff.’

She smiled but the woman stared blankly at her.

‘Not really,’ Moriah said.

‘I know who you are.’ A finger wagged. ‘Your father is going to fix our bridge. Isn’t that right?’

Moriah shrugged.

‘Your father’s fixing the bridge and you’re a saint. I’d say we’re very lucky to get you two.’

Moriah sat glumly. She wouldn’t usually be smart to an adult, but she was feeling happy because of Shane. Even just thinking that made her smile again.

‘Do you know your father’s mobile number?’

Moriah shook her head. ‘It’s satellite or something.’

The woman gave a big sigh. ‘Can anybody else come and get you?’

And even though she could instinctively feel that it wasn’t a good idea to reveal it, she was too proud to hold his name inside: ‘Shane,’ she said.

The woman frowned. ‘Shane? Shane Mannis?’

Moriah didn’t say anything.
The woman leaned forward in her chair, bringing her stomach and boulder breasts with her. ‘Where did you meet Shane?’

Moriah shrugged.

‘You stay away from Shane. He’s had a rough trot and doesn’t need young whippersnappers frilling around him.’

Moriah wanted to shout at the woman. Shut her up.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘I’m not frilling around him.’ She felt close to tears for some reason. ‘He doesn’t even like my dad.’

Suddenly the woman laughed and some of the skin beneath her face wobbled. ‘I got the wrong end of the stick that time. I added two and two and got five.’ She reached out to grab Moriah’s wrist and shake it. ‘Never you mind.’

Moriah felt completely bewildered. She wanted the hand off her. She wanted everybody’s hands off her. Telling her what to do all the time. The only person who wasn’t telling, who was asking, was Shane.

‘He asked me to dinner,’ she said.

‘Who did?’ The hand clamped tight.

Moriah didn’t answer. Just saying that was enough.

‘Shane did? Missy? Is that who asked you to dinner?’

Moriah wrenched her hand free and sipped her watery cordial.

‘Goodness sakes. What’s the matter with you? I asked you a question.’

Exactly, thought Moriah. And her neck turned scarlet, but she held on to her silence.

‘You finish your drink and we’ll call Father. He’ll get you home.’

‘He’s on-site.’

‘Beg pardon.’

Head down. ‘He’s working at the bridge.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean your father.’ The woman snorted. ‘I mean the priest. Have you met him yet?’

Moriah nodded.
‘You do get about, don’t you?’ Suddenly the woman laughed hard and Moriah looked up to see teeth with lots of grey fillings in them. ‘I don’t think you’ll be up to babysitting.’ She laughed and laughed.

Moriah stood. ‘Thank you for the drink.’

‘For saving your life, you mean. Wear a hat, missy.’

‘Okay.’ She took a step backwards. ‘I have to go now.’

‘And do you know which way you’re going? Because it won’t take a minute to ring the priest and have him pick you up. I don’t want to read in the newspaper that you expired on the way home.’

Moriah pointed. ‘I just go back that way and then that way.’

The woman nodded. ‘Well, don’t dilly-dally. Do you know what that means?’

‘No.’

‘It means don’t do anything else but go home. And don’t say I didn’t warn you about Shane Mannis.’

Moriah ran down the passageway and out the front door.
Janice

‘So what do they have to do? Throw a brick through the window?’

Janice chewed a fingernail as she waited for the answer. But halfway through whatever she was being told, she held the phone away from her ear and hung her head to cry. Silently. They weren’t going to help her.

When she rejoined the conversation it was to yell. ‘No, it’s not all right! How would you feel? No. I don’t have any evidence—nothing you would think was evidence anyway.’

She continued to cry, now into the receiver.

‘Forget it.’

And she hung up.

So much for the police.

Deidre started to cry. Of course. Janice walked into the nursery. A furious little bundle of pink flesh kicked its legs and heels into the bedding. She bent to pick her up and then, abruptly, changed her mind and walked out of the room and shut the door. A little cry wouldn’t hurt her and Janice had to take care of something.

She sniffled a moment on the other side of the door, feeling the tears rise again. This was her day: get up with the baby, feed the baby, entertain the baby, put the baby to sleep, have a nap herself, get up with the baby, feed the baby, entertain the baby, put the baby to sleep, have a nap herself. In between, just for variety, were the nappy changes, the vomiting, the wailing and all the household chores that were going to hell. It was a thrilling existence.

She wound her hair around her fingers and stuck it behind her ears. Then looked around. There were flies congealing on dishes. A pyramid of clothes on top of the washer, a sodden, probably moldy mess of clothes inside, and a line full of stiff and tiny clothes
hanging in the sun. Vegemite smeared the chair arms. And the only smell worse than her underarms, a smell that sat limply in the living room, came from dirty nappies not yet taken out to the bins.

But she was coping with all that. Millions of goddamn women had done so for centuries. And she only had one child. Right? So she could cope with all that. It was the men that made it difficult. The men and their insinuating ways of letting her know that her baby wasn’t going to be hers for very much longer.

Entering the laundry, Janice opened an odd-shaped cupboard that she called the horse-shed. It had a section cut from one side that reminded her of a horse-float and she let the broom and mop heads dangle from the opening, kind of imitating an animal. This morning though, she reached for the hammer—and old-fashioned ball-peen—and then fished around in a large canvas bag of nails. She pulled out as many long, thin ones as she could find in the semi-darkness. The bulb in the cupboard had blown a week ago and she hadn’t yet replaced it.

She heard a scuttling in the cupboard corner and rather than investigate, like she would once have done, she hurriedly got out. Held the cupboard door shut with her foot, the hammer raised to hit whatever managed to shove her aside as it got out. But nothing came. Her shoulders relaxed. The danger wasn’t inside, she reminded herself. In her dreams the danger came from outside. Dreams of hands snatching Deidre. Or of an empty crib and she, frantic, running to the open window and looking out just in time to see one of the men running along beside the house. Dreams of Deidre crying for her, down a well. And dreams filled with horrid images that she wouldn’t allow herself to recall during the day. Sick, sick dreams.

If that weren’t enough, there were phone calls. At first she tried answering, but no one spoke. Sometimes she just let the phone ring out. Lately she’d starting snatching up the receiver to listen before it rang, see if she could catch them out. Then they started calling around to the house. Pushing the front door bell and leaving, before she had a chance to
answer. Once they’d even left a box of clothes and food for the baby. She threw it all out. She wasn’t going to poison her baby. She’d had enough though. Enough.

Which was why she’d called the police—on the north-side. But all they wanted was proof that something had already happened, which was blatantly stupid. What was the point of only being able to act after the crime? Close to tears again, she cheered up when she realised that Deidre had stopped crying. The baby was doing that more frequently, she noticed: crying and then stopping all by herself. “Self-soothing” the books called it.

Putting the hammer and nails down on the kitchen bench, she went outside. Good lord the sun was strong. She blinked and blinked and blinked, but in the end she had to go back inside for sunglasses. Janice hadn’t been outside in the broad daylight for quite a while: she was usually sleeping. Along one corner of the back fence lay a stack of unpainted palings: leftovers from her sister’s landscaping. Janice had been going to sell them, and then she was glad to have them piled over the dead and buried chickens—keeping the cat off. Now she had something else in mind.

She gathered up an armful, noting with annoyance that a few splinters caught and ripped her little camisole. Not that it mattered too much: the once lovely pink satin top had gone grey with repeated washing. Inside she eased most of the palings up onto the kitchen bench, keeping a couple under one arm. Then she counted out twenty nails, which she placed delicately between her teeth and lips, and picked up the hammer.

Janice walked to the livingroom window, dropping the palings and hammer onto the couch. She thrust the curtains to one side. The view wasn’t much anyway. With her left hand she held a paling horizontally over the bottom of the window, then, with her right hand she eased a nail from her mouth and transferred it into her left hand. It took a minute to be able to at once push hard enough against the wood to keep it in position and still hold the nail straight out—all with the left hand only. When she had mastered that, she picked up the hammer and began whacking the nail through the paling onto the
window frame. By the time that one paling was anchored over the window, Deidre was crying again.

‘I’m doing this for you, darling,’ Janice called out. Then she picked up the next paling and laid it over the window. She would do every window in the house. Anything to keep the men out.
Saturday 27th February

Charlie

He sat up the back. Watched the man standing on the stage of the community hall clutching at a piece of paper. Like it could save him. He’d been hoping to see that interloper Shane here. But there was no luck but dumb luck and old Charlie was whip-smart. Too bad. But now that he was here he may as well throw peanuts to the monkeys.

A tall man handed the bridge foreman a microphone, but he refused it, and then, in a manner anyone with half a brain could see was totally out of character, pulled briefly at his trouser legs to sit on the edge of the stage. Getting closer to the action, getting down on the same level. Charlie could have saved him the trouble. Half the people in this meeting were here to gawk and the other half had a bee in their collective bonnet. But to give him his dues, the foreman waited until the hall was quiet before troubling himself to speak.

‘I’m Will Abrahamson. The new foreman for your bridge construction.’

A few people clapped.

‘I know a lot of you aren’t happy I’m here.’

Charlie grinned. Truth was guaranteed to put a lot of backs up. Seemed like Will knew it too because he continued on a different tack.

‘What I mean is, that I’m from out of town and I appreciate that what is needed here is local knowledge.’

A few nods.

‘Basically, that means I’m dependent on you to get this bridge right. There’s no word yet on what went wrong with the former bridge. We can’t say whether it was the actual construction or the materials.’

Charlie’s tongue snaked out to wet his chapped lips. He could put on a show for them at this point. Tell them what it was. But that was the beauty of his role: all behind the curtain.
‘For the record I don’t care what part of the process was at fault. All I care about is giving you a sound bridge in the shortest amount of time possible.’

‘Maybe that was the problem with the previous bridge—built too quickly.’ A middle-aged woman up near the back rows. Big woman. Big voice.

Will nodded. ‘Maybe. Maybe it was. All right, I’ll rephrase. I want to make sure you get a sound bridge—however long it takes. Whatever it takes.’

Now that was a honeyed phrase: whatever it takes. Did the man truly start off at that position, or was he going to have to be forced? Half sighing, half grinning, Charlie was glad the young punk with the effigy had failed. This was his territory now.

‘More money—that’s what it’ll take.’ Same woman. Charlie sniggered. He liked her gusto. Matched her girth.

‘Ma’am, you are?’ Mr Foreman finally had to acknowledge his heckler directly.

‘Gussy’s my name and as you gather I’m not so keen on this project. We’ve been driving around the perimeter of our town to get to the north side for years now and it always worked fine. Couldn’t really see the point of this bridge from the get-go and now the damned thing’s fallen over.’

Charlie wanted to clap at the circus.

Will pulled at his nose, looked at the floor. ‘I don’t want to get involved in your local politics, Gussy,’ he said. ‘The alternative route works for you. I suspect there are others in your community who might find it somewhat easier to get about their business if they don’t have to take that detour.’

‘This is about the new miners, that’s what this is about. Half-wits noodling about after the big dream. It’s not about the people who have been here for—.’

‘All right, Gussy.’ The tall gentleman who’d had the microphone stood and turned around to face her. ‘We’ve been over all this in the meetings last year. The bridge is happening whether you like it or not.’

‘Don’t cut me off, Joe. I’ve got a right to speak if I want to. Building a bridge takes resources that I don’t think we want to use that way. Or why not at least put the project off until we achieve some mining success?’
Joe turned to face Will. ‘We already voted on that, Gussy. Mr Abrahamson has come all this way, and I think we owe it to him to just listen to what his plans are. Please continue.’

Will looked at Gussy and smiled. ‘Like I said, however you came to this point is for you to know. I’m only interested in what happens from now on in. We’re underway and all I’m really saying is hello, let me get on with this and I’ll soon be out of your hair while the bridge will be carrying you across to the north side of your lovely town for years to come.’

There was no response from the floor. Old Charlie raised his hand.

‘Yes?’
‘What if there is a problem?’
A few faces turned to gawk at him. Stranger. But the foreman didn’t know he wasn’t local.
‘If there is a problem we’ll solve it.’
Charlie stood now. ‘I’ve been involved with the building of hundreds of bridges.’
He watched as Will had the decency to colour.
‘I’m just wondering,’ he continued, ‘how many you’ve been involved with?’
The silence in the room become acute.
‘None,’ Will finally said.
Charlie sat down again and let that set amongst the pigeons.

As anticipated there was fuss. Squawking and chest beating and strutting around. But Will handled it well. A credit to himself. He answered all accusations calmly. Maybe a little coldly, but that’s a man ruled by reason. Shouldn’t give little boys rulers and science sets: made their hearts seize.

Charlie let the wheels turn without him now. He was more interested in the woman who had been his partner in crime: the obese heckler. She might be just the kind of fertile
ground into which he could plant a simple weed: the kind of weed that would distract everybody from the flower he really needed to cultivate.
The Bridge

Monday 2nd March

Gussy

She began to hyperventilate. She’d done this before, so immediately stood and slowly walked over to a certain kitchen drawer from where she retrieved a brown paper bag. She inhaled into it and gradually calmed herself down. This was what happened when she got overly excited. She waved a hand at herself, fanning her flushed cheeks.

It took her the best part of the morning to come up with the idea of patronising the shop nearest the bridge site. And she got mighty weary of traipsing along the aisles, looking at the bags of corn kernels ready to microwave into popcorn, and the rows of sports drinks with added vitamins—all while dodging the first welcoming, then curious, and finally, suspicious gaze of the checkout girl. About an hour into this riveting adventure Will entered the shop.

Gussy laid a hand on her chest and shook her head for some time before she was able to get a word out.

‘Prayers are answered, Mr Abrahamson. That’s all I’ll say for now.’

He gave her a tight little smile, recognising her instantly, she saw. ‘Depends whose prayers,’ he retorted.

‘True. Not your daughter’s, I hope.’

His entire demeanour changed. Concern mixed with irritation. She would have to tread gently. ‘I don’t like to be the one to bring it up—.’ She could see that wasn’t a great beginning. ‘What I mean is that Moriah is a very singular girl and—.’

‘Has she been truanting?’

Gussy shook her head. No. At least not that Gussy was aware of, and for her that amounted to the same thing. ‘This is a more delicate matter.’

‘Sounds like I should stay right out of it then.’

‘Now that’s precisely the problem.’
Will sighed. Took a bottle of water off the shelf. She wanted to tell him he may as well be purchasing liquid gold, but he got in first.

‘If you’ve got something to say, Mrs—, I’m sorry I don’t know your full name.’

‘Everybody calls me Gussy.’

‘Please just let me know what’s on your mind, Gussy, I’m due back on site.’ He looked tired. Exhilarated, but tired. Far away from home.

‘I think your daughter might be taking up with the wrong kind of company.’

He looked at her a minute and she could see that he was thinking what she said wasn’t exactly a revelation. ‘Okay,’ he said slowly, like she was a little dim. ‘Well, thank you for the insight. I’ll keep my eyes peeled.’

Gussy cleared her throat and played the ace with triumph. ‘I mean male company.’

He was alert now. ‘Are you telling me my daughter is dating someone? Here? Already?’

Gussy held up her hands in partial denial. Now that she’d played her hand she could afford to backpedal a little. String things out. ‘I don’t know anything for a fact. I hear things. I see things. And she as much as told me someone asked her to dinner. I’m just bringing things to your attention. You’re busy building your first bridge. Ecetera, ecetera.’

Will took a minute, then smiled. ‘Okay. Once again, thank you for the heads up.’

She was enjoying herself now. ‘How many other children have your raised? This your first?’

Will wiped his mouth. Working hard to keep his patience. ‘What is it again that you’re bringing to my attention?’

Gussy hesitated.

‘Did you see her kissing? Hear her swearing? Catch her grafffitting?’

Gussy huffed herself up. ‘I didn’t see anything. I’m just concerned about her choice of companion. He—.’ She stopped on account of Will’s smile.

He saw this and had the courtesy to look down at his feet.

‘Am I amusing to you?’ she demanded.
He sighed again. This time far more gently and when he looked at her she saw it was with patience. ‘Are you concerned about my daughter in the same way you’re concerned about the bridge?’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘It seems to me Gussy, that you’re concerned about a lot of things.

She was so thunderstruck, she remained absolutely silent.

Will continued, ‘I’m sorry you felt you had to trouble yourself with this. But if she has a boyfriend, or even the intimations of one, frankly I’m delighted. First I’ve heard or seen anything like it. Good for her. In the meantime, she’s probably having a hard enough time working it all out without us talking about her. If you understand my meaning?’

Gussy’s mouth clamped shut.

‘I appreciate you looking out for her. For us, if it comes to that. But she’s got a damned good head on her shoulders, Gussy, and her interests are rather tame. I’d trust her choice.’

Gussy gave a brittle laugh. ‘If you’re referring to her interest in all things saintly—.’

Will interrupted, ‘That’s exactly what I’m referring to and if you already know that about her, chances are this young man does too. I haven’t been that supportive of it in the past, but I’m beginning to see where it might have its advantages.’

Gussy shook her head. ‘You’re barking up the wrong tree entirely.’

‘I’ll take it from here.’

Gussy set her mouth as straight as a hairpin. That was it then. She’d warned the daughter, she’d warned the father. That was about as much as a body could be expected to do.
‘You’re a hard man to get hold of.’
‘I am. I am. Sorry you’ve had to chase me but I’m always on site and none of the mobile phones out here—mobile bricks, I call them—seem to keep a signal longer than five minutes.’
‘Five minutes is probably long enough.’
‘Right. Okay. I’ll keep that in mind.’
‘So where are we?’
‘The old footprint is completely gone. Took longer than I thought it would.’
‘How’s the schedule looking then?’
‘We’ll be back up to speed in 24 hours.’
‘Heard there was a bit of a ruckus at the town meeting.’
‘I’d hardly call it a town meeting.’

Silence.

‘They did learn that I hadn’t built a bridge before now.’
‘Everyone has to start somewhere.’
‘I said as much, but you’ve got no idea the small-town mentality.’
‘Out in the sticks, hey?’
‘Like I said, we’re making progress.’
‘Good. All right. Nothing specific I needed. Just like to be kept abreast of things I’m paying for.’

Silence.

‘It’s a joke, mate. Heat getting to you?’
‘Probably. Look, I’ll do a better job of sending reports. And feel free to drive out whenever you like.’
‘Ha-bloody-ha.’
‘You do your schoolwork today?’ His first words to his daughter across the dinner table. She nodded. She wasn’t speaking to him at the moment because of the cat. She’d answer a question, but not verbally.

‘Good,’ he said, although he wasn’t sure whether to believe her or not. ‘I know it’s hard sometimes.’ He nodded when he saw her skeptical look. ‘I mean it. I know how hard it can be. I hated school when I was your age. And once again it’s all new people.’ She stared at him.

‘But I gather you’ve already met a few.’

He tried to read her expression. Was she afraid of what he might know? He honestly couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

‘I’m not prying, Moriah. I’m just trying to tell you that L— isn’t like Melbourne. People here, well they like to know what everybody else is doing. They especially like to know about new people.’

She was hanging on his every word. This was a new experience for him. He liked it. Or was it an old experience? Wasn’t this closer to what it used to be like—when he came home from work and she flung herself into his arms? When he was telling her something about the world that was new to her: how aeroplanes flew, or why some flowers opened their petals in the moonlight? Maybe he could have some of that with her again.

‘The number of times I’ve had make my way in new—.’ And just like that her eyes glazed over. He wasn’t sure why. There never seemed to be a reason. It was in these moments that he most resented his wife’s actions. This was partly her responsibility.

‘Anyway,’ he said, pushing his plate away. She stood to take their plates over to the sink. Her sullen and bulky form knocking against the table edge. He tried tamping down the thought, but there it was: he wished Moriah was a boy. It had to be easier. And possibly more enjoyable.

‘You be all right if I go out for a while?’
The Bridge

The water pounded against the plates as she affected not to hear him and he looked to the heavens while making a pretence of putting his hands around a throat and strangling it. When he looked over at her again, she was staring at him.

‘I’ve got to just run out for bit. Do you want to come or are you okay here by yourself?’

She opened her mouth as though to speak, but caught herself in time and just shook her head. She was too old for this malarkey and he had a good mind to tell her so—but he let his shoulders sink instead. Make her feel guilty for a change.

‘Okay. Well call me—the number’s on the fridge—or go next door to Miss Harding, if you get stuck with anything. I’ll be about half an hour.’

She nodded and around fifteen minutes later Will was sitting in the land rover outside old Charlie’s place.

Place gave him the heebee-jeebees. There was no noise and no movement. He knocked and after waiting a while knocked again. Gurgling sounded from near the back of the house. Deciding to disregard civilities, Will walked briskly around to the back yard. The old man was lying on the cold dirt, one hand pointed up at the stars.

‘Charlie?’

The old man jumped in his skin and then slowly turned his head to peer up at Will.

‘Are you all right?’ He made as though to help the old man up, but Charlie batted away the outstretched hand.

‘I’m Will Abrahamson. Remember? I tried knocking but you didn’t hear me.’

Old Charlie now tried to sit up—mouth pulled into rictus as he used every available muscle, and still failed. He stayed where he was.

Will sized up the situation immediately. ‘Maybe I can put the kettle on?’

‘Have a look at the stars,’ Charlie coughed.

Will craned his neck back, way back, the better to see.

‘Get down.’

Will sighed, hands in his coat pockets, and squatted. ‘Look, mate, I don’t really have time for this. I just wanted to talk about the bridge.’
The Bridge

‘Southern Cross. Brightest stars tonight.’

The squatting wasn’t conducive to astronomy so Will kept his eyes on Charlie. Trying to get a handle on how drunk he was and how much time to waste finding out out.

‘Originally or more formally known as Crux, the Southern Cross is made up of four points. One of those points,’ Charlie paused and used his index finger again and Will had no choice but to at least sit down on the ground and pretend to care. ‘One of those points, called alpha Centuri, is actually a triple star, made up, in part, of a red star called proxima Centura. I’m sure you can guess that proxima Centura is the closest star to our solar system?’

Will was trying to see which one of the stars old Charlie was pointing at. ‘I don’t look at stars much.’

‘Figured,’ said Charlie. ‘You think about the earth much?’

‘I have to.’

‘I don’t mean soil, I mean do you think about the fact that we’re living on a moving object?’

There was silence for a moment as Will gazed upwards. Charlie sounded lucid and knowledgeable and Will was getting dragged somewhere despite himself. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Figured.’

Will tried to laugh. ‘Too much on my plate down here.’

‘What’s on your plate down here is because of the movement of the planets. What do you think solar panels are but prayers to the sun.’

Will stayed quiet. He would wait for an entrance into what he wanted to say.

‘You know the earth moves around the Sun? I presume they’re still teaching that,’ continued Charlie. ‘Anyway, earth moves around the sun, sun moves around the centre of
the Milky Way Galaxy and the Milky Way Galaxy orbits in the Local Group of Galaxies. See how small we’re getting?’

Will did and it was making him dizzy. This was a trick he was going to remember. ‘What does the Local Group of Galaxies spin around?’ he asked.

Charlie smiled and spit to his right. ‘Well, I know that the Local Group moves at about 600 kilometres per second. A speed totally unexpected. But I don’t know, and I don’t think anyone else does yet, why it is that we’re moving so fast. Nor what around, to answer your question. What do you think is out there?’

Will shuddered. ‘Look, I appreciate your astronomy lesson, but like I said, I’m actually here to talk about the bridge.’

‘That’s exactly what we are talking about.’

‘We are?’

‘The bridge, the planet, the universe.’

‘If you’re trying to tell me that one bridge doesn’t matter you’re headed in the right direction, but you’ll have to convince a whole other lot of people who think it does.’

The old man spat again. ‘Never said it didn’t matter. The problem is that it matters much more than you think.’

Will nodded. ‘I can see you love all this old wise man stuff and I’ll admit I’ve learned something tonight but—.’

‘Help me up.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I can’t get up. You haven’t learned anything and I need to get up before I get chilblains.’

Will stood and heaved the fragile body upwards. ‘I just want to ask you one question.’

‘Yes?’ Charlie began walking towards the house. On the way he dropped his trousers and began pissing.

‘Christ.’ Will folded his arms across his chest.

Charlie zipped himself up and opened the back door. ‘I don’t like you either,’ he said.
Inside despite himself, Will leaned against the wall watching the older man’s hands as he filled an electric jug to make tea. When he wasn’t speaking he could have been someone’s grandfather. Bent over like a question mark. When his tea was finally handed to him, Will saw that the tea stains from last time hadn’t been properly washed away. He watched as Charlie poured a third of a cup of tea for himself and then filled the remaining two thirds with some colourless liquid. Figured he had approximately half an hour before talking would degenerate into pointlessness.

‘In here or there?’ Charlie asked.

‘Here’s fine.’ They scraped back some chairs and sat.

Charlie waited.

Will looked down at his hands, nodded slightly. ‘So, you knew I’d never built a bridge before.’ The question, the accusation was momentous to him. He had to fight the urge to qualify Charlie’s knowledge with his other building experience.

‘Jim told me.’

Whatever response Will had expected, it wasn’t that one. He didn’t realise Jim knew Charlie. He sipped at his tea. It was bitter and weak.

Charlie gave a lean smile. ‘Why do you think he hired me?’

‘I didn’t know he did.’

‘Just as consultant. Nothing important.’

Will nodded. Feeling slightly off-key. He didn’t know what was past and what was present here.

Charlie gave him another more generous smile. ‘He doesn’t like me either. None of us like each other. Not even from distant school days.’

Will narrowed his eyes.

Charlie laughed. ‘Poor Will. He thought he was the sun and he’s just found out about the Milky Way Galaxy.’
Will saw that he’d underestimated Jim and Charlie and purely for reasons of appearance. A CEO’s flashy grin and a drunkard’s slur and he’d thought he was smarter than them both. Instead, he was well and truly out of his depth. Weighing up his options he decided to risk asking what he wanted to know. ‘What’s your typical role on a bridge-build?’

‘You’re not ready for that. Ask another question.’

Will looked down at his tea. Frustrated. Confused.

‘Jim only does what he needs to do, Will. But then you should know him better than I do.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘No. I don’t think so either. I’ve sat across the table from hundreds of men like you, Will. I’ve had this conversation hundreds of times. Some of you are a little quicker to catch on, some a little slower.’ He sipped at his tea. ‘What else is on your mind?’

Will shut his eyes briefly. Whatever he asked could only give the man more satisfaction. Any display of ignorance. But he was ignorant. In fact, he felt strung up by his balls. It was Jim he wanted to rip through now: Jim must have known his foreman would eventually find himself here, seated across the table like so many other idiots.

He decided to try a new tack. ‘What is a black hole?’

Charlie laughed—a gurgle in the back of his throat. He shook a finger at Will. ‘I’m not letting you sidestep. What’s a black hole; think of a rivet hole in space. What does that mean? Cavities concentrate stress. That’s what black holes do—concentrate stress. Concentrate energy. Millions of galaxies. Best to give in to it. Next question, real question.’

‘All right. Why did the last bridge fall down?’

‘Good question.’ He squinted at Will. ‘Do you really want to know?’

Will tried to understand the question. Couldn’t. ‘Of course I want to know. I don’t want to make the same mistake, if that’s what it was.’

‘No mistake.’
Will cocked his head to one side, as though trying to hear better. ‘Something obvious then, you think? Even deliberate?’
‘Ignorance.’
Will nodded. Okay.
‘Lack of respect.’
Will tried to make sense of this. ‘Referring to spirits or something like that? Is that what you mean?’ He had been warned that there might be some fuss with regard to sacred sites.
Charlie nodded.
Will sat back. Pleased with himself and at the same time trying to think through the implications. Charlie might be suggesting a type of sabotage because proper dues weren’t paid. ‘Well, surely we can get that seen to.’
‘Up to you.’
‘Okay, well I’ll put the word around.’
‘No, no, you have to carry out the ritual.’ Charlie drained his cup.
‘I thought the whole point was that white men weren’t allowed to.’

Charlie sneered. ‘You ever seen an Aboriginal bridge?’
Will shook his head.
‘So,’ said Charlie, ‘it’s not an Aboriginal ritual.’
‘Now you’ve lost me.’
‘All right.’ Charlie ran his tongue along his top gum. ‘Get me a beer.’
‘Look, mate—.’
‘In the fridge. Get yourself one too.’
Half mindless with sudden frustration and the desire to get this over and done with, Will did as he was asked.
‘I open it on the door handle,’ Charlie offered.
But Will had the satisfaction of using his bare hand.
Charlie drank greedily. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘no doubt you want the simplified version. But do you want the long or short simplified version?’
‘Short.’
‘The land is living—moving, living, breathing. Running round the sun. If you want to alter the land you must pay it dues.’

‘What sort of dues?’

Charlie closed his eyes and nodded. ‘Exactly.’

Will could feel his jaw-line stiffen with restraint. He kept himself in check for Moriah’s sake. He kept himself in check by thinking about what he was going to do to Jim next time he saw him.

‘Just tell me what the dues are, Charlie.’

‘Blood.’

‘Sorry?’

Silence.

‘Come on, Charlie. You tell me about the hundreds of other men sitting before you, and I’m supposed to believe you’ve told them they have to offer blood dues?’

Charlie nodded.

Will took in a long breath. ‘Well, that’s all very interesting.’ He hoped his voice sounded as sarcastic as he intended. ‘I’ve never heard of this before and I’ve been in construction for over twenty-five years.’

Charlie fixed a lightless eye on him. ‘Doing renovations. Building on top of other people’s foundations. Including your office complexes. Have you ever built something on land that hasn’t had any sort of structure on it?’

‘Course I have. Vacant lots. All kinds of things.’

Charlie smiled. ‘Vacant lots,’ he repeated. ‘Vacant lots in the city are not so vacant.’ His eyes were like black prunes. But the smile didn’t leave his mouth.

Will stood. ‘It’s been a very illuminating evening. I think I’ll make my way now.’

Charlie clutched his beer. ‘You’re a free man. Do what you want. But you’ll be back.’
Will looked at him a long moment. ‘Just a small word of warning: if I find out that you’ve been sabotaging the bridge in any way—.’

Charlie had his hands raised in the air. ‘No need,’ he said. ‘But when you want to know more, you come back again.’

‘You can be sure I will.’

Charlie suddenly yelled. Banged his fist against the table. ‘You think you’re humouring me. You walk away and build your bridge and pretend you know nothing about the sun.’

‘I don’t know anything about the sun!’

‘Then walk away!’ Charlie fairly spat the words at him but then suddenly drooped. Looked his age. ‘It’s not that difficult. What are you getting so riled up about? I can give you books that will show you that men have been doing this for thousands of years. Round up some animals—.’

‘What?’

‘Find an animal.’ Charlie looked up at him. ‘Then kill it on-site, offer it and bury it. It’s as simple as that. You’re getting worked up over nothing. The Milky Way Galaxy is only one of thousands orbiting up there.’

‘What?’

‘It gets bigger. The story you’re in gets bigger.’

Will shook his head as though trying to rid it of everything he was hearing. ‘What if I tell someone?’

Charlie grinned.

‘I mean it. Imagine the field day the papers would have.’

‘So tell them.’

‘Does Jim know about this—your advice?’

‘Does the Milky Way Galaxy know about the Sun?’

Will held a hand up in front of himself. ‘Okay, stop. Just stop talking.’

Charlie nodded. But it wasn’t triumphant. It was perfunctory.
The Bridge

‘Just for the record, old man, I think you are silly in the head. I’m sorry to say that, but I think it’s best if you know where I stand.’

‘I’m tired,’ said old Charlie.

‘I’m tired too,’ Will said, and he left.
‘I want some help, Father.’ Gussy wasn’t looking at him when she said it, but he opened the door wider and pointedly looked at his watch, then back at her.

She didn’t bother trying to tell him it was only going to take a minute and he gently sighed and let her come inside. She was lucky, or he was lucky, that she hadn’t come ten minutes later. He’d already have been in bed with his thesis notes.

As it was he stifled a yawn as he followed her down his passageway and into the living room. He referred it as his prayer room because it was where he said his daily mass and where all his religious artefacts were. The cross and chalice and Bible. He liked to think it comforted his visitors to see all these otherworldly signs in the midst of their troubles. They certainly comforted him.

Gussy sat in the highest chair in the room and looked expectantly to him.

‘What seems to be the problem, then?’

‘I suppose I’m a bit lonely and I don’t mean to get involved in other people’s business, but I don’t have much else to do.’

He wanted to laugh. What a self-pitying piece of nonsense. She loved putting her nose in other people’s lives and the pretence at otherwise was a weak contrivance. But she had to know he knew that, so what was she up to? ‘There is always work for idle hands, Gussy. Are you here to volunteer your services?’

She half-smiled and he wished they could have just had an honest conversation, but as far as he knew it wasn’t possible. Better just to stick to the script.

‘What’s on your mind then?’

‘The bridge.’

That was unexpected. In Father Nott’s mind Gussy was the modern day equivalent of the old-fashioned matchmaker. Even at the bridge site she still concentrated her energies on the activities between the younger men and women. That was the singular misfortune of
women who lived for their men; when the man was gone, so was so much of the purpose. Still, Father Nott hadn’t deluded himself into thinking that Jesus was going to help her fill the time up.

‘What about it?’

‘I’ve heard talk that the reason it isn’t standing has nothing to do with the way it was built.’ He looked quizzically at her. ‘I’m referring to rituals, Father. Apparently there are certain things that need to be done in order to get a bridge to stand and let me just say that the only reason I’m paying any attention is because I don’t want to be pouring good money after bad. Again. Now do you know anything about these rituals?’

Father Nott shook his head, his ears pricking up. ‘What exactly was said? And who said it?’

‘I don’t want to attribute it to one person, Father. That hardly seems charitable.’ Despite himself he could feel his face crimsoning, and then, of course, at his discomfort she predictably relaxed.

‘I’m simply here to discuss the general matter with you.’

‘Well, I repeat myself—what was said?’

‘I didn’t follow it very well.’

Father wanted to throw his hands in the air, but he didn’t move. He stayed quiet. One of the things the confessional box had taught him was the power of silence. A question asked was a question asked indefinitely if you didn’t rush in and help the person who didn’t want to answer it. He simply looked at her.

She cleared her throat. ‘What I mean is that I probably didn’t understand what was said.’ Father once again held his tongue. There was very little, in his reckoning, that fell outside the powers of Gussy’s understanding, unless she flat out didn’t want to understand. She was just having fun teasing it out.
As if to confirm it, she frowned at his silence, then continued speaking. ‘He said the bridge needed help to stand. Or rather, that the land needed help to accept that the bridge would stand. Or would be there. Or something like that.’

‘I’m not sure I follow.’

Gussy bent and placed her handbag on her lap. He could see that she was on the verge of announcing her goodbyes.

‘Now really, Gussy, there must be a reason you felt compelled to come here and tell me about the conversation.’

She nodded.

‘Well, then, out with it. Plain speaking.’

‘I think he has, or is planning to kill an animal to make the bridge stand up.’

Father Nott looked at her. ‘Is that what they said?’

She shrugged.

He sat silent a good half minute. Then said, ‘Does that upset you?’

She looked surprised. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Gussy, animal sacrifice has been going on for a long time.’

She shuddered slightly, excitedly. ‘Not nowadays, surely?’

He nodded. ‘Possibly. Probably. People still cling to pagan rites. They like the tradition and they like the directness. And when you add alcohol,’ he peered at her to see if she would react, but she was sitting mum so he continued, ‘well, who knows where it leads. It’s far more difficult to sit with an unseeable God than to worship the sun and moon. The instinct to reach for a god is entirely correct, but many prefer a pagan illusion.’

She leaned forward. ‘And you’re not worried about it?’

‘Beyond hoping whoever it is chooses one of their own animals and doesn’t go trying to steal someone else’s or that he doesn’t perform the more garish ceremonial rituals, no, I’m not at all worried.’

Gussy put a hand to her chest. ‘Well, that makes me feel a lot better.’
Father Nott genuinely smiled. She was a strange one. Who would have thought that she could be spooked by such a thing? ‘We all have our beliefs, don’t we? It’s remarkable how limited they are in the scheme of things. Even I still knock on wood.’

‘I pray to Saint Anthony whenever I lose the remote control.’

Father Nott smacked his knees and gave a little chuckle. ‘There you are then. You and I are as heathen as the next.’

Gussy got to her feet. ‘It’s amazing how things can play on the mind. Especially when you’ve got no one telling you how silly you are.’

Father nodded and moved her out of the room and along the hallway.

‘You won’t tell anyone about this?’ she said.

Father opened the front door. ‘No. Just between us.’

She started to go, then pulled back. ‘By the way,’ and she tapped the side of her nose, ‘that girl, Moriah, claims to be a saint.’

Father frowned for a moment. Moriah who? Then he remembered. ‘Ah, well,’ he said. ‘The follies of youth.’

Gussy left.

When he shut the door he leaned against it for a moment, with his fingers to his lips. Well, this was exciting. Animal sacrifice. Who would have thought this lot could concoct that? As he told Gussy, he wasn’t worried about it. But it certainly changed his perspective on the conversation with old Charlie, the devil. Mind you, if Father didn’t get on top of this Charlie might find himself in a spot of trouble. The rest of the town was much more inclined to react precisely the way Gussy did. Charlie was very foolish to have announced his intentions like that and remarkably fortunate that she came to him. The last thing he wanted to be dealing with was any sort of mass hysteria. Better nip this in the bud as soon as possible.

Not that he was going to try and prevent it. Charlie would see soon enough that slaughtering animals was better for food than to make the world a little closer to the way he wanted it. People always thought that they believed in the result or outcome of religious ceremony, when most often what they believed in was the ceremony itself: the
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trance, the words, the joined hands, the bent head, the bits and bobs that were eaten or
drunk or nailed on the wall.

No, people didn’t really believe in the outcome of pagan rituals, they believed in the
dance. Still, hats off to old Charlie for trying. It would make things a little livelier for him
for a bit too when word got around. Nothing like controversy to stir the spirit. In fact,
Father clapped his hands together, he might have just found his thesis topic: *Baal
Retruns: Paganism in Outback Australia*

Father finally left the front door to go and have a sherry. He wanted to sit up for a bit and
savour it all.