My Father’s Notebook
Part One
Chapter One. Mainly about JAY
Me and Art came up from the oval walking slow-single-file on a bitch-hot day full of sorrow. We walked along the sun-cut morning street. Art who was two steps ahead, was stooped and breathing heavy as we approached the blue stone lane. Neither of us said a word. We were on our way back from our mother’s funeral, weighed down with it, and I heard, or thought I heard her casket dragging behind us on the road, like a torn wooden boat. I felt the rippled sun on my shoulders, Art still ahead with my shadow across his back, a grey-light-embrace pulling me up the footpath.

We turned into the blue stone lane behind Ray Street, walking on curved bricks, already pulsing-warm and bulging in the sun. The laneway was littered with tan, sickle-shaped leaves that fractured under our feet, the coffin-boat still behind us. We walked the length of the lane until it split off and narrowed, then we walked up the smaller section. Art paused at the gate and turned to face me. He was half-smiling, his eyes spoiled-red. At the funeral he’d been crying, like a little girl. He didn’t open the gate. His face, bruised and misshapen was glistening with sweat. I knew he was gonna ask me about Susan, I just knew.

“Did ya fuck her?” I looked at his feet, I couldn’t help it; slightly splayed, a shoelace about to give; looked back at him, sorrow like a lead rope between us.

“Fuck off.” I could feel the sun on my neck. Art stood broad, the broken gate behind him.

“Well did ya?” He squinted and his jaw protruded past its normal place. I saw his broken teeth. I looked down again, frowning-sad, holding myself together. Art turned his back to me and went through. He didn’t hold the gate. It slammed in my face. The pale grey palings clacked and rippled. I heard a bird scatter in the leaves above. I pushed the gate open, went
through and shut it quiet like someone was sleeping.

The garden seemed smaller. The lawn was the colour of skin. I walked across it and up the steps to the veranda where Art was pacing. The back of the Ray Street house was shimmering in the sunlight. It was hard to approach. I could feel sweat running down my neck; into the small of my back. I stood in the shade next to Art. There was a feeling I didn’t understand. It rose to my chest and gathered on my face.

“Well did ya?” He was angry now. I turned away.

“Jesus Art.” I sat on the bench next to the door, couldn’t find a place for my hands. The bench was hot and uncomfortable, its oily surface sticking against my pants. I wanted to stand and go inside but I didn’t.

“Do you think it’ll feel different in the house.” I could see a cup on the table. I thought of the milk-fat in blotches floating on the surface. Art was pacing again. I imagined he’d drink that coffee. The thought made me sick. He didn’t want to go inside, any more than I did. He sat on the hot bench. I felt the weight of his body.

“Don’t change the subject Jay, did you fuck her or not?” He was close to me. His voice was softer. I could smell his breath.

“Just fuck off.” The words came without energy. I pushed him. He stood up, pacing the deck again. I heard his shoes sounding on the wood.

“Come on Jay, what’s the big deal, ya either did or ya didn’t.”

“You left her.” I turned to look into the house and saw Art’s features reflected in the window. I could see the hot morning sun, hurled bright on his face. Art’s face. His right eye and cheekbone were still raised. The bone under his eyebrow was enlarged. Billy Wednesday and Charlie had really given him a beating. He’d stopped pacing. I don’t think he knew I was looking at him; examining himself, tilting his bruised face. He reached his hand up, pressed his fingers below the eye. I saw him grimace. It was strangely private; his shoulders impassive, his lank dark hair grown out since hospital. He pushed it off his face and stepped a little
closer up behind me. I wanted to look away but I couldn’t. The reflection was mixed with the straight-sight of the beige lino cupboards, the flowers on the bench; all mingled together. And in that mingling everything was back to how it had been. My mother was inside somewhere and me and Art were sparring at the gym. My father was a story I’d never known. Then, it was gone. Art lifted his hand to his forehead, turned his face back and forth against his palm. He was so close I could hear the skin rub. He said something I didn’t catch. The voice seemed to come from the reflection, from the empty kitchen. It made me jump. Like the voice of the dead. Then the image was gone. The cupboards and flowers came back into focus.

“Jay!”

“Let’s go inside,” I said, but Art ignored me.

“So ya did.”

I turned, looking at his puffy face, his hair hanging across his eyes. I nodded for the first time. I thought of Billy Wednesday and the night he put Art in hospital. Going to visit him. Seeing a tooth covered in blood, root and all in a kidney dish by his bed. Seeing his muscled arm long and limp on the cotton broad-weave blanket. I thought of Susan, too. Susan and Art had been going out for a while and I hated every minute of it. I hated that he was five years older and all I wanted was for time to pass and for it to somehow sail me into her. Or push her off somewhere I wouldn’t have to deal with her glistening skin and her smell every time she came round to visit Art. I shook inside every time I was with her, like I was cold. The desire to kiss her was as big as clouds. It had a hold of me like a disease. I was only fifteen and it felt so impossible. Like there was no remedy.

Art sat next to me on the bench.

“I don’t care you know.” His voice trailed away. He leaned his face on his hands, his eyes covered, “I don’t.” I thought he was going to cry again,
like the girl at the funeral.

“Let’s go inside.” He ignored me again. We sat there for a while not saying anything, the birds singing a silver-rattle song in the trees above.

“Mum woulda liked us sitting here.”

“Yeah, sitting in the hot sun.” He was slumped. I wanted to hug him but I knew he’d hit me. He’d hit me for sure. So I left it. And it was then, in that morning, I had the strangest feeling – that I’d crashed the love between me and Art. Like it was a car made of black-glass.

On the first of December, about three weeks after the funeral, it was forty degrees at eleven o’clock. I was at Ray Street alone, sorting things out, which mostly meant getting high, trying to duck the heat, putting pots in boxes, cushions, books, tinned food. Art had fucked off somewhere. To ‘sort himself out;’ and with every object I packed I cursed his name. The heat sucked me tired and paid me back in sweat. At about one p.m. I was in the front room looking out the window. I noticed the silver-dry rain-dusted glass catching the light. In that moment the window was made of flat white gauze. Beyond it there was a breeze in the branches of the trees. I heard the gate open, and like he’d always been there my father showed up on the garden path with an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth.

I’d never met him, but I knew. I just knew. My body throbbed. I heard the sound of a dog whine. My father looked cool, as though the heat didn’t touch him. He was unmoving. The metal gate half-open in his hand. He stood strong and even, his legs apart and I couldn’t stop looking at him. I wanted to move, to hide, but kept thinking it was too late. In the strangest way I felt I was making a decision. He started up the path. I was sure he hadn’t seen me. I felt my stomach turn, watched the breeze ruffle the trees by the window, dragging leaves in a slow-and-scratch across glass. I looked back to the path, to the open gate but I lost sight of him.
Then, I heard his heavy boot-steps on the veranda. He must have walked along its length, away from the door, looking up the side of the house and back again. There were ten or fifteen steps; slow but purposeful. I waited for the knock at the door. It didn’t come. I was motionless. I waited and waited. It didn’t come. I heard his footsteps stop and as if the heat had changed his mind he walked back down the path, shut the gate, turned left and was gone. The empty house pressed into me. I looked across the street straining to see him, trying to believe it had been him at all. I went back to the dry-grease feel of newsprint on my fingers, wrapping kitchen glasses in the real-estate section. The matte brown cardboard box swelling at the sides as I stuffed it full.

**Jay About Susan**

I don’t know if Art knew what he was doing when he left town after the funeral with his dog-tail between his legs. He went to some shit hole hotel with yellow wallpaper and square-stitched bed quilts. Without him, sorting our mother’s house was a joyless, hollow-day-after-hollow-day-chore. For two weeks I pulled things from cupboards leaving them in piles on the floor, sparkles of dust scattered in the sunlight. I washed walls with sugar-soap in green torn rubber gloves, the caustic grey water ran – pin-striping my memories, dragging them over the skirting boards into pools of muck that stained the floorboards pale in large shapes like dogs I could never fix. I took pictures off the walls pulling the nails out clean when I could but mostly bits of plaster fractured, flaked and fell, beneath button sized marks in the smooth surfaces. Every movement had a grief-echo to it. The boxes filled and I slid them across the floor to the hallway on top of scrape-tear sounds that rippled up my arms. I pushed and dragged all the furniture into corners. I mopped the bathroom. I emptied kitchen draws upside down onto the lino floor, stainless knives and forks, a cork screw, plastic straws – all making a restless silver-cling, a cut-smash sound at the gloom.

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My footsteps on the boards gave me visions of the hollow dark spaces beneath the house. I spent half the time forgetting what was next.

Then random things – the crumple and dry-slime feel of the old shower curtain – I stuffed it into a box; the bumping of pots pulled one by patient one from kitchen cupboards, then in fury scooped in armfuls from low and high cupboards in a clanging mess. The noise helped me breathe. It broke something. It broke the grief-echo. But the silence always came back. The silence was Art’s fault. Even when I sat and did nothing the heavy silence and the slow-pass moments of time twist themselves together somehow.

In the middle of the second week the forecast was forty and I worked slow, in the never-stop blanket of heat. I was resting on the couch watching some mid-day crap on TV when the phone rang. The ringing was spooky, like it made me forget, like the sound of it would summon my mother through the back door. After the jolt of this her voice drifted behind my eyes. I let the phone ring. It stopped and rang again so I answered and held the flat, warm cream coloured receiver to my ear.

“Hi, Jay, is that you?” I knew the voice. It was Susan.

“Hey, have you heard from Art?”

“No.”

“So you’re there alone?”

“Yeah.” She muttered something under her breath.

“Susan?”

“Nothing, nothing. That sucks, that really sucks.” She wasn’t talking to me. Then she said, “Hey, shall I come round, would that be ok? It must be hard.”

“I’m ok,” I said,

“Na, seriously, Jay. You shouldn’t be there alone.”

“I’m fine.” I wanted to get off the phone.

“I’ll come over, really. It’s no problem.” And that was that. In less than an hour she was at the front door in peachy colours holding a hat and a
bottle of wine. Thirty-five degrees. The first thing she did was go to the cupboard looking for glasses, which weren’t there.

“Where are the glasses, Jay?” Her voice was soft and sad, like she thought I was about to wet myself. She was bossy. I pointed to a box in the hall and she rummaged through the newspaper packages. She found a glass and a sick-green coloured mug.

“Ya want ice?” She poured the wine and went to the freezer and filled the glass and the mug to spilling with milk-coloured ice that cracked and turned clear as we stood awkward and unsure in the kitchen. The wine dripping in odd dull beats onto the checkered lino floor.

“Come on, come on,” she said, “let’s get out of this house for a while.” She walked toward the front door. “It looks like you’ve been making a mess, Jay.” And she laughed and I followed her to the front veranda where the sun was creeping forward on the dark cupped wooded boards and we sat and drank wine and ice and I took her cigarettes. At first we didn’t say anything. Cars went by. It got hotter and I was remembering the body-sounds, the scratch of a pushed back chair on the lounge-room floor,

“Let your brother be Jay, there’s more if you boys want it,” or the odd splash-drip of a shower scattering water minutes after the taps were off; the hum of the fridge; the clack of curtain rings pressing up hard against each other to let the day in. The absence was reflected in everything. It was a thirsty silence.

The ice in my glass was gone. I drank cold watery wine, staring at the front gate, the shadow it cast on the path. I almost forgot Susan, then she said,

“Now, tell me, Jay, what’s that busted up brother of yours doing?”

“I don’t know.”

She tilted her head to one side. She was looking at me out of one eye. She sat forward in her chair. A long silver necklace kinked and sweat-stuck, glistening on her chest. She looked away and from sitting, holding the end of her cigarette between her thumb and finger, she rolled the side
of her shoe onto it, and threw it into the garden, blowing smoke in a long stream.

“He hasn’t called?” She lit another cigarette.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

She got up and started pacing the verandah like Art had on the day of the funeral. She was wearing sandshoes with no socks and they made a squeaking sound as she turned.

“I called Charlie.”

“He’s gone to the country.”

“I thought he was training Croft.”

“No, Art’s gone to the country.”

“The country?”

“The doctor told him he was to stop boxing.”

“I wouldn’t know. They beat the shit outta him, ay.”

“I hit him, too.”

“You,” she laughed, “what for?”

“We were mucking round. I think his face is pretty bad.”

“Oh.”

She looked off somewhere.

“He’s pretty cut about it.”

“About what,” Susan said. Her voice was harder. She filled her glass quickly and it spilled and dripped onto the veranda.

“About getting beaten.”

“Oh, come on Jay, you mean you don’t know?”

“Know what.”

“Art was gonna win a lot of money on that fight, Jay. They all were. Him and Charlie, Billy, they were gonna win.”

“What ya mean?”

“He was supposed to go down, Jay, throw the fight.”

She lit another cigarette. Looked at me as if I was stupid.
“Yes. He changed his mind in the middle, that’s when Billy really laid into him. He was trying to knock him out. That’s what they all had their money on, a forth round knock out. But Art and his thick head… He didn’t get beat-up in the ring, Jay. He got beat-up in the change rooms. They both laid into him. Probably your old man too. I wouldn’t feel too sorry for Art.”

I looked at her quick.

“Jay?” Her voice faltered. She was pinching the bridge of her nose, looking at me over the top of the little fist shape that gesture made. She turned and sat on the step.

“What ya mean probably my old man?”

“Nothing. Just forget it, Jay, ok,” her tone trailing out toward the street, toward all the streets, as if she wanted to follow it down the fucken path. She put her sick-coloured green mug in the dirt, rustled it in stable, “…just forget it.”

“It sounds like you were gonna win some, too.”

“Maybe I was.”

“He fucken hates Billy Wednesday.”

“I know, I know… hates Billy Wednesday. Jesus.”

She got up and paced some more.

The next day Susan didn’t drink wine. She was ordered and brutal.

“Three piles, Jay,” she said as she stood on a chair unhooking a curtain and folding it in a rectangle, “one for keeping, one for the op- shop, one for rubbish.” Each room changed to something sparse so quick it was like she’d cut it out of cloth. She held things up,

“You want this?”

“What is it?”

“If ya don’t know, ya won’t miss it. Out.”

“Want this?”

“Out.”
The boxes full of things to take to Wrights Road piled up in the hallway. We decided we’d do a trip to the tip. Drove out there with the windows down, the summer sun smashing off the windscreen.

Back at the house Susan tried to make jokes, talking to characters in the photographs we found; she threw things out windows to get me to laugh, put on my mother’s hats, put on accents.

One afternoon I was in the bathroom cleaning cupboards and I sat on the edge of the bath and started to cry. I pushed the bathroom door shut with my foot but like she had been waiting Susan came in anyway. She stood in front of me. I was looking at her belt buckle, at her shoes, her hands, anywhere but her eyes.

“You know, Jay, it seems it won’t change, but it will.” She sat next to me on the edge of the bath. “It will.” She put her arm around me.

“I know.” She was pulling me close to her, “They’ll rent or sell it. Someone will come in and paint the joint, knock a few walls down. Then they’ll start looking in the letter box and you won’t have to come here anymore.”

“Is your mum still alive?”

“I don’t want to talk about my mum.”

She stood and touched my face then turned from me and went into the kitchen.

She kept cleaning, wrapping cups in newspaper and putting them into boxes, taping them up, writing what was in them with a fat texta. Stacked the boxes in the hallway. I didn’t do much after that crying in the bathroom. I spent some time in my old bedroom upstairs, looked at some books, made a few piles on the floor. At the end of the day we sat at the kitchen table and drank wine.

“My old man was here the other day,” I said.

“What,” She looked shocked. “Did you talk with him?”
“No, he just stared at the house for a while then he left.”
“I thought you never met him.”
“I haven’t.”
“How do you know it was him?”
“I just know.”
“You be careful of him, Jay.”
“Do you know him? You said he was in the locker room.”
She didn’t answer.
“Did you tell Art. I want you to tell Art, Jay.”
“Do you know him?”
“Let’s just say he burnt me more than once.”
“When?”
“I’ll tell you some other time, Jay. I will. Just not now.”

Wrights Road – Art and Jay after the funeral.

The week after the funeral, before Susan came to help me clean, before Art left, we spent most of our time moping at Wrights road. I didn’t tell him about our father, I don’t know why. We didn’t speak about Susan either, but she was between us. The emptiness from Ray Street had followed us, too. We tried to move ourselves back together but I think we just needed space, which was hard to get at Wrights road. It was a small flat we’d been in for six months, since the week our mother had kicked us out. That is, she kicked Art out and two days later told me I could piss off too. The Wrights Road flat had stained carpet and brittle torn, silver backed blinds on sprung rollers. The blinds ripped again and again when we pulled them down, the sounds of it like tearing paper, unexpected and shocking. Their tattered surface gave our place a run-down feel that we didn’t mind at first. The hot days dragged on and we hung out, floored by the heat, listening to music, eating the salads Art made, in the lounge room. I loved the heat, the slowness it imposed. The blinds let slices of sun in from the north,
alive and golden-yellow, and we watched them rolling across the walls like arms of light.

Each morning that week, before it got hot, I woke to the sounds of Art working the bag in the yard. His heavy breathing beneath my window was filled with strain. He was trying too hard. I could hear that without looking at him. I heard the bag swinging on its chain and from my bed I pictured where he was, moving in, straight shots off his right, the left trademark hook he had. Every day that week I lay staring at the ceiling of my room, feeling the days warm up before 8a.m, listening to Art. In my mind’s-eye I watched his feet move, saw his effort in his expressions, and wished he could find that deadpan-calm again.

Most mornings when I listened I thought of my father, too. Of where he was, wondering if he’d come back. And of course I thought of Susan. In the afternoons, despite the heat, I followed the sun outside and sat in the shade under the fig tree. I listened to music, smoked joints and drank long-necks of Melbourne Bitter so fast it seemed the bottles were thin as copper piping. Occasionally Art would come outside and we’d hang out and talk about boxing and why Art didn’t take drugs, and the pool hall, and girls and his twenty-fifth coming up. Then our conversation fell away and Art would move into the red bag and there was peace between us as he beat it rhythmically and slow with the sweat dripping off him in the filtered summer sun. The sounds of his breath and his blows and the chain-crink, straining on the beam it hung from, were caught up through the house and through the music and without saying it we were trying to stick our love back together, just hanging out in the heat, with all that hurt.

On the Saturday afternoon just before Art left he pulled himself into a new pair of boxing gloves and stood in bare feet and shorts hitting them together. I looked up at him from where I was sitting in the yard, his tattoos bright with sweat, almost alive. He was moving round the bag trying to look on form but not kidding himself or anyone else. And, after
awhile he came and buffeted me off my chair in his frustration. He was shadow boxing around me, just a fraction too close, smiling and ready. Sometimes we would spar but we hadn’t for a long time.

“I’m not in the mood, Art. Seriously.”

He ignored me, laughing a kind of clicky laugh, and I stood up. I could see he was ready to turn mean, which he sometimes did but I didn’t care.

“Come on ya little cunt, don’t just stand there.”

He was still moving around me. I was sure the gloves were too tight. I could see a tiny amount of fat on Art’s forearms bulging pink and white from the glove’s hem. I imagined his fingers turning blue. He moved in closer and I pushed him away, as something changed inside me, memories spilling into my body and chest. I clamped my teeth together and told myself not to cry. I knew Art saw it, or smelt it, and it seemed he wanted to help me and hurt me at the same time, shake me up, shake himself up. He moved in closer smacking the curved red sounds of the gloves against my face. I pushed him off, the smell of beer on his breath. It was a thirty-seven degree day. The sweat was on his arms and chest. He slid round my hands. Moving in again hitting me low, up close, breathing in my face. I pushed him again. He caught his foot on a chair, stumbled against the fig tree. I thought he’d stop but he didn’t. He moved in closer. I felt the hard edge of the outdoor table press into my hipbone with each punch. It was still light hearted, but only just.

I looked at Art’s face as he laughed and saw the naked gum where Billy Wednesday knocked his tooth out. His whole body had something sad and disabled about it. Upper cut, hook. The silence at Ray Street bad followed us, Art was just trying to tussle with it. Kidneys again, up into my ribs. He didn’t hit me hard but it opened up some part of me. I clenched my teeth together again. He followed me neat, curved and efficient. Punching something I didn’t want to see to the surface. I rolled my torso like he’d taught me, swayed and ducked, bumping into the bag that set to swinging and creaking on the beam. There was some music playing, I don’t
remember. I just felt the heat and our sorrowful clinches. I winced, rolling with his body blows, dropping my elbow, just holding on. Until I hit him. Landed a bare fist uppercut just under his jaw. He recoiled as if he’d been bitten.

I didn’t hit him hard but I thought I’d broken his jaw. Something fell off the table and onto the bricks. Then somehow our mother was in the yard too. We both felt it, or at least I think we did. Art stopped and pulled his gloves off. He turned his face away, curled his shoulders over and for some reason handed the gloves to me. I reached for them with both hands, my palms up. It was the strangest gesture, and all at once they were like a pair of flayed embryos resting side by side. I moved to hold them—thumb and fingers. Inside, the gloves were warm and moist with sweat. I put my arm around Art’s sweaty shoulder, looked at his misshapen face and it took the wind out of me. We stood there for maybe ten seconds, the heat of the day around us, then our embrace broke. His eyes looked so sad,

“...I think that doctor’s right.”
“...You’re still getting better,” I said.
“I’ve all I know. It’s the only thing I know.”
“Why don’t you call Susan,” I said.

He didn’t answer. Just went up the stairs and left me in the quivering heat which came back into focus like a blanket-haze, the red bag swinging and creaking on the beam. I bent to pick up a chair and put it on its feet.

**Jay on Art Leaving**

At 9 a.m. it was already thirty degrees. There was a blue duffle bag thrown in the back of Art’s ute. I saw it over his shoulder as we hugged at the door.

“...I’m sorry, Jay. I really am. I just have to get myself together.”
“Whatever,” I said. That’s all I could say as a feeling of aloneness came down on me like the dark inside of something. I watched him drive away, the heat of the day just starting up. It was like a slow siren and in it there was the sound of Art’s ute that spluttered into the maze of streets long after he was out of sight. I went round to Ray Street. That’s when Susan called. When I let the phone ring out the first time. I couldn’t stop thinking about Art but each day she came and each day I ached to be in the same room as her. We packed and cleaned and drank and put on fm radio. Susan sang along to the songs she knew, under her breath like she was trying to hide it. There were some days she couldn’t come. On Mondays and Wednesdays Susan worked at the library. On these days I was at Ray Street alone. They were the hardest days.

The leaves in the blue stone lane continued to fall. I was up in my room sorting books. There was a knock at the door. I walked slow down the stair, the worn carpet at the lip of each step a tender press of pricks beneath my bare feet. I opened the door with a stupid grin on my face, thinking it was Susan. I didn’t see him coming this time and there he was looming above me like a soft-jazz nightmare. The first thing I thought was, why’s Art knocking on the door. He looked like Art. For a long time neither of us spoke.

He was a tall and proud man. I could see that straight away. He had a tan from some other place. It was a creamy brown that stood out next to his pressed white shirt like an advertisement of health. But I could tell he wasn’t healthy. He wore dark pants and polished but worn dress shoes. His hair was slicked back and ruffled. He had the look of a wealthy man on a holiday, but he didn’t look wealthy. Somehow he felt dirty, under all the shine. Maybe it was the oil in his hair, or the smell of him, tobacco and deodorant, I wasn’t sure what it was. He had a single old-style wooden and canvas suitcase that he placed gently by his left leg. The case was polished and clean.
“You must be Jay. Do you know who …?”

“I know who you are,” I said. I was trying not to move. I was trying to stand my ground. He looped one thumb in his belt and his body swayed forward and sideways. With the other he reached into the pocket of his loose fitting pants and took out a brass lighter and a soft, cellophaned packet of cigarettes. He put the packet to his mouth and pulled a cigarette with his lips. Still holding the lighter and the packet in one hand he snapped the lighter open, rolled the wheel into a wave-limp blue-flame, clapped the lighter shut. And pocketing the kit blew smoke too close to the right of my face. All the while his thumb was looped in his loose, wide, tan belt.

“You gonna ask me in?”

“I guess so.”

My hands were trembling so I put them in my own pockets, rolled my head toward the door. He paused, giving the boxes in the hallway a good looking over, then he put his suitcase down on the clear side. I sat with him in the living room a while. He smoked another cigarette, ashing into a cuff he turned up on his pants for that purpose, throwing his butts into the clean fireplace. He made a bit of small talk. I felt like I was twelve.

“So, you like footy, Jay?”

“Not really.”

“Cricket?”

“Nah.”

“You look like your mother. How old are you now?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sweet-sixteen, hey.”

He lit another cigarette. Offered me one.

“No thanks,” I said.

“You don’t smoke… that’s good.” He seemed restless. “When’s your birthday?”
“October.” These were the only two questions he asked me about myself, when was my birthday and did I smoke. What was I gonna say. I smoke dope, not cigarettes. He stood up and went to the kitchen and called out,

“…You got any glasses?” His voice echoed into the empty rooms and I heard him opening and closing kitchen cupboards.

“I found a mouse-trap,” he called out. There was no humour in his voice. I heard him unpacking boxes in the hallway, pulling things out and leaving them on the floor with the newspaper half torn open. I stood watching him, the hot day rolling in the open door he’d never closed.

I didn’t say a word. I hoped Susan wouldn’t come. I wondered how she knew him, but I didn’t want to see them together, not yet. My father found a heavy tumbler and a frying pan in a box marked ‘kitchen’ and took them into that room and put them on the table. He went back to the hallway to his case and laid it flat on the floor. He took a loose key from his pocket, leaned over and opened a small padlock that dangled from the case. I was closer to him now. The open case filled the afternoon with a chemical musty smell, lighter fluid and cramped clothing. His shirts and pants were folded neatly and there was a magazine and a newspaper in a fishnet slack elastic pocket in the lid of the case. He pulled the clothes aside and took out a bottle of bourbon.

“I’ve been living out of this thing for a while.”

“Where have you been?” I said, and wished I hadn’t. He didn’t answer. He glanced up at me, closed the case. He locked his silly little padlock and went back to the kitchen. He poured himself a drink and filled the glass to the brim with ice.

“You know our mum died,”

“Yeah, I was sorry to hear that.” He put his feet on a chair, lent back. He unfolded his Wednesday paper across the kitchen table, put his drink down on it. The paper caught the condensation running down his glass.

“Where’s Art?” His voice was brittle, unpleasant.
“He went away for a while.”

“Did he now. Left you here alone.” He lifted his glass. It stuck to the paper and pulled the page up. He pulled the glass away. The paper was wet-grey and it tore without a sound, a small part of it stuck under his bourbon like a price tag. He lit another cigarette and looked up at me,

“What room you sleeping in?”

“I don’t live here.” I said.

“Where you living?” he said. I didn’t answer.

And that was it. He took the front room next to the door. It was totally empty except for the stripped-back bed. He slid his case under the bed and said,

“I’ll be back later.” He walked out leaving the door open.

Before he was out the gate I’d picked that silly lock with a hairpin the way Art had shown me and I went through my old man’s things like a menu. My heart was in my mouth and I thought of Art’s missing tooth as I squeezed my tongue in my back teeth, smelling that musty-chemical smell again. I fingered my father’s cool neatly folded clothes like they were radioactive. I didn’t feel guilty, I felt totally justified. My father left my mother before I was born, I knew that much. Now he comes back fifteen years later and puts his feet up like he owns the joint. Well, fuck him. I squatted down beside his case with its lid leaning on the edge of the bed and went through his things one by one. There was nothing exciting, not at first: the neatly folded clothes, a razor – loose but placed carefully in one corner, another leather belt folded on itself like a toy snake, four Zippo lighters, and a small, leather-bound notebook that looked as if it should smell of something old. I picked it up. It was heavier than I expected and had a red rubber band round it that was old, cracked in places and brittle. Trying not to stretch it I slid it off the leather surface and turned the pages.
The notebook was filled with names, and what looked like telephone numbers that kept me interested for a while. Every sound outside made me jump. I remembered the door was still open. I still had to pack his things back into the case, but I couldn’t resist looking through the faintly lined pages of that book. I was glad to hold something of my father’s in my hands. I moved from a squat and sat on the floor next to the case. I left the door. It was almost fatalistic. I accepted if he came back I was busted. The anger I’d had left me a little. I studied the notebook, the worn leather, the shaky-stitched binding. I turned over the pages slowly and carefully. There was no poetry, no descriptions of films he’d seen, or women he’d loved, just names and numbers. It made no sense to me. The phone rang and I nearly jumped out of my shoes. I didn’t answer. I put my father’s things back, locked the case and pushed it back under the bed. The phone rang again. This time I picked it up.

“Jay?”
“Susan?”
“…yeah.”
“You ok? You sound strange.”
“Yeah, I’m ok.”
“What’s wrong?”
“Nothing, nothing.”
“Jay,” she said, “…I can’t come over today.” I felt my body sink as if I’d forgotten how to count.

“Ok,” I said. I knew I sounded cut.

“My mother’s come down from the country. I have to spend some time with her.”

“Ok,” and I nearly said it, ‘…my old man came round. I think he’s moved in.’ It was almost out of my mouth when Susan said,

“I might be able to come in the arvo, otherwise I’ll come round tomorrow. Promise.”

“I’ll see you, then.” It came out like a whisper.
“Take the day off from that house, Jay. Go down the beach. Go play some pool or something. How long have they let you off work anyway? Who’s sharpening those cues?” She was trying to be funny.

“Kim said take as long as I like.”

“Go down there, just say hi. Least it’ll be cool in there.”

“Maybe I will, thanks Susan,” and I hung up the phone.

It was hot again, thirty-something and the house felt heavy. It was worse now. Everyday I thought of Art and wanted him to come back to sort out our father, and I wanted him not to come back, so I could be with Susan. The empty rooms were piled here and there with things to throw out, the furniture in some rooms stacked in the corners. I thought of going down the pool hall to get out of the heat, but I couldn’t get that notebook out of my head.

With my hands shaking I slid my father’s case from under the bed and picked the lock again. I took the notebook out, re-locked the case, pushed it under the bed, and went up the worn-carpet-stairs to my room. I didn’t think much about it as I copied the entire contents of the notebook onto both sides of a piece of paper. Time seemed to bubble up and stretch, I felt like an hour had passed up in that hot room. I almost tore the pages as I wrote, fast and deliberate. Half way through I opened the windows. The air that came in was no relief, thick with the heat of summer itself, carrying the sounds of cars passing, and a lawn mower somewhere in the distance. I felt like a detective and realized somewhere in my guts this was serious, but I didn’t know why. At every line I stood and looked out the window for my father, or strained my ears for his boot step on the footpath. My hands still shook. My fingers were sweaty. The pen skid on the page in directions I didn’t intend. I held it tighter. When I was done I closed the notebook. I neatly folded my list. I slid it between the pages of a black hard cover book that was next to me on the floor.
I heard noises in every moment and was worried it was my father coming up the stairs, but I couldn’t resist. I opened the notebook again. I was struck by how neat it was. It was an old book and the pages were faint lined and bound with string, like I said. At the central pages the string had cut into the paper and some of those pages were loose. It looked as if there were some missing. But, everything was so neat. The writing was clear and careful, every letter perfect. To me it seemed ridiculous. Anal. At first glance it looked like a telephone book, names and numbers, but it was more than that. There were little things that made that clear. Some digits were underlined, there were two sets of numbers, on each line, a group of eight numbers and a group of six. There were stars and squares and other symbols next to most of the names. The script seemed to hum with something mysterious and it was in this mystery, with the hot summer breeze coming in the window that I was caught. I heard the front door close and there was a jolt-wince through my body. I couldn’t move. I snapped the notebook shut, carefully replaced the brittle rubber band, and tucked the whole thing in the belt of my jeans under my tee-shirt. My heart was pounding. I circled my room several times, fuck, fuck, fuck. I said under my breath. I heard footsteps that sounded like Susan’s, but I wasn’t sure. I went down the stairs into the front room and was circling in there when Susan came in.

“Jay.”

“Shit, Susan!”

“The door was open. What’re you doing?”

I hesitated, wondering whether to tell her or not, “Nothing. Just resting upstairs.”

“It must be so hot up there. Hey, my old lady wanted to go visiting some friends so I thought I’d come over.” She was chirpy, almost excited, like cleaning up at a dead woman’s house was better than showing her mum round. She went into the kitchen and I followed her, sucking my stomach in.
“Wanna drink?” I said.

“Yeah, why not.”

“There’s some beer in the fridge.”

“Ok.” She went to the fridge and took out two stubbies. I didn’t say much. I hoped she would start working in the kitchen so I could get back to the front room. I was thinking my father could come home any moment. I tried to get to the front room, but Susan was chatty, leaning on the back of a kitchen chair, swaying like she meant something by it.

“I hate it when my mum’s in town.” She stretched the word hate like she was calling to someone a long way away. “I know I shouldn’t say that. I know I should be grateful to have a mum, but I tell you what, Jay, she drives me crazy.” I wondered if my father would be back. Susan opened both beers then ruffled round in her bag.

“Did I leave my cigarettes here?” She didn’t look up. Her light brown hair was in two pig-tails falling forward. She looked good. She was wearing sandshoes, no socks, jeans and a singlet.

“I don’t know,” I said, “maybe on the front veranda?” She ruffled her bag some more. Then she went out the front with her beer, still rummaging, walking absent-mindedly.

“Found em,” she called and I went straight into the front room. I pulled the case out and opened it up. One side of the notebook was covered in sweat; the rubber band on that side a darker colour and shiny. I couldn’t worry about that. I put it back, sweaty-side up and closed the case and slid it under the bed, breathing in gasps I could hear. I thought of my list stashed upstairs in the funny picture book. I had no idea what it would mean. That list spent half the summer in that book under my bed at Wrights Road. It remained there pressed between the middle pages, patiently waiting for its importance to be delivered to me. It came. It took all summer, but it came – like fucken room service, delivered yellow, and as powerful as a full-spread in the lottery.
I went outside to join Susan. Still shaky, I sat in the chair beside her. The sun shone on the veranda and over our feet like a tide of gold-whispered light and I poured myself a wine.

“That’s yesterday’s wine, yesterday’s glass, it’s warm, Jay. What’s wrong with you?”

“My old man came back.” I looked for her reaction, but she didn’t seem phased.

“When?”

“Earlier today. He left some stuff here and went out again. I think he’s gonna stay.”

“He’s fucken what?” There was a long pause. She was thinking hard. I looked across at her and wanted her hand around my shoulder again, like it had been in the bathroom. I wanted her touching my face.

“He’s left a suitcase here.”
Chapter Two. Partly about SUSAN
Those weeks cleaning up my mother’s stuff went by slowly. My old man’s return did strange things to me. I looked at my hands, at my limbs, and I saw him in me. The shape of his finger nails, the veins on the back of my hand. One day I was in the bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror, the cool tiles beneath my feet. I was turning to try to see my profile and Susan came in looking for a towel.

“I need a towel to wrap that big vase in,” she said. I reached into the cupboard and passed her a large towel.” She gently closed the door. Then, she came back in.

“Jay? What’re ya doing?”
“You said you know him.”
“Yeah.”
“Do you think I look like him?”
“I dunno, Jay. I don’t really want to think about it.”
“You don’t like him, do ya.” I turned away from the mirror.
“No I don’t, Jay, I don’t.”
“Why? What’s he done to you?”
“I’ll tell you some other time, but if he keeps coming round, you won’t see me here.” She opened the bathroom door, stood in the doorjamb.

“But, he’s hardly ever here Susan.”
“Look, I just don’t wanna see him.”
“What do you want me to do, kick him out?”
“Fuck yeah. Yes.”
“I can’t do that.”
“Why?”
“He wouldn’t listen to me. I want to get to know him.”
“You and me were starting to be such good friends, Jay.” She lowered her voice and she sounded like a dream that hadn’t started. I looked at her gently. She held the door open behind her back.
“You sound like you’ve made up your mind,” she said.

“I haven’t made up anything, I’ve just never known him.” It sounded like a complaint, a complaint about her, getting in the way. But that’s not how I meant it to sound. The bathroom seemed small all of a sudden.

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

“I do actually.” She went to say something then stopped. “Jay, I just want to keep hanging out here, with you. Getting this thing done. I like you.” And I felt like saying that was what I wanted, too. But my old man was a presence folded around me, a coat I hadn’t noticed, heavy and comforting. I felt bigger with him around.

“He says he’s gonna teach me how to drive.”

“Shit.” She shut the door and I heard her call out, “I can teach you that, anyone can.”

When I came out of the bathroom she was gone and after that she came less and less. As she withdrew the things that reminded me of my father came forward. Each day I walked up the lane and through the heat to Ray Street I knew the house would be somehow more ‘him.’ His shirt would be hanging on the back of a chair in the front room, his bottle of bourbon sitting on the kitchen bench, the boxes he’d unpacked – they would all shine. In these moments I forgot about Susan.

Some days he was home when I came in, sitting out the back reading the newspaper, or doing push-ups in a white corrugated singlet, his sweaty hand marks drying quickly in the sun when he stood, the ghosts of his effort withdrawing as if to hide from me.

“You gotta keep in shape, Jay. Look at me, I’m nearly fifty and most twenty year olds couldn’t touch me.” Once I caught him in the kitchen with his notebook open, a long new red pencil poised above the page. He was startled and shook his head rapidly as if to wake himself but he wasn’t
as secretive about it as I thought he would be. He gently closed the notebook and left it on his opened newspaper.

“You keep a diary too, Jay?” he said.

“No.”

“You know what, what about one day you and me go out for drive. There are a few people I’d like you to meet.”

“Sure,” I said, not knowing if I meant it or not. I sat on the chair opposite him. The notebook lay there between us like a plate of food between two hungry men, both too apprehensive to make a move. It was at times like this my father lit cigarettes. He did it now and blew the smoke of his first drag down on that paper and notebook and I watched it white and thin and almost hard to see hit the table and spread broad and full and continuous in the heat that filled the morning. The smell of his tobacco smoke opened the memory of when he’d first knocked on the door. He looked at his notebook, and then at me and holding my gaze he said,

“I went down to Maggie Brown’s.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You know who she is?”

“No.”

“The real-estate agent.”

“Right.”

“I gave her two months rent.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s just say you don’t need to move those boxes for a while,” he said. He leaned back and put a foot up on the third kitchen chair like he owned it. This father I’d never known, living in my dead mother’s house. Art was gone. Susan was I didn’t know where.

“I’ll need to get your half off you in the next day or two.”

“My half of what?” I said.

“The rent.”

“I don’t live here, I’m not paying rent.”
“You’re here everyday, Jay. You use the place.”

“I’m cleaning it up. I’m not paying rent,” I shook my head. I couldn’t believe it. I’d learned some things off Art and one of ‘em was smelling when someone was trying it on. For a moment I actually thought about all the time I spent out of the sun and wondered – maybe I should pay rent. Then, I kind of woke up.

“I’m not paying rent.” I laughed.

“Have it your way, Jay. But if you’re not paying I’ll have to change a few things round here.”

After that he wasn’t round much, either. He came and went. I was alone in the house again, tidying up the garden, pulling weeds, sweeping dry dusty summer dirt off the path. Sometimes I wouldn’t see him for days, and in those times a grey-silence filled the house again. I missed Susan and her decisive ways, and her jokes. I missed my father too, and I wished Art would come back. But like he made himself the cure for his own withdrawal it was my father coming back time after time who filled the emptiness. He’d come in at random times – the sound of his voice, his boots on the floor, the faint smell of his cigarettes, they took the weight off me. Almost by mistake I started to like him. Maybe it was the similar features.

He was tall and thin with a wiry strength that reminded me of coat hangers. Even in his eyes. He was graceful and menacing and spoke slow at me like he thought I was a bit stupid. Even that half insulting tone of voice drew me to him.

“Ya been crying over ya mother?” he’d say as if he was imagining how disgusted he was if I had.

“I been ok,” I said, “I been fine.”

“That’s what ya telling everyone is it.” He lit a cigarette and hitched a thumb into his belt. I could feel myself pulling away from my old life, pulling away from hanging out with Art; memories of him came to me. I
craved to wake one morning at Wrights Road to the sound of his breath under my window, working that bag. I imagined over and over the beating he got in the locker rooms, the long plank benches he would have fallen against, the hard floor. Sometimes as we sat, me and my father, I would look at his knuckles, wonder about what Susan had said. Then, bit by bit, these memories faded and my father was singing an old tune I didn’t know or his plate was in the sink, an impression in his pillow, they became what I hoped for each day at Ray Street. The evidence of him started filling the silence a bit more everyday.

December 1985

Just before Christmas in a week of heat that refused to break Susan started coming round again.

“I saw him leave,” she said, “I’ve been waiting across the street at number 18 for about half an hour. Fuck, Jay, what the fuck’s he doing here?” She pushed into the house and shut the front door, walking through the place looking at what I’d done without her. She absentmindedly flipped through the pile of letters that were on the lounge-room table. She was looking at the floor, pacing and agitated. She stopped and looked up at me from under her hair, smiling,

“How you going sweetie?”
“He paid the rent.”
“What rent?”
“Here. He’s moved in.”
“I suppose it doesn’t matter any more, Jay. The cleaning’s nearly done. Let him have it.” She looked at an old lounge chair covered in worn dark leather. “What’s this doing here?”
“My dad bought it back from a mate’s house. Joseph somebody.”
“Jesus.”
“You want a drink, Susan?”
“Nah. Has he taught you to drive yet?” She was smiling, almost laughing. She reached and touched my shoulder, “I’m only joking.”

“I don’t think he’s going to. He talks to me like I’m twelve.”

“You are aren’t ya?”

“Very funny.”

“Looks good in here, you been busy.” She stopped pacing and sat down in the sun that was coming in the window. She looked serious and held her fingers interlaced, resting her hands on the table.

“I found Art,” she said.

“Where is he?”

“Charlie told me he was in a motel in Green Valley, so I drove up there yesterday. He wouldn’t see me.”

“What do ya mean, he wouldn’t see you.”

“I mean – he wouldn’t fucken open the door. I drove all that way.”

“He’s embarrassed about his face.”

“Jesus, it can’t be that bad… can it?” I heard her teeth click together and she looked up with her eyebrows raised and lips pulled back in something that was not a smile. She breathed in a kind of hissing breath between her closed teeth. Later in summer I would hear that sound again.

My father made it, after Art knocked him out.

“It’s pretty bad,” I said.

“I guess you don’t mess with guys like Charlie.”

“I guess not.” And she stayed, and we cleaned, packing books, and we didn’t talk about my father anymore. But in the afternoon when everything had heated up to about a hundred degrees, I did find Susan in the front room, just standing there, looking at my old man’s things. She kept saying to me she was sure I missed my mother, she was just sure I did. Then she left.

The next week or so she never came round when my father was there, but she did come round. Susan would ring and ask if my father was there, or
wait at number 18. The two of them seemed to be continually turning away from each other, dancing a dance.

Slowly the house transformed as me and Susan packed things away, threw things out, cleaned and vacuumed, washed windows. It changed too because my old man would pull things out of boxes and bring small bits of furniture home and put them in the front room, in the living room. Some how Susan managed to avoid him. It was like she had a sixth sense. It was odd to see the two things occurring at once, as though green leaves were growing on a tree as gold ones fell off it. He ‘found’ a long bench made of plastic at the local footy oval and put it under the window by his bed. He covered it in a blue sheet he pulled out of the boxed marked ‘linen.’ It looked ok. He found a lamp somewhere, and a small rug he put in the bathroom. The silence at Ray Street slowly gave way to a different feeling; my old man’s broken occupation, whatever that was. And as he made the space his own I wondered more and more what it was he did and I started to think about that notebook.

The first time I saw my father and Susan together was the Friday night before Christmas. I was working late at Ray Street, sorting out the back room. Most of the furniture was gone. We left the couch and coffee table, and the kitchen table with some chairs, as well as the bed in the front room, which my father had. There was a pile of stuff for the tip on the front lawn. The rest of it, the boxes, the cupboards, the whole house, including my Coles Funny Picture Book was at Wrights Road. Susan and I had taken it there, load after hot sweaty load in a van we hired over a weekend. The clean up was nearly done and I was just about to go home when there was a knock at the door and it was Susan. She looked different, dressed-up, with her hair pulled back. She felt softer. She was wearing a leather coat, jeans and boots. She had a six-pack cradled under her arm.

“I was just passing, Jay.”
“Ok,” I was nervous but I didn’t get long to enjoy that. Susan and I were sitting on the couch half way through our first stubby, talking about what a good job we’d done, when we heard the slow crunch of a key being pushed into the front door lock. There was some fumbling and fussing. We heard the door slam. Susan jumped. I think she’d just realized it was my father. She bumped the table with her knee and was jumping round holding her leg,

“Shit, shit, shit,” her beer rolled off the table and fell, foaming a creamy hiss onto the floor. I didn’t get up. I just watched her jumping round then saw the tall shadow of my father appear in the doorway, pulled there by the commotion. Susan bent down and rubbed her knee. She looked up at my father, then at me, then back at him. He smiled at her.

“Hello honey,” he said.

“Hello, Jon.” I looked up and could feel a past between them.

“You two know each other?”

“You could say that, hey, Susan.”

“You could say that.” Susan was picking her beer up and drinking what was left of it. My father and her seemed to have different ideas about what it meant to know each other. She stepped past him and walked down toward the front door.

“You cutting Art’s lunch, Jay?” he was laughing. He lit a cigarette. I caught the Zippo smell. He clapped the lighter shut. Susan came back with a mop. My father sat next to me on the couch.

“You sleeping with both my boys?” he said, looking up at Susan. She swept over the spilt beer one time and leaned the mop against the wall. My father had left his cigarettes and the grey-gold Zippo on the table. Susan didn’t answer. She took a cigarette without asking, spoke with it between her lips.

“Looks like you’re the one…” she lit the cigarette and dropped the lighter on the table, “sleeping somewhere you shouldn’t, Jon. They kick you out of the rock you crawl under every night?” She looked at me and
stepping around the coffee table she slid her hand across my shoulder and turned toward the door,

“I’m going, Jay, I’ll catch ya some other time.”

“Ok,” I said. I went to follow her but my old man held onto my forearm and pulled me back into the soft couch. His grip was firm and slid a little on my sweaty arm.

“Leave it,” his voice echoed in the empty house. We heard the door close and I sat there next to my father not knowing how to leave. I missed Art and his tough lessons. Without Art I was somehow very alone, like a child in a crowd, a man in prison for the first time. When he was around I always felt the world was softer, easier. That’s what I missed. But, I couldn’t tell him that. He’d told me over and over to stay away from our father if he ever came back. And, sitting there on that couch in the smell of spilt beer and smoke and the silent throb of my mother’s death, Art’s words came back to me, rolling in my mind’s eye, as if they were carved in a tree.

“Let’s have a beer, Jay.” He stood and turned toward the kitchen. Then, like he’d read my mind he called from the hallway,

“I want you to tell me about Art’s boxing.” I could feel the violence beneath the charm – it felt cold. I knew that feeling from the bullies who actually hit you after they pushed you round. I heard the fridge door close and the muffled sound of bottles rattling.

“You seen him fight or what?” He sat next to me on the couch again, just a bit too close. He lit another cigarette. I could smell a current all through his body, a threat of something I didn’t understand. It was the sound of a stream that I sat by and I couldn’t seem to walk away.

Art back at Wrights Road for Christmas

Art came back for Christmas, on the 22nd. He was there sitting heavy handed at the kitchen table by 7.30a.m, his blue duffle bag open and
spilling on the lino by the back door. The morning sun anxious and flickering between us, the smell of clothes and cooking, his plate smeared with bacon fat and scratched egg yolk. A thin pair of bread crusts shaped like a wooden peg.

“I made you eggs,” he said.

“Good to see you too, Art.” He tilted his head toward the stove. On it there was a small aluminium saucepan still with black coffee, the grounds up the sides were a matte-brown grit, the dark sand of Art’s thanks. There was a large pan with a plate for a lid next to the coffee. I reached out and touched the plate. It was still warm. I lifted the plate and beads of tepid steam rolled onto bacon and congealed fat, two fried eggs with solid light yellow centres, fried tomato.

“You look different,” I wiped the moisture off the plate with the side of my hand and tipped the breakfast Art had cooked me onto the plate’s warm, wet surface. I lit the gas under the coffee. “You had a hair cut?”

“Been running every day.”

“You don’t look so fat.” I laughed cautiously. I saw Art look down. He shuffled in his seat. The ghost of our mother somewhere between us, the dirt of that under my finger nails.

“How you been, anyway?” He looked up at me, held my eyes. His face was still swollen above the cheekbone. He looked like he had two different faces, one broad and beaten, the other thinner, longer and meaner. He reached for his t-shirt and pulled it over his head.

“Mum’s place is almost done?” He looked down again.

“Almost.”

“Right.”

“Susan came round to help.”

“Right.” I poured the coffee. There were grounds floating colour whispers of an untold fortune on its surface. It steamed black on the table. I sat opposite, took a knife and fork from the drawer. A cluster of hungry hope about my father was in my stomach.
“Dad came back.”
“What’s that?” He raised his eyebrows, lowered his face.
“Dad came back,” I said.

Art leaned in his chair.
“When?”
“First of December.”

“Shit.” He reached over and took a piece of bacon off my plate, ate it in his fingers.

“He’s moved in.” Art was quiet. “He’s paid the rent.”

“Fuck.”

The sun was coming through window over the sink, smashing bright and shiny on the taps and the flat stainless corrugations. I turned to look at Art.

“You fuck off and leave me with it, all the fucken shit in that house, then tell me ‘Don’t go anywhere near him.’ I’m sorry they beat you up, I am. But, Jesus don’t come back telling me I’ve done it wrong. He’s been at Ray Street in and out drinkin’ fucken beer and shit with me. He met Susan, who knows him too, some fucken how. What’s the big fucken secret? What’s so bad about him?”

Art stood up. The reflected sunlight was a bright touch on his face. He looked taller, stronger.

“Jay, listen. I’m gonna go down the gym. I gotta get back to it. I’ll come round to Ray Street this arvo and we’ll talk about it, ok. I’d like to see what you’ve done, really, I would.”

“Maybe you can tell dad you think I shouldn’t go anywhere near him.”
He laughed. “It’s so empty over there Art, there’s nothing there except for dad’s stuff.”

“It makes no difference anymore, does it, fuck. Let him move in.”
I thought of the notebook. I had a feeling that might make a difference, pressed flat in my funny picture book.

“He offered to take me out to Great Hill,” I said. “He wants me to see what he’s up to out there. That’s what he said”

“That’s a two hour drive.”

“I know where it is.”

“Do you know what he does? Do you know?”

“No because no one will tell me anything about him. Except to keep away.” Art ignored me. He picked up his bag. “It’s always later. I’ve been at Ray Street dealing with all this shit and now you’re going down the fucken gym.”

“He’s a con-man Jay. The worst type of con-man you can think of.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m going down the gym. I’m gonna fight Croft.”

“He’s a heavy-weight.”

“He dropped some muscle.”

“But Charlie’s training Croft.”

“Not anymore, he isn’t.”

I left him standing in the kitchen thinking about his gym session and went upstairs to get my stuff to go round to Ray Street. I was wondering if my father would be there. I was hoping he’d be there.

**Art at Ray Street after the gym**

Art’s face was red with effort when he came to Ray Street after the gym. The day had got hot and the polished boards at our mother’s house seemed to come alive, vibrating white yellow in the sunlight streaming in the front door. Art stood in the hollow hallway for what seemed like minutes soaking up memories and indistinct private things of his own. His body was still.

“I’m sorry, Jay, really. You’ve done so much.”
“Susan helped.”
“Yeah?” He walked slowly through the house, up the stairs on his own. I heard him opening and closing cupboards. I knew the clean empty carpet on the base of those cupboards, a brighter less faded tone, like it was laid yesterday. Lonely carpet, sound catching and hard to bear.

I got a beer from the fridge, one of my old man’s, and sat on the front veranda in the shade and let Art tour his memories. The street was still in the heat, like its wings were clipped, vibrating soft. I was sinking into a half opened summer betrayal. I wondered where Susan was. I wondered when Art would come out of the house that was no longer the one he’d known, the sun ripping the day open tight-rope yellow.

In the middle of January my father came rattling up the front path one morning with three brand new cooking pots stacked one on top of the other in his outstretched arms. He came in, dumped them on the kitchen table then went out and came back with a very large box of groceries. And, like this, it was in the week that Art came back to Wrights Road that my father started to cook for me. We started to hang out. I had no reason to be at my mother’s house any more, the cleaning was done. Somehow my father kept me there. He cooked in an apron and a singlet; pasta sauces and casseroles, always with loud steaming flourishes at the beginning, liquid onto a hot pans, purely for theatre I was sure of that. Then these things would simmer endlessly in the kitchen, in the heat of the days, fragrant with ingredients I did not understand and we would drink cold beer together and he would tell me about things that sounded like gold the colour of pirate black.

“You got a 24% chance of hitting a full-house if you’ve got two pair at the flop. A heavy track makes the favourite more likely. Holding pockets pairs in heads up poker is a good thing.”

The meals were eaten with polite conversation that billowed and lulled like a parachute in a flat field wind. I was surprised by my father’s good
manners. This is what we did, me and him, with Art’s place so vacant it hurt me.

The summer moved on with me and my father, and sometimes Susan, cooking and eating in the kitchen, hanging out, like an accident waiting to happen. There were weeks of it. They seemed to melt into each other in the heat, and twist tighter every day, as if there were thirty people winding a clock thinking they were the only one. I began to love him or I thought I did. He was young for a father, and strong and tough. He let me smoke and joked around with Susan and me, saying Art better watch out being out the whole time or ‘little Jay’ would make a move.

We sat in a kitchen in singlets or just our shorts and bare feet on the only cool surface in the place, and Susan in light summer dresses sweat glistening off all of us, and we ate and drank and spoke very little. They were almost gentle times, and I slowly became closer to my father and to Susan. Though I could feel something between the two of them hovering in the air. They never spoke about how they had known each other before but I knew they had and it seemed to be that old connection, whatever it was, that made them be civil to each other. My mother’s absence became softer, less a part of everything.

When the food was eaten I would wash the dishes and he and Susan would dry them. He never asked me to, I just did it. Hot froth singing its constant rice bubble sound and we stood there side by side, like we’d done it for years. These were the times we talked.

“So,” he’d say, “what’s it like being fifteen?”
“I’m sixteen.”
“Sixteen, fifteen, what’s it like. You got a girl friend?”
“Sort of.”
“What’s her name?”
“Yeah, what is her name, Jay?”
I didn’t have a girl friend. I was just imagining the time at Wright Road Susan had come to say good-night to me in the winter before our mother died and given me a hand-job under the sheets while Art was downstairs, wondering why lamb and rosemary taste so good together. I was thinking of her, hoping like a devil on a ride it would happen again one day soon.

“April,” I said. And my father would just nod and push his bottom lip out a little like he could see exactly what someone called April looked, smelled, sounded like. Then he usually started asking me about my mum and that’s when I made my excuses. I could feel the cut in his voice, the spite, and I didn’t like to be a part of it, so I’d go outside and Susan would come out and share a smoke with me, or we’d walk round to my friend Josh’s place. When Susan wasn’t around sometimes I’d close the door in my room and take out the list I’d copied, before I took it round to Wrights Road, hoping that some vibe I’d got off my old man in the kitchen would give me a clue so I could work out what these names and numbers were all about. But it didn’t happen. I was half hoping he’d come up and find me reading the list and ask to see it. I wanted to see what his reaction would be.

**Art and Jay sleep at Ray Street**

It was just after that conversation that something happened to change everything. My father had been round less and me and Art had made up and one day I decided to show Art the notebook ‘cause I just couldn’t keep it to myself any longer. I led Art to the front room again and in the dim shadowy light from the hallway I lifted my father’s bedspread and showed Art the old case under the bed. I pointed silently to the new furniture, the long bench, the lamp, the old chest that had turned up at some point at the end of my father’s bed. The room was grey and dull and Art couldn’t seem to take it all in the half-light. He stood there, his face in shadow, as if he couldn’t comprehend what had happened. I turned the lamp and the room
filled with onions of light, mild and ringed all up the wall in reflection. I tugged at Art's sleeve. I pulled the blind down and slid the case out from under the bed, opened the lock and pulled out my father's notebook. I removed the rubber band and passed the open notebook to him. Art stooped to put his beer on the floor and took the notebook in both hands. He turned the pages. Then he reached for the rubber band and replaced it. He passed the notebook back to me.

“Fuck man, you better be careful with that shit. You don’t know who he is.”

“Well who is he then?”

“Just leave that shit alone, Jay. You hear me.”

“It might be worth something.”

“Put it back,” he almost whispered it.

“Jesus, Art, relax will ya. He won’t be here tonight.”

“Just put it back,” and I did and I locked it up and we stood together in that room for a moment just looking at each other, both of us kind of frowning and smiling at the same time, like we’d got through something. But it wasn’t over, not by a long way. We took more beer out to the back yard and for a while we forgot about our father. We sat in the yard in the hum of cicada song. I could feel the heat coming off the house, up from under the veranda. Just for a moment the yard was filled with memories that came alive in me – me and Art laughing and running and Art picking me up and swinging me in circles until he was so giddy he couldn’t stand straight.

“Let’s stay the night here,” Art said. “I’ll help you sort the rest of this place out in the morning.”

“There’s nothing to sort out, Art.”

“Whatever. It’ll be our last chance to remember this place. At least I know I won’t be coming back.”
We woke to the sounds of shouting downstairs. I was about to rush down to see what it was about, but Art held me back. He raised his finger to his lips and held me upstairs. We heard Susan downstairs and then my father, and I thought it was strange her being here because she had told me she was uncomfortable with him on her own. She and my old man were talking and I didn’t catch much but it started getting heated and then it all went quiet for a moment and the next thing I knew Susan was going mental, and I have to say I was pretty scared.

“You fucken’ cunt, who the fuck you think you are. Fuck, you fucken’ fucken’ fuck cunt.”

“Listen honey, you just get a grip,” he was saying, “calm down,” over and over, cold and firm and I know for fucken’ sure that ain’t going to work. I’m just hearing it all and scared cause it all has a steely feeling I’ve been part of something I shouldn’t have been a part of and then I hear her go all broody and hear her walking up and down and then she’s yelling again; then it’s all quiet again. Me and Art can see my father out my old window down on the front lawn, smoking and shaking his head and breathing out through his mouth so his cheeks fill and swell and then he’s breathing in through his teeth, and he just looks all worried and stormy at the same time. He’s upset like a gangster in a movie who’s just whacked someone he didn’t really mean to, but he’s too tough to really take it that seriously.

Art and me were in my old bedroom on the first floor. It was off the side of the house. It was kinda sticking out on its own and I could see the front and the back yard from the north and south windows. We were looking out to the front yard at my old man and we could hear a clattering noise upstairs. We looked at each other and stood real quiet behind the door. It’s Susan going into our mum’s old room, a room that our father was storing his things in. He had moved them from downstairs. Susan is pretty quiet and I know she’s up to something. Then we heard her opening the
back door, and we heard it bang. I went to the window that overlooked the back window. Art was looking too. We saw her by the incinerator, and she had our old man’s case and she threw it on the ground, on the tan summer dry grass and she was walking firm and purposeful to the back of Art’s ute, which he had left there because he’d been having trouble with the transmission, and she got a can of fuel off the tray and the next thing we see is her open the case and take out one of those Zippo lighters the old man had about four of. The case was on the top of the old incinerator and she was pushing at it so hard the fucken cold coloured smoke-stained grey bricks at the top of the square opening were falling off. One landed on her toe and she was cursing with a twisted angry expression over and over, trying not to swear out loud, but she got the case in there. Then she upended the fuel can on it and into the case, which is open a split, and there’s a lot of petrol in that can, and then she throws that on there too, the empty can, and lights a Zippo and throws it right in there on fire losing that forever. The woof of flame flares out and up her arm like she’s burned herself, but she’s ok, rubbing her face and storming through the house and I think she’s gonna see my father on the front lawn and she’s gonna attack him. Me and Art race to the north window to see what she’s gonna do but she just walks past him nice and close and puts her finger right up under his nose and walks out the gate, turning left and gone outta sight behind a large azalea. We watch all this and without a word between us we somehow just know somehow it’s just the beginning. When Susan left went to look at the incinerator. The flames were about ten feet high.

Every possession our father bought to us was gone, and me and Art as soft as feather-feet go back to the other window to see him. Our father was out there pacing and he must have sensed something out the back ‘cause he goes through the house, I hear his Cubans clomp-whack the floor and I see him out there, the top of his old case angled outta the incinerator in a tongue of flame high up and he’s running at it and trying to pull it out, but
he couldn’t get near it. The heat beats him back and he was swearing. Then he was running back and forth and to the garden tap, but there’s no hose. He ran back again and, then he was like a madman. He was kicking at the grey bricks of the incinerator and just kept kicking at it until it all came down in a burning pile.

The new oxygen opened the flames up like a cut and explosion, and dust and soot of other days were all of a sudden all over the garden. Our old man was kicking at it all and there was no way he could get near it – all fire and bricks everywhere like a miniature ruin alive with flame. And, his case and all its insides were there somewhere under it all and, by now well and truly fucken burned to fucken fuck. I was trying hard not to run down and help him but something told me not to and Art was steely and unmoving. Then, forgetting my cover I leaned out the window and I felt the heat of that thing, I shit you not, even though I was thirty feet away. I was scared he saw me. Then, he stopped. He stopped his ranting and seemed to realise his case was gone.

Me and Art watched as our father just sat in the middle of the lawn with the ash and heat around him and put his head in his hands and curl over so we can see the ridge of his lean spine showing through his sweat-tight shirt. He was just rocking like he was crying and I thought I could hear him weeping the word shit, shit, shit outta him somehow. It was like it was not coming from his mouth but from his whole body or somewhere else, hissing outta him like he was made of wet wood in a fire. I wanted to go down there and put my arm around him, but he didn’t even know me and Art were in the house. I got the feeling I’d better keep it that way. Art gave me that feeling without saying it and without a word the two of us got dressed into our jeans and t-shirts quick as we could. The we slow-stepped down the stairs and out the open front door, into the street, and we turned left and then we were gone behind the azalea, too.
Susan tells Art and Jay

Susan stays away from our house for about a week, but then one day I come home to find her crying through the black-eye my old man had given her and Art’s there sitting at the table with her and I knew he’s waiting like a snake. It was the first time I’d seen him with Susan since what seemed like forever and he keeps saying he just feels it’s his fault, and he was sorry, he was sorry. He just keeps saying it over and over. Then, like it’s all supposed to happen just like it does he says he’s gonna do what needs to be done the next time the old man steps in and I know he means it. I reckon he’s probably been waiting for it all his life. I don’t say it. I keep my mouth well and truly shut, but I think it – Susan was probably a part in her own beating. She shared more tender moments with my father that Art hadn’t seen and there was something between them that I knew but could not understand.

As the summer heat continues, I watch the days pass before my father comes back. I know he’s gonna come back, but I can’t say why I know it. I watch in my mind’s eye over and over as she burns all my father’s possessions in the incinerator at the back of the yard, case and all. The dust and heat rise over her rage-drunk head and as I remember it she doesn’t seem triumphant but defeated and all fuzzed up before a background of hot vibrating air.

After about two weeks he does come back. He says he has to get the few things he had on a shelf in our mother’s room. I remember the summer rain was spilling over a lop-sided gutter and he was without a coat and tall and bedraggled and thin under his wet clothes that clung to him like the skin of a fish. His timing is bad, because Art is home, sitting at the kitchen table and when the old man comes down the stairs with a box in his hands,
and Art says one word and that’s it – my connection with my father is changed forever.

“Outside.” Art gets up cool and lithe and almost sad. He follows the old man out the torn wire door. I know for sure my father fancies himself but he’s been away a long time and hasn’t seen Art beat the living shit out of every opponent he has ever boxed. Not to mention the street. All bets are off and he breaks my father’s jaw with a sinister left jab that the old man doesn’t even see and leaves him twitching on the muddy lawn. I call an ambulance and I am the one who waits with my semi-conscious father, trying to talk with him and honestly thinking he could be dying. The rain was splashing all around us out there and I was glad for it. It covered my crying silent and hard about all the time I never had with my father, and about my mother – this assault reminds me of all that. And sitting there in the mud with my hand on my father’s shoulder, feeling his chest slowly rise and fall, something strange happened inside me. I no longer hated my father, and I no longer loved him. He’d been friendly to me, shown me some things I didn’t know about. Despite Art’s threats to me to leave him to lie there alone, I waited with him until they came. I told him I’m sorry. Then he’s gone; without ceremony, without siren, moving slowly down the rain drenched street.
Chapter Three. Mainly about ART
Art

The day I was born, my father was at the dogs with his gangster mate, Joseph. They climbed a tree that straddled the fence so they wouldn’t have to pay entry. It was a big oak lit up by a streetlight at the back of the track.

Inside the track it was darker. My father and his mate dropped like two silent animals, like a night-splash, into the smells, sounds and sweat that were part of that dog track at the close of day. As my father’s feet hit the ground he was wincing. He was nodding his head over and over, mouthing “fuck, fucken fuck, Jesus”, hopping, too with Joseph before him solid at the tree, his arms crossed, a frown on his face. My father had deeply torn the skin off his elbow on the inside of the rough brick wall. His jacket sleeve had slid to his bicep. After twisting his arm out to his side to see the wound, he pulled the jacket down and cupped his hand over the elbow. As he did this he was thinking the scab would stick to the lining jacket lining. And, like the pain had woken some wider attention in him, he remembered my mother was on her way to hospital to birth her first child. Me. But my father was gone. He was at the dogs.

The sounds of it, the gamble-rumble, the quilt of noise, tight-stretched with the breath of men and dogs – it held him there, desperate, incomplete, and from that moment forever lost to me. The hum of lights on the backs of dogs, the heads of men, on my mother’s groaning-push-distorted body, they were the only warm things. Dog’s feet like drum beats, slapping spayed sand. And my father’s elbow was settling into a throbbing pain. He pulled his sleeve down and was holding the fabric against the wound as he walked.

He looked like he was cold and was thinking, again, how the blood will dry and stick to the lining of the coat. He thought about going to the dunnies to wrap his elbow in toilet paper, but then heard the sounds of
dogs before he’d taken ten steps from his original path to the track. He heard the dog’s breath as they ran. Their breath pressed deep into my father’s decisions, deep into the humid evening. No phone calls. No flowers. How’s ya fucken father?”

In the maternity ward my mother’s eyes were closed-slap-fanned crow’s feet, tight as glass. Her left hand was clenched around the edge of a pale blue big knit cotton blanket. She held it so tight the marks were still on her palm, mixed with the lines of her short-life fortune when morning came. Her hand was squeezing something she couldn’t have. I was a difficult birth. She bled a lot, tearing herself to bring me into the world. And, in the blood and shit and all the foul fuck that goes with it we heard each other’s cries and a little split smile came to her lips.

It’s mostly to do with my father, laying down his bets, sweat on his fingers. My father, his heavy heart, mean as a wrecking ball. His strong tanned frame, his aching elbow, losing his love of me with every bet. I am ashamed to say my bones are poured half-full-of-him; spiral stairs in a fog of blood. He lost that night. Ten grand, and, he never went to the hospital, that day or the next, or the next. So, in the void he left, my mother called me Art. Art, two hours after I was born, cradled in her pale, exhausted, black and white expression. I’ve seen the photos.

At the time she didn’t realize who I was. She was blinded, or deafened by the absent echoes of my father. Blinded by the pain and blood it takes to shit out a child. She was looking at me with a smile, her lip-closed smile. That same smile was on her face when she died. Her tired blue-rust eyes had forgotten. She’d forgotten my father.

My father’s gangster mate made two mistakes that day. Being my father’s creditor was the first. Ten grand. The second, after getting a beating, was not taking note that he should leave the Tanners well the fuck alone. If he had, twenty-one years later his son Billy woulda never got the chance to put
me in the hospital. Also, twenty one years later, and when I recovered, I wouldn't a had to kill him. Maybe we woulda drifted together anyway. Maybe we were fighting our father's fight, I don't know. Now, when I think on it I wonder how my old man feels about it all, that night at the dogs. But, while my mother bore me, howling like a cow-wolf into the hospital corridors, my dog-man father poured money down his throat. He slid neatly folded bills under the cashiers wire grid window. In exchange he took white wax slip tickets with the names of dogs printed on 'em. They were bets that would seal our fates, they were what defined it all. It was all there on the slips in dark, clear Times New Roman. I would see them forever in the shadows of my memory of his face. They were clear as his smell. Dogs’ names; everywhere: Mark Twain, in the first, a sure thing; Pharaoh’s Mask, eight to one in the sixth; Dancing Chariot, four to one; Buka Sunset, scratched; Bernie Bayle. That day—not one came in. It was an Unlucky Day.

My father kept losing and Joseph kept making good on his debt, peeling off weathered cash from a fat roll, large fingers moistened with spit, handing it over in fast count piles of five hundred. My mother pushing out the placentia, her cries turned shrill, as if I had a dead runt twin she was objecting to; pushing from a bloody space so tender it was hurt by the air, sad as all alone can make you.

Like I said, the old man dropped ten grand. He beat-up Joseph Wednesday in a bar on the way home for giving him money, and got charged with assault. There were two plain-clothes right next to him having a drink. Like I said, it was an unlucky day – they busted him twice, once for assault, and once for fucking up their good time, for tearing the buttons off their shirts. He spent the night in a cold lock up, bruised and alone; (bruised because Joseph was no slouch, and the two plain clothes had been obliged to defend themselves).

My mother, quivering in shock wrapped and warming in a her cotton blanket up to her chin was getting ready to encourage me to suck some
more from her, thin warm pure butter-yellow milk. At the same time she was full of lonely rage. She curled into pale enduring sorrow, both hot and cold at the same time, somehow hoping, as if a cellophane fire could keep you warm, that everything would be alright. He didn’t come home that day, or the next, or the one after that. It was almost ten days and by that time my name was Art Jackson Tanner. Art Jackson Tanner. It had been with me long enough to stick. When he finally showed, he looked down at my sleeping face and drawing on a cigarette, scratched his hair and said:

“You called him what?”

As though something might change.

The thing about my father was that, in many ways, he could be charming. He could be funny, well mannered. His problem was alcohol, as clichéd as that sounds. There were many times I saw him sitting in front of a drink he’d poured. He had a way of looking at it – as though it were a stock market decision, or a living animal he was about to ingest. Sometimes he tipped it down the sink. The splatter of liquid against the stainless steel felt like a victory, beating a fucken little tin-drum sound into the kitchen. He never rinsed the liquid away. He left it there, whatever it was, red wine, white wine, whiskey. It smelled and got sticky in the day, until my mother came home and smiled over it stained and sugary in the sink as if he’d given her a bunch of flowers.

I often watched my father in those moments when the drink was poured. He stood so still. Almost like a trance. I never knew which way he’d go. He explained it to me once, a week after he came back, just after my mother died. He said he would feel his chest buzzing, like he’d had four cups of coffee in a row, a jitter, like frayed wire cable twisted too hard inside him. He knew if he started there would be trouble. ‘I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in darkness.’
Art. One Afternoon—a memory of his father, 1972

One afternoon on a weekend in early childhood me and Jay watched him tall, standing under a tree in the back yard. I was seven. He was dappled with yellow sunshine, shadow leaves across his clothes and as Jay went off toward our mother, I watched my father look up into that tree listening. He frowned, puzzled and angry. I could tell when he was angry because he shuffled from foot to foot. Now he was listening like he was gonna disagree with fucken big old shushing out seashore sounds of rustle in the wind. Then, he looked at the drink he’d placed on the outdoor table, dappled too.

The garden was full of my father’s mates, drinking their first drinks, ignoring their wives, their kids. These men, they would often come to the house on summer evenings, or the weekend, and they would cook food together and serve it up to us like a bunch of woman. But, they weren’t woman. They would talk dirty and laugh and dance, little snips of gypsy-green dance, and music, that cut the garden up with shadows that made me feel small, my stomach turn with a longing envy, and a want to grow up as soon as humanly possible. I was watching my father doing battle with the whispers of a tree, watching his friends.

They were brothers, these men. Not like me and Jay, in another way. They moved around the garden and in and out of the house, bunched in twos, or threes. It was always strange to me every time they were here, which when the weather was hot seemed to be a lot. They even followed each other to the toilet and stood talking through doors while one or other of them took a dump; pausing in mid sentence to deliver a splash into the conversation. How do I know this? I followed like a cut shadow. My father was still under that tree but I could hear him saying,

“I fucked her.”

“The fuck you did, she wouldn’t hand you a fucken biscuit, Jon.”
“She couldn’t walk to the fucken cupboard, that’s why,” and he guffaws they laugh and I hear my mother and her fumble-hurried-hand at the crinkle sound of biscuit packets in the after-school afternoon.

Sometimes in these moments the men look at me, realize I’m there, they never explain. But mostly, I was below them, not tall enough to be noticed, to be part of it, trying to be out of the way so they would let their guards down. And, they scuff me and punch my arm and offer me cigarettes that they clip jerk away before I realize it’s a joke.

“Hey Art wanna a smoke?”

“Hey, Art, where’s that crazy little brother of yours?”

“Hey, Art, go and get me a beer will ya, one ‘o them blue ones.”

“Hey, Art, you got a girl?” They were all big and loud, and friendly. But, there was one thing I did understand. I could feel it like the cool grass under my feet, watching my father watching that drink. And, that was, somewhere, under all that wine bottle fun, they hated each other, in the way you can hate someone you’re stuck with. He lifted that glass he’d been looking at for so long to his lips. I was seven and it was the last time I loved him.

That afternoon, the last time I loved him, was the first time I saw him hit my mother. He drank whatever it was in one swallow. No flowers this time. I was looking up at him, and even then I could feel something coming; a tall thin man, in loose fitting jeans with a brass buckled belt and a singlet; or, he wore suit pants, white shirt bunched up round his waist, made him look like a movie star, fine Italian shoes. His voice had a knife in it and his eyes didn’t shift around but tended to rest on people. It was loving, and uncomfortable. My heart ached for him, time passed, I lost him in the crowd. Then, a sound jumped out of the afternoon.

A smack-thud-dull-sound like it was mixed in oil. Everyone stopped, kids, barbecue sounds, salads being passed round, check-clothed table fun under the big tree. The rush of silence made everything suddenly bright, and people parted and there was an opening like split and I saw my mother
reeling, staggering against a garden bush, that held up. I went closer. She clutched at her face like a child. Her nose was sticking out and pressed between her two little fingers. Her hands were held up and over her eyes and at the same time I heard the gurgling noises I knew Jay always made before he started to cry and a long flat moan from my mother that haunts me still.

I saw blood pouring thickly from her nostrils and into her open mouth; her head tilted back, dark hair falling loose. I wondered what blood tasted like as she spat it in watery frothy bubbles onto the grass, where it sat up and then went down just a broken stain on the blades of grass. I felt like I was filled with hot liquid. I’d been hit. It was quiet for a long time. Everything was still bright and sound, crisp as music all alive, waiting but silent. It was the beginning of what my family always had been. It all came rattling in behind my mother’s soft howl.

My father was breathing funny, like he’d just run from somewhere close. This heavy breathing was what I remembered as Jay came and took my hand, quiet as he could. I felt him quivering, felt it in his hand. Our mother had steadied herself and had a wad of sky blue tea towel pressed to her face. Our father was blustering around like he’d been slighted. The most shocking thing, and that was my father’s friends, all grown men didn’t do a thing. They didn’t assist my mother, and I stood near them, in their ranks. I did not assist her either. We were afraid, I could smell it, like salt rats from the sea, looking down, looking away, every one of us. The women too. A lady called Jenny someone started to pick up some things that had fallen off a small table. Then, Jay let my hand go and went inside. My mother followed as though her three-year old son was leading her to a different life.
Jay describes his father’s return in the summer of 1985

Six weeks pass before my father skulked onto the porch in the middle of a still, late afternoon. I am sure he’s watched the house. He knew I was the only one there. I opened the door as saw him coming up the steps. He wouldn’t come inside so I sat on the step with him drinking iced tea. He had a pack of straws in the inside pocket of his coat. He takes them out and offers me one with a down turned mouth. We sat in the shade. The air was heavy and still. And he made some attempt to explain his miserable person to me through his wired up jaw that some how made his head bob up and down while he speaks.

His words were filled with air and imbued with a hum and buzz that was both frightening and reassuring, hissing through his teeth.

“I’ve had a cunt of life, Jay,” he says, the words coming out like he has to grate them through his teeth. He sat on the step and slumped.

“You got no idea. I been in and out of homes, and beaten by my old man in the off times. Then my old lady leaves him and hooks up with a worse fuck, called Jason, believe it or not. He got in my head and left me blackened and blue inside and out.”

“Why’d you call me Jason, then?”

“Your mother did that. I asked her not to and she pushed me for why and I said I didn’t wanna talk about it. I never told her.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want her pity, or the shame of it. I wanted to leave it behind.”

“So you hate my name?”

“No I don’t, Jay, it just took me a while to get used to it on someone else’s shoulders.”

And he goes on and on and tells me about the war and his grandmother and how his sister ran off somewhere and he’s never known her and the summer heat is throbbing against everything in the front garden and cicadas wrenching a constant tear in the afternoon fabric and he convinces
me. Despite him hitting Susan, something in me is giving him room and I can hardly believe it and I feel like I’m being lied to at the same time as told the truth and I imagine Art’s voice in my head, that bastard mean brother, who would put the whole story into the case and burn it high like Susan did.

But I’m not Art. I don’t forgive my father, but part of me puts my understanding of what it all really means on hold. At that moment, which was a moment I decided to stay with him, at least for summer, I ignored what he was because I needed him. There were so many things I wanted to know, about why he’d come back. In all these things I forgot what I already knew. He was trouble. He was only interested in himself.

He sat and sucked up his ice tea and smoked cigarettes and continued to ask me about his things and did I know if Susan had taken anything out of his case before she burned it. Then, all of sudden, in a conversation that seemed friendly he started to sound urgent in his distorted words.

“Do you know if she looked in that case before she burned it, I mean you and her are pretty tight.”

“I dunno. She burned it. I told ya.”

“Come on, Jay, we both know Susan’s sharp, she’s gonna have a little look before she does something like that, look for money or even a bottle of booze.” I wondered if he’d seen me and Art leaning out the window. He wanted to see what had happened. I felt my hand go sweaty. I thought I was blushing, and my legs seemed to lose their desire to keep me up.

I followed him down to the back of the yard, the still day around us hot and quiet, pinned with bird song now, and I watched him lift up what was left of the incinerator, one brick at a time, and cover his nice fine clothes in a grey ash that also collected on the hairs on his arms, proud there like a thousand tiny white-grey butterflies quivering in the movements he made. There was not much to be had, the leather case was gone, charred bits of it the size of wine bottle labels, brittle as bark. He found a twisted, rusted lock with the screws hanging loose, a belt buckle, all of it was burned and
smelled of kerosene like a chemical cough breath of burn-you-bastard-burn that Susan has spread all over it and in it and up its fucken arse like she wanted my father to know she’d cut the colour out of every precious memory he carried in that old case. The petrol smell was out there in the heat, spread across the garden, too, like a splash of shadow just to rub it in, right up ya nose, ya cunt.

My father poked around with a stick and nudged the bricks again with his boot, then he asked me about his notebook again. There was a tone in his voice that made me proceed with caution.

“There were,” he said, “some numbers in that book that I can’t lose. Do you understand, Jay?”

“No.” I said it too quickly.

“You see, the thing is, Jay, there’s a time limit on all this. I gotta have that notebook, mate, if it’s still around.”

It was as if he knew what I’d done, without knowing it. He was begging me. It was as if he could he would snap his fingers off one by one and trade as many of them as I wanted for those numbers, he would have. But I froze. I looked at him and tried my hardest not to let him see the ice on my breath, the ice in my eyes. We were squatting next to the pile of ash that was his life. It was sandy-like-dust all over the fucken place. Then, for a tiny moment, just the smallest tiny moment, I considered telling him; and in that instant I felt like everything in my mind was laid before both of us on the ground like a picnic, or the parts of an engine that we would put together. All these thoughts were laid open, or so it seemed, on a broad thick cloth.

I remember hoping, to a lord I didn’t believe in, that my father hadn’t seen my expression. And while I was thinking these things I lied. There is no choice but to lie. My mother, who’s nowhere to be seen, insisted I did. Art insisted I did. So did Susan. And it was to them—my violent lovers—that I was loyal.
Further thoughts on the notebook

The moment my father left I went straight up to my *Coles Funny Picture Book number 4*. I had the strangest feeling that it would be charred and smouldering in a kind of sympathy burn. I almost expected to find my bookshelf blackened and collapsed. Of course it was all just as I’d left it. My single A4 page was folded in there, intact and flat as a jack of hearts. I looked at the list again. I wondered what could be so important about it. What was the ‘time limit?’ How can a book have a time limit? The page almost felt heavy in my fingers. But, still, there was nothing there I could make any sense of. Part of me wanted to give these numbers back. It was a strong part, too, and I did battle with it inside myself. I still hated him. I still felt ripped off that he’d missed most of my life, that he thought he could just pick me up like I was a shopping bag he’d taken a rest from, no big deal. But, then hearing him speak through that jaw, the hiss and quiver, about the notebook, hearing his story. It mixed me up. I enjoyed his punishment. I enjoyed my power and, at the very same moment, I wanted to cry.

I folded the list and put it back in the *Coles Funny Picture Book*. I wondered if I’d tell Art about it. I went down stairs but he wasn’t at home. He was deeper in than me. At least the old man didn’t know I had a copy of his numbers. He sure as hell knew that Art had broken his jaw. His packet of drinking straws reminded him of that. We all knew, Art, me, my mother from her resting place, Susan – that my father, Jon Tanner, was not gonna take that one lying down.”

Art hitting our father

In my imagination I held the notebook for a long time. Felt the weight of it, looked at the frayed hollows at the spine. I licked my thumb and rubbed a mark on the back cover. It spread like mud. It felt like the dirt was
coming from my fingers, spreading over everything and as I held the
notebook open at the middle pages I imagined my father standing in the
corner of the room watching me. His expression was kind, not angry. His
tall, thin body leaning against the doorframe; lighting a cigarette, the smell
of his Zippo fluid and tobacco. I imagined him frowning and frozen. In
what I imagined, he couldn’t touch me or talk. He just had to stand there
wondering what I’d do with his everything, rubbing my mud-fingers on the
secret to everything he had. And, in this moment, looking at my father
standing in the doorway, I felt part of me gently crack and open and at that
moment I became a naked soldier without a uniform. I imagined myself
looking up at him.

“What’s this part mean,” I said, “with the stars next to the numbers?” I
lifted my head to where he was standing. The bed creaked. A rush of
afternoon air filled the curtains, twisting them like a flag hanging down. I
looked at the notebook, looked at my father. He stood smoking. Then, he
turned and left. He did not answer my question. I imagined him walking
down the stairs. I heard the boards moving under the carpet, calling out
their song to his slow weight, to his heels. In the sound of his leaving the
notebook felt heavy, and the more I realized I didn’t know what it was for
the heavier it became.

I went downstairs. A cut of yellow sun was coming through the window. I
hoped for Art. I could feel my father’s secrets and I hoped for Art to
break it all, smash it into nothing I could recognize. Looking out the
window – where I’d seen my father for the first time – the heat of the day
was on my face, a slap of sun. On the verandah I sat on the step in the
shade. The heat had presence, pressing against the memory of everything.
The cicadas filled the afternoon. The sound shook my body. The sound
made memory difficult, it made the earth vibrate. I thought of my mother
rotting, until that was pressed away too.
Then, looking down at the step I saw my father’s glass and a pile of cigarette ash grouped in the crease of the brickwork, undisturbed in the still day. His glass had a little spit of liquid in it, a tan-piss-whiskey colour with melted ice. The more I looked the more I wanted to drink it and the thought made me sick. I took off my shoes and felt the heat from the step push up through my sweat soaked socks. I thought of the notebook again. Felt its smooth surface in my mind; flipped through the pages. I was tied to that book, me and my father, like objects in a hammock sewn together, tangled in a way I was only beginning to know.

I imagined my father watching me again, watching me look at that spit of a drink. Again he was standing still just watching, one hand in his pocket, by the lime tree. Then he turned and left my mind’s eye again. I saw his lanky arse walk out the gate, the clap of his Cubans on the concrete, and he was gone – the spirit of him breathed out and away by the heat of summer day.

Before I knew it I was sitting on my bed again; the empty house moaning in the afternoon. I looked at the list of numbers again thinking somehow they can cover the cool damp smell of my father’s going. The sun was streaming in through the window, broken with the leaves it’s falling through, over the bed, over the notebook. In my imagination I saw the pencil indentations of my father’s writing, the shiny graphite, the bright white paper and I knew then, I just knew, he would be back.

In my mind’s eye I watch my father’s lanky arse walk out the gate again, and realize I will be seeing him again and that I will want to follow him. I realize that somewhere in my needy and lonely heart he has set up strange desire I can’t quite figure. I begin to imagine what sort of a life he’s had, putting it together from the small bits of information he’s given me and I find myself sitting on my bed again in the empty house looking at the list of numbers I copied from his notebook; again thinking somehow they may clothe the cool damp smell of his absence. Somehow they may connect
him to me. Then I pick up a pencil and write – *Why Did You Go?* – on the top margin of the list. I wasn’t feeling sorry for myself I really just wanted to know.

With that list in my hands I realised that watching Art hit my father had shaken me. It was almost as if I were the one lying in the mud in the rain. With Art’s violence my father was all of a sudden gone, like a smell hosed off the pavement. But, I remained affected by him. I had been seduced. The way he just moved in, his almost total confidence, the way he smoked and drove his car off slow – it was just enough to make my father seem intriguing. Then, of course there was Charlie Parker. I forget to tell you about him.

The memory of my father there, that first six weeks, was something I wanted to open and look in on. Peep-show style and the more I looked and thought about what I saw, the more I began to realize, or began to sense, that somewhere in what he carried into our summer lives was like an empty canvas bag, half stuffed with something useless, or even something malign. I could feel this like the weather had turned. It was more than his absence. That was a disease with a cure; a failed buckled remedy as it may have been, cooked up and wrapped in flavoured steam, silent, and eaten with me, like some kind of dog would consume something, but well mannered, in a double hot kitchen. His presence for those six weeks was a remedy. It was like a wax padding over every injury he’d caused me, injuries beaten into me every day he was away. When he hit our mother, as Art told me he did after the Susan incident, when he hit Susan, he ejected himself really. Even if Art had not delivered his reckless rough justice, knowing my father hit my mother meant that I would never look at him the same way again. It just took me the whole summer-heat-fuck-up to realize that. Art already knew what he was. It was me who had to find that
out the hard way. I wanted to believe he was something different. I wanted that so bad that I couldn’t see straight.

When he came back there was something uncanny about it, something severe, and it was only later, at the end of summer, when it was all over that I came to realize what I had taken for a remedy, for possibility, in his summer recipes, was an illusion I had wanted so bad I’d made it up. The canvas bag was empty. The wax paddiing a jaundice con. By the end of summer I would realize he was like a worm, a parasite. But he was disguised, from me, like my own finger or my own voice, something I didn’t notice. That endless flow of food that came in neat, never quiet enough little serves: fettuccine al pesto, matrichiano, cannelloni;

“How about this one, Jay, scaloppine vino biancio,” on a warm plate, it was in fact a seamless disguise. It was an attempt to dominate. Art had seen it. That was why he’d been out of the house almost all summer. It was as if he had left me with him so I would understand for myself. I had to go through summer to understand.

Seeing Susan with a black eye didn’t make me understand. The way Art took my father outside didn’t make me understand. Perhaps it would have turned out better if I had seen it then, seen him for what he was, but I didn’t, well go fucken hang yourself over that one, . . .

I sat very still on my bed. The page with numbers wavered in the breeze coming through the window and I don’t know why but I went back down stairs and, deliberately tempting fate, I sat on the step again and studied my list in the wake of my father’s departure. Seeing him leave created a painful silence. Holding the paper in my hands I felt like he was watching, but I told myself that was paranoid. I felt the numbers were some how a part of him and maybe that was why I felt his presence. I thought at the time that perhaps, in a romantic way, I was exaggerating their importance, they did feel weighty, and there was my old man’s urgent need of them. That meant something. The actual script seemed ordinary enough but, there was something about them…Each line had a name and a corresponding set of
eight digits, then the other six digits. I looked at my handwriting, neat and
deliberate. Each letter clean and separate, each number rounded and clear.
Mostly the names were Christian names. Anglo names: John – 5798 3416, 09 21 Bill – 9878 0741, 08 03 Adrienne… Some had initials following
them: Jackson. U. – 9416 2834, 06 14 Rosemary. V. – 8433 4009, 0611. There were also the Mr. and Mrs: Mrs. Delahunty – 9787 2400, 1211 Mrs.
Grace, Mr. Pippen; J. W. Simpson. It was a long list. There must have been eighty names in two columns on my creased A4 sheet. Still, two
months after I had transcribed them, they felt important. The sense of it is in my guts, I think I just knew without knowing I knew, you know what I
mean.

It was at about this time Art was training for a lead up fight to his fight with Croft that was scheduled for some time in late summer. I went down the
gym with him sometimes. I liked the early mornings, the dew on things, the low day energy, everything quiet and waiting to warm up its dirty daily motion. Me and Art walking down White Street with the fruiterers and the newsagent unpacking trucks, the occasional car. Art liked me coming down with him, he said. We talked about our parents and what was going on. He was pretty pissed with me for hanging out with the old man so much,

“What else was I gonna do? You just left me there with him.”

‘Go some place else, play some pool, go to Josh’s.”

Art never boasted about hitting the old man. Actually he avoided that
topic. It was as though it saddened him in some way. I suppose he felt sorry not to have had a father, too. I thought I could feel that under the soft sounds of his tracksuit as he walked, the close fitting shoes almost silent on the pavement. We’d go to the gym, up the stairs and across to the locker room. I never changed, but I would hold the pads up for Art for a while, swinging them randomly at his face like he’d shown me and he’d duck and move in and clap these terrible jabs into my padded hands that
sent vibrations all though my body. He was taking it easy, just warming up, and I’d stay for a while, walking around watching the other guys when Art went to work on the big bag, or skip.

It was down at the gym that I first met Charlie Parker. He was one of my father’s friends, into every sort of betting you could think of. He was into the dogs with our old man Art told me, and I also realized later that he and Art had something going with boxing, but that did not become clear until it ended. I never talked with Charlie. To be honest I was frightened of him. He was low to the ground and solid as a boab tree. I somehow just never really felt comfortable when I was near him.

I went down more often with Art during December. Once he told me he felt stronger when I went down there with him which I thought was a surprising thing for him to say. Maybe he was concerned about the fight. Maybe he was concerned about my father’s retaliation, I am not sure, I just know it felt right to hang out with him at the start of each day. After an hour or so I would leave and walk back up Station Parade and buy myself breakfast at a café next to the Juliet Bar; then I’d go to work at the pool hall.

**My father’s postcard**

The days went past and my father was gone but gave me enough of his time, enough of his cooking, in his summer stay, for me to be intrigued, and somehow, and it’s weird, I started to forgive him. My vision of all the shit he’d done, my vision of Susan crouched over the unstable wooden chair the day he’d hit her was diminishing. At this time I somehow forgot her crying and the soft moans stitched into her tears. I forgot the colour of her hopeless despair. I forgot Art’s anger, the pure force of it on that day as he put an arm over her rounded shoulder. I forgot Susan’s anger.
Although my thoughts of my father had been black and cold for almost all my life I knew, with a kind of sick feeling, that part of me was beginning to side with him. I felt it coming around inside me like a big rusty ocean liner doing a U-turn. I found myself wishing my father would come back, not to Art and my dead mother, who clearly hated him, but to me. I wanted to cook with him in the summer kitchen. I had Art teaching me, looking out for me, but he was only twenty-three. I wanted my father's experience. I wanted his knowledge as if it was something I could scoop outta him like a long tongue-curl of hard won survival.

The more Art and the memory of my mother tried to warn me off my father, the more I wanted to find out what it was they were warning me off. The more they tried to hold onto me, the more I wanted to be separate. Because neither her nor Art had ever wanted to talk about my father's life, I was forced to construct a picture of who he was, and, in a way, it gave me a perfect reason to feel what was becoming a low level hate for everyone else. Over and over I asked Art about my father but he wouldn't give me any information. I begin to inflate my father, and his image pushed into every aspect of my life. I started to make up stories about him. I gave him a sister and a brother as well as two more step-brothers. It was not purely imagined, because I knew bits and pieces from conversations I had had with him, or overheard. In my mind his life slowly became so detailed that when I spoke about him I was no longer lying. And all the time I was going to that Coles Funny Picture Book, number whatever it was wondering about those numbers and feeling like both their power and my father were slipping away from me as each day went past.

Me and Art kept going to the gym, but my heart was less and less into it, as he got more and more serious and intense. Then, one day a post card arrived. In the image on the card, there are two men photographed in black and white. They are dressed in suits and ties standing by the side of a large pool table, holding pool cues and smiling with pursed lips into the
camera. He knew I liked pool. When he was staying with us he told me he had a friend called Charlie Parker who had been national champion. When my father mentioned Charlie Parker and pool I started to feel my whole family had a web of connections that I didn’t know about. There are no balls on the table. It appeared as a very dark space in the picture. The camera’s flash had picked up on the small golden circles that were stuck to the felt as markers for the games – snooker, billiards, eight-ball – played in that old pool room. One of the men in the photo was smoking a cigarette. He was leaning on one leg and looked older than the other man. My father wrote one sentence on the back of the card. It was in blue ink and sat on two lines directly in the centre.

To cook pasta well
add olive oil to boiling water.

Art tells Jay to avoid father.

It was a cooler afternoon and my father and his broken up jaw had been gone for some time. Susan’s black eye had healed. Me and Art sat at the kitchen table and he asked me if I wanted a drink and I take the orange juice he’s poured, bits of pulp stuck to the side of the glass and I’m wondering why Art hasn’t been here earlier to push me off my father when it mattered, down at the gym six days outta seven, moving with more intensity every day, which is what always happened when he was preparing for a fight. I see his hands are thin and his nails are chipped. He shakes almost imperceptibly, a result of lifting heavy weights, as he hands the glass to me, putting it down and sliding it across the table as if the sound it made could somehow be a yawn.

“You have to know Jay, our father is someone it’s best to avoid.”
I have nothing to say. I wonder – if my father is such a cunt – why did Art put up with him for the month or more he stayed? Why didn’t he ask him to leave.

Art stands up and opens the heavy kitchen window and explains to me that my father has done very little all his life but lie and steal. As he says this he hoists the third window up almost violently so it bangs on the top sill and I see the sash cords jump like they’ve got a current in them, it’s as if he is laying down a rule that I’m not allowed to speak. He wants me to shut-up and listen. He tells me about my father’s drinking. He tells me about his gambling, his involvement with crooks and the dogs at the track. Other woman, drugs, whores. He tells me about Charlie Parker – he tells me calmly and without visible anger, and I listen to him. There is anger there though. I know the toughness in my brother and I can feel his passionate hate for our father seething under the surface, Medusa-like, as though those snakes had retreated like cat’s claws disconnected, living inside part of him, beneath his skin, like some kind of all over pregnancy he’d never let go of.

But, he doesn’t realize that all I was old enough to hear, to understand, was how exciting it all sounded. I was enthralled by what he was telling me, I was young enough to get it all wrong, I had no idea what I was in for. My father started to seem like a dark prince of the sea, some kind of semi-super-fucked-up-hero who I would have been more than happy to learn from. Art went on.

It was about the time of the pithy orange juice speech that Art began to teach me how to box for real. He had become a chance for the national title and oddly something in him had become softer. His preliminary fight, was a week off. He had recovered from his Billy Wednesday. He said it made him stronger. It was as though he had nothing to prove to anyone anymore. His attitude was more relaxed and more serious, and there was something very weighty about it. All the aggression in him was somehow
under his control, is how it seemed. I'd been around a lot of boxers. I had to say that I was not that impressed with most of 'em. They just had fight buzzing on their skin, in their bones the whole time, it was like a the noise of leaves in a tree, just there all the time, like they were waiting for someone to step out of line. Art was different to that. He still had that energy, but there was a side of him that was gentle, it just didn't have that same electric feel to it. His body was humble. It's not easy to describe, he just had nothing to prove.

I would go down to the gym with him three times a week. I think he was trying to be there for me, too, which made what was about to happen between me and Susan worse. I don’t know, but I enjoyed our time up on those worn unpolished boards learning sequence, spiral steps, slapping out our connection into pads and downward directions,

“...stay grounded he'd say to me, fake fake, one two – move to the right side, keep moving...,” His lessons, at least in the beginning, were slow. Everything was repeated over and over again and although I hated the repeating I could feel that there was something helpful about it. Stepping, twisting, shoulder rotation, punch from the floor. For my sixteenth birthday he got me a skipping rope. I felt I was slowly becoming something, someone with him, who I did not really want to be. I loved spending the time with Art, helping him help me, but it was like I was a kid whose dad wanted him to take over the family hardware store and who really just wanted to catch a fucked up old train as far away as was humanly possible. Sort of like that, though I didn’t want to train it outta town, that was Susan’s O’Reilly’s daydream, and that’s another story.

Jay on boxing

I never saw the point of boxing. It wasn’t my style. In the conflicts I had with Art and the bullies from the neighbourhood I always thought punching on was pretty stupid. I never once saw any reason to fight fair.
When I got threatened I just did something ugly. Smacking Art across the face with a coffee cup or breaking his foot with a large orange pot. Damien Angler, one of Art’s mates, four years older than me, he found that out too, forty stitches in his fucken head after picking me and Josh one hot-coal-blue-stone-ally day. His goading friends did not say a word. Art had had to speak with Angler’s elder brother and I found out later he gave Angler some money. That’s my style.

In the training Art was calm. He was encouraging and enthusiastic. I met his trainer and some of his training partners. I met Charlie Parker, short and fat in a crumpled suit, always talking with Art after his sessions, both of ‘em covered in sweat, thick as thieves with something hidden, but I forgot what Art told me about that business. I felt more comfortable down at the pool hall or the pier, listening to the bay softened waves.

Art won his preliminary fight. His opponent, Mini Jackson, went the full distance. Mini got four broken ribs, a detached retina and cut above his left eye that split in every one of the four remaining fights before he gave it up to go live on some farm somewhere, raising irises with his uncle. In other words he stayed up ten rounds but got the shit beat through him so bad that he never got over it and went to growing flowers like a woman.

Then, one night around this time Art said he was out at a bar and got badly beaten by four guys he’d never seen. Charlie Parker was there and he called me at Wrights Road at about midnight and I heard the ghost of my mother swallow the words like they were hard oiled broad beans she didn’t want to take in. I didn’t exclaim or cry. It wasn’t half as bad as I’d been expecting. I put the phone down and I remember the light falling over the kitchen table, my hand resting on the receiver for what seemed a long time, then I said to myself, Get your shoes on. I did not really know how to take it. All I ever knew of Art was that he’d never lost. Most of his fights didn’t
even go four rounds. I had seriously never imagined that he could get hurt, at least I’d blocked the possibility of imagining. First Billy Wednesday, now this.

I had heard old radio broadcasts of fights, old style Cinderella broadcasts, where the whole crowd had gone when someone got ko-ed. In my mind’s-eye I’d travel back in time and see some guy lying still who had had sucked all the sound outta everything for miles, just for a moment. It was an odd feeling to listen to someone almost die on the radio. There was something about listening to broadcasts like that that felt like someone had fallen into a dark lake at night. No ripples, no movement, swallowed into the mouth of something as though the whole surface were sealed lips, taped shut on that forever. I didn’t have a licence but I was backing the car out before I had even closed the driver’s side door, my shoes in my hand and my socks heavy wet from the dewy path.

I realized in the car on the way to the hospital, and it was imbedded like a tick into the silence, that this beating was not an accident. The reach of my father’s breath had found a sound-space to hum into. It was between us, oscillating like the ocean tide, a sweet spiteful breath – staring straight into us. Somehow I felt it was my fault and as I drove I could see my list of numbers from that burned notebook passing under each street light flash, bathing my movement to Art like a soft harmony. My father’s words were caught in every one I passed. In the twenty minutes it took to get to the hospital I didn’t speed, not once, and I did not have one single word worked out to say to Art. Time’s passing felt as if vengeance had eyes without eyelids, a gaze as taut as wet string hung out tight to dry. In the car I could feel this was the time that our family - me, Art and my dead mother that is, kind of came open. Like a cut.

**Kidney dish injections**

The hospital smelt of something I was not familiar with and it made me feel sick, sitting on a row of smooth blue plastic chairs, looking down at a
shined cream lino floor, so clean it was oily coloured. I was outside smoking a cigarette when the doctor invited me in to see Art. He was in a room with about six other people all lined up in beds like white number one domino chips, dark hair units on crisp white sheets. There was a fat man coughing up phlegm and a boy way younger than me moaning into his pillow with a stainless steel kidney dish half over turned by his hip on his bed, a pair of scissors looking to find its way under his leg. His voice seemed to carry fatigue like a parcel.

My brother was at the end of the room. I was glad to see him conscious. As I walked my shoes made a squeaking noise on the oily lino. Art’s face was bandaged up. He looked like shit. He was frightening and feeble at the same time and the first thing I’m reminded of are my father’s injuries. I felt shocked by it, by this memory. In my stomach there was a feeling of retribution that was oddly pleasing, and it took me by complete surprise. Art nodded at me and I could tell there was a smile somewhere in the mess that his face was in. I sat on his bed and ate his hospital food that some dip shit nurse has imagined he would want. He could hardly move his mouth. Art was pretty drug fucked and mumbling and I didn’t stay for long. I think he felt ashamed, again.

Art was in hospital for a week and then he pissed off again somewhere for long enough to remind me of the old man. Art told me when he got back that he’d stayed at the same hotel he’d been to just after the funeral and that he hadn’t left his room once, except for two visits to some local GP for pain killers.

His doctor was very negative about the possibility of Art boxing again. He explained to Art that the structure of his face would always be weak and vulnerable to further fractures during fights. I can tell Art is upset, even though he dismisses the medical opinion. He continually touches and pushes his face as though it was some kind of boat or mechanical
appliance he is testing for strength. He starts talking about Billy Wednesday and the four blokes in the pub constantly.

One afternoon about four weeks after the bar fight we were sitting in the back yard eating some barbecue steaks and Art starts telling me about Billy Wednesday. Billy was a kid from our neighbourhood who was born two days before Art. He was the first kid Art knew who took up boxing. He was tall, and was overweight at school, but soon he was training five times a week and doing pretty well. Billy’s dad, Joseph, was a mate of our father’s, Art said. They’d go to the dogs together and he tells me that Joseph has some dodgy connections. Billy had an older brother who had done some time and ended up drowning in some big waves off Woolamai after a big night and since that time the Wednesday family only saw the ugly side of things. Billy’s mother and father were still together, but, Art said, that was a mistake both of them repeated every day, and he laughed.

Billy had always been a tough kid. His father has some friends who were professional boxers and he had got Billy private lessons before he’d turned ten. I could tell Art was afraid of Joseph, he even said it himself, but this second beating reminded him he was going to kill Billy Wednesday anyway. He said he had made up his mind while pissing into a plastic bottle in his hospital bed. The nurse had had to heat the bottle under the hot water to encourage Art’s reluctant bladder to relinquish almost sixteen hours of fluid. It overflowed or Art had angled it wrong and he had covered his groin and the light blue hospital sheets in piss. When he stood up to go to the toilet and wash himself, a headache, that had been waiting for him like a thief, made him reel and the nurse had to help him the three metres to the bathroom. He told me he sat in a plastic chair full of neat little holes with his bare feet on a wet cold floor while she washed his genitals and backside helping him to elevate himself off the chair.
Jay and Susan

In the time Art was away at his hotel out of town, watching FoxTel, codeine fucked, Susan O’Reilly and my father turned up again. I don’t want to talk about most of it, except to say that when Susan came one day telling me Art was not returning her calls, I was sitting on the veranda at Ray Street alone and she came up the side path and called me “Art’s brother.”

She wore sex like a mood and I remember I was relaxed as I stood to greet her and she hugged me in the door and holding onto her I was reminded of smooth things – boiled eggs with the peel off. I sat with her smoking. Moving between action and memories and it was the step where I sat with my father. It was cool beneath me and Susan smoked rolled up cigarettes that combust all broken burning tobacco caught in the autumn wind and in my clothes and everywhere. She offered to roll me one but I took the soft plastic bag from her and did it myself. She had come to see Art. She was so worried it looked like her eyes had changed colour, and I remembered part of me, a strange and unpleasant part of me, hoped like the weight of the seven oceans that Art had died somewhere and that my moment alone with Susan would stretch itself into another year so I could take her mood and press its round shape against me, and fuck her in the afternoon sun that I knew was warming my bed.

She asked me if there was any wine in the fridge and I went inside trying hard to look casual. It was exciting, like finding money on the street, that quick snatch before it goes. I reached into the fridge for the clean skin that I’d taken from Ray Street. And, as I reached into I remembered I was supposed to meet Josh at seven at the pool hall, but I told myself that I’d already forgotten. I ran up the wooden stairs to my room and pulled half a gram of dope from a jar on my desk. It was wrapped in foil and I remember looking out the first floor window at Susan sitting on the lawn.
leaning back on her elbows. I was hoping the day would divide and give me an island of time with her.

I delivered wine to Susan sloshing, half-full, half corked, and opened my foil and rolled from her packet without asking. There was the smallest dust of an afternoon breeze pushing cool over us. The smell of dope was heady, moist and dark, and the two of us didn’t seem to realise, but we were entering an agreement to barter that smell, and wine, all summer, all autumn long, with touch traded and stolen, kept like a little garden noise over the back fence, something we couldn’t let go of.

**Jay trying to vomit Susan out of his system**

After the pub fight Art didn’t want to see Susan. He was too embarrassed and cut up about the whole thing to show himself. I told Susan that one of Art’s cheekbones was raised and that it makes him look like a victim or a mental patient. She wanted to know the details and I gave them to her, my second hand understanding, served up sliding-scratched toward her like a bowl of ice cream glass, betraying Art with every word. And, it slowly dawned on me, while Susan O’Reilly is drinking wine, that a force I could feel but couldn’t see was pushing at my family, somehow making us separate. And it dawned on me that Billy Wednesday was going to die. Sometime in our wine drinking and smoking Susan told me she liked me as she poured wine into a brown coffee mug that we shared, ‘cause it was the only clean thing I could find, and I sat there hoping. The smell of her circled me and she offered me this, her smile over and over. Our conversation was like spiral rungs to the part of a tree soft enough to waver strong from side to side in the wind, and we drank wine until she was gone, and then she’s swallowed into the dusk and I am throwing up alone in the garden, dirt sticking to my palms and hoping with every retch that I can vomit her out of my system but I know I can’t.
I feel as if my insides have become another colour. I took my father’s offers to hang out on weekends. Either that or they took me. And, as I got closer to my father I know his nasty nature spilled into me, soaked slowly through the pores of my skin like little bits of something just too big to get in there. They left me open to bad rain for the rest of my life. But that summer with or without my father I was the one ready to betray my brother who had lost his identity with two beatings. I was the one who did that to Art by going to the dogs, by making my father believe that his notebook was locked up somewhere. I did it just by keeping secret about it.

Art 1985, remembers an earlier time

Before the accident with Billy Wednesday in summer 1985 I’d been with girls proud and all over, but Susan O’Reilly was different. She was different for everyone, a broken mould, kind of special, who just made every single person she was close enough to talk to feel like life had something extra about it. It was easy with her, it flowed, but I knew she was trouble. For starters she knew the old man. I’d see her at my fights with him way before he showed up at Ray Street to fuck Jay’s life up. Susan and him had some history but I never really wanted to know. None of it seemed to matter. I was twenty-three years old and I felt she understood me. I’d seen her at the library, scanning *White Jazz*, *Rope Burns*, *Catch 22*, handing them to me. I was taken with her at this time, calm and forthright handing out books, making old ladies blush with comments they were not expecting.

At the pub when we first got together the dim light, all caught in smoke and swallowed fragments of conversation, revealed her arms and chest and they looked as though they were oiled, glistening through my composure and making me breath different. We went home together that night to
Wrights Road in a dirty taxi with the window down and her hair blowing in my face, my hand in the small of her back, aching and twisted, but so delicious I couldn’t a moved it if she’d been on fire. Jay was asleep. Susan and me kissed in the warm night stairway and we woke on my bed in the sun all twisted together in bad breath and echoes of sex that piled around us like sound memories blurred and burned around the edges. I heard her in the shower and wished the walls were made of sugar and they’d dissolve so I could get a look into all that steam.

She returned to me shiny; long hair in wavy rows springing up and down her back, a thin stream of water running down her spine into the crack of her arse. We came, I mean we embraced - gutter minded people - together again, her standing quivering a soft heart gift when Jay comes into my room – Susan pressing against me and her hand against her own open mouth her coded lust coming from between her fingers. There was a silent pause with Jay standing tall and blue-eyed, the sun over one half of his face. He was strangely deadpan like he’s walked in on Susan brushing her hair, then left without a word. Later she said she would make it up to him, and I thought she was shitting me but as it turned out I was wrong.

I couldn’t help feeling Susan was very important to me. Sometimes you meet people like that in your life, you just know they’re going to push into the sails. Somehow they just understand. It hurt me just to think about it. I didn’t want to admit it to myself, ‘cause everyone before that had just been part time. Susan was the first one I loved. She was part of my thoughts of every day. As I prepared for the Billy Wednesday fight I could feel her in me, somehow a part of every movement. Not quite, but it was almost as though I was doing it for her, making something more of myself, transforming myself into something better. There were dreams I had. I slept with a like pride of loins, they were around me as round and smooth and beautiful and sharp toothed as that. Then Billy Wednesday and some cunt ref named Stan Lockey went and fucked all that up forever. I can’t
work out if I lost Susan then or she lost me. I didn’t love her very well after my face got smashed in. I was just too ashamed to let her near me.

Jay and Susan

You never know what is going to happen, at least I never did until Susan O’Reilly turned up again at Ray Street near the middle of summer and I was home alone in Art’s new sweat top thinking it might be my father. The guilty pleasure of wearing Art’s cloths had covered me all morning. Factory folded creases running soft down the arms all the way to a month or more without my brother around. The new clothes smelt and she tells me she’s been to Wrights Road looking for Art but she couldn’t find him and now she’s happy sitting on the couch with me, she says, watching midday films just starting and white wine again, and somehow this time I wasn’t nervous. The moment with her has the feel of something about to happen, so I drink the wine slow and careful. The second time she runs her fingers up my leg I am there with her like April, no objections. She leaves me waiting while she gets more wine and lights small joints from her purse one for each of us that burn at different rates and we share the ends in a haze like they were the answer to everything.

No one’s due home until long after the credits. Art has been refusing to see Susan and she’s cut up about it, just all twisted, and I sink into that couch with Susan beside me drinking and the TV throwing blue shadows across her good looks, cool and flickering sickly sweet. She is touching my leg again and my breath encounters obstacles. I knew that Art and Susan were fucking before his accident, but that’s all, and something of Art is lost to me in all of this. I was surprised how easy it was for that to happen. He’d been washed away in a tide and the sand where he’d been is smooth to step on. My desire has my reason bare – and – if Susan was the girl friend of every Arabian king who had ever lived it would make no difference.
She unbuttons my pants and I forget I even have a brother and know there are forty minutes, and that's an ocean enough. I watch her drop wine flavoured thin spit into her hand to move it cool on me, a slow motion like her love for that part of me is Christmas carols, and with it a bucket of silver tinsel has been dumped into my brain, alive like it has its own sun in there. She has pushed her mouth against my ear and whispers,

“...one day I want you to fuck me...” across her motion and against my green age she leads me in that moment away from every pain I ever knew. I come to crave her like food, her breath a tear-drop moon of heat. She is a drug named again and again and there are no objections, it is there in me instantly. When it's over I honestly quiver in her arms like a born animal. She wipes her hand and tells me to turn the not so new jumper inside out and I smear my own face doing what she has asked as if she was Rome itself. The flickering TV cannot help me now. My ribs ache and she tells me she has to go and offers me tomorrow over and over and leaves, soft and resolute – a joint rolled on the table looking at me like a sin, twist up like a sparrow leg, a bumpy girlish rolled one to go on with.

Alone in my room I recall the wish that night would twist itself too, into five minutes, but it takes its regular time with me wrapped up inside, safe from the storm of expectation. Art’s new jumper is guilty and crunched under my bed. Susan has sewn herself to my future, an emblem on my brother’s soiled clothes. She has cut cards from my skin and now I have to play them, dry and twisted each, a see-through flush of love.

In the morning my desire for Susan has become a haemorrhage that spills over the front page of every day of the rest of that summer, naming its purpose like the blood on a butcher’s apron. I see her once a week, sometimes more. She’s led me into her long good looks and, for me, she has become a fog of morphine summer sex. She is encoded with division, and I breathe her in like the air at an execution. She comes to see me
during the day and takes me out for fish and chips or walks by the sea. Really gentle stuff.

She brings beer and sometimes wine and the two of us get drunk and sunburnt and she leads me to dry garden beds beneath bushes in the parks and pleasures me there until the sticks and foliage, that press pink tattoos into my arse cheeks, begin to hurt and the spiders that are all around us move as though they had been still before. I think of Art and his injuries, but it stops there. There is no remorse. There is no room for anything but the dreams that sixteen years olds weave around women – fast and tidy and dirty justified. Susan and me are getting what some barman who saw us called ‘grit peachy.’ Like Darby Shaw and Grey Grantham. She is a purl stream sound, and somewhere down in my bones down in my days there’s a riverbed waiting as if Nature herself had ordered me drink what I was dreaming. She will not fuck me but something tells me not to ask, and so it goes, Susan O’Reilly loving both of us, before and after summer, Art then me, and as it would turn out, Art again, as though it would never matter.
Chapter Four. Mainly about JAY, again
Jay’s thoughts on Susan

The first time Susan gave me head she hummed a firm deliberate hum into my spasm that took up a permanent place in my groin. Later, when I was older, I tried to show other girls how to do it but they laughed or refused and it was never the same. Just thinking of her makes me desperate for relief that I find under library tables in my pants, in bathrooms, wherever I can get it. None of my friends know about Susan, I am almost certain of that. I don’t tell one single person, though the ache of it covers me in every single second, like patches of little inch zinc armour with holes on every corner, have been stapled all over my body. Even though we have never slept together I begin to feel her against me when I fall asleep at night. It’s like my eyes have changed their colour too, one black, one blue, cold lust and love too big to manage.

Once after what seemed like a string of one sided encounters Susan teaches me how to touch her under a grey tree in a clouded park, the cool wind blowing across both of us and into the silhouette of her skirt. She takes my finger as though she is supporting a broken bone and guides it across the roughness of her pubic bone and into her wet sex. She is calm and warm and whispers instructions to me that I fail at over and over again and I watch embarrassed as she does it herself, her lipstick mouth, her natural mouth, swelling to consume my kisses as though I were a doll in her bedroom.

Susan O’Reilly is five foot eight. She is twenty-four years old. I am assaulted with the thought that she will go, but I steer my life toward her like the captain of a shipwreck. In it I feel like I am also the captain of my brother’s broken face and it’s hard to describe without being revolting but she makes me want to shit my pants and vomit ice cream still cold from my aching insides. In my dreams I piss blood and come blood and cry between her legs and wake with my pillow in my arms. The way I used to look at things she juices in her hands and I hear her call my name when she
is not there and turn looking for her eyes in every stranger I see. One afternoon she came to my house without wine, without dope. She had come from the library and she was wearing glasses, that she got all embarrassed over, and told me they were just straight glass, to give her a professional look at work and she’d forgotten to take them off. She was in jeans and a yellow top with flat end knotted cotton strings loose hanging by her chest and she was swollen with welcome, the sun on the back of her calves. As she comes inside I feel my insides have been torn like a ragged sheet with the white cotton strands spilling into room.

Then, her smile is full of promises, and there are a thousand dusty drops of her laugh in my belly. She is softer. Something has happened and she takes my hand and without saying one single word she leads me up to my room and does not even bother closing the door. She unbuttons my shirt one at a time and slow. Not lusty or hungry, just slow and almost sad like it hurts to open to my skin. She unbuttons my pants and pushes them down, but she never stoops, just slides her feet down the outside of each leg catching the waist of my jeans in her toes and she hugs into me for balance.

In my days she has become every word that is spoken. They all seem to whisper something else. She has told me to cut my fingernails and I have obeyed her like she’s a queen, she occupies the room like air. She leaves me standing there with my pants a tangle and my shoes like enemies of the moment as tight on me as a monkey’s hairy skin. The window is open and there is a breeze that wavers this space between us and lifts the pages of a magazine resting on my bed. As Susan takes her clothes off I sit on the bed and paw at my shoes with my feet and the magazine is on the floor fluttering in our crumpled clothes and we lie together still, facing sideways, still. The love making is almost motionless. We come together and yet we don’t move, our embrace is crying and warm and pressing into some utterly new caress. We are sober and calm and the day’s passing as a detour now until our next meeting. The day and the heat have entered the room,
entered us, and the world and spices and seven sea pirate sun shit can have whatever it likes, because the sun has found its way between our legs, between our eyes, a wet light sex rippling through, as though we shared our bodies, like sharing a sound, a clarinet rattle wooden chain as thin as thin around us sober, elastic wood with joint-links of joy and sorrow. When she has gone there is pink mist over the city and I swim in it, clean and glad and I’m hoping for the time without her to wither and disperse as though I were not a part of its passing.

There will come a time with Susan where nothing means anything and my father’s still living at Ray Street and he knows long before Art what I’m doing, and I am waiting for it all to crack open like a dam unzipped. I can feel Art’s hostility rolling in through the summer, tumbled up in cool clouds that he hasn’t even seen himself. I am not afraid of him. I’m afraid of hurting him. His two-time smashed in face will never be the same and though he’s back training, it’s really only for fitness, or so the doctors say. There is no where to go that does not scowl at me except toward Susan and the further into her, into my dust coloured lust I go, the more complicated it all gets.

When she begins to fuck me, I mean after the still fuck we had, I am surprised by the marks she leaves on my grey flannel sheets. I am new to her. Enthralled and ashamed and I wash my sheets like a retard with too much soap in the laundry sink when the house is empty. It takes me half the fucken day, soap and water everywhere. The marks are like dried flour water flowers patted out in random touches as though a little moth had flapped them off her wings. Susan smokes after sex and the open window takes the smoke and swirls it away. Sometimes she brings a pair of joints and we smoke them one on top of the other and everything soft-skin-kiss-love between us blurs into the day like a cool change or the smell of the sea. Susan does not have any brothers or sisters and I patch her story together from the little pieces she’s said as they float invisibly, words like
fish in a tank filled with black. She never invites me round and I feel when she leaves she’s dropping sunflower seeds of our heat all the way home.

My father’s return

My father’s been away from Ray Street a while but he’s still paying the rent and I’m hanging out there thinking about Susan, and he comes back one day in the middle of summer and calls me from the dry cupped boards of the veranda he’s pacing on. Art’s down the gym training and my father’s jaw’s fixed, but he moves it slow side to side every now and then like he’s testing it, wagging round a cigarette like a kid’s lolly. He’s tanned from somewhere and it suits him, a slippery colour that presses next to his shirt as if it’s been designed. His hands are fidgety, into his pocket, out again, dragging on that cigarette, about five times in little three beat suck break exhales as though he’s got somewhere he’s gotta be in but he’s gotta finish that fucken’ smoke first. Then, he’s inside the house and I can feel he’s wanting something. His eyes are like metal leaves on a tree-wind-day and it’s in the way he moves, his posture like a headline, pointing to a corner somewhere I haven’t been. He’s reptilian, something the sun’s fixed up, walking back and forth in the lounge room, making the boards creak and ache like they wished he wasn’t there. Then, and I knew it was coming, he says,

“I know you got that notebook, Jay.”

“Who told you that?” I laugh.

“Don’t get fucken’ smart with me.”

“I told you I don’t have it, I got no idea…”

“Susan told me.” I know that’s bullshit, but I also know he knows, and I wonder. I can’t remember for all the fucken dark lines on a slate roof if some time in a sober or drunk or dreamy naked love I’ve told Susan about the notebook or not. Then I think maybe she’s got it. Maybe she looked
through that case before she lit it up. Or maybe my old man thinks she did. It’s the first time I don’t trust her.

I don’t like my father in the room, I don’t know whether to sit or stand. But, at the same time, his presence warms something. I want him to open up and show me something, display it, take me some place I don’t know yet. The tide of my father is all over me, and I’m caught in it like it’s rolled me up. He’s a capable profound current and when I’m with him I am becoming unrecognizable, even to myself.

In me – as I smell the lighter fluid his matte brass-scratched Zippo is overfilled with and the click slap sound of him lighting another cigarette – there is a feeling of being criminal partners, two people who have decided to make a mess of something: pool balls, some cunt they don’t like much, some extra money plan that’s exciting but, that’s as sure as doomed before the get away car has got the handbrake on. That’s how I felt. It wasn’t just him. I had his numbers. And just thinking about them, neatly folded in Coles Funny Picture Book, made my eyes narrow. I could feel the start of a grin on the wet inside of my cheeks and I didn’t like whatever part of me wanted to let that reach the outside. This was no game, my old man was agitated looking right at me and I clenched my jaw so tight my ears started ringing. I enjoyed watching him squirm. I felt so justified. I thought of Art and Susan. My body felt bigger, I was angry with everybody.

“Look…” I noticed my father had had his hair cut and it’s combed back, wet as silk as he runs his fingers through it. The tan is from somewhere else. It’s a softer colour, too soft for this summer. This summer just wouldn’t let that kinda thing happen.

“…where’s my notebook mate?” I can feel him trying to gently pry his way into my favour and also I feel he’s angry and wants to beat it out of me. I’m not really afraid, let him hit me and see what happens. Art’s punch will look like a fucken holiday if he turns his back on me, ever once.

“It got burned in that suit case, I told ya.”

“We both know that’s not true, mate. I need those numbers, Jay”
“I haven’t got any numbers.”
“Art’s got ‘em?”
“No.”
“How do you, know!” He yells this at me and I get such a fright I stumble on the corner of the coffee table.
“I just know. He woulda told me.”
“Look, Jay, do you have any idea what those numbers are about and how many people are going to be wanting to know where they are?”
“No.”
There was a little break in his intensity, as he presses the end of a half smoked cigarette into a large glass ashtray on the table. I hear its thin soft paper splatter-tear, see the split tobacco spill, a little cut moment that his grease hard voice follows, running into the thin avenue of quiet left in the curl of stubbed smoke. He tells me I have grown, that I will do well with the girls. His voice is slow. Nothing is the same. I feel the rash of my lie breaking all over my skin and for the first time I realize fully that my mother was trying to love me when she told me to keep away from him. I have had time to consider. I know he’s not a good man. But, I was unsure. My mind’s wary, but my body wants to follow him, walk down some volcano pit on hard iron rusted shoes – it was a very odd sensation, and despite the difficult conversation – with him and inside myself, I could not let go of that body energy that had me drawn toward my father, even toward his raised voice, like a song. Dry sand takes in the water of the sea.
“Where’s Art?” he says, then, talking through his teeth in an unpleasant imitation of his injury, jaw wired up and aggressive again, he says. “Fucken busted ma jaw, didn’t he.”
“I don’t know where he is.” But, I do know where he is. He’s at the gym and I wish, like I said, to a god I don’t believe in, he’d come home now. First time for everything. I was praying like a pope’s apprentice for Art to stay away while Susan had a hold of me, and thankfully he was
obliging; then, with my father there ready to beat his notebook outta me, I’m praying for Art to be there. It was all about what I needed at the time.

My father sat on the couch and put his feet on the table, next to the big soiled ashtray.

“Jay, what about we go for a drive?”

“I told ya, I haven’t got that fucken notebook.”

“Jay, I know that’s not true,” he’s soft all of a sudden, and it’s more frightening than his yelling.

“Susan burned all your things.”

“You told me you never seen that notebook in your life so how do you know it was burned. Did you see her throw it in the fire?”

“No…” I know a little about my father’s relationship with Joseph Wednesday, and I have my suspicions about what happened to Art in the pub. My father is almost capable of being heavy and I was afraid. I feel he’s somehow growing into my space now and I wish again that Art would come home. And, just like a delivery he does; comes into the lounge room without a sound, I feel him behind me like the sun’s come in, yellow light. I turn to him.

Art, Jay and their father

It’s odd but with my father in the room I look at Art differently. His hair is longer. He has put on weight. There’s a roundness in his face and he doesn’t look as mean. His injuries are clean but somehow I can see and sense them beneath his skin. He’s face seems fragile to me, and the old man can see that too, I can tell by the self-satisfied scowl on his face. He takes his feet off the table and stands up from the couch slow and easy.

“You hit me pretty good.” He’s mimicking the broken jaw again, his teeth clenched, and all I can think of is how I’ve been fucking Art’s girl while he’s been sunk in the sadness of that broken injured face.

“You hit Susan pretty good.” Art says.
“She had that comin.” At this Art just sighs. It’s not a regular sigh though. It’s a sigh that’s got a gut sound in it. My father does not seem threatened. I hear his leather belt creak as he reaches down and picks up his packet of cigarettes with the Zippo resting on top of them and pockets them in one smooth movement, the clear crisp cellophane cover on the soft packet sounding out like a little swallowed cough.

“Jay has something I need,” he’s looking at Art then at me. He must feel like something has been lost – in his ex-wife’s living room with his sons and it’s nothing but ugly.

“Jay’s got nothin you … fucken fuck off… nothin you need.” Art’s voice is cold. It has a blue anger and all of a sudden he’s coming up in himself somewhere inside, and I think of a fat hooded cobra snake. His tone and his posture have changed, filled with intent, and in that moment I realize I’m also like that, completely. Our father is standing still now, tall and unaffected in his boots. He just doesn’t look fussed at all. I can tell Art’s working out angles, making some space around himself.

Susan talks about Art

Before his accident, before Jon hit me, I would wake in the Wrights Road house with Art’s back to me and I’d look at his tattoos. Grey tattoos as strong as bone. He’s always already awake, reading. Books that he’d borrowed from me at the library. Catch 22, Rope Burns, White Jazz. The house had a soft feel in the mornings. Soft sun with bird song, as well as anything else, the sounds of Art’s slow breathing. I could feel his heart’s slow rhythm and the pages turning, the way he did it with his tongue wet spit middle finger pushing the corner of consumed words, a slide page-soft-paper-rasp-sound and the tired paper click of the next chapter. These fragment sounds, and the bird song were colours of love for me. The tunes came in slithers of sound, thin ribbons of music easily heard, easily
broken. I seldom felt ready for them or for the day from beneath the cover of bed, the cover of sleep, still departing into this song, ruffling the sound.

There is silver dirt on the dry window. It has been slapped there by rain of other days. It’s broken in the morning light with the dreams I don’t remember. I look at its shine, my hand on Art’s chest, on the side of it, moving with his breathing, the webbing between my fingers open stretched, just a little with every rise, so soft this love. In the kitchen below I can hear Jay grinding coffee. The sound comes up muffled, enough to be still in. We make love. Art holds me rolling slowly, gently pulling my throat exposed to kiss, my head back with my hair caught up in the gentle mornings, like Art knew that at these times I was vulnerable as a shadow. We never talked about it. He just knew.

At the table Art and me and Jay eat eggs. My sex is remembering at the table, a swell there, and I look at Art’s eyes and see an underwater love, breathed up silent over me, warm and close enough to see.

“Susan,” Jay says, “you reckon Art’s gonna win this national title, whata you think?”

“I dunno, Jay, why don’t we wait ‘n see.”

“You going to the library?” Art would say.

“Yes,” but only for the morning.

“Wanna get lunch? And what about you Jay? You wanna get lunch with us?”

Susan at the library

At the library there’s plastic all over everything, covered books, linoleum tabletops, air-conditioning. It’s quiet and peaceful and putting books away is like taking a piss, some kind of relief that you do on your own. Jon knows I work here and some days he busts into my lunch hour with silver hope flash bourbon. He’s got nowhere else to go. My stomach turns, hip flask hit one, two, and everything he’s got on looks double ironed, dry
cleaned, smooth and older man sex ready to wrap me up, or so he thinks. That’s not gonna happen. Experience is everything, as smooth as plaster walls. I’m not sure why I go with him, to humour him, to pacify him, to pay my debt to him. It’s complicated because the more I see him the more guilty I feel, which makes me feel like I should make up for not giving him what he wants – by seeing him. It’s fucked up, I know.

We go to the park down the street. The bench there is cracked green paint and bird shit by my side, bare foot sunshine, pissed at lunch time on what ever Jon’s got, and mints for dessert, digesting oceans of his hopes for summer sex between us, that, like I said – won’t happen. It’s like I had a sister, I’m guilty but I’m angry. That’s the reason he helped, expecting something in return. Is that real help? Yes. But it’s sour. I hold the doors, every last one of them closed and shut down and if he doesn’t like that he can go fuck off back to his army boots and the clean short haired muscle boys he’s roomy with. Go tickle their fucken’ arses. Does he fuck ‘em? Probably does. Maybe. Like I said, Jon Tanner threw me a bone. I was only sixteen. I’d been dealing with Jon’s mate Charlie Parker who was supplying me and somehow something went sideways and Charlie gets opened up and seen by some plain clothes one night with pounds and pounds in the boot of his car, and anyway it somehow all ended up landing me a boat load of bullshit and I did some time, six months in Pine Hills, some low-lock security farm juvenile joint far out somewhere.

Jon knew some of the woman there and I got looked after, got out quicker. For that I’ll have his lunch, and take his hip flask, and I’ll go to that house to look out for Jay, but that’s it. I never once told Art or Jay, I never told anyone really. I was just a lucky girl caught in with the wrong crowd.

I eat lunch with Jon. He turns up at the library four days out of ten (when he’s here in town that is) and I’ll give him an hour. It’s a twice twisted black honour, like a little ring inside my skin, I can feel it – tight thin dark gold, red black against my bone – a sort of angled marriage, an
oblique acquaintance with need. I owe him. He knows that, he knows I know, and, a free lunch is a cheap price.

We eat rolls dusted in white flower broken up in brown paper that crackles into the wind. We unfold it all and share it, flat between us. Sometimes he’s got a beer to two or, his neat little hip flask that makes me wanna own it every time the shiny surface is out and flashing in the sun. We talk about the days gone by. I don’t flirt. Not a single whisper, but I know sharing a bottle is good enough for him, and he tries it on. Or, he used to.

Now, all he ever talks about is his notebook, that he thinks Art stole off him, and that Jay knows about too he reckons. He asks me if I know anything about it and I say no I don’t, which is exactly true, ‘cause I have not one fucken idea what he’s on about. I can see he’s half crazy with it, that’s all I know, without even looking.

There are cigarette butts round the bench, they blow and roll and flat tumble flip in the breeze, squashed and alone and disgusting. Jon sometimes wears a hat, semi brim panama lookin’ thing, sunglasses. He removes the hat while he eats, resting it on the bench. It sits there on the edge of its brim and it wavers in the moss-strong wind, like my hair, like it had it’s own little way of holding on. Jon’s face is tanned, young for his age and covered in the sense of salt and cold storm sun, wind blown all of it, into a seaman’s strong first move – made on every woman he ever sits next to. The trees dabble shadow over us, over his white shirt like a sunshine batik.

Susan and Jon at an early Art Tanner fight

It’s surprising, Jon’s boys are like a new thing in my life, different and soft. I first saw Art at a fight Jon took me to. Front row, I remember it was the 4th of July a year before we were going out. It was before Art was known, before he was doing well. Jon was saying things loud into the noise before
the fight started; he was getting into Art, pulling him down, half yelling at me over the crowd. He didn’t like Art. That was plain to see.

“My son’s in this but he’s got no chance here, I just hope we see a few rounds.” I had just got out of Pines and all the noise and smell of it was going to my head, I didn’t know what I was doing there. Like I said Jon helped me out. When Art came out Jon said, “Looks a bit runty, doesn’t he?” The two boxers touched gloves, rules mumbling their way to us in the front, close enough to sit on. And, yes, Art was not tall. What he was was sinew muscle that looked as if it had grown out of his bones. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He was calm. He had tats all over his back, simple stuff like nothing I’d seen, no colours. He had black hair that was long and loose and sweat-oil-shiny. He was on his toes, the lights shining off the perspiration covering his body. There was something scary about him. He didn’t look brave but just completely strong, like he had a job he knew he could do. The other guy was dancing around, wobbling his head, taller, bigger, but Art was still. I felt he was vibrating inside, waiting for the bell. Jon had bought plastic-cup beer and he was into Art again, jumping up and down and yelling at the ring, spilling it over his trousers.

“He’s gonna get creamed, he’s gonna get creamed.” And there they were.

It’s something I know about men. Some men are just cold under it all. They always give it away at some point, something slips out. Every time I hear the little stone-cold words let out, over the top of all that charm and flowery crap, I feel sick. It’s like my blood turns sour. And, sitting there before that fight had even started, the sticky concrete under my feet and men all around me like I was a card in a pack the wrong way round, I knew about Jon Tanner.

The fight went for ten seconds, the start-bell was still sounding in my ears, and the judges who were next to us had not even picked up their fucken pencils. Art came at the other guy like a big tree cut down, a slow heavy unstoppable movement toward him direct and accelerating all the
time with his whole body, his whole being; right in close, two kidney punches, I saw the sweat on the other guy’s face explode with Art’s right hook knock out. The unconscious man was four feet from us. I saw his white mouth-guard pressing half dislodged into his upper lip, his face distorted on the canvas. The ref’s waving over him like he’s on fire, pulls that mouth guard out and there he is, big and flat and loose, boots laced up to his shins, his eyes open but with a still expression, like glass marbles. I look up at Art and I think he looks at me. Then he’s got a robe on and Al Green, his manager, has his arm around him and they’re gone. Al, a tall man with a crew cut, doesn’t even look happy. He’s just shaking his head, like he can’t fucken believe it. I suppose he thought it would go a round or two. Probably had money on it going a round or two.

Susan on Jon and wild flowers

Just before the fight, walking down past the Juliet Bar, Jon was telling me about the things he’s seen at war and it’s not a pretty tale. The garden space outside my front window is filled with little wild flowers that have found their way there all on their own and I like that kind of life; but stories of war, when you really think about them, or at least when I do, piss all over that stuff like a maggot infected thing of men that rules the world and continues the sun. Jon is so filled up with hate and pain and violence and war that there’s nothing, and I thought he might have it tucked inside on that walk, have it under control, but I was wrong. I see it all so busted up, broken teeth blood-bloom-burn over everything, and it’s infectious. When I’m with him, I find his grey sight creeping over my love worn view, a grey sally slant and I hate it. It’s not my job to help him. I’m sure it’s been made part of him, a new told storyboard in his heart, another one emblem of tough fuck off. Why do I bother? I owe him that’s why. It’s the only reason.
Susan on blood

Women bleed. I’m no different. And sometime after I saw Art in the first fight I knew that he gets it. At least he did before he got his face smashed up. One evening I was standing in the bathtub, just about to have a shower. It was before his accident, before Christmas, as hot as forty two outside and we’d been seeing each other about six months. The bath tub is a dry, cold, pale-blue metal tub under my feet, before the shower is on. Blood running down the inside of my legs, day three of my period and heavy globs of it, red-brown globules that splat over the hollow enamel like little drum beats, the tide of time most men don’t understand. It’s lost into the cicada song coming from outside, and those sounds are as loud as the day’s sunshine filling the bathroom.

When I started sleeping with Jay he was frightened by my periods. But Art is different. Looking at him, looking at me, I hope he will handle me and spoil himself, all thumb joint bold pressing. Maybe he’ll lick it off his fingers, press his salty mouth against me. Art full clad leaning over the tub barefoot balances there waiting. And, there’s something soft in all this force, a comfort, the muscle around me.

Maybe it’s the boxing. Maybe he’s used to the blood. I’ve seen him torn, eyes open, split lips spitting blood and water into the bucket, into his corner, volumes of it. The noise of the arena has slowed down and I watch him, splashing rose-colour water and blood over the stained surface, onto the shoes of his trainer. His mouth all cut up inside and out, I can hear his breathing. Then there’s the other guy. At the dinners we had after fights Art’s hands tremble and he jowls his tongue inside his mouth, feeling the damage. We drink wine and salt food, the painful solution.

In my bathroom he sits calm and bright on the dunny with the seat down and watches me bleed in the dry tub. His eyes are tender and all outside a buzz of evening, dusk’s falling full on a night life, there’s a soft light hazing through the fly wire and Art undresses, and I get to look at him.
– cool and mean and strong, tatts and scars, and he steps in gentle. Gentle as a mammal fish. Gentle as a master cat. We spread our feet, dull waterless squeaking, soft blood wet thighs pink oiled innards and he holds me tight like we’re about to jump and turns the shower on cold to take my breath away, and I struggle to move but he won’t let me. He holds my struggle. The hot day is gone. Then he turns the warm water on, warms me slow, in control, and kisses into me, into my bleeding, presses me against the corner tiles and I think I’ll slip now and fall but we’re jammed in a shower rain held by his strength.

He fucks me slow in the sound of it, beads of water on his eye lashes and little rose washes rolling down our legs and off him as he withdraws covered in my blood and enters me again. They spin away, chased by spiral cicada song not quite loud enough to hear, but I know it’s there; all fucked up in water and following my blood and sex and everything else down the bathroom plughole. Under it Art’s as soft as anyone, broken teeth, his swollen eyebrows, split scars. Under it all he’s as tender as a broken rib inside a lung, and I’m like the dream of ice to take the pain away.

There is an open box of tampons on the bench next to the sink, shadowed by my toothbrush. Art takes one out of the packet and tears the cover off, looking into my eyes like he’s pouring me a drink on a special occasion. Without words he encourages me to sit on the edge of the bath, cold and curved pressing on my flesh. He squats before me naked his cock hanging, but still full, and he spreads my legs like a door to a sick room, like a door to someone sleeping, quiet at that. With one hand on the tiled floor to steady himself, he presses that white compressed cotton into me softer than I could myself, and it makes me cry. He stands and turns and I notice open dry healed blisters on the back of his heels big as coins, pink as rose, with dried edges of milk white skin. He offers me his hand and pulls me up, enfolding me. I am coloured by our love, our fucking. I am a butterfly going backwards, not ready to return.
Then, he leaves me there, standing still, and before I’m dressed he’s got me a neat bourbon, warm as night, the colour of blood, at rest on the low table outside. He’s in his boxers and sweating already against the night air. We sit in the heat in the darkened back yard summer and I smoke cigarette joints while he drinks, and cars pass outside with their lights broken up. My body is warm and cool at the same time and Art’s a rupture of love in the night. He’s the first man I ever and always loved, and I am sorry but I’m going to have to let him down.

**Jay speaks of his father and cars**

After the incident in the living room with his boots on the table my old man was careful about when he came by. He left that day, no incident. I saw him a couple of times, and he’d calmed down a bit but I could tell he was still thinking about his numbers. I saw his car once or twice, parked outside, and I knew it meant he was going to come up the driveway sooner or later, walking slow, well dressed, asking about his notebook. It was Saturday the fifth of February. He asked me to go for a drive with him and it seemed less threatening than the first time in the lounge room, and so I went.

His car was a Lincoln ’64 with a soft top and he drove it smooth, like it wasn’t there, like it was an extra part of him. He looked as if he had some place to go. The car was salt and pepper, white and grey, a toy that’d just come out of the packet was the feel it had. The rubber mats on the floor were always shiny and oiled and I was sure he had a spare box full of new ones in the boot. I was sure that slightest bit of dirt on those mats meant he’d stop the car and walk slow to the boot and pop it open with the extended metallic creak it made, and peel off a new one from that stack in that box in the boot. I imagined him pulling up the soiled one and just leaving it on the road, behind the front wheel. I imagined him sliding the new one carefully into place, driver side, passenger side, front and back,
black shiny rubber and new. There were white wall tyres and chrome so bright I thought the sun could go on holiday.

Pulling from the curve outside the Ray Street house the car slid away quiet and gouache like it was a brand new high-end rental, rolling soft, smooth as a fish in water. He drove with the top down, the wind soft-slapping his hair round, and in my mind’s eye, before we’d got to the end of the street I could see him open it up on a long straight road leading out of the city. As we drive he tells me he’s bought the car in Amsterdam and had it shipped out but I don’t believe him. I’d learned from the time I’d spent with him that he was always making shit up to make it sound more impressive. We went down the highway just like I dreamed it. We went to the beach and back again. It was the first of many drives I went on with my father after Art’s accident. I never told Art about it and, in the end, me and my old man met at a phone booth a block away from Ray Street, like we were hiding from someone. I don’t know what it was that kept me going with him. His was a secret without an answer.

**My father and Charlie Parker**

One day, still summer, I went out of town with my old man to a dog track in Smithy’s Rest, some in-bred suburb somewhere, a fuck-up jive joint midnight-boat that should’ve been headed straight for the rocks, to put it out of its misery. That trip was the beginning of all the trouble for me, a long slow drive, my old man smoking Marlborough like a puppet movie star. It was a Sunday this time, not Saturday and the top’s up and all the streets are quiet but for the wind pushing the car around; and I am in the front seat and one of my old man’s friends, Charlie Parker, Charlie Parker from the pool hall, from the gym, named after the Charlie Parker, so he says, is sleeping in the back seat. His head is lolling about, brushing hair grease all creamy pale over a corner of the raised window and my old man’s ashing his cigarette on that side into the afternoon air and bits and pieces
of grey ash are thrown onto Charlie's suit jacket, onto his shirt, his greasy face; like the fat fuck deserved some kind of punishment. I can see his belt buckle where his jacket has fallen open, shiny, silver, neat and square holding his belly in, bold like a pregnant stone. I can smell him, too. Even from the front seat he has a lurid colour smell, a greasy, smoky, b o. a fine lace cloth of rancid smell and it's on me like a placement of fog. Somehow he looks different to the times I've seen him at the gym. There is something about him that is far more serious, even as he sleeps.

At the track there are six races, seven or eight dogs in each and a scatter of afternoon sun. My old man and Charlie explain that there are four possible winners excluding freak runners – and you can never pick them, they say. Because the car park is full, or, because you have to pay $8.50, my old man pulls up half a mile down the road and we walk with the cool wind behind us, the sun on our faces, dry cleaning Charlie all the way, but for his greasy face that will have bits of my old man’s ash stuck to it all day long. The pavement has heat to it, and Charlie has come alive, waddling on stocky legs, fast and powerful like he wants to break something. Next to my old man he looks short, almost gross and sickly. But he’s tough. I been round fighting all my life and I can tell he’s a mean cunt who’d probably shoot you if it came to that, mean and flat and pale. He’s talking racing now and only racing,

“Black Ticket,” my old man says.

“Waste of time,” replies Charlie, “the forth is C. Grange, Flicker and Mr. 5,” and so it goes, names and numbers and swearing and this and that is all it is, and none of it I understand. I’m feeling small with these men, buffeted and not there at all at the same time, like the anchor’s come loose or something. Like I could drift off and neither of ’em would even notice my steps had gone. Charlie, the fat fuck, keeps calling me Jason though I’ve told him I hate it, at least twenty five times. He won’t listen, and I know he’d likely kill me but I just wanna smash his head against a fucken
wall. What I don’t know about Charlie this first time I meet him with a proper introduction, so it’s called, is that he deals coke on the side and that I will end up with a lot of money that I can’t resist sending his way, like it was meant to be.

For some reason I’m not mad at my old man, I don’t know why, that’s god’s own private mystery. I should be. Maybe it’s because I’m dreaming about Susan. Perhaps it’s the driving trips he’s taken me on before this one, or maybe it’s just because Charlie is taking up the hatful space in me. My old man’s wearing a suit too, light and crumpled and looking like it should. They walk side by side and I move around them, between them trying to find a place that is closed to me. The times I brush against the fabric of my father’s suit in the crowd of the dogs I’m opened in a goose bump agitation. The two of them are dressed like brothers, like wedding guests, like gangsters, and there’s only the outside for me.

After the first race my old man gives me twenty dollars,

“…have a bet, Jay,” he says, as we enter the noise and smell of the turnstile spit-paid-for-sticky dirty under cover asphalt of the betting area; never been rained on, never been washed, or so it seems, and feels like it’s covered in piss, or something only men do. I’ve got my entrance ticket in my pocket and I fold the twenty in three and pocket that too. It will be there at the end of the day, no bets for me, I tell my father that and he just says do what you like it’s your twenty. It’s gonna be just enough to pay the taxi I will have to catch home. I follow my old man and Charlie to the window and watch them make a couple of plays, peeling money from bill rolls, fat-handed like paws, sally money, some kind of gold shit glinting. They both wear rings.

Charlie is smoking like a bastard and talks his bets down the rotted length of cigarettes. His roll of money looks like nothing, but it must be ten grand. He picks up his tickets and loiters over them, checking the details before leaving the window, as though he’s just been ripped off, an –
‘are you tryin’ to con me?’ look on his face. He’s got a transistor radio up to his ear, the staccato race calls, a twist cut sound like bees.

My old man’s style is different. He is altogether slower and does not have the angular movements Charlie has. He speaks slow at the window, sure of himself, like he’s a fucken emperor sitting on a minion’s face just for a rest. He doesn’t check his tickets but slides them clean off the stainless-steel tray directly into his pockets, the whole transaction resembles a drug deal. I can almost feel how smoothly those thin shiny paper bets slide on that tray. Smooth as a shallow accident waiting for a chance.

This is all I ever see my father do. Things with dogs, with cars, with women. And, when he’s gone, at the end of summer, the racing of dogs, wherever it is, wherever I am, will bring him to my attention as though he was standing by me, as though he were there, waiting to be rude. Pavlov proven, a proxy father tied to a sound, a smell, a memory of dogs that will last forever.

I got tired of the betting ring after a while, I needed some open air and space so I went to the back of the stadium and rolled a small joint to get me through the afternoon. I looked for a phone booth to call Susan but I couldn’t find one. The sun was hotter and the wind had dropped. Watching the races was exciting, looking down from the stands. I remember being surprised by how powerful these shiny dogs were and how large they stand. Full and thin and chests of gold and muscles. When they run the sandy track sprays up behind them. They break from the gates like one animal pouncing forward, ribbons of muscle until they move apart and tear at the money all the mugs have put on them. The hum of the mechanical hare is loud and crude, and the dogs lean into the turns scattering sand, breathed by back runners, stuck to their faces, wet jowls, teeth out under their muzzles, little thunder sounds they beat the track with. Men shouting at the side-lines. It’s too much noise. But up the back
it’s ok, and in the rows of the tiered seating I see Charlie Parker leaving a seat in the top row.

“Good view from up here, Jason.”

“Are you winning, Charlie,” I say.

“Not yet, Jason, not yet.”

“Where’s my father?”

“Don’t know, son, dunno.”

Charlie Parker is pushing past me puffing down the concrete stairs. There aren’t many people around. I look down over the crowd trying to spot my father, but I can’t see him anywhere. The afternoon has changed again and opened up to a cool wind and I take Charlie’s seat up high and alone. I sit and watch them run. I can see beyond the track over the fences and roofs of houses tight packed in front of me, and behind. Only the big lights are higher, all around the track, cold and off as though they were part of a ghost town. The wind whistles into the seating behind the sounds of men shouting – dogs, dog names. Their heavy voices and panting mix in this wind and it all somehow becomes indistinguishable.

Finding Charlie Parker’s dog tickets

I roll myself another joint, putting my coat over the seats in front of me as a wind-break. The afternoon light in the surface of the fabric of my coat is exposed where the lining is torn and beyond its tattered edges the gauze like cloth is filled with a thousand tiny holes where the sun comes through. The broken light falls over my hands as I twist up my marijuana cigarette. I find its warmth as I pull hot smoke into my lungs and exhale only a dust, holding each drag until my face quivers red with an unnatural animal strain, to get the full effect. Being stoned makes me think of Susan and I wonder how quickly I can get back to her if I left right now.

When I finish the joint I scrub the filter against the ground between my feet. A bunch of sparks disperse in the breeze and are gone and I am
caught by their dying little flickers noticed against the concrete. I follow them with my eyes and it’s then that I see, wind pushed against the back of the concrete tiering, a little wad of dog tickets. I pick them up and read the names of the dogs. There are about ten tickets, several names on each one. The afternoon lingers slowly on and finally there are no more races and the track is scarred with paw prints. A lonely melancholy feeling comes down like an open swell jellyfish billow, round and loose and over the whole fucken place. The sun is on the way out.

Down at the betting offices there’s a lady with a tired look on her face. It’s the end of the day and her finger tips are grey with ink. I hand my tickets over to her and she looks bored and lonely and I can tell she needs a drink because I’ve seen that look before. She’s looking through a book filled with results and I see pencil cursive script round and neat and full of promises, it must be a diary she keeps, then she scans my tickets looking at her screen. Of the eight tickets I give her she hands six back and tells me they are no good. Then she says,

“I will have to get my manager to look over these other two.” Her voice is tired. I am stoned. I have smoked two reefers in half an hour and the experience at the betting window is making me uneasy. I know my father and Charlie Parker will be around here somewhere and now those tickets have taken on an unexpected importance I begin to feel it was a mistake to present them.

At the window a short fat man in a white suit coat appears and calls me son and asks me where I got the tickets and I tell him I made a bet with my brother and with the two hundred dollars my dad gave me but my brother’s gone home to see his girl. The fat man in white says,

“Well son, what you have in these tickets is twenty seven thousand dollars, but I can’t give that money to you.”

“Why not? Give me my tickets back.”
“Ok, Ok son, keep ya knickers on,” he says. “I can’t give you the money because you’re not eighteen. You might be tall son, but you’re not eighteen. You come back here with your father or your brother and we’ll sort this out, Ok.” As he’s finishing his little underage speech he hands me the tickets shaking his head in disbelief, and, at that moment I hear Charlie Parker say,

“It’s a bit late for betting Jason.” The ticket man draws in a breath to explain but I frown at him quick as a snake and he sucks his words back into his mouth leaving a silence for Charlie Parker to blow his smoke into. His curiosity follows like a shopping trolley. There is a queue of three and I know Charlie will have some tickets to talk about with the man in the white coat, the tickets that were his that I now have in my pocket. And, I know that in under ten minutes he will have the story about the twenty seven thousand out of the white coat man and my father will turn up and have it too, and I have already decided to find the back gate and catch the bus home before Charlie Parker gets a chance at another drag.

Before anyone has had time to sip the dog smell afternoon air I slip into the crowd. The conversation between Charlie and the white coat has started but I am half way round the track and out the click-et-y clack cold iron turnstile and into the street and away, walking the side streets to avoid my father who will be claiming those tickets if he can get in close enough. I run north away from the car, through the streets filled with outer suburban homes and I am sure I can find my way into them for an hour or so before I go back to the bus stop. The dusk thick-s up the light like some kind of favour, like whoever invented a bubble, and as I approach the main road a lone taxi comes driving up the thin street and I do a twenty dollar deal on thirty dollar fare, and I agree the meter stays off, and I say he can toss the fucken meter out the window if he wants, saying twenty is all I got and I get in curling up against the cold. He pulls away quiet and tired. His name is Armel, his long face is grey and cool in the evening light. A
twelve hour shift he tells me, and the two of us spend the next half hour not saying much, me hoping that Art is home and that I can get there before my father.

Susan in summer Cranberry

This week I’m dressed in Cranberry, scatter colours with red as bright as broken sun. I love it warm and brown my skin until I can take no more. I am wearing no underwear in this heat and somehow the men know and look me up and down but I see they are tired and hungry with nothing to offer. They are wrapped in rice paper. Ready to tear, as buoyant as balloons. All filled with sour wind.

9.30a.m. I get out of bed leaving it warm as if it were sleep itself slowly dying, fading like mist through the sheets as I put my clothes on. Sunglasses, ribbons, blue, blue, tied quick loose happy, lipstick, heels and I am steady, out the door and the day all round me like a kiss. I go down my steps and Mrs. Jones my neighbour bent in two with 75 tells me it is a lovely day dear, and if she could straighten up she’d be shot with envy as though it were every word, she the page, waiting woman concierge, too old to play at sex, wink whisper written all over her and it’s gone. I know that, it’s gone in a flash. But, let the sun shine on me and open me like a cross-eyed flower. I will give my warmth to the day.

Yesterday Jay told me he was going to the dog races with his old man and I’m thinking on that and how my mum’s coming down for a visit from up north on Saturday, which has arrived like it leap frogged the other days. My mum is all envy like Jonesy. Broken up by every single click clack noise of the train she took, unzipped at every crease like the sounds, one and all, click clack, teeth on the zippers, that held her bitter bile behind her skin. I know she loves me but she pours into me like a fucken rotating 3 pronged
sprinkler spilling out frozen lollies of spite all over. Cutting me up like ant bites.

“Susan,” suck-suck-cigarette-cry give me more, “…why are you wasting you life with your fancies, your father would turn…” and I say if he did he’d rattle like a bag of long marbles ten years gone and for fuck sake mum, why not say some pleasant thing.

She is in my spare room and I made the very big mistake of telling her about Art and Jay on the phone three weeks ago and we go shopping, her plump feet bulging like swollen fingernails against the cuticle curve of her rounded leather shoes. She snips at sales girls and actually buys nothing. I am the only one.

“Can’t call it cheap this blouse, that knit. The snow would fall right though it.”

“Yes, mum, but it’s nice, and it doesn’t snow here.”

“What about those boys you’re seeing, Susan, it just doesn’t feel right to me.”

“It’s not right mum, that’s probably why I’m doing it.”

“Well I really think you should consider choosing one of them. You’ll only get hurt dear.”

“Yes mum.”

We eat meals that I have made, and half of them are lazy. The linoleum on the table offends my mother. She insists on a table-cloth and after dinner I let her wash dishes in cold water with too little soap and I do it all again when she’s sleeping, a greasy film over each and every one. The nights with her here are oddly a comfort. When she is quiet I can feel she’s just lonely and tired, and I can care then and feel bad for hating her, but then she gets up, trying to change the colour of my eyes; and fuck it, nastiness spills into my heart, they are blue and won’t go back. I don’t see Jay while she’s in town. I can’t.
After a long weekend I take her to the station. She goes home dissatisfied. We wait together in the wind. She throws her cigarette buts off the platform into the big dark rocks on the tracks before the train. They spit up orange sparks and roll and twist and hide in there somewhere forever. She boards the train with my good mood, a shawl over her shoulders, and it’s warm and settles into her like any good robbery.

We wave quiet waves and they bounce off the glass windows of the train, little acrobats who have missed the safety net and, click-ed-di-clack the train moves off and zips her bitter love back inside, nowhere to spill now, and I’m gone and fuck, I actually feel sorry she’ll have nowhere for it to go, and a little bonsai tree depression grows out of the grates on the platform and wraps around my feet as I walk; until I get to the sun’s broken pieces – that’ll undo it all – my toes are wrapped in sweat, sliding in my heels, click clack gone and other sounds and I can smile at this, and let the men look, I’m sure Mrs. Jones can hear me from her living room, walking in my heals, clickety clack, off to see one of those Tanner boys.

**My old man standing outside the racetrack**

The shadows on my father’s face are like large segments of type, angled and brutal, and before this moment he has forgotten what it’s like to lose, at least that’s how I imagine it. He’s standing with Charlie Parker by the car thinking I will show up but that’s not going to happen and the wind is blowing grit-dust into their faces. Charlie Parker is smoking and they both realize at the same time that I’m not going to show.

“How much?” my old man says to Charlie, leaning on the bonnet.

“Twenty Seven.”

“Shit.” He bums a cigarette but can’t get it lit in the wind. The night begins to fall on them, black snow, a Pompeii afternoon, if I’d been there I am almost sure I would have got a beating.

“He’s not coming,” says Charlie, “he’s not stupid.”
"Nar."

They push themselves reluctantly into the car and drive off without their bill rolls, every part of half an hour behind me.

**After the dogs with my father and Charlie Parker.**

It’s almost dark by the time I get to Wrights Road and Art’s home in shorts and a singlet skipping sweat onto the back veranda in the evening. The patch of wood beneath his feet is all shined of dirt, his regular spot, and the taxi is gone with my twenty dollars. When I’m next to him I feel I’ve dragged the full sized ghost of Susan onto the verandah with me, into Art’s space and I’m sure he can feel it there like it was flesh and blood. I tell him I need to talk with him and he puts me off,

“In a minute, let me finish,”

“It’s important, Art.”

“Fuck, Jay, I’m in the middle of a session, for fuck’s sake,” but I grab the rope and he’s just about to slap me when I pull the tickets out of my pocket and wave them in his face. I can feel my father and Charlie Parker are somewhere close enough to smell and I tell Art the story again and he tells me to go, just get out of the house and go and stay at Josh’s or something. He takes his old brown wallet out from the pocket of his jeans on the chair outside and folds the tickets and puts the wallet back.

“That’s not a bad day Jay, not bad. At Charlie’s expense too.” He laughs.

“Stop foolin’ around Art.”

“Fucken hell, twenty-seven grand, Jesus man. He’s gonna want that back.”

“I’m not givin’ it back.”

“You might wanna think about giving it back, Jay. Charlie’s not the sort of guy to just let that go.”

“I’m not givin’ it back.”
“Whatever.”

“If I can’t trust ya, give me those tickets back.”

“They’re your tickets, if ya want ‘em back, you can have em’.” But I didn’t take them back. Art agreed to go to the TAB and get the money for me. I told him he could have five grand, but he said he didn’t need any fucken gambling money, which was pretty funny, considering what he was up to.

The street was cold and I left my coat at home, so I went fast across the railway line and toward Josh’s place, and the evening dew shining off those tracks like a magic trick. Josh wasn’t home and I thought of Susan and all her promise and I cut into the dark dusk with a thin intention toward her door that she had closed to me while her mother was in town.

I walk the two kilometres to her place like it was a block. I decided to call her first and I stopped at a phone box at the end of her street and I didn’t have any change so I make it reverse charges and the operator lets the phone ring out and apologizes, but I ask her to try one more time. Susan answers with her voice full of sleep and pyjamas, but she is not angry and accepts the call. Ten minutes later she’s at the phone booth with sandshoes and an overcoat and we go to a late night bar. She orders a double scotch and a coke and we share that and she orders another one. I tell her about my dog tickets and how Art’s sorting it out, and I tell her about my father and Charlie Parker and how pissed they are going to be. She listens to me looking at me sideways and there’s soft music knitting up the air like a smoother drink than scotch. She orders another couple and splits them again and then we’re on our way to getting drunk and she pushes her sprawling fat lips against me and whispers that next time she will be expecting me to buy the drinks. She laughs, makes me realize that everything is going to be alright; at least that’s what I made of it at the time. I had no idea how wrong I could be.
The barman squints through his thoughts of underage lies at the pair of us, and a woozy comfort circles us. I am all stitched up with Susan so close that she’s like a fucken garment. That night I stay at her place for the first time, watching her neighbours walk their dogs next morning early out her bedroom window until she takes her mother to the station, leaving me hidden in her room. I told Susan I was going to work but when I got there Josh and me had mixed up shifts so I went home.

**Susan about Jay**

The day my mother left and I dressed in cranberry, what I didn’t tell you was I had Jay in my bed. He came round late after stealing some money off Charlie Parker and I took him out for a drink. I woke with him, a secret under my covers for the first time and I was surprised at myself.

“Jay, Jay, I’m getting up, but you’ll have to be quiet in here.”

“I’ll go soon, too,” he says.

“I’ve gotta get up, take mum to the station,” and he watches intently as I dress in the grey morning light. I make my mother breakfast, an omelette with fried tomato and while it’s cooking I go to wake her up. She’s still asleep and I stand in the door and watch her for a while. I stand there feeling that tenderness I can feel for her when she’s asleep. There’s a musty smell in the sombre room.

“Mum…”

“Mmm,” and I can hear saliva gurgling in her throat as she wakes.

“Mum, wake up.”

“Yes, dear. What time is it?” and she looks up at me without her glasses and her eyes are clear and have a far away expression and she gives me a distant smile and, “…what time is it?”

“Eight. Come and have some breakfast.”
At the table I sit and drink tea. I don’t like eating with her. She gets up with her shower-wet hair and goes to do the dishes.

“Leave it, mum. I’ll do them later.” I am getting anxious about Jay in the house and don’t really care if she sees him but just don’t want to upset her.

“It won’t take a minute, dear.” And, she washes the cups and plates and frying pan and dries them slowly like she doesn’t want to leave. Then we walk to the station, me wheeling my mother’s suitcase on the pavement, click-et-y-clack. It’s nine o’clock, the sun already warm and I felt for my mother, a long train ride, going home to an empty house. We hug a half-hearted hug on the platform and she steps up into the train, huffing and mumbling into the carriage, I have to say I felt relieved. I watched the train pull out, then went to buy a drink from the newspaper stand.

“Coming or going,” a man who must be in his eighties says.

“Seeing my mum off.”

“Oh. What can I get ya, love?”

“Just an apple juice, thanks.”

“That’s all?”

“Yep. Thanks.” I felt hungry. I was dreaming of breakfast. Walking back from the station my skin drank up the hot morning sun like a lotion and I wondered if Jay would still be in my bed or gone home and I wanted to see him and I wanted to see Art, so I went to the Wrights Road house, took my sunburned lips to whoever would have them. Art wasn’t home. I went back to my place to find Jay still asleep in my bed. Asleep, he looked tender, like my mother had, and I could like him totally, at that moment. His breathing had a rhythm all his own and he was like a boy covered with the outside edge of the moon. He didn’t spill. In the warm bed he kissed me, half asleep with a gluey mouth. He was so gentle, as if I was a prickle bush,

“Just kiss me, Jay.”

“I’m half asleep, Susan.”
“Come closer.”

It was at about this time I started to feel guilty. He was starting to like me, I could feel it, falling for me, trying to be familiar in the way he spoke to me. We made love and showered together, his pale lanky body, vertical, like the long dirty vertical grout lines in the tiles behind him.

Before it was midday I went to the Tanner house, to escape the heat. Art was down the coast with a mate. Jay and I sat outside and after a while we were into a bottle of white wine that we drank with ice in the dappled sun at the outside table. My mother was a memory halfway dissolved.

“How come you hate her so much?”
“I'll tell you some other time. When’s Art getting back?”
“I dunno, later.” Then we were upstairs playing backgammon on the foot of Jay’s hot bed in the afternoon sun. He told me he’d daydreamed about me the first time I’d come round to see Art after his accident.

“Oh, like what kind of a daydream.”
“I just wanted Art to go out and leave us together.”
“That’s it?”
“Yeah, kind of.” Jay rolled a joint and we kept drinking white wine and hung out the window like a couple of socks blowing dope smoke into the trees. The day was all broken up in the leaves that were washing in the wind. They were just a foot from our faces. We were different in the house. Risking time in Jay’s room, never sure if Art would come home or not, stand-offish with each other.

To tease Jay I put lipstick on in one go and as I did I heard the birds’ midday song, spaced like train stations in the long, straight, silver afternoon. It all went so smooth and so slow I felt we could almost slide into yesterday. We kissed just once more, playing backgammon on the bed, well before Art came home. When he did we were downstairs outside
at the table, as cool as cousins, throwing dice and keeping score. But… we were pissed and I’d left my lipstick on an upside-down glass in Jay’s room with the lid off and, in the end that’s what did it. Art saw it there of course – came down the stairs, rumbling like a sack full of bowling balls.

“What the fuck’s going on with you two?” He was holding my lipstick like it was a disease, extended as I’d left it, gloss and a sun-cut shine coming off its little hot coloured prong.

“Nothing, Art, really.” He didn’t even look at Jay.

“He’s got fucken lip stick on his face for fuck sake Susan, you’re so full of shit, just fucken go will you, just fuck off.”

“Art, really, it was nothing.”

“Just fuck off.” That wasn’t gonna change. Really it was his broken up face that he was angry about but he yelled at Jay who wept like a child, confused in front of Art’s fury like love itself had left his neighbourhood. What could I do? I left. Looking back as I went down the side path I saw the two of them just standing there looking at each other. They were something, folded like an elbow crease together, inside each other like a monkey grip. What else could I do but go. I walked in the hot sun, drunk and stoned to my house that was too warm to sit in, filled with the smell of my mother’s three day camp-over. I sat on a chair in front of the dark quiet grey TV and wept, with my body somehow cold, and aching for tomorrow.

Susan: Susan

When I look at Jay you know what I think? I think his personality’s kind of broken up. He doesn’t know who he is. Tall and handsome and in me there’s something that can’t help but continue towards him, and I think I’m getting carried away myself. I almost feel energized by Art’s anger. The very next day I’m over at Wrights Road, cautiously, and Jay’s alone and soft-eyed and hanging out the back. When he sees me his manner’s loose
and I wonder if somehow Art’s made him feel angry at me, turned it round onto me, but he seems glad to see me and I feel like he understands where I come from, even if he’s only young. There’s sunshine in his eyes. He smiles into the light as though it were everything, splashed across his face, warm and translucent and clean in this city full of shit.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Jay, how you going.”

“Ok.”

“How’s Art.”

“He’s pretty pissed off.”

“Where is he?”

“Gone down the coast.”

“Oh.”

“I wanna kiss you.”

I kissed him once, before all this started, ages ago. He must have been fourteen. I saw him in the supermarket and I dunno, I just felt like it. I just walked up out of the blue and kissed him on the lips. He didn’t know what to do and kinda stood there, looking at sixty brands of potato chips. He was so sweet and funny, and confused. Fourteen, fifteen. That’s how it started. I just liked him. Then after Art got hurt, me and Jay started to hang out. Jay was softer than Art, ready for something but softer. He seemed affected more than Art by all the shit in their lives. For starters he stayed at home. Art was always out, training, or down the coast, and after his fight with Billy Wednesday, like I said, he wouldn’t see me. There was no one there.

Around that time I found out from Josh that Jay was a bit of a stoner, so we smoked a few joints together. He was always nice to me. Asked me how I was doing; did I wanna drink or something? He always asked. He was pretty good looking. I said that didn’t I? and so one day I decided – fuck it –. I thought I was doing him a favour, I mean, I wanted to, don’t
get me wrong, he was young and I'm not sure he had a girl. Just young and strong and cool. I gave him a hand job under his bedcover about six months after the supermarket kiss. I just went up there and did it. Reached in under the warm covers, kneeling by the bed. He was all into it and wide eyed. Ok, I stroked his hair and told him I liked him. I did. Then I went back downstairs to dinner with Art. Lamb chops with rosemary and mash potatoes. That’s how it started, while I was seeing Art, and I don’t reckon anything woulda come of it, but then Art just cut seeing me. That led to yesterday. To the moment Art saw my lipstick on an upside-down glass in Jay’s room. Then today, awkward in the back yard of the Tanner house with Jay and me wanting it but feeling like we were same-pole magnets who can’t get close without sliding off sideways. The laws of nature were saying no.

**Susan remembers Art**

Before he got beaten-up twice, Art was different. Art was mean. Not to me, but just mean inside somewhere. I saw him fight lots of times, and he was ferocious. Most of ‘em didn’t ever go two rounds. He busted people’s noses in the juniors, so I heard. I mean he fought all over the place. Never lost a fight. He had these dark eyes that shone after the fights. He took me out and we had a good time. I watched him wince as he ate. It was all the cuts in his mouth. He didn’t smoke or do anything, really. No drugs and just a few drinks. Almost like he was religious. That was the hardest part for me. I liked to get fucked up and I couldn’t do that with him. It just felt wrong. But I had an ache in my breasts and behind my eyes for him. I couldn’t get Art outta my head. Yesterday was still ringing its pain-song in my ears. I loved Art, I really did. He was just something else. His body was confident, the way he walked. He’d come down the library and visit me sometimes, borrow books like his brother. I always thought it was to impress me, but then he told me he’d been reading everything he could
since he was a kid, him and Jay were both like that he said. It was a funny mix, boxing and books.

When Art got thrown from the ring or fell, or whatever the fucken story was about what Billy Wednesday did, he changed. He changed after that pub fight. He went away for a while somewhere. He went away for ages, out in the country. He called me a few times and he sounded fucked up, I have to say. He was taking codeine he told me. Telling me on the phone he wouldn’t even go outside. He didn’t want to see me. His face was bandaged up. And telling me he was gonna kill Billy Wednesday. The whole thing kinda freaked me out and I kept my distance a bit after that. That’s when I started hanging out with Jay. Like I said.

So there I was mixed in with both the Tanner boys. Loving Art and waiting for him to stop being so angry, and hanging out with Jay on the back veranda and waiting for that to end or to be legal, what ever happened first.

The day was just getting hotter and looking at Jay I thought – he’s mostly soft and gentle and unsure of himself.

“You remember the first time you kissed me, Susan?”

“Yeah, in the supermarket.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“I dunno.”

“I’m caught in you now. Like in a net.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I just really liked you, Jay.”

“But you loved Art.”

“Come here.” With Jay it started once when I was over there looking for Art for about the tenth time. Jay was there by himself and we got pissed on white wine in front of the TV. He was a bit older and I thought ok, just see what happens and I pulled him, stroked his leg and kissed him and took out his hard cock, pulled it slow and he came all over Art’s new
jumper, and honest, I started to like him. I never took him to my place. He was only fifteen. I think he was too young for people to suspect anything. We hung out at his place when his family was out, or sometimes in the park and we fooled around wherever we could. For ages I just wanted to make him feel special but then I fucked him and that was a mistake. I’ll tell you why. Because my love for Art just cracked as if it’d fallen off the mantle piece. I remember it happening all soaked in sex and summer fatigue up on Jay’s bed and I was on top of him and it was all so slow and gentle and careful, he was, and I came in the music of the bed’s role-a-record on Jay’s turn table and I started to cry. He was looking right at me. All of a sudden too close, and I knew then, just knew I’d have to leave sooner or later, and it just wrecked me that I’d let myself be able to hurt him so much.

**Jay at the market bumps into Charlie Parker**

One Sunday afternoon at the market, after the incident with Art and Susan, I was standing at the donut caravan, motley-white peeling paint, aluminium, listening to live music somewhere close and a heavy hand comes sliding onto my shoulder, with a measured menace. I felt it on my flannel shirt and I am ready for some kind of conflict but I turn and Charlie Parker is smiling and smoking and calm, settling me down before I get a chance,

“Jason, how are you son?” The market sun is bouncing off his shiny fat face and I swear I can see the music rippling the fat at his jowls, or maybe its just the way he’s slow-hopping from one foot to the next.

“I’m ok, Charlie. How’re you?”

“Fine, just fine son.” He adds some extra weight to the hand on my shoulder as he says this. He exudes some kind of harnessed power into the day. He’s fragrant with it, like a scent. Charlie and me stand there, holding up the queue until a woman with a shopping trolley behind us asks if we’re in line or not. Charlie turns slowly and looks at the woman. He gives off
the vibe he’s feeling kind of interrupted. He gives her a long stare and then a wink and then he says,

“My apologies madam, I was distracted by my conversation with this young man,” and then he turned back to me, all the while with his hand on my shoulder. The music is scattering amongst the crowd and the shouts from the vendors, prices and produces and accents rolling over everything, a noise-smoke from other places. I am wondering if there’s gonna be any trouble. My heart starts a catch-slap rhythm that jolts through my whole body. I am sure Charlie can feel it. He doesn’t move or disengage, but follows me with his heavy hand on my shoulder all the way to the window. He’s on me all through the dollar fifty for 3 jam donuts.

“Have you got anything smaller?” the donut man says to me.

“No.” I say.

“Carrying fifties, Jason. That outta my twenty seven?”

“No.”

“Give us a donut,” and I hand one over like I’ve got not choice. I could easily outrun him and I think about turning and bolting into the queue but he’d be back, he has an I’ll-find-you look about him.

“Quite a win you had Jason.” His voice is honey-like, almost caring. He stinks of smoke and sweat and as he speaks he lets me go, like in his mind his words are some kind of chain command, and I have to say, and if that’s what he’s thinking, that’s what I’m feeling and he’s not far wrong. Behind his voice and his movements there is always a motive, cool-wind-deception in every gesture. Suspicion prickles all over me. For the first time I notice his clothes, a loose shirt, slacks, and a pair of light Italian shoes that look as if they will burst open under the pressure of his fat feet. I walk with him wondering what to say and how to say it, when, just like that, he let’s me off.

“Keep the money, mate.” He takes his hand off my shoulder, digs into his pocket and lights up another smoke.
“Do something with it.” He claps me soft on the other shoulder. “Quite a win,” he says and winks at me. He turns and walks away; just like that. I follow him with my eyes, not quite believing what’s just happened. The music’s still playing and I see the sun find his scalp through his thinning oily hair. He bumps into the old woman from the queue and in no time at all they’re chatting like long lost cousins. Then I lose them in the crowd.

**Jason thinks about Charlie Parker’s money**

There is something in the exchange I have with Charlie Parker that gives me a boost into a type of confidence I haven’t known before. I don’t know why he’s letting me off, letting me have that money, but Art’s put it safely in the bank for me and I been trying not to spend it. The feeling in me is that I’m up late, past bedtime, drinking wine and shifting from third to fourth gear on a country road with Art dozing relaxed in the passenger seat. That’s how I imagine it anyway. That was how it seemed it could be.

It’s at this time I start asking Art to call me Jason, following Charlie Parker’s example. I shed the name Jay like a coat that no longer fits and in many ways Charlie Parker was the tailor. He left me with something. He left me with respect, that’s what I thought anyway. He came to me in private and gave me the opportunity to stand my ground. He said keep the money. At least that’s what I thought. He’s let me in I thought, he’s handed it to me like an unfolding sea, broken open in the afternoon. Asleep on dry land as a child in a donut queue, and then awake on a boat as someone older after talking with Charlie Parker, that’s how I felt – ready to drift until I take it somewhere. That money, that twenty-seven grand, as it turned out would let me get started. Without it, working out what my father’s notebook was all about would’ve been useless. That was what it would all be about.
Art and the money

I put my own money in Jay’s bank. Gave Charlie the tickets back. Someone like Charlie doesn’t just let you have that kinda money. I didn’t do it for Jay – Jason, is what he’s calling himself … shit. I did it because it was just bad business not to do it.

End Part One of My Father’s Notebook
– a Two Part Novel.