

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities:
***My Brother's War* and its Exegesis**

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Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

DECLARATION

This work is the sole work of the candidate, contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, and to the best of the candidate's knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

Applying ‘theory’ to the creative process is an emerging field in humanities and social science research; the evolution and recognition of this ‘practice-led research’ is a major innovation in academic research circles. This PhD project uses both a creative thesis and a critical exegesis in its practice-led research exploration of ‘hegemonic masculinities’, a sociological framework not previously applied as a writer’s tool. By deploying R. W. Connell’s hegemonic masculinities to research and writing, both creative and academic, both thesis and exegesis presents insights into how theory informs and enriches the creative practitioner by making explicit the dynamics of the creative research process. The project traces the performative, social, and contextual confluences between theory and creativity, and highlights the basis of my self-reflexive understanding of hegemonic masculinities, especially as an artistic practice.

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My Brother's War

by

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Part I

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ONE:

“These gutless Sons of the Sunburnt Country wankers,” the Sarge said, her boots kicking the dusty tan boots of Trooper ‘Pup’ Jenkins—who groaned and got to his feet—“they aren’t slingin’ their arses into this shit. That’s why we’re going home next month, so we can fight them and their stupid insurgency, now that the bloody Yanks have withdrawn east of Hawaii. Our presence here is not a ‘vital national interest’, according to the Prime Minister, not like fighting the Sons of the *Sunburnt* Country.”

The desert evening faded, leaving a bruised sky and shadows that congealed around them. The Sarge thought this place laid on the best-damned sunsets north of Cable Beach. She missed the fishing, a fifteen-foot surf rod arching out beyond the breakers, keeping a taut line and sharp eye for the tell-tale *taptap* of a threadfin salmon or trevally, some hotbod miner or jackaroo to build a fire and cook her catch. Except that most blokes she hooked up with didn’t know how to clean a fish. In fact, more knew how to cook it rather than catch it and gut it.

“Sergeant, what’s the holdup?” The Lieutenant jogged down the line. In the Sarge’s opinion, the Lieutenant jogged far too many places. She wondered for the umpteenth how many nasty spots he’d really been in. Either way, she distrusted him enough to keep her own boys tight and covered.

“Jenkins was just asking one of his questions, sir, about the insurgents back home, about why us poor bozos are fighting here while the Yanks are bunkering down CONUS.”

Jenkins shrugged into his pack and slung his rifle across his chest, not wanting to look at his Sergeant at this moment of ignorance.

The Lieutenant checked his watch and peered at the bruise-colour sky. “Time’s a-wasting, Trooper Jenkins, and darkness is falling. Our American cousins have a new administration, whose policy is one of isolationism, which leaves us without critical force protection assets like air support, long-range fires and in-theatre logistics support, and thus exposed, so what do you want to know about our little expedition here to the Greater Pashtu Kingdom?”

“Why us, sir?”

The Sarge snickered and the rest of the platoon came to a higher level of readiness.

The Lieutenant, oblivious, sighed. “Why what?”

“Why are we *here*, sir? In the Greater Pashtu Kingdom fighting *for* the Seppos when the Sons of the Sunburnt Country are back at home fighting *against* the Seppos—and the Chinks—and they’re shagging our wives and girlfriends and blowing up Coles and Red Rooster?”

The Lieutenant stroked his chin before looking at his Sergeant, who shrugged. “We’ve got to meet Lieutenant Colonel Bliss in seven hours, and if we’re late, I’m blaming you. Colonel Bliss is a bastard about timeliness.”

“The Colonel’s cool, sir,” the Sarge said. “Courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship.” The troopers nodded, and several murmured: *Remember Moresby*. “I served with him last year in New Guinea, and before that in HQ-JOC.” She didn’t mention some of the other jobs they’d shared, the need-to-know stuff they’d done on secondment to ASIS; slotting tangoes in Jakarta and Moresby and Honiara, generally running around on His Majesty’s Service murdering people.

“Yeah? What were you doing in Joint Ops?”

The Sarge opened her mouth, but the Lieutenant waved his pale hand and continued speaking:

“Colonel Bliss was Adjutant when I was in 1st Class at Duntroon. He wagered the entire cadet list that he would win the Mt Pleasant run, with full kit, twice up and down, and he did.” The Lieutenant nodded, a wide grin coming of out nowhere. “A hundred and thirty cadets, all ten years younger, and he beat us all by two and half minutes, all with his stim injectors offline for the day. Everyone else had stimulant access. The Commandant kicked our butts and doubled PT for two weeks, but she was happy that she had such a hotshot Adj. We paid for that loss in sweat, so get your lazy arses into gear. I will not disappoint Colonel Bliss—”

“Sir!”

“Trooper Wilkes?” The Lieutenant turned to the sigs op, who read incoming flash traffic. Her eyes shimmered a multitude of colours as her combat goggles fed battle-data.

“It’s Colonel Bliss; he’s in contact with a company-sized group of militia.” Wilkes held up her arm and keyed a sequence into the pad beneath the skin of her left forearm, a faint red glowing through her skin. The black knobs on the peaks of their helmets linked everyone’s goggles onto the C2-net; the Sarge unrolled her Sony pad and watched the data update. The holo-image, a live feed from an overhead drone, displayed

three heavy trucks and several smaller vehicles making dust. Flashing red boxes surrounded each, and the red boxes closed in on several smaller blue boxes, Colonel Bliss's unit.

The Sarge didn't suck her breath through her teeth, although she really wanted to. Twenty-two years in the uniform, eleven of them wearing the sandy beret of the Special Air Service, the most coveted in the Australian Defence Force, had toughened her too much for rookie displays.

The Lieutenant sucked in his breath. "Orders?"

"Move out in thirty seconds," the Sarge shouted, and everyone snapped into action.

"We are to double-time to al-Hazjji Gezrit, sir, that's the fort at the mouth of the valley." Wilkes expanded the colour map. In one corner, an image of a crumbling fort appeared, and a blue circle flashed over their current position and it grew into a moving arrow. "We are to establish hasty defence and cover their exfiltration."

Jenkins, the Sarge saw with a grimly satisfied sidelong glance, had added steel to his gaze and his spine. She switched the holo-display to her goggles, dropping coordinates and lines of advance into cache memory on her pad's flexible surface with swipes of her gloved fingers. The rest of the platoon formed up as the Sarge calculated the movement rate required to cover that sort of distance.

Strewth.

"Double-time, Sergeant," the Lieutenant said, still with a tremor, "lead the way."

* * *

Fariz, the Iraqi guide, slipped through Lieutenant Colonel Brett Bliss' fingers and ran into the minefield after his donkey.

"Colonel, geddown!" A trooper yelled, one of the new direct entry boys.

Far too damn smart was Brett's opinion of these direct entry womps. He'd risen the hard way, infantryman, through the ranks from trooper to officer. A rare breed, to win selection for the Regiment as both other ranks and post-Duntroon officer.

Now some dozy towelhead civvie kills me. Brett went limp and bit dirt just as Fariz trod on a mine.

Shrapnel tugged at Brett's pants and his face, and his left ear popped loudly. Dust and smoke enveloped everything in a fine brown rain.

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Another blast, this one further away.

Brett sneezed, his throat raspy. Something lay in the dirt before him—white bone sharp, olive green tunic dusty.

Fingers dug into his shoulder, pulling him up. Jacko, his sergeant, peered at him through darkened Scott combat goggles, and pulled down the ribbed wool scarf that covered his mouth to display a manic grin above a deep tan. “Good to go?”

“Yeah, Jacko, ta.” Sometimes, late at night, sitting on watch with the night-vision goggles on, he caught Jacko looking at him. Brett never felt those urges, either way, and it bothered him.

Jacko tapped his earpiece, and then pointed at Brett’s, which dangled from the brim of his helmet. “It’s for you.”

Brett reached up with his left hand and pressed the ear-bud back into place.

Big Dick and Little Dick, the security element, murmured hushed code.

“Green One, this is Red One. The convoy is continuing, but three technicals and two covered trucks have turned around. They’re coming back this way, making serious dust. I say again: incoming hostiles at high speed, ETA three minutes, over.”

“Ack, Red One.” Brett released a long breath, and felt better. “Form up on me; we’ll set the ambush right here.” Brett nodded at Jacko, who stepped away and waved the kids into action.

Brett dusted himself off and looked around. Twelve troopers, two heavy weapons, fifteen tubes of MetalStorm, ten blocks of ADW, and a smattering of assault rifles, against at least one hundred towelheads with AKs and mortars and .50 cal on the technicals.

Plus whatever indirect kinetic support I can summon from depleted Coalition stocks.

“Don’t worry about the numbers, boss,” Jacko said, “they’re just towelies.”

“What have I told you about reading my mind, Jacko?”

“Sorry, boss, but there’s bugger all else to read except for your bloody Yukio Mishima books, and they’re in Japanese.”

“*Kutabacchimae!*” Brett said, and they both laughed. Brett always had something to read in his kit, something suitably warrior-poet, which is how he got his nickname, the Samurai Monk. The Monk bit came later, once his first platoon sergeant realised that Brett wouldn’t join the rest of them in the Port Moresby curly-girlie action

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after a nasty op into the PNG highlands. The more the squadron cajoled, insulted and reasoned, the more serene Brett's youthful, refusing smile became.

"Stevo!" Brett shouted. The trooper stepped forward, his fatigues filthy. Brett wanted to wrinkle his nose at the smell of sour sweat and unbrushed teeth, but he wouldn't smell any better and Stevo wasn't complaining. "Get up on the ridge with your scope and get me a headcount. They're coming from the west and we need to site the Area Denial Weapons before we leg it to the fort. You've got thirty seconds—run!"

* * *

The bumble-bee buzz of a dying round fluttered past Brett's ear. He flinched, briefly, to blink away the coarse sand that blew across his eyes.

"Odey, where's my fire support?"

A rising tone in his earpiece presaged the reply from the attached Forward Air Controller. "Five plus, sir, before the nearest arrives, a Storm pod UCAV. There's a battery of Canadian guns on the move about forty clicks west, but it'll take them time to deploy, acquire, and then deliver rounds on target."

Brett's other brick leader, Billy Duggs, out on the left perimeter, staggered and fell as a long stream of incoming fire raked across that group. Dust rippled through the position a second time. One of Duggs' machine-guns returned fire. In the corner of Brett's vision, a red icon began to flash—Duggs' life signs.

The crump of mortars walking closer caught his notice. He clicked his fingertips, opening the section-wide channel. "Incoming!"

Around him, the squad bit dirt.

The first bomb landed with a roar, seventy-five meters away and low.

Brett crouched and sprinted toward the small huddle of civvies who'd been fleeing the province on two grumpy, hoary old black donkeys when the SASR overtook them. Wrapped in green and brown rags, these skeleton people milled about as the bombs kept walking closer, oblivious to Brett's shouts and gestures. Several of the group fell from scything shrapnel.

With relief, Brett saw that the girl was still upright; her black headscarf had come loose and was blowing about in the gusting wind. He'd noticed her instantly when they'd crossed paths. Nine or ten years old, with perfectly smooth olive skin and sky

blue eyes, Brett had felt a surprised twang in his heart. He had no kids, no wife, no fuck-friend in every port, but looking at this girl he felt a thawing in his heart for the first time since he fled his home, since the night of the rape.

I have to save her.

Leaping up, Brett sprinted and dodged, and then a tremendous force kicked him in the back. He flew forward, skidding sideways, his head a misty cathedral of echoes. His fingertips dug into the fine sand as the marked line of the minefield rushed closer.

Brett's hearing cleared, the clattering of small arms weaving through the chatter in his left ear. Sitting up, Brett saw members of B Brick lift Duggs, and Brett paused to click his fingertips in the code that opened a window titled *Duggs — Bio* in his goggles. Overlaying the unfolding battle was a dynamic coloured display showing an erratic pulse trace and a plummeting blood pressure. Brett released implant control to Odey, and then called up his own file, scanning through the data, and authorised additional doses of stimulants for the fighting troops and narcotics for the wounded. Two flatlines and Duggs; the other nine in his team were okay—stressed and fighting for their lives—but okay.

Movement outside the perimeter caught Brett's attention and he sighted along his weapon. A peasant boy, no more than ten years of age, wearing oversized red trousers and a long blouse, ran toward them with an AK cradled in his scrawny brown arms. The kid's shirt showed dark circles under the arms and Brett could make out perspiration-trails in the dust on his smooth face. The boy stopped, legs apart, and raised the AK toward B Brick.

“Don't you dare, you micro-scrote,” Brett whispered, finger moving automatically from the trigger-guard to the trigger, “don't yo—”.

Yellow flashes erupted from AK's muzzle and the boy rocked back. Brett exhaled slowly, his thumb switching his own weapon to single shot, and increased the pressure on the trigger with an easy squeeze. The boy flopped, a cloud of pink mist spewing from the back of his head.

Brett felt nothing, the kill just another small box in the vault of his mind, the details ready for the mission report. He scanned for more threats. Seeing none, he lowered the rifle and looked for the girl.

The civvies seemed the worst hit, their bodies broken and split. Fariz's other donkey bleated and wandered to the side of the road. Brett helped the clan elder to his

feet, the man's bronzed skin smeared with thick red globs. Dropping his pack, Brett knelt beside a young woman holding her abdomen. She writhed, teeth bared but silent, arching her back against the earth. The girl scurried to their side, wide eyes on the sky, reflecting the infinity. The wounded woman grabbed the girl's hand and clutched it to her lips, murmuring a prayer or admonition.

Brett pulled them down and lay over them as mortar rounds fell closer.

Streaks of tracer reached through the clouds of dust and smoke. His eyepiece was alive with reports:

“—crossing left, three o'clock—”

“—get that fucking tube—”

“—acquired: firing—”

“—vitals fading—”

“—they're breaking contact—”

Peering around, Brett felt the tension in his squadron ratchet down as the noise died away. Crouching on the balls of his feet, he ejected the clip in his rifle and counted the remaining rounds with a cold, casual interest before slapping it back into the carrier. The civvies, with the hollow-gaze of the shocked, began to clump around their dead and dying. Brett's team huddled up, surrounding him, spinning the caps off water bottles and cross-loading ammunition from their packs.

“Watch those arcs,” Brett said.

Jacko nodded. “Taken care of, boss. You're wounded.”

Brett scanned himself through dusty goggles, not finding any blood.

Jacko laughed, pointing to Brett's rear. “Your arse, boss, not too much blood and apparently not too serious. I've listed the last of your morph to trickle, 5 mils per.”

Brett breathed deeply, nodding, feeling only numbness as his implant upped the synthetic opiates.

“Where are we at, Jacko?”

“Three clicks, boss, straight through the scrub to Gezrit. Gotta move quick, they'll be back soon. The airbase had been hit, something chemical, so no air support or extraction. It's just us against them.”

“We'll make it, we're the best,” Brett said loudly, looking at the faces of his squad. Mostly he saw toughness, but some were fraying at the edges. They'd been outside the wire a long time. Even when a leader didn't believe the gee-up, the team

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needed to hear the confidence. “We’ll get these civvies safe, and we’ll make the RZ at the fort, and we’ll beat these pricks back into the godless valleys of this shit-hole, and then we’ll go home and crack a Coopers Pale Ale and toast our fallen mates. These bastards are not going to question my courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship.”

“Remember Moresby,” Jacko intoned, and the squad nodded.

We’re not gonna make it, Brett thought, frigid inside as he calculated. He stood up and marched toward the civvies, aiming straight for the girl. She looked up, her gaze twin spears, and Brett felt something collapse, something buried in his soul.

For the first time since his father died, Brett felt fear. Not even when he’d been informed about his mum, two, three days ago, had he felt anything. Now, here, was a deep, clammy, all-consuming fear.

* * *

The Sarge smiled when she saw Colonel Bliss limping through the darkness. She huddled against the fort’s exterior wall, high on the knob of earth at the entrance to valley. The green shapes in her night-vision display were highlighted by flashing blue boxes as the data links between their battle-management systems shook hands and started talking, relaying icons to her goggles. Lieutenant Colonel Bliss climbed hardest, but his path was sliding too far across the steep incline.

“Adjust twenty degrees left, Colonel; I’m gonna flash the UV.” The Sarge switched on the pulse beacon until she saw the incoming troops trim their heading up the slope. Keeping low, she ventured out to meet the group.

“Good to see you, sir,” she murmured, reaching to take the bundle from the colonel. She saw the limp arm emerging from the bundle, flapping as he walked. A gust of wind tugged the dark cloth, revealing glassy eyes and slack cheeks.

It’s just a kid, the Sarge thought, and a memory of carrying her niece back to bed after an early Christmas morning momentarily swamped her.

TWO:

Lawrie Bliss looked up from the column of names and figures when his computer dinged, letting him know that he had received a facemail. Glad of the distraction, Lawrie combed his thinning blonde hair with his fingers and swivelled his chair to face the screen on his desk. He could see his chubby face reflected in the screen, and found himself wishing once again that he had inherited Brett's wide eyes and cheeky smile, that angelic face the girls had always loved. Lawrie could hear the whir of a vacuum cleaner on the far side of the office; Roger the night cleaner was doing his rounds. Roger was a nice guy, sure, but he did not use antiperspirant and exuded a rank body odour that Lawrie had come to associate with time to go home of an evening.

Lawrie unlocked the screensaver with a password and thumbscan, and opened Mail. The network popped up a box asking for another password; Defence was a paranoid place to work.

"Goodnight," said Denise, not looking at him. Denise was one of the auditors in his team. Lawrie looked up and smiled politely, sure that his confused hatred showed.

"Night, Denise, see you tomorrow." Lawrie watched her walk away, admiring her shapely young rear-end whilst trying to avoid breathing in the cloud of floral Impulse that she sprayed on herself several times a day. He thought again about holding her down and ripping her blouse, exposing those snowy white pillows, biting them, squeezing her throat until she gasped, all the while holding that polite smile cemented onto his face. *His pudgy face.*

Tipsy, he'd pinched Denise on the bum at the Christmas Party last year, and she lodged a formal complaint with the Director General: Governance and Compliance. The DG was her uncle, and the complaint was a permanent blot on Lawrie's file. After a cursory disciplinary process, he had been demoted two pay grades and lost his supervisory role. Six months later, he was back acting in his old job on higher duties after his replacement, John, had taken a promotion into Attorney-General's and moved to Canberra.

Lawrie glanced at the clock on the wall: 5:35pm. He became aware of the purple sky outside the office window, of the glittering lights of the Melbourne CBD and the twinkling red brake lights of the streams of traffic. In the window, against the darkening panorama, he saw the reflection of his cubicle farm, now empty save for himself and Roger the cleaner. Two cubicles over, Graham had left his usual clutter of files and

manuals spread all over his desk. Lawrie tried to enforce Defence's clear desk policy on several occasions, and each time Graham had made the extra effort, but given a week or two and the clutter was back. The closest cubicle, neat, tidy and clean, belonged to Margaret, who had Kinder Surprise toys arrayed across the top of her monitor. Margaret's children and grandchildren grinned at Lawrie all day from the photos in metal frames that clustered around the African violet that struggled for life in the dry air-conditioning. They were both competent, trustworthy audit officers, needing little supervision or policy guidance. *Unlike Denise.*

Lawrie's screen went black, the screensaver kicked back on, which dragged his reverie to conclusion. Like a machine-gun, he typed in the screensaver password and thumbscan and then the Outlook password. Nothing, no new messages. He stared for a second, uncomprehending, then reached across his desk to the switching box, which scanned his palm with the green sweeping glow of a photocopier. The screen flickered, there was a click, and the Top Secret network popped open. He used the shortcut key to open Notes, which requested a further password, this one a long alphanumeric sentence that he had to change every week.

On top of the list, his Inbox, the newest arrival sat expectantly, in pink letters. His gaze swept the Sender and Subject lines automatically. The sender was Brett Bliss and the Subject line read *Hey Bro*. Eager now, alert, Lawrie opened the facemail and greedily watched his brother speak to the camera:

"Hey Bro. This place is hot and dusty – worse even than Mildura! The dust is brown, not red, but fine and sneaky. It gets into our kit, and your snot comes thick and gritty. These bastards fight hard, when they choose to fight. We're making a difference, though. I'm less impressed by the Yanks, bro. They have no idea about warfighting, treating it like a computer game. They haven't seen New Guinea. Anyway, things are different now, we're all pulling out. I'm coming home soon. It's been too long. Cheers bro."

No mention of Mum, and that irked Lawrie as he mulled over the facemail on his drive home. Brett had been gone for so long that picturing his face was impossible; the man on his computer screen was both familiar and strange. Brett seemed not to have aged, but infinitely older at the same time. The yearly Christmas card often came with a photo of a panorama or a coastline, but Mum snaffled them quickly and mostly Lawrie pictured his older brother as a teenager, angry and rough and violent, that last day before the two great men in Lawrie's life abandoned him. There was Brett, standing in

the hallway with tears streamed down his face, their father slumped on the floor. Lawrie felt so helpless, so without manhood, and the feeling of the moment is what he today associated with Brett's memory.

He packed up the files, locked the cabinets with another thumbscan, and shut his computer down. He waved goodbye to Roger's back and left.

Flashing red and blue lights on the road ahead slowed the traffic to a crawl. After ten minutes, he saw the roadblock, a military checkpoint, with soldiers carrying guns and wearing full armour. A large, squat tank sat in off to one side, its turret swinging from side to side. The troops pulled several cars over to the side and searched them. Lawrie kept his hands visible on the steering wheel, inching forward until a soldier approached the side of the car and motioned him to roll down the window.

"Evening, digger, how's things?" Lawrie smiled.

"ID check, sir. Please present your card."

Lawrie's Defence ID and Australia Card were on a lanyard around his neck, tucked into his breast pocket. He extended them to the soldier, who scanned it with a wave of his hand. Lawrie turned his face upward and the laser read his retina. The machine flashed green.

"Thank you, sir, please proceed."

Lawrie nodded, winding up the window as he drove slowly forward through the chicane of the checkpoint. Just as he was getting up to speed, a small black Ford pulled from a side street, forcing Lawrie to brake hard. Lawrie wound down the window and leant out, eyes bulging.

"You brainless dipshit moron cunt!" he screamed, hands white as they gripped the wheel. "Get a clue and get the fuck off my road!" He sped up, sitting inches from the back bumper of the Ford, weaving from side to side. The Ford's red brake lights flared. Lawrie mashed the accelerator, swinging wide around the turning car, one hand pressed hard onto the horn. He shook as he fought to bring the vehicle below the limit.

The sparse traffic on Station Street evaporated as he turned left down Highbury Road and pulled into the carpark behind the store. The flashing bulbs and pink neon tube added to Lawrie's tickle of shame as he ducked into the Pink Pussy. Inside the door, a wooden partition shielded the inside of the shop from view and displayed an

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R18+ sign at eye level. Rounding the partition, Lawrie's nose flared at the paper-stale smell of angst. A thin tremor spidered up his back as he saw the woman behind the counter. The few men in here shuffled along the aisles, avoiding eye contact at all costs. Past the Asian, beyond the Lesbian, behind the glass case full of pink dildos and silver vibrators, Lawrie found the shelving displaying his treasures. On the covers, in the neat clear plastic bags, in knee-high socks and school uniforms, with braided hair and teeth in braces, his girls sucked lollipops or their fingers or flashed coy smiles just for him. *NewCummers. Barely Legal. High Society: Teen Angels. Purely 18. 18Eighteen. Just 18.*

Lawrie licked his lips.

THREE:

Maureen loved her boys, Brett and Lawrie, in no particular order. Brett was her baby, her first, but he'd been gone forever, and Lawrie had cared for her in the years after her Reggie passed. She loved her boys enough to do this right; she finished writing in the little green book, then double-checked the figures and the instructions, and snapped it closed.

The house, dark save for the buzzing fluoro over her head in the kitchen, smelled of Pine-O-Clean. The bathrooms were scrubbed and the floors vacuumed and washed. Fresh sheets, with neat, tight hospital corners, awaited sleepers in every bedroom. The dusting, including the knick-knack shelves in the little-used dining room, had been the first thing done this morning. She detested the dusting; it made her sneeze and wheeze and nobody was ever at home to say a simple 'God bless you.' The only sound was the tick-tick-tick of the grandfather clock in the entry, her patient companion since that joyous day when she'd had the man in to disable the chimes. How she'd dreaded the quarter-hour ding and the half-hour ding-dong and the hourly dong, dong, dong that echoed up and down the house. But the ticking, the relentless marking of time, comforted her.

Not long now.

Maureen sighed, nearly finished with her day's work. Lawrie wouldn't be home for another hour; public service payday. He often came home on a payday smelling of cigars and beer. Some things she need to know.

The paperwork, next to the envelopes addressed to her boys, lay in neat rows on the tablecloth—a white expanse with tiny red dots that matched the curtains covering the window above the sink. Everything was at least \$100 in credit: the gas, the electric, the council rates, the home and contents insurance, the car registration, the car insurance. Enough for at least a month, enough for Lawrie to get back on his feet after a short period of not having to worry.

That was the dread in Maureen's world, that her actions or, worse, inactions, would cause others worry or stress. She was a woman of little human footprint, according to that nice Doctor on the TV. Maureen was entranced by the range of crafting and cooking shows that were available online; she remembered when Melbourne only had five channels. She took up cross-stitch, scrap booking, Italian slow cooking, needlepoint and quilting, reviving girlhood pursuits and amusements long

forgotten. She made cakes and muffins, dream-catchers and potpourri hangers, delivering loads of handicrafts to St Vinnies or the Women's League or the district hospital and community centre. She'd done her bit, over the years, and maybe a little extra.

As she rose from the table, the pain flared and that horrible old-person grunt came out of her mouth. Maureen hated that sound, so involuntary. She remembered her own parents, who lived with her when they became infirm; both made that same sound.

Her slippers made scuff-scuff noises as she shuffled down the hallway, her eyes scanning the neat white tassels along the edges of the deep-red runner. She paused in Lawrie's room to switch on the light beside his bed. She sighed again, and decided to sit a moment. Lawrie's walls were covered with photographs—some boys had naked women, some had cars, but Lawrie had landscapes. He loved photographing valleys and deserts and mountains rising like pyramids. He had travelled, over the years, the benefits of working for the public service, using his annual leave to see the world in four-week bites. Egypt, Ireland, Norway, Kenya, Tasmania, England and, once, even Antarctica. That was the only trip for which Maureen felt envy. She would drive him to the airport, always on a Saturday morning, and pick him up exactly four weeks later. Only when he was flying to Auckland to meet the boat heading south did she resent being left behind. Usually, having the house to herself for that whole month was heaven, but Maureen had always dreamt of that white, frozen expanse.

As a girl, she'd borrowed a book from the primary school library about Mawson Station; the glossy pictures of ice fields, penguins, and glaciers sparked something in her. She read about the scientists and the big ship, an 'icebreaker', which came every six months with food. Her librarian, Mrs. Thomson, a short, bubbly woman with stray grey hairs floating around her head, explained about oceanographers and biologists and meteorologists.

"In my day," Mrs Thomson had said over the top of her glasses, "very few girls could grow up and be scientists or doctors or lawyers, but that's all changed now. If you study hard and read about lots of things and go to university, you can be a scientist in Antarctica. You could discover something new, something no one has ever seen before. Would you like that?"

Maureen had liked that very much, and she did work very hard in school, getting good grades with the aim of getting a degree and going to work in Antarctica, until the age of sixteen, when she first met Reggie Bliss, the much older man who seemed so

worldly. Soon came the pregnancy and the wedding, and the endless nappies and sniffles and school holidays. She told herself that, once the boys were grown, there would be time. And grow they did, at a terrifying rate, the years and clothes sizes climbing higher, until she could see a hope for a change of direction when Lawrie turned twelve. He was becoming quite the little man, old enough to do without his mother so much. She decided to go to university. She checked the Internet, took an online course, downloaded the forms and filled them out, posted them off and waited, never telling her husband. Of course, she confided in Lawrie—he knew how to keep a secret. Her adult-entry scores were outstanding, and she selected a Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne as her first preference. The terrifying wait for first-round offers dragged by; she had it marked on her kitchen calendar. Her excitement mounted through Christmas and New Year as time passed glacially. Two days before it arrived, two days before she planned on telling her husband the ways things would be from now on, Reggie died.

The funeral expenses crippled the savings account and the household budget and her nerves failed her. Maureen threw away the letter from the Admissions Centre, unopened, and started work in the bakery. The early mornings had never come easy, up before the sparrows and in bed after *Home and Away*. Her thick ankles and sturdy legs, what her Dad used to call her ‘peasant inheritance’, ached all day beneath the firm compression stockings.

The joy of handing in her notice two weeks ago was second only to the ecstasy she experienced this morning, her final shift, when Billy sent her home after her farewell lunch. The party, sitting on upturned milk crates in the loading bay, finished quickly once the cake had been divided and eaten. Shirley had wrapped Maureen’s present, the fine gold filigree bracelet, in a large food-processor box, and the laughter echoed against the white painted concrete. Billy made a stumbling speech, thankfully short, which ended with the happy news that she could go home rather than back to work.

Maureen roused herself, checking her watch. Lawrie would be home soon, and she wanted to be gone before he turned the key in the door. She rose with a grunting sigh, and turned to smooth down the bedspread. Her left knee ached as she continued down the hall. She paused briefly at Brett’s door, but didn’t enter. She cleaned it every week, dusting and vacuuming and keeping the sheets fresh, just in case, even though Brett hadn’t been home in twenty years.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

But he'll come home now.

Her room, with its floral curtains and burgundy duvet, was at the end of the hallway, right next to the front door. She checked that the front sensor light was on before entering her own room. Reggie gazed at her from the large gold frame on her bedside table, standing stiffly in his British Army uniform, a grey English winter in the background; it was taken on his last day of service, right before he jetted out to Australia. His blue blue eyes twinkled.

Damn you.

She sighed again, swallowing the last of the three red pills with a sip of water from the glass beside the picture, and then made faces in the mirror as she touched up her lipstick. On her dressing table was a smaller frame, this one of an impossibly young and happy girl in a white dress next to a smiling old man in a black suit, holding cream roses as a swirl of bubbles moved across the scene. Reggie had done that, without her knowing, he'd bought little bottles of bubbles disguised as champagne bottles, and had the wedding guests blow bubbles instead of throwing confetti as they left the church. She's loved it, and giggled happily, dancing after them as the breeze swept them around.

Reginald Lawrence Bliss was stern with the boys, and distant, always retreating to his shed when all she really wanted was a hug . Sex had been planned and conducted like a drill, with timings and deliberate steps. He seemed not to have a high sex drive, and wasn't a husband who pestered her for 'intimate relations' . But she always orgasmed, despite the decreasing frequency of 'relations' after their whirlwind honeymoon to the Gold Coast. In his last years, he lived like a monk, denying himself the pleasure of his wife's arms. She missed his smile, the one he kept just for her, the one she could see every day in the wedding picture on her dressing table. She missed his proper British ways, and his saucy accent, and his hard, calloused hands across her shoulders.

Maureen sat on her bed, waiting for time to expire, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock.

FOUR:

Red lights flashed constantly in the corner of Brett's vision, but he couldn't decipher what they meant. He was supposed to be doing something, but the noises seemed faint and far away. The wall, brown and coarse, loomed over him; as he leant against it, the residual heat soaked into his shoulders. His feet hurt, his ears rang, the backs of his knees and thighs felt wrapped in razor wire and there was a clicking in his chest every time he breathed deep. The smell of cordite, gun-oil and melted bullet casings had soaked into his blistered fingers from the hot barrel of his rifle.

He swung around, shoving the weapon deeper into his shoulder and through a gap in the wall. His patch of vision looked out onto the dry riverbed that swept around the knoll upon which the ancient fort sat. A shape bobbed up, orange and yellow infra-red in a window of his goggles, and he squeezed off two rounds. The shape disappeared, but there was no mist or spurt, so Brett had to assume misses. His thumb flicked down, taking the weapon to triple-volley and then full auto. Two more shapes appeared, further in the left-hand edge of his arc, and he gave them the rest of the clip—all two rounds, both tracer, both too high. Then came the dead-man's click.

Last clip.

Years of range training and field operations made what came next more instinctive than breathing: right thumb ejected the empty cartridge, left hand reaching to the small of his back for the last magazine. He slapped it home, hard, welcoming the sharp pain in the heel of his left hand. His right hand pulled the action back and let it go just as shapes rose up outside the wall and rushed toward him. The middle and last two rounds in each clip were tracer; he counted all three go leaping from the small crack where he was wedged, the flame leaping from his barrel a solid beast. Hot shell casings bounced around the confined space, burning the tip of his nose and tinkering off his helmet and combat goggles. The click came again and he dropped the rifle, leapt backward and pressed himself flat. Panting, Brett felt the *taptaptap* of rounds slamming into the outer side of the still-warm wall.

The sky was a usual mountaintop dusk: a bruise of gold and scarlet, and over to the east, on the far side of the open area inside the walls, over the shattered head of the eastern keep, a darker sky turning black. The moon had been visible for the last two hours, and would be full again tonight. The towelies felt confident enough to maintain 24-hour operations, a development unheard of even last year.

Sony night-vision lenses—

Something huge flew through the gap and skidded to a halt. Brett saw teeth, white, and a hand with something in it, something short and metal.

Brett's knife teleported into his hand from its sheath on his chest. He stepped forward, his own teeth bare. The shape hadn't stopped moving, a liquid shadow, and faced him. It crouched, pistol rising. The gloves kept Brett from the texture of the knife's handle, but not its weight. He waved it, showing the blade, and kept moving forward.

Brett saw the race, the distance between them, and felt a knob of uncertainty. Brett saw the hammer fall. He feinted left, turning his body. The shape fired the first shot, which cracked past. Brett fought the instinct to dive away; instead, he locked his wrist and leant forward. The gun fired again, almost in his face. The knife rose upward, catching the towelie under the jaw. Brett's weight drove the point up and up and up. The gun fired a third time, twisted between them as their bodies collided. Brett yanked backward, and felt the spatter on his hand and face. He reversed his grip on the handle, bent his elbow, and chopped down into the towelie's chest, once, twice. He twisted away, closest to the gun-hand, and crouched. The towelie fell backward, limp.

Brett sheathed the knife and ripped the 9mm Browning from the thigh holster, sighting the gap in the wall.

He stepped back, feet sliding through the dust, and ducked as a long stream of heavy-calibre reached out from the valley's mouth toward him.

Brett scooped up his small kit-bag with his left hand, moving sideways, the Browning pointed at the small gap as the big gun outside fell silent.

He slid back further, along the wall and away from the hole. A small round object flopped in the dust at his feet. He stared at, willing it to go away and take him with it. Something pushed him over, crushing him, and the first thought through Brett's mind was that the wall had collapsed. It had survived here for two thousand years, only to fall on him. The explosion seemed overbearing, squeezing his head and chest, but distant.

Eyes streaming, Brett looked up to see the Sarge, dark against the darkening sky, roll him onto his back. Her strong hands frisked him quickly, and he opened his mouth. She smiled and lifted, jerking him to a sitting position.

"You okay, boss?"

He stared at her, blinking.

“I kicked it away. They missed.” She smiled again, gripping him by the straps of his belt-kit and hauled him up. “We gotta move, boss, time to fall back.”

She pushed him forward but he resisted, holstering his 9 mil and dropping his kit bag. She hesitated, then saw what he was reaching for.

“Leave her, boss, she’s gone.” The Sarge shook her head. “Brett gritted his teeth, the only useful thought was: ‘lift with your knees’. The bundle never seemed to get heavier, even though he had carried her across this bloody desert. He wasn’t leaving her. He had seen what these towel-headed cunts did to dead girls; not this one, not while he could still save her.

The Sarge, crouching low, scrambled back to the gap in the outer wall and lobbed a grenade through the hole.

“Last one,” she said, with a shrug. The explosion blew dust back through the hole, and maybe even a scream or two. The Sarge led, her rifle in one hand and water-sacks in the other.

The others huddled further around the western wall, in the corner where it turned north. Big Dick and Little Dick, as always, had spread themselves out from the main group: Big Dick had wriggled into folds of the earth, and the Sarge pointed out Little Dick atop the dusty mud keep. Their .50 cal guns swept from side to side and each wore a thick golden necklace of ammo belts. Jacko lay on his back, tucked deep into the corner of ancient walls, his face pale and sweaty. Odey knelt over him, checking Jacko’s pulse the old-fashioned way, while the new Lieutenant paced around, his rifle in his hands and his helmet tucked under his arm. Everyone was covered with dust and muck, their sweat having caked the dust to mud, and all were gulping water through tubes from their CamelBaks or up-ending tough green plastic hip-canteens.

On Selection, in the distant way-back-when, Brett’s field instructor gave the best bit of advice Brett ever heard—carry your water internally. After a decade in the mountains and deserts of the world, particularly in the arid upper reaches of the northern Middle East, Brett appreciated the wisdom of these words. Once, in the high passes of Iran, right up where what was once Afghanistan started to climb back down to the real world, his squad had gone several days without water. Your lips cracked, your brain shrank and stopped working, and your internal organs shut down. Somehow he had kept walking, dodging the angry tribesmen who hunted his group, until he stumbled into a drug-runner’s shack. The leathery old man looked up and Brett shot him in the face,

once, his final conscious act before blacking out. He didn't remember gulping down the mucky brown tea, or vomiting it straight back up, and he certainly didn't remember the trip back to where his squad crouched in a dead-end gully. That won him the Distinguished Service Cross, his third, and a 10-minute meeting with the Prime Minister. Brett thought the medal was still in his locker, back in barracks outside Perth, but he couldn't be sure. He'd meant to post it to his mum. Too many deaths on that piece of silver-blue and ochre-red ribbon, all neat and snug in its blue velveteen case. He hated the damn thing.

Pup Jenkins rushed up to them, a grimy brown bandage covering one-half of his head. The Sarge shooed him away, and Brett moved off along the northern wall. He slid down, cradling the bundle in his arms. The Sarge, crouched down but facing away to the south, held out her canteen. Brett stared at it.

The warm fluid trickled down his chin as fast as it trickled down his throat. He coughed, a tearing sound, and handed the canteen back to the Sarge. He slumped further, shutting his eyes as the noise of the drone grew. The bundle across his knees filled his mind. 'The angels are rushing to defend me', he thought, remembering that old song his mum played all the time. 'I'm as cold as a stone. I'm down on the ground, with seconds to live, and you can't go now.'

For the first time in years, from nowhere, he felt the surge of tears, hot and wild behind his eyes.

Won't.

Still the tears threatened, pressing, urgent, as the song danced inside his head:

'A knife for a gun,
a death on the run,
I'd die for that one,
kill me, come.'

His patient stabilised, Odey's face scrunched as he piloted the drone, the two-inch joystick sticking up from the face of his pad. Now that Colonel Bliss was back inside, the last claymores and ADWs gone, Odey drew a no-kill box around the inner fort and authorised weapons-free on any heat or movement signature outside the thick, old walls. The drone flitted and swooped, its synthetic-aperture radar keeping it out of

harm's way from ground-fire. Odey knew that the towelies didn't have anything in the area to seriously threaten the beast, except for a lucky shot, so he kept it on a short-ish, low altitude leash around their emplacement. It transmitted its weapons load and flight pattern to Odey via his tac-goggles; the decreasing numbers of 40 mm rounds, both HE and area-denial, kept him keen. He opened a dialogue box and queried the reinforcement package on its way from the Gulf—the US carrier group had launched a re-supply flight two hours ago and it was due soon.

The Sarge came over to him and squatted down. "Update?"

"Fifteen minutes at the outside, they say, which I take to mean no sooner than thirty."

She looked up as the drone crunched into an impossible stall-turn to lay another carpet of AD close to the outside of the wall. "And our friend up there?"

"Redlined. He's down to eight per cent." Odey sighed. "We're not gonna make it."

She pursed her lips, glancing at the crew. Her gaze lingered on Colonel Bliss and Jacko. "We can't run. Half a belt for each of the heavies. We're nearly out of ammo for the longs. Only a couple of clips each for the shorts. Then we're taking knives to a gun-fight."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, Odey, very yeah." She stood, arching her back, eyes roaming the perimeter. "Any news on the air base?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. The CBNR team reported the strike as a nerve agent, something low-tech, below the detection threshold. It will probably be very short-lived, so they can have the runways open again in an hour. 'Bout the same time that vertical lift arrives from the carriers, which is no good to us."

"Might be yet, trooper, don't give up the ghost."

"Oh, I'm with you, Sarge." Odey laughed. "We'll gut these towel-headed fuckers to the last arm, if needs be, and use it to wave in exfil. At least HQ knows where we are."

Jacko died, quietly, and nobody volunteered to wake Brett so the Sarge did it, Jenkins bouncing around behind her like a hyped-up puppy. Brett just nodded, checking the darkness of the sky and the wrapping around the bundle across his knees. Nothing needed to be said, so he said nothing. The Sarge was worried now: Colonel Bliss had

not spoken for nearly six hours, not even when he'd slipped off to set the last ADWs outside the walls. She pulled Jenkins away from the group under the guise of scrabbling around the interior perimeter.

"Listen, Pup, things are getting squidgy and I've got a task for you, QT."

Jenkins' head bobbed up and down. "Sure, Sarge."

"Velcro to the Colonel. He's been outside the wire for sixty-two days, and his mum died a couple of weeks ago. Make sure he's absorbing information, make sure he's reloading the 9 mil, and if it comes to hand-to-hand, you watch his back. I'm blaming you if he comes out of this with anything more than that scratch on his bum, understood?"

Eyes wide and lips a thin line, Jenkins nodded furiously.

Big Dick appeared at their side, his machinegun cradled across his chest. His goggles were dusty and he sported several weeks' growth on his cheeks and chin. His dark round eyes, like all of Brett's team, pierced everything. His gaze, relentlessly sweeping across the top of the walls and into corners and shadows, settled on her before lifting off again.

"Sarge, gotta minute?"

The Sarge waved Jenkins away and faced the short trooper. "Sure, Dicko. Whatzup?"

"We gotta fall back into the keep. Odey says the bird is about to go dry. LD and me have a five-belt left, then it's party time."

The Sarge looked down at the colonel, noting his slack face and far-gone gaze. "Okay, crack on."

Lined up inside the door of the keep were their comrades, covered with a plastic sheet, boots pointing toward the far wall. The Sarge had tagged them with the GPS scanner, which automatically relayed the location of the bodies back to Canberra for exfil at some time in the future.

We know where our dead lay, the Sarge thought, and briefly considered moving them for the upcoming toe-to-toe, but then decided against it.

The inner keep was a square tower, three levels, with nothing inside except more dust and some dried up batshit on the middle level. Some wag had been through and

tagged the walls with white spraypaint. Apparently, *Big Red One* ruled, *OK*. The US 1st Infantry Division had been in the area sometime in 2016, judging by the '16 under the graffiti that pointed out that *James loves Ramona* and the hyperbolic wisdom of *Don't Mess with the US*. The latter tag was painted over as a towelhead rushed toward the staircase and the Sarge shot him, his head exploding with a liquid *plit* and brains and blood rained back over the wall.

“Or the Aussies!” Little Dick shouted, laughing. The Sarge, crouched behind him, tapped his helmet twice.

“Fall back, digger,” she shouted, hitching her thumb over her shoulder.

They scrambled upward, using the curve of the steps at the first landing to keep cover over the entrance. Her breath burned with each gasp and she reached for her canteen before remembering that Colonel Bliss had it, up on the roof. Three grenades flopped through the doorway and she flinched back, pressing Little Dick down. The concussion rang her bell, but the fragments pinged harmlessly off the walls. Little Dick leaned forward and fired a few rounds back out through the opening.

Thank fuck these bastards don't understand building clearance, she thought. *At this rate, we can still defend the roof, unless they've got mortars.*

As if on cue, the crump of a mortar round shook the walls of the keep.

The Sarge sighed and motioned to Little Dick to fall back up the stairs.

FIVE:

Lawrie woke with the sun; even on a Saturday morning he rose and padded around the house, moving from bedroom to bathroom on light feet. His mother's door was closed; he's shut it after the funeral, and hadn't been in there since. He tried not to remember the note, and the scramble up the corridor to pound on her door, yelling, or what happened next.

He knew she was sick, but had not known how far things had progressed. After his father's death, when Brett left, his mum had it rough for a couple of months and had been sectioned into the Box Hill psych ward. That she'd held the job at the bakery, afterward, despite the murderous early starts, made Lawrie proud. He hated her weakness, when he was a teenager. As he grew into adulthood, however, he felt trapped by the guilt of standing beside his mother's hospital bed, revolted by her Thorazin eyes and drooling lips, and wishing her dead.

Praying for it.

But God did not answer Lawrie, so he turned away. That was years ago.

He ignored the closed bedroom door as he picked up his keys.

Lawrie squinted as he slipped out the front door. Birds twittered and chirped, and the damp of the front garden seemed fresh. The gravel of the driveway crunched as he walked to his car, which, being in the shadow of the giant fir tree, was still covered in the night's dew.

The streets were almost empty on the way to the gym, which he found pleasing, and the sunshine on his arms sent a tingle across his back. The electric motor hummed, barely audible, and he tapped his fingers in time with the radio while waiting for the lights to change. When the lights went green, the car in front of him didn't move. A familiar prickle of rage danced across Lawrie's scalp and he felt the heat rising in his cheeks.

"Come on, you fucking halfwit!" Lawrie screamed, spit dotting the windscreen. "Learn to drive or go back to the sheltered workshop!" The driver, nothing more to Lawrie than a shocked pair of eyes in a rear-view mirror, pulled away quickly. Lawrie mashed the accelerator, overtaking.

The carpark was crowded for such an hour, but this wasn't unusual. The classes started early here; Lawrie had tried Pilates and the circuits, but the sense that people were watching him in the mirrored wall made it too uncomfortable. He preferred the pool, the ability to lose himself in the repetition of laps.

The pretty young thing behind the counter, with her red and blue polo shirt and short brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, smiled as he entered the automatic doors. Ellie. He had his membership card at the ready, but Ellie didn't look at it, smiling instead straight at him, her gaze firm and welcoming.

"292," Lawrie said, dropping his eyes to the array of sports drinks lined up on the counter like a platoon of soldiers on parade, a blush climbing his neck. He couldn't help but imagine yet again what Ellie looked like naked, what running his tongue across her thighs would taste like, whether she would claw at his back in a moment of passion.

"Mr Laps," she said, tipping her head slightly as she pecked at the keyboard behind the counter. "Have a good swim, Lawrie. See you after your workout."

He mumbled an incoherence and shambled toward the change-rooms. Ellie was paid to be pretty and welcoming; anyway, he was a sad old fart and she wasn't. But still, she did brighten up every time he walked through the door.

The change-room was empty and he hung his gym bag on a hook. Stripping off his T-shirt, he hung his towel around his neck and collected from the bag his swim-cap and goggles, both expensive Oakleys. The humidity of the pool deadened the occasional splash or the murmur of talking from the corner, where the dripping or towelling swim-club members gathered around coaches and white-boards—the lanes were nearly empty. He timed this deliberately, after the early morning training and before casual lappers.

Fitting his cap, its built-in player came to life, lighting the inside of his goggles with a menu of songs. Lawrie just listened to music, despite the abilities of his goggles. He couldn't concentrate on his laps, on the process, if he also watched the video clips. He pressed PLAY, taking his stance on the fast-lane blocks, counting breaths and forcing patience. His medley started and he dived, hard, slicing into the water. The first strokes seemed rusted shut and the water sucked the heat from his skin, but the first track was fast and hard, daring him not to keep up. He concentrated on his breathing and kick pattern.

Warm into it, he thought, a ritual of denied pleasure, a deliberate beginning.

Lawrie's muscles wanted to flail, to throw the water from the pool and explode down the lane.

The freestyle warmed him quickly and the first tumble-turn registered in the lower left corner of his goggles, 0 changing to 1. Halfway through the second lap,

nothing existed except the water rushing over his body, the music blaring in his ears, and the little number in the lower left corner.

At lap 25 he paused, hanging from the lane-rope in the deep end, sucking gulping breaths. By this time several more people had joined him in the lane, splashing him as they completed their turns. A wrinkled and hairy old man, hands encased in blue Nomex swim-fins, stopped next to him.

“Nice morning for it,” he said, nodding.

Lawrie pointed at his covered ears and ducked beneath the water, moving under the rope to the medium lane.

Six-beat pattern, he thought, breathing deeply and visualising the trip down the lane and back again, *an even, broken tempo*.

This medley was mellow, a mix of old-time ballads and love songs. It helped, somehow, to hear others lament their love and loss. The slow and sad made him go fast and easy, the opposite of how he started each ceremony.

The counter reached 40 and he stopped again, panting toward an even breath. Each limb seemed both filled with lead and on fire. He reached up, fingers exploring the side of his cap for the raised buttons. He skipped a couple of tracks, searching his goggles for Butterfly, a drum and bass trio that had conquered the world ten years previously. This track, a wailing dirge that climaxed with a strings arrangement that made Lawrie ache for weddings and funerals, drove him down the lane.

The beauty of swimming, he thought, sobbing as the lyrics ripped through him.

* * *

The Coles carpark was a tangle of parents leading children and old people wandering without hurry or awareness of others. A mother dressed in a baggy grey tracksuit pushed a trolley full of bright, sugary cereal and fluffy white slabs of toilet paper whilst she attempted to herd three toddlers in matching Collingwood jerseys across the pedestrian crossing. Her limp hair flopped across her pale and acne-covered face, and Lawrie tapped his finger impatiently on the steering wheel. His heart beat faster and the usual ache in his jaw spread.

A large group milled about at the security checkpoint at the mall entrance. Soldiers, in body armour and helmets, scanned the crowd. He showed his ID card, a

soldier with mirrored sunglasses comparing it to the biometric data she read off her handheld display. He emptied his pockets into the small plastic tray, placed his hemp carrybags in another and pushed them all into the X-ray machine, stepping through the metal detector.. Another gaggle of loud and grubby children blocked his way, the mother intent on talking to her friend. Lawrie muttered, moving from foot to foot, searching for a path through. The mother ignored him, focussing instead on talking into the phone woven into her handbag.

“Jimmy’s been sick, somethin’ in his lungs—”

As the metal walkway slipped beneath its grating, Lawrie danced past the shrieking kids, glaring, and collected a trolley from the long snakes outside the store. He entered, fighting the shopping cart’s urge to veer left, making his way straight into fruit and veg. Lawrie began with the apples and bananas, loading them into the first of the hemp bags. Avocados and cherries, and enough salad stuff for dinner tonight and tomorrow. He moved over to the deli counter and swiped his ID card, which took a number from the red dispenser. Lawrie’s jaw ached as he watched the number on the LED display increase with interminable slowness. When his number was called, he ordered the steak and sausages from the short Greek man wearing the white linen uniform and white paper hat.

He moved through the store, pausing in the spices aisle. He planned to cook a lamb curry on Monday, and needed more fenugreek seeds. Reaching for a packet of cinnamon sticks, he paused, the pantry shelves foremost in his thoughts.

Didn’t I buy cinnamon last week? Or was it cloves?

And how many peppercorns are left in the grinder?

He hated not keeping the pantry in his mind, complete and up-to-date. He lifted his father’s watch to his face and pressed a contact on the outer rim.

Dad’s watch was his only thought as the rush of memory and loss came and went. Lawrie took the watch from his parent’s bedroom two weeks after Dad’s funeral, and hid it in his room in case Brett came back. It stayed there for years, and his mother never asked after it, even when she eventually did get around to a sort-through of Reggie’s clothes and shoes and what-not. But one day Lawrie saw an ad about a Samsung patch that sat across the back of your old watch, turning it into a fully digital port. Less than two millimetres thick, you could access the webs, store data and make

calls. Lawrie tapped out the commands to bring up his pantry inventory, which scrolled across the watch glass, and cycled through the items.

Lawrie needed to keep a fully stocked pantry. He did almost all the cooking but, on occasion, his mum attempted a cake or a slice, and he wanted her to have everything at hand—

Of course. Won't need all-spice .

“Lawrie, hi!”

He turned, his attention coming back slowly. The short, slender woman beside him, with a pretty, heart-shaped face framed by short dark hair, smiled widely.

“Um, hi, Lise.” Lise had moved in next door and quickly became friends with his mother. Lawrie cooked a roast for Lise and her teenaged daughter Jeena every Monday night. He spent most of those evenings in the kitchen, padding around in his ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron; he couldn’t do chit-chat like other people, instead preferring to be the quiet presence outside. Lise had tried to come into his kitchen, but he hustled around and answered her offers of help with gruff monosyllables as he chopped fresh mint for the peas. His mother, used to being the centre of gravity in her recliner in the lounge room, summoned Lise back.

“Lise, dear, leave Lawrie; he gets grumpy if you interfere in his domain,” Maureen called through the open door. “Just yell out and he’ll get you what you want.”

Jeena appeared, rolling her eyes at Lise. The girl was short like her mother, and had developed a similar sized bosom that drew Lawrie’s gaze against his will. Her breasts seemed to press up over her tight white tank top, with pink bra straps showing, a short black skirt, fishnet stockings and Doc Martens. Her makeup was heavy and pale, offset by black lipstick, mascara and nail polish.

“C’mon, Lise,” Jeena said, her tone sarcastic, “leave Lawrie alone. He’s a good little housewife.”

“Jeena!” Lise frowned, reaching out to place her palm on Lawrie’s forearm. “I’m sorry, Lawrie, she doesn’t mean to be rude.”

Lawrie couldn’t look up, afraid of being caught staring at the girl’s chest or shapely legs. His heart thundered, his nose filled with the spicy perfume that surrounded Lise.

“Have we met before?” Lawrie said. When she laughed, he felt foolish and a blush filled his cheeks.

“You’re funny. You cook for me every week.”

“No, I mean, yes, I know, but, you’ve always seemed so familiar. Did we go to school together?”

“Went to high school elsewhere, and didn’t go to uni,” Lise said. “Having a child at fifteen kept me from a lot of the typical activities. I didn’t even finish high school, but I’ve travelled a lot.”

“It, you know, feels like, I mean, I know you from somewhere.”

“Me too!” Lise touched his arm. “When you carved the roast last month, it really struck me that I’d seen you do it before. I don’t know where—”

“No worries, doesn’t matter,” he mumbled. “Go and relax, dinner will be ready shortly.”

Then, three weeks ago, by conniving and trickier, Maureen manoeuvred Lawrie and Lise onto a date. They ate a pleasant dinner at a fancy bistro, and made stilted chit-chat about fellow diners. Afterward, Lawrie drove them both to Carlton to one of the boutique cinemas. They laughed through a modern French farce, lots of sex scenes and missed understandings. But Lawrie’s discomfort, the nervous awkwardness of his clumsy conversation and exaggerated gestures, led to an even more torturous goodnight moment in the driveway; Lise leaned in, her face upturned, but Lawrie twisted sideways and pecked her on the cheek. He’d not seen her for more than a week, and then the funeral, and everything.

Now, in the glare of supermarket lighting, without the precocious daughter to distract him, Lawrie noticed Lise’s high cheekbones and wide, round brown eyes. He liked the way tufts of her hair stuck out at odd angles, and the spicy perfume was back. Lise had freckles across her nose, and he felt an urge to kiss her. It was strange; a sweeping déjà vu seemed to still the chatter around him. Past and present kept bleeding together. Things kept mixing up in his head.

“Good morning, Lise, how are you today?” Lawrie said stiffly.

“We’re good, but we haven’t seen you for more than a week, and I’m want to make sure you’re doing okay.”

An old couple shuffled past, heavy drab cloaks and thick ankles, speaking in a European tongue. Lawrie struggled to look at her; the packets of cake mix and boxes of bi-carb soda on the shelf behind Lise kept his focus.

Lise’s watch tinkled. She raised her wrist and squinted at the screen. “I’ve gotta go; Jeena needs tampons.”

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Lawrie blushed, cheeks burning. Lise finished reading the text and looked around, not noticing his discomfort.

“Good to see you, Lawrie. Do drop over for a cuppa, when you’ve got time. We’re there for you, and it’s important you know that.” Her watch beeped again, more insistently, and Lise pressed the side to speak into it.

“What, dear? OKAY, yes, I’m on my way soon, after I go to the hairdresser, so about an hour and a half.” Lise rolled her eyes at him, smiling, and she waved, moving lightly away toward the checkout lanes.

Lawrie stood, stunned, in the middle of the aisle. His head spun, the fleeting encounter a surreal dream. He wandered slowly to end of the aisle, staring at the packets of nuts and dried fruit for five minutes, before heading to the checkouts, emptying his goods onto the black rubber conveyor belt. His next conscious thought was on the drive home, the intervening minutes hidden beneath a dark and heavy cloak.

Turning the corner onto his street, he slowed as he drove past Lise’s house and stared at her empty driveway, the shed’s white roller-door a blank denial. He swung his almost noiseless car into his own driveway, the crunch of gravel loud. He sat behind the wheel, breathing deeply, not wanting to go inside and deal with the empty, accusing house.

SIX:

Brett woke, the white walls and crisp sheets sparking a flash of panic. The thumping of his heart matched his panting breaths. A hot, prickly sweat popped out across his chest and up his neck. His head wouldn't lift. His arms and legs remained pasted to the bed.

A nurse appeared above him, her cropped blonde hair above crisp cams. She smiled down at him. "How are you feeling, Colonel? Any pain?" Her accent was thick, southern US. Her name tag declared LINDSEY.

Brett froze. The nurse bustled around, checking the saline bag hanging above his head and sweeping her scanner hand over his body in segments, the sensors embedded in her fingers reading pressures and temperatures and taking ultrasound image-captures.

"You're at Camp Victory." She pecked at the pad under the skin of her forearm with a slender black stylus. "Doctor will be visiting shortly."

The walls seemed to stretch very high, and a wave of vertigo crashed over Brett. The bed started to spin, the roof rocked crazily. He squeezed his face closed and grunted. Sour bile filled his mouth. He spun. The burning heat grew worse and he wanted to cry out.

The nurse's voice floated in. "Colonel Bliss? Colonel?" Her hand was cold.

The images came like machinegun fire. The girl, dancing in the crossfire, rounds shredding her chest. Jacko, hit in the guts. Little Dick, head torn off by the last mortar round. Towelheads, screaming. His knife, dancing and slashing, droplets in the dust beside his boot. His mother, years past, lying insensate on her bed, glazed gaze seeing infinity. Duntroon, barracks crisp and neat on a Canberra winter's morning. Cradling his weapon, that first trip into the mountains of West Papua, sweat and rain endlessly dripping from the end of his nose. Strangling the Aboriginal boy when he stumbled into their hide overlooking the terrorist camp in the Great Sandy Desert. Patrolling, always patrolling, pack heavy and digging into his shoulders. His father, clutching his chest as he fell, a look of pained disappointment the last thing he gave to his son. The images came, and Brett couldn't make them stop. The panicked heat increased. His blood thumped in his head. Brett thought he would die, and now longed for it.

The young doctor, whose white coat glowed in the shaft of afternoon sun that streamed through the window, tapped the stylus against his lips. He sat watching Brett, chair pulled close to the edge of the hospital bed, which was raised to have Brett sitting up. The pillows behind his back and head bunched uncomfortably, but Brett wanted the discomfort. Twice a day the doctor would come, sit, watch, ask questions, whatever. He was a blunt tool, beneath Brett's notice and certainly of no use.

"Why, Colonel Bliss, why do you refuse to talk to me?" He exhaled slowly, searching Brett's face. "I've seen combat, 1st Marine at Shiraz, then Tehran. I went ashore with the boys against the Silkworms overlooking Hormuz."

When the Brigadier walked in, slouch hat in one hand, Brett felt a sliver of hope. *Now we will see some action*, he thought. The doctor rose slowly from his chair and they shook hands.

"Doctor, how is he?" Brigadier Owen was tall and broad shouldered. His more salt-than-pepper hair highlighted the tanned and craggy features of his face. Owen wore a chest full of ribbons on his polys; Brett shared many of the same ribbons, earned on the same operations.

"Uncommunicative, sir. He's not catatonic, which would be understandable, but he's not said a single word since he was admitted. That concerns me, and it's why I asked you to come."

The Brigadier looked down at Brett, nodding. "Thank you, doctor, you've done the right thing."

After a few beats of silence, the doctor got the message and shuffled away, closing the door with a loud click.

Owen glanced at the closed door and shook his head. "Civvie puke."

Brett wanted to speak, but his boss had yet to acknowledge him. The Brigadier went to the window and stared out at the courtyard, his hands crossed behind his back. Owen adjusted the blinds, cutting the sunlight into black bars. Striped shadows fell across Brett's bed.

When Owen turned toward the bed, his face a rioting crowd, Brett's guts knotted.

It's worse than you thought.

"Lieutenant Colonel Bliss, your last mission was a failure on all counts. Three families have gone to the media and the Prime Minister is hunting heads. The Service and the Regiment are in disgrace, as far as the public is concerned. The Joint Standing

Committee has recommended the establishment of a Royal Commission. They present their terms of reference to the National Security Committee of Cabinet on Wednesday. I'm here today to inform you of your rights, which, under the Defence Force Discipline Act, do not extend to a right to silence. I'm here with the full weight of the CDF. You will now debrief me on every aspect of the mission. Now is the only time that complete honesty without putative censure will be available to you. At this point, with seventeen fatalities in your team and three casualties here in Doha, you can reasonably expect as the very minimum that your career is over. You may also, in the fullness of time, be charged with gross misconduct, dereliction, and disloyalty. That means prison time, if not worse. Do you understand?"

Brett's chest collapsed.

The thumping of his heartbeat filled the room. The sticky cold sweat had returned to paste him to the pillows. Worse than any dream from the previous days, these moments yawned before him as the chasm that would engulf his very being.

What he'd hoped, despite the shattered memories of the preceding week, was that his boys had pulled through. Then a more terrible thought rose in his panic: *They're throwing me out.*

Brett looked down at his hands, which trembled in a way that an SAS officer's shouldn't. Tears of denial, of anger and betrayal, filled his eyes. He couldn't let them start, because he knew a flood awaited, and that wasn't acceptable while his CO stood in front of him.

Owen, of all people, they sent Charlie Owen!

Charlie Owen had been his squad commander when he first passed Selection. Charlie Owen had pinned medals to his chest, had handed him the little velveteen case with his Captain's pips, toasted him at The House in Swanbourne and at Duntroon House when the Chief of Army had praised his efforts in PNG. Charlie Owen who, bleeding from a femoral artery in a dark night in the middle of Queensland the second time they went after the jihadi leader Thomas haji-Muhammad, had asked Brett to ensure the Army looked after his wife and kids if he didn't make the CASEVAC. The evacuation point was still three kilometres away and Brett had carried Owen over his shoulder, running the last kilometre at full tilt, their cover blown and the Aboriginal militia squads chasing them with .303s and automatic .22s. Brett held Owen's hand on the dash back to base on the cattle station outside Longreach, murmuring at him to 'hold

on' and urging Charlie to describe his wife's face. Owen, lying in a hospital bed of his own, had shaken Brett's hand and sworn a life debt. Now he stood beside Brett's hospital bed and wrapped the administrative noose around his neck.

"Do you understand what I said, soldier?" Owen said, voice harder than before. "Don't be a woman."

Brett pursed his lips and fought back the wave of tears. He clenched his jaw into what his mother called his 'never ever' face.

"Perfectly, sir. I have nothing to say at this point."

Brigadier Owen slammed his hand against the foot of the bed. "Bullshit!" His voice rose in volume and menace. "Give me your mission report, Colonel Bliss, right now!"

Brett flinched backward. His heart beat even faster. Years of training screamed inside his mind, but Brett ignored the voices and urges.

When Owen spoke again, it was soft and measured but harder than granite, blacker than obsidian. "I gave you a direct order, you pansy."

Brett shook his head and rolled to face the wall, bringing his knees toward his chest. He could feel the storm in the room, and his back being so exposed left him shivering. The hot rage forced the tears, and he felt their slow passage. Brusque footsteps strode to the door and it slammed closed. Brett turned further into his pillows and now the tears became torrential. A thin wail tore itself from his chest and expanded past his gritted teeth. The wail continued in shuddering bursts.

* * *

Major General Davis was a big man, round of chest with a belly that threatened to spill over his belt. He wore more ribbons than anyone except the Chief, and had spent most of his operational career in staff jobs in various theatre headquarters. The common term for this sort of officer were 'thruster'. He had bullied and belittled those around him for his entire career, gaining promotion on the hard work of others. Everyone knew he played both sides of the political fence; it was his school-day friendships with Federal politicians and party machine men that promoted him beyond common sense.

"Lieutenant Colonel Bliss, please rise," he bellowed. Brett did so, straightening the jacket of his dress uniform as he stood, his chest full of ribbons, commendations and medals. The committee room in the depths of Parliament House was a sea of green,

white and blue military uniforms or dark suits. Everybody wore stern expressions. At the morning and afternoon breaks, a wide puddle of nobody surrounded Brett, and even his own counsel, a Lieutenant Colonel Reeves from the ADF Inspector General's office, broke away. The high walls and expensive fitting of this room gleamed in harsh white. The Joint Standing Committee, sitting behind a raised and semi-circular bench, had loomed most unwelcomingly over him for two days, firing question after question at him and his counsel. These were Senators and Representatives, elected politicians with oversight on matters defence and foreign affairs. They were used to more compliant, or even subservient, attitudes from those in uniform, and an upstart half Colonel proved an unwelcome nuisance.

Poor Reeves spent most of his time repeating the same phrase: 'against my advice, my client refuses to answer that question', to an initially shocked and then overtly hostile panel. After the first hour, General Davis called the Attorney General in from the House of Representatives to lecture Brett on his lack of rights and the requirement for him to answer fully and honestly all questions put by the Committee. The punishment for contempt, apparently, was more jail-time. The words *disloyalty* and *death penalty* were used.

Brett didn't flinch. The anger in the room built and built, until before lunch on the second day the Chair of the Committee called a sudden recess. A painfully thin young man in a herringbone suit approached Brett and stuck out a claw, which Brett shook automatically.

"Lieutenant Colonel Bliss, I'm Jason Dowdy, Office of the Prime Minister. The PM would like a word, please, upstairs."

Brett followed the dark blue suit up several levels in small steel elevator accessed with Jason's wrist-chip, and eventually onto an open terrace dotted with ferns and palms in large round white planters. The thin sunlight warmed, then the chill breeze stole it back. The view down Capital Hill crossed the white roof of Old Parliament House, across the steel-grey of Lake Burley Griffin, and up the dark-red of Anzac Parade. On the shoulder of Mt Ainslie, copper-green dome rose above the blocky tan building, sat the War Memorial. The Prime Minister, leaning against the rail at the edge of the terrace, talked into a headset. A thickset man with a shaved head stood between Brett and the PM, his immaculate suit bulging under his left arm. Brett noted the round

lapel pin and the polished shoes. The man held up a hand, palm out, and Brett halted, his back straight and hands by his sides.

When the PM finished his call, the bald man nodded and stood aside. The PM advanced, hand extended, a wide smile lighting up a young face. The man had watery soft features and squinty eyes. Cartoonists mocked his resemblance to a children's storybook character.

"Colonel, thanks for making the time. I'll have to keep this brief; the US Ambassador is on her way over." They shook hands, but Brett kept his closed and watchful expression. "I remember you from that meeting in Qatar. The Abu Rahaman thing; you took him alive. That was an important rendition."

"Sir."

"Look, Colonel, I'm told it's not going well downstairs. You're not being cooperative, and General Davis is pissed off." The PM jammed his hands into his trouser pockets and turned to look over the lake. "Nobody likes the General pissed off."

"Sir."

"I know you guys take operational security really seriously, but it's a closed session, everyone has clearance, so there is no need to hold back the details."

The wind rippled Brett's coat and chilled the points of his ears. He kept his hands crossed behind his back and his own gaze on the War Memorial.

"Sir."

"Even if you are trying to protect someone, maybe somebody messed up out there; maybe you want to keep the faith with your soldiers. That doesn't really help us back here, either at my end or for the wider Army." The PM nodded, the beginnings of a comb-over flying up and over in the breeze. He pointed across the lake. "There's a reason that the War Memorial is visible from here. It's to remind me of the sacrifice of our forefathers, that their heroism made this nation great."

Brett suppressed a bitter laugh. *Civvie puke can't even get that right.*

"We need the nasty truth to try and improve things, make sure that it doesn't happen again. That's why we need you to be specific and detailed. The more help you provide us now, the easier everything runs for everyone."

He eyed Brett, who didn't flinch at the implied threat.

He's just another pollie.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“Now go back down there and answer the damned questions. Do your duty.”
The PM marched away, his bodyguard leading.

Brett called out, a sudden, angry tear in his eye. “You’re wrong, sir. The Memorial reminds you of the cost of your choices, the cost in blood. It’s supposed to make you act like a human.” But the PM hadn’t stopped, and Brett wasn’t sure he’d heard.

SEVEN:

Lawrie dropped his keys into the small clay bowl on the narrow table in the hallway. The bowl sat between a black and white photograph of his father in a dark wooden frame and a vase holding flowers. The flowers were dead, and petals littered the table and had spilled onto the floor.

Only my keys.

Lawrie knocked, hard and loud, on his mother's door and listened for a reply from within. After waiting several beats, he turned the handle and entered a step. Her scent, of face powder and citrus flowers. He felt shorter, awkward. The pale blue walls and white ceiling loomed higher. The matching walnut wardrobe and dressing table were on the right, her bed straight ahead. The bedspread was neat and taut, the stack of contrasting pillows arranged, to Lawrie, with a painful need for order. There was no romance novel on her night-stand, open and face-down, spine broken and pleading to be read. Lawrie took another step and sat, unsteady, on the end of her bed, soaked in her scent, and felt numb and breathless. He stared at himself in the angled wing-mirror of the antique dressing table. He sat for a long time, staring at himself in the mirror, trapped in the decades evoked by her scent.

After a while, Lawrie became aware of a thumping sound outside. The noise, from the far side of the house, seeped into his consciousness.

The spa.

The spa motor was pumping bubbles into the spa. His mum liked a spa after work, often before he got home. She worked hard, she said defensively, and she deserved a little pampering every day and, besides, the water came from the rainwater tank.

Lawrie rose, head cocked, and crossed the hall to the closed door opposite his mother's room. *Brett's room*. Lawrie never went in here, hadn't done so for years. He knew his mother kept it like a shrine, polished and ready for the prodigal's return, but he didn't like to examine the topic of Brett too closely. He kept those feelings at arm's length, in their right place, a neat little box on the edge of his emotions. This door he didn't bother knocking on, he just swept it open and marched in.

Opposite the door was a window, covered with heavy dark blue drapes. Old posters of sports stars and women in bikinis gazing lustfully into the camera decorated

the walls. Ribbons and medals, glories from sports events and school awards, were pinned to a corkboard above the pine desk. The bookshelves were heavy with novels and stacks of comics and tall hardcovers about jet fighters and World War Two. Lawrie wondered if the paperback edition of *Atomised* was still there, whose cover displayed a girl wearing translucent panties, and which Lawrie would steal for frenzied sessions in the toilet. The book was dense and exciting, and over the years Lawrie had consumed all of Houellebecq's other works. Lawrie also noticed the lower shelf held their father's encyclopaedia, its dark brown leather volumes neatly ranked. The line of volumes created a puff of memory, of flicking through page after page, scanning the pictures and skimming the entries. Of being admonished about having clean hands and putting them away in the right order.

The bed was made, there was no dust, and the Lawrie could imagine that built-in robe would be full of ironed shirts and trousers, with school blazers and ties ready to wear. Beside the tallboy sat Brett's satchel, black with a gold clasp, next to two pairs of polished black Bata Scouts. If Lawrie looked inside the satchel, would he find a library book, years overdue, and spiral notebooks filled with immature scribbles and daydreamed doodles?

With a careful hand, Lawrie nudged one drape sideways and peered out. He was overlooking the courtyard along the side of the house, the covered space where his mother installed the spa that also served as her greenhouse. A large fern obscured most of the view, but Lawrie could see someone splashing about in the spa. Above the chugging of the motor he could hear a voice singing an unknown pop song. It was a girl's voice.

Jeena.

He couldn't see anything except the odd glimpse and flash. She was alone, and apparently naked. Lawrie felt a grim excitement take hold.

He dashed back down the hallway, through the kitchen and out into the laundry. Slowly he unlocked the back door, eased it open, and stepped out. He trod carefully toward the corner of the house, pressing himself against the white plastic cladding. He moved enough of his head around the corner to expose one eye, his heart thumping in his chest.

Lawrie marvelled at the sight of the girl in the foaming water. Drops formed on Jeena's skin and down into the inviting canyon between her breasts. Her hair was

plastered flat, and she moved about, singing and splashing along to a song only she could hear. Jeena wasn't naked, as he'd hoped, but wore a white bikini that caused more excitement than disappointment. Lawrie's hand went into his pants as he watched, fixated by the way Jeena's breasts floated upward against the tiny triangles of her top.

Lawrie came in seconds, his breath hard and panting, and still he watched. Fevered imaginings crashed around inside, of what he would do to her, of what she would taste like as he buried his head between her legs. He was hard again within seconds, and the sticky slickness in his jocks made the second round more intense as he forced his thumb across the ridge of his glans——

The doorbell chimed and Lawrie leapt backward, heart pounding harder. He darted for the back door, feeling a stab of guilt that maybe Jeena had seen him. He grabbed a tea-towel from the kitchen on the way through and wiped his hand. As he reached the front door he looked down, inspecting his trousers, and saw no visible patch. He flung the door wide, expecting a Jehovah's Witness, and stared blankly at a face long changed and yet clearly recognisable in any photo hanging in the lounge-room.

"Hey bro," Brett said, holding the screen door open with one hand and a large green canvas bag in the other. "Can I come in?"

Brett sat at the kitchen table, a stubby of Coopers Pale Ale in his hand as he leaned back with a leg crossed. He rubbed his thumb along the edge of the table, feeling the dents in the wood where he'd stood as a child and chopped with his father's chef's knife. Dad had unlooped his belt and delivered the punishment, but Brett refused to cry. The subsequent stern supervision of the repair job was its own reward and besides, according to the old man, "Only girls cry".

"She's really gone," Brett said, exhaling. "How could you not notice?"

Lawrie, leaning against the sink, bit back on the spike of anger. He had a hot, sweet cup of tea, and felt a pang of guilt about the shopping in the sink, worried about the sliced meat. He was also aware that the spa motor had fallen silent. Part of him had hoped this interview would be brief and that he could go back outside.

"Early for a drink, isn't it?"

Brett shrugged. "Promise I made, a while back. Out in the desert."

"How's that going?"

“The war?” Brett shook his head before raising the bottle to his lips to drain it. “It’s like all wars, political games played from afar. Brainless polties and gutless generals. Everybody hates the war, especially those safe back here.”

“The news doesn’t give much detail, more losses, more allied atrocities, more dead civilians.”

“Most civilian deaths are not non-combatants, bro. Just because they’re not wearing a uniform doesn’t mean they’re not legit targets.”

Lawrie pointed at the empty in Brett’s hand. Brett nodded, and Lawrie moved to the fridge, handing over another bottle of Coopers green. Brett said ‘cheers’ as he cracked the top with an economical twist of the wrist.

“I wouldn’t call it safe here,” Lawrie said. “Twenty-two people died last week in a K-Mart on the Gold Coast. Those Sons of the Sunburnt Country wankers are tearing this country apart, and your mob seems powerless to do anything about it, regardless of the checkpoints and patrols and extra-judicial powers of detention.”

“Yeah, well, when you pick up a weapon and choose to stand picquet, then you have a right to whinge. A lot of people in uniform are dying to protect this country, and the least the public can do is to support us.”

“So you’re actually in favour of compulsory selective service and the *Loyal Australian Act*?”

“If that’s what it takes, bro, then yes. This country has spent too long being fat, dumb and happy in pursuit of nothing except individual self-interest. Where is the sacrifice? Where is the honour? This is the forgotten side of the Australian ‘fair go’. It’s not all footy on the weekend and equal rights for the sick, lame and lazy. It’s about not shirking.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Doing your bit, doing your best, and taking care of your—of your mates. Courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship.” Brett drank from the stubby, long and deep, and remembered Moresby.

Lawrie, lips pursed, unloaded the shopping, packing it away into the organised cupboards, soldierly rows of cans and neat stacks of small plastic containers, each marked with a label in his precise handwriting. He tore open a bag of muesli and emptied it into the relevant Tupperware, folding the empty packet neatly before dropping it into the three-section bin under the sink.

Brett watched, taking deep draughts from his beer. “I still can’t believe she’s gone.”

“She left everything paid up. She knew what she was doing, and planned ahead.” Lawrie kept working on the groceries.

“Hey, you lived with her. What do I know?” Brett soaked up the kitchen, the timeless ghosts near and close.

“Then why give me a hard time?” Lawrie said, putting both palms flat on the cabinets while he stared out the window. His heart beat faster, and he hated the whine in his voice. Then he remembered his cup of tea and reached for it, slowly and deliberately raising it to his mouth. The urge to throw it in Brett’s face flashed, but he quashed it.

“She missed you, you know, but she never said anything, but I think you could have visited, at least once in how many years? You could have come to the funeral.”

“The war has been keeping me kind of busy, you know. I never forgot her birthday, or a Christmas or Mother’s Day.” Brett emphasised his next point by indicating with the neck of his stubby. “You guys got a slice of every one of my pay-packets, too, so don’t insinuate that I let anyone down, that I haven’t done my bit.”

“Oh, yes, the money! I forgot how much support that was to her when you ran away, when I buried Dad and worked every night mowing lawns up and down the street to pay for the funeral, when I visited her in the hospital for three months, when I couldn’t go to uni because she couldn’t work because she lay in bed crying for the better part of year, when I paid bills and did the shopping and washing and cooking and cleaning.” Lawrie held bunched fists at his side, staring down at his brother. “I was the man of the house, so don’t come back in here after nearly twenty years and pretend that you have somehow *contributed*. And don’t you dare imply that I haven’t done my bit.”

Brett exhaled again, letting the challenge flow through him, and finished the beer. He put the empty on the sink, took another from the bottom shelf of the fridge, and went out into the back yard, letting the screen door close with a slam. Lawrie rinsed the empty bottle with a burst from the grey-water tap and placed it carefully in the glass section of the recycle bin under the sink, pretending that the burning in his eyes weren’t tears barely held.

The backyard was a stranger to Brett. The expanse of lawn was gone, replaced by dark timber sleepers making raised beds of herbs and vegetables and paths of crushed white gravel. The old red-brick shed had been replaced with one made of dark green steel, and the silver water-tank was now a series of dark green plastic oblongs. The giant lillypilly tree in the back corner was missing; in its place trellised tomato and

bean plants were draped in white netting. Brett moved between the beds, identifying silverbeet and chillis and mint, crunching steps taking him past the shed to the far back corner where the compost bin and incinerator had stood. Now, a stack of black plastic tubs sat next to a raised plastic compost tumbler. This is where Dad would retreat of an evening to smoke Drum rollies and drink longnecks of homebrew, sitting on his green treated-pine chair and listening to talkback radio on the brown Sunbeam transistor sitting in the shed's small window. The boys played in this corner in the afternoon, always careful to abandon the space before their father arrived home from work. Opening the top black tub, Brett saw vegetable scraps feeding a squirming mass of worms. He watched the worms retreat from the light, leaving behind half-consumed carrot and wilted lettuce.

Rotted and eaten away.

Standing the doorway to his bedroom, a fresh beer in his hand, Brett marvelled at his mother's dedication. Over the years, he'd wondered about the things in this room, books on the shelf or mementos in desk drawers. He'd wondered if anything remained, those apparently lost treasures of his youth, and if his past still existed in any coherent form. The rushed departure from this house two days before his eighteenth birthday, framed by the awful look of agony on his father's dying face, seemed just minutes ago. Yesterday's memories collapsed in on him, from the Natalie Portman poster on the wall to the Daniel Ricciardo World Champion Formula 1 racing car on the nightstand, the 2016 Red Bull. Here it all was, dusted and neat, preserved.

Collecting his green kitbag and suit-carrier from the hallway, Brett carried them into his bedroom, treading carefully as if the façade of things past might crack. He swung the kitbag onto the bed and crossed to the old-fashioned dark mahogany wardrobe, twisting the small metal key and swinging the door open. Inside, on hangers and enveloped in a strong smell of naphthalene, were his blue school shirts and charcoal grey trousers. Everything was neater than he remembered keeping it, arranged by item and colour, the sort of precision his father had insisted on and Brett had wilfully ignored. Of course, that background in precision and correctness came in handy when he joined the Army the day after his eighteenth. He had snapped into that regimentation in a way that would have made his father proud, but also angry. The Drill Instructor, the

boys' private nickname for the old man, knew what Brett was capable of and resented the petty rebellions—unironed shirts and unshaven cheeks—taking them as both a personal challenge and direct indicator that he'd failed his parental duties.

Brett felt that moment with an intensity he'd never previously allowed. His father's face, furrowed in pain, Reginald Lawrence Bliss's sparse grey hair limp as he fell to the hallway carpet, the policemen pulling out of the driveway with a crunch of gravel and the sound of the clock in the hall, tick, tick, tick. Brett had felt saved, and scared, when he realised what was happening. The voices in his head said many things, in that moment, from *ring the ambulance* to *yell for help* to *I'm gonna get away with it*. But the loudest, most insistent voice said *run*. So he did. He ran down the hall, out the back door, vaulted the fence to Clint's yard, then ran out to the adjacent street, the deep scratches on his neck and face from the girl's fingernails stinging with sweat as he ran and ran and ran. That same voice kept him alive in combat. Now, back in the frame for the first time since it happened, those feelings were back, stronger than the flooding memories they accompanied, hot with closeness.

For the first time Brett was aware of the deep shame and burning guilt he'd carried, locked away and buried, about those few minutes.

I shouldn't have come back.

The room came to him through the long tunnel, and prickling skin and sweaty brow made him hot and faint. His chest hurt.

He felt the suitcase drop from his grasp, and the giant hand crushed him. He felt jelly in his knees, and staggered closer to the bed.

When Lawrie entered the room behind him and spoke, Brett yelled, spun around, and backed away with wide eyes and hands raised in defensive fists.

Lawrie stepped back, shocked. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Brett turned away, his body trembling.

"Brett? What's wrong?"

Lawrie retreated from the room. He stood in the hall, unsure of what to do, caught in his own flashback, seeing in Brett's face the same pain, the same anguish that his mother displayed. Lawrie associated that expression with sessions in the hospital, the psychologist sitting between them, the distraught mother and her thirteen-year-old son suddenly grown old. To see Brett with the same face, the same whimpering helplessness, transported Lawrie back to dark places long abandoned.

Then the doorbell rang, and Lawrie jerked. He wrenched the door open with more force than forethought, and found Lise smiling up at him.

“Hi, Lawrie—are you all right?” She stepped in, raising a cool palm to his cheek. “Mate, it’s okay, I’m here now.” Her tone was soft but firm. “Come into the kitchen and—”

She saw Brett and stopped, registering the look on both their faces. “I see, yes.”

Lawrie felt a sudden surge of jealousy, which roused him. “Lise, this is Brett, my brother, he’s just arrived and we, well, it’s been, you know...”

Lise knew what to do. “Come on, Lawrie, let’s get the kettle on for a cuppa, and Brett can come down to the kitchen for proper introductions when he’s had thirty seconds to settle himself in. He’s been away a long time.” She smiled at Brett and took Lawrie’s hand, leading him back down the hall like a child.

All business, she fussed around, filling the jug and organising the cups. “Let’s have a proper pot, shall we? Air out the good china? Something nice and relaxing, like an Earl Grey? Yes, let’s.”

Lawrie went to the sink and rinsed the three new empties that sat on the drainer, his movements robotic and his gaze unfocused.

“My hair appointment was cancelled, another bomb scare at Chadstone, so I came home, and you seemed so sad, so I wanted to stop by and invite you for dinner, and then I heard the news on the radio.”

Lawrie turned, face of thunder, and Lise stood in front of him. He blinked several times, and again she reached for his cheek.

“Mothers hate to worry their children,” she said, “even if the children are grown up.”

Lawrie came back into the conversation; her chatter calmed him. He smiled, grateful for her presence, and she returned it and he felt good for the first time in the day.

“Thank you, Lise.” The urge to kiss her buzzed around in his head, but his practiced ability to crush such impulses kicked in and, instead, he stood smiling at her.

Lise felt him relax. Lise blushed and waved an ‘awh shucks’ hand at him, her eyes sparkling. “Your mum was a treasure. She helped Jeena and me over the last couple of months, including my job, not an easy task these days, and she kept an eye on that darling Jeena monster of a daughter.”

Lawrie felt an accusing spike of shame at the girl’s name, and hunched his shoulders. “Brett just arrived, out of the blue. It’s all caught me on the hop.”

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“You’re not that close?”

“He’s been gone a long time. Mum got the occasional facemail, or a postcard from cities around the world, but he struck out on his own.”

“Leaving you behind, with a lot of responsibilities.”

Lawrie nodded. “For a very long time. And now he’s back and Mum’s gone.”

“What’s this stuff on the news about him? I heard his name mentioned on the radio on the way home.”

“What stuff?”

“On the news, for the last couple of days, about the Army officer, and then today they mentioned Brett’s name.” Lise shrugged. “He was at Parliament House, surrounded by reporters, something about the massacre in the Middle East, all those SAS troops killed. You didn’t see it? I thought it was him, from the pictures, but this morning they named him, and I thought ‘Poor Maureen’.”

“Brett, on the news? No, I didn’t see it.”

“Bro.” Brett stood in the doorway, clenching and re-clenching his jaw. “There’s some stuff we have to talk about.”

Lise looked between them, and then indicated toward the kitchen chairs. “A cup of tea first, I think. I’m a big believer in the restorative powers of the hot cuppa.”

Brett nodded. “The brew-up is one of our rest moments, in the field, the chance to sit down with your mates.”

Lise bustled around while the boys sat, Lawrie fidgety and Brett almost slumped forward, looking at his shoes. As Lise handed out the cups, Lawrie remembered his manners.

“This is Lise, Brett, she lives next door. She’s a friend of Mum’s.”

“Of the Bliss household,” Lise said, and Lawrie nodded. She and Brett shook hands, and he seemed to gather strength from the formality.

“Lise is correct, broMy Army days are over.”

Lawrie met Lise’s gaze and understood. He nodded. “Tell me everything.”

“I can’t do that, not yet. There was a battle, a few got out okay, but all my boys died.” Brett sipped his tea, thinking about the Sarge, about Duggs, about the Dicks, and most of all about Jacko.

“The Army want someone to blame, and it is my fault, so I’ve been placed on leave pending the results of the investigation. Some scumbag political advisor, or maybe

the PM himself, leaked my name to the media, which means that I'm likely to face a very public trial." Brett wanted to tell Lawrie about the extra visit he received, two days ago, the two neat suits from ASIS, Federal Agents Daniels and Matthews, and their deal. That meeting turned toward threats, and Brett was now seeing that their threats weren't empty, if his name had been released to the press. Brett wanted to tell Lawrie about that meeting, but couldn't, not without explaining the whole thing. And this new chick was here, and he didn't know her and, all things considered, maybe didn't even trust Lawrie. Besides, the ASIS suits might keep *all* their promises.

"For doing your job?" Lawrie couldn't reconcile this thought, not with all the medals and awards that Brett had, the ones he sent home for Mum to keep. She had them mounted and they hung in the living room, part of her shrine.

"My shame's going to be a national event. There was a reporter, with 4RAR, an embed, but she didn't survive, and her footage will be released during the Royal Commission, and then it turns *real* nasty. The commandos died hard, and so did the reporter, but two troopers and I lived and maybe that's too much truth for this country to handle. The up-inside of battle is bloody and violent and something most people don't want to acknowledge. The war is unpopular, and the troops are coming home and the Opposition is using it to beat up the Government, according to a couple of mates in the Department." Brett laughed, harsh and bitter. "I still have a couple of mates. One rang me in the cab on the way here. The Minister is ducking for cover, and the rest of the Head Shed is doing the same. Careerists, gutless cleanskin careerists. I wouldn't be surprised if news crews start camping out on the front lawn any time now."

Lawrie felt battered by the day. His head seemed heavy, overfull. "What, I mean, just who, but, what the hell? You're bloody hero."

Brett shook his head. "I'm just a dumb soldier. And now they've taken that away from me, which means that they can do anything they please."

Lise spoke softly. "What are your plans, Brett? Do you have something lined up, not work, sure, but somewhere to lie low? If the media have your name, then they will be here, and that's not good. What can I do to help?"

Brett shrugged. "I was planning to go on the lam, really. Just buy an old car and head bush, pitch a tent for a week in some quiet corner of a national park and see what happens."

He sighed, and Lise didn't like his eyes.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“I was thinking north;” Brett said. “I know the country around Seymour and Albury pretty good.”

“I have a farm up that way,” Lise said.

“Nice area,” Brett said. “I can hunt, live off the land—the Army gave me some skills, after all, that will prove useful.” He scratched his chin. “Besides, with the state of the nation at the moment, that’s about as long as the media interest will last. As soon as the next bomb goes off, or another pollie is kidnapped, the sharks will frenzy on something else.”

They sat quietly, lost in the rudeness of the day.

“Excuse me,” Brett said, rising. “Gotta hit the head.”

Lise watched him go down the hall into the bathroom. She put a hand on Lawrie’s arm, rousing him. “Don’t let him go off by himself. Certainly not camping out in the bush by himself.”

Lawrie frowned. “Why not? He can certainly handle himself, he’s in the SAS.”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about.”

“Then what? He’s tough, he’s been in the war for the last twenty years.”

“Exactly. I don’t think he *is*, certainly not at the moment.”

The light went on for Lawrie.

The toilet flushed and Lise poured more tea as Brett returned.

Lawrie stared at his brother.

“What?” Brett said, iron in his voice.

For the third time that morning, the doorbell rang and everyone looked down the hallway.

“Leave it to me,” Lise said immediately. “Both of you stay here, out of sight, and you’d better make sure the blinds are drawn in the lounge-room.”

Lise closed the kitchen door as she went. Through the spy-hole, she saw the blonde in the blue power-suit and the cameraman on the front veranda. She slipped the chain into place and cracked open the front door.

“Hello?”

The blonde held a microphone to her mouth and said: “Sarah Gwendoline, Nine News Net, how are you, Mrs Bliss?” before pointing it at the crack in which Lise’s face appeared.

“They’re not here. No comment. Go away.” Lise saw two more vans pull up in front of the house, media logos on the side.

“Lieutenant Colonel Brett Bliss is implicated in the death of more than twenty soldiers under his command and perhaps he’d like to have his side of the story heard?”

“Private property, go away. I’m ringing the police.”

“Wait—”

Lise shut the door.

The doorbell rang again, and then a phone inside rang. Someone knocked on the door, loudly and firmly. Lise retreated back to the kitchen, checking the bedrooms as she went, making sure windows were locked and curtains drawn.

The brothers stood together in the kitchen, now darkened with the blinds closed. Lawrie’s pad, on the table, vibrated.

“Turn it off,” Lise said, and Lawrie did so. The doorbell rang continuously, and the knocking became more insistent.

“The sharks,” Brett said sadly.

“We’re trapped,” said Lawrie, amazed at how quickly his day turned surreal.

“No, we’re going to my house, right now.” Lise moved toward the laundry and the back door. “We’ll jump the fence. Get anything you need and let’s go.”

Lawrie stared at her, amazed.

“You ever been in the Army?” Brett said, raising an eyebrow.

Lise pushed Lawrie, who patted his pockets for his wallet and keys. He grabbed his pad and nodded.

“One sec,” Brett said, darting to his room. He unzipped his kitbag, dropped out folded shirts and shorts, keeping the essentials. He went to the mahogany tallboy and wrestled it forward. Reaching behind, his fingers found the bundle latched on the back. It was a black velvet bag, twenty centimetres by ten. He smiled, lifting it clear, and dropped it into his kit bag, which he zipped closed.

“Brett!” Lise hissed, “let’s go!”

Lawrie checked the backyard from the doorway. He crouched low, like he’d seen in the movies, and scurried toward the back corner, where Dad always smoked. The others followed, crunching footsteps loud. Reaching the worm farm, Lawrie halted and turned, cupping his hands for Lise to use as a boost. She went over the fence into the thick bushes in the back of her garden. He turned, and Brett had his hands cupped.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“You next, bro.”

Lawrie went over, the branches scratching his face and he landed face down in the dusty soil. He rolled away and Brett vaulted the fence with ease. Lise stood and brushed herself off, venturing out into the yard using the sheets on the clothesline as cover.

“This is fun,” Lawrie said, but Brett pulled a face.

“All clear,” Lise said quietly, moving toward the security door. Lawrie veered away toward the side of the house.

“Where are you going?” Brett hissed from behind.

“Gonna sneak a peek.”

“Don’t be daft.” Brett pulled him back by the arm. “Why risk being seen? That would alert them; risk versus reward. Don’t be daft.”

“Please please please, Jeena,” Lise said, “don’t let today be the only day in your life you lock the back door like I constantly ask.”

The sliding security door screeched and rumbled as it opened, and then they were inside.

“Wait here,” Lise said, “I’m going to close the curtains.”

Lawrie was breathing hard, the excitement hot in his blood. Lise’s house was a mirror of his, so they were in the laundry.

Lise came back and the brothers moved into the kitchen, which had been renovated with granite benchtops and shiny appliances. It also had a skylight, which made it much brighter, even with the blinds drawn.

“Nice,” Lawrie said, noting the terracotta tea and sugar canisters and pot purri bags hanging over the sink.

“Thank you.” Lise blew a ‘phew’ and slapped her hands on the outside of her thighs. “Well, today is really kicking into a higher gear.”

“You’re a quick thinker, Lise, thank you.” Brett said.

“Single mother, asshole boyfriends.”

Brett laughed, and Jeena wandered in, a bored expression carefully cultivated. Lawrie saw her still-damp hair and felt guilty. He looked at the floor as Jeena was introduced to Brett.

“Pleased to meet you, Jeena.” Brett held out his hand, which the girl shook.

“How’s your day going?”

“Boring, as always. There’s never anything exciting to do.”

The adults laughed and Jeena scowled.

“What? You guys!” Jeena stamped her foot and slouched away, her slippers scuff-scuffing on the timber floor.

“It won’t be long before they start canvassing the neighbours,” Brett said, checking the clock on the oven and thinking about the ASIS guys. Agent Daniels seemed like a real hard bastard. “I would.”

“My car is in the driveway, unfortunately.” Lise said.

“Did the reporter get a look at you?” Brett asked.

“No, I don’t think so, why?”

“If you’ve got a credit card, I can transfer you some funds. If you’re willing, of course, then you and Lawrie can go buy me a van. Back that up to your garage, I exit through the back door, into the garage, into the van, then I’m away.”

Lawrie frowned. “Sounds awfully complicated. Why can we just run to Lise’s car and drive away? They’ll get some footage, sure, but you’ll be gone.”

Brett shook his head. “No, that puts Lise and Jeena in the frame. I don’t want to have them connected with me, especially on the news.” He couldn’t explain about the ASIS guys, Federal Agents Daniels and Matthews.

“You are so paranoid!” Lawrie said, mockingly.

Lise met and held Brett’s gaze. “No, Lawrie, I don’t think he is.” She nodded. “Why not?”

Lawrie shrugged his shoulders and turned away. “Excuse me, all this tea is getting to me. The facilities?”

Lise pointed. “Out there, first on the right.”

As he was leaving, Lawrie heard Brett say to Lise, “Can I get on the net, please?”

Lawrie liked the mustard-coloured walls with blue seascapes in black frames. It felt much more contemporary than his house, so much more alive. He reached the bathroom door and pushed it open, arm extended. He collided with Jeena, his arm caught between them and pressed across her breasts. She uttered a yelp and stepped backward, a look of surprise flicking into annoyance.

“Dirty old perve,” she said, “cop a feel off someone else!”

Lawrie, shocked by the incident, stood mouth agape. Jeena laughed, and slapped him on the arm.

“Don’t be like that, Lawrence, I’m just joking.”

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Lawrie tried a smile that didn't seem real. "You scared the heck out of me!"

"Heck?" Jeena laughed again, and Lawrie felt stupid. "Fuck me! You had your heck scared, huh?" She shook her head and crossed the corridor to her bedroom, shutting the door while muttering "heck heck heck."

* * *

Two hours later, Lise stopped the just-purchased white Toyota van at the head of the street and whistled. "Look at all that!"

Ahead of them, the road was jammed with news crews and thick knots of onlookers. They filled the roadway. The police had set up barriers to control the crowd and blocked the entrance to the street with their patrol cars, lights flashing silently. Lise wound down her window as a police officer, wearing a neon green reflective vest over her uniform, approached and scanned the van's rego into her pad.

"Road closed, ma'am, to all but local traffic," the woman said sourly. She checked her pad and frowned. "You've purchased this vehicle?"

"Yes, officer, about an hour ago," Lise said with her voice bubbly and excited. "I live just down there—what's going on?"

"ID scan, ma'am. I need to confirm your registered place of residence." She held up a face scanner.

"Sure, no problem." Lise frowned. "What's happened? My daughter is at home; should I go and get her out of here?"

The officer's eyes flicked between the scanner and Lise and Lawrie, her free hand dropping closer to her holstered weapon. The machine flashed green, which changed the dynamic. "Nothing to worry about, ma'am, just some crowd control measures. It's a media thing. Proceed carefully." She stood back and waved to her partner, who rolled the cruiser out of the way.

Lise inched forward, and another officer, brandishing a bullhorn, made a lane through the crowd. A cameraman, a transmit rig slung across his shoulders and camera to his face, stepped back into their path and Lise braked hard. He stared angrily at the van, and Lawrie made a shoo-shoo motion. The cameraman turned, filming Lawrie and Lise while mouthing silent obscenities. Lise rolled forward some more and honked the horn. A policeman grasped the cameraman by the belt and drew him backward, and Lise

rolled on. The cameraman kicked the side of the Toyota. A news van blocked Lise's driveway, the driver sitting behind the wheel with his door open. Lawrie leaned out the window, shouting and pointing, and the driver gave them the finger before starting the engine and rolling forward a couple of inches. Lawrie swore and Lise put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Don't give them the satisfaction. Let me." Again she laid on the horn, this time a sustained burst, and the crowd turned toward them, including the police. She laughed as she saw a policewoman push through the people and shout at the news van driver, who rolled forward as far as he could, tight up against the van in front, which stood with its back doors wide open. She had to mount the curb to get to her driveway, gunning the motor and squealing the wheels. Getting from the van, Lawrie watched as Lise chased the reporters and bystanders from her yard. He laughed as she closed the white metal gates that only came to her knees.

"Officer! Officer!" she shouted, summoning the closest uniform. "This is private property, and I want these people kept beyond my boundary line and clear of my drive! Him, that man wearing blue, he's trampled my rose bushes! Section 25.4 of the council by-laws prohibits undue interference in my peaceful enjoyment and, as the on-scene authority, it's your *responsibility* to ensure said enjoyment! Further, the *Loyal Australian Act (2019)* specifies that gatherings of more than ten people without a permit that hinders a public thoroughfare constitutes a serious offence, with breaches in residential or commercial areas carrying a fine of up to 25 years imprisonment."

The policeman held up defensive hands, looking helpless against the masses, but decided that the short angry woman with a functional knowledge of the law was more to be feared. He shooed people from the fence and stood guard at the small white gates.

Lawrie, waiting at the front door, stood amazed as she came back down the drive toward him. He shook his head. "You're amazing! Where did you learn all that stuff?"

Lise smiled. "The legal stuff? I told you, asshole boyfriends. And I spent a lot of time at protests and rallies: anti-war, save democracy, anti-uranium mining, inciting proletarian uprising, that sort of thing. I dated several university boys and learned lots by keeping the eyes and ears open and the mouth shut. But that was the old me, Miss Submissive, but she's eroded completely away. Hey, why don't you stay with us for a couple of days? It's going to stay this sort of hectic, and I'd feel better with you in the spare bedroom rather than running that gauntlet. Brett seems to be passing through, and

now all this attention. Call in sick to work, bunker down here where I can keep an eye on you. Besides, it'll be nice with a man in the house for a change."

Lawrie blushed, and Lise touched his arm.

"You don't have to decide right this moment, but give it some thought. It's been a tough day. Hell, a tough month." She unlocked the front door and they went inside. Brett emerged from the lounge room, and Lise tossed him the van keys. "Have you seen it out there?"

Brett nodded. "Jeena and I have been peeking out the curtains. Madness."

Lise took a seat on the couch next to her daughter, flicking the screen off.

"Welcome to modern Australia, voyeurs all."

Lawrie felt another pang. "I'll make a pot of tea."

Lise nudged Jeena. "Go help."

"No, it's fine, I've got it."

"Go." Lise said.

"Oh-kay," Jeena said with a sigh. "C'mon, heck-boy, I'll show you and you can be a good little housewife."

"Jeena," Lise said softly, "enough."

Jeena filled the kettle and Lawrie moved to the fridge for the milk. He paused; at eye-level was a magnetic digital photo-frame, which rotated slowly through happy snaps. A photo had grabbed his attention: his mother, wearing her blue coat, was between Jeena and Lise at the Sorrento beachfront. It was a sunny day and all three were laughing into the camera. The image changed and Lawrie felt a twisting sadness.

"Push the left button," Jeena said, "and it will gorewind. Push the middle button to pause." She reached across him and recalled the image, their hips touching. His mother came back. He saw the deep age lines, the grey skin and bags under her eyes.

How could I have missed it?

"When was this?" Lawrie asked.

"Last month. I had a half-day at school, and Mum and Aunty Maureen and I caught the train down. We had affogattos at a café and walked around."

"She never said anything to me about it."

The kettle boiled and Jeena went to work. Brett came in, saw the image and stood beside Lawrie.

"She looks old," Brett said, running his fingertips over the plastic.

“We worked hard for a long time to pay off that mortgage.” Lawrie’s anger was back, hidden for so long, unfocussed.

“She wasn’t that old.”

“Terminal melanoma, with secondary cancers in the kidneys and her brain. That’s why she did it.”

“Still. She must have been very alone.”

Lawrie bit down on his hot retort. “And you didn’t know anything? How could you not?”

“Mum and I, we, I don’t know, didn’t talk.”

“The second stint in the hospital took it out of her. The medication, maybe, but there was also some electro-convulsive therapy. What would you know about it, anyway? You weren’t here. You ran away.”

“Hey, I was doing my duty,” Brett said, crossing his arms.

“Not your duty to us. Not to her.” Lawrie snarled. “Not to Dad.”

“He died, Lawrence, get over it. He was old.”

“I think you killed him,” Lawrie said quietly. “Why else did you run away like a coward?”

Brett shoved Lawrie across the kitchen, scattering the tea cups, which shattered. Jeena backed toward the laundry.

“C’mon, dickhead,” Brett barked, his fists up. “I’ll tear your fucking head off,” He was on his toes, balanced, and stepped forward to drop a left jab onto Lawrie’s cheek.

“Coward!” Lawrie sobbed, picking up the teapot and hurling it to the floor. Brett danced in again, a combination left-right to Lawrie’s body, leaving his brother on his knees, winded and with tears in his eyes.

Lise rushed in, taking instant stock and moving between the brothers. “Brett, stop it!” She went to Jeena, who was pressed into the corner between the oven and the sink, arms crossed. She hugged her daughter and whispered into her ear, stroking her hair and pushing the girl’s face into her neck.

“Outta here.” Brett barked, snatching his kitbag from the floor near the laundry. Lawrie hadn’t risen, and his head hung as he cried, shoulders heaving. Brett stomped up the hallway and flung open the front door with a crash. Stepping into the sunshine he moved to the van and leapt in as the crowd turned and identified him. They surged forward, leaping the small white gates. Shouts and camera flashes exploded.

Brett gunned the engine and jerked the vehicle backward. Screams mingled with the revving engine. He drove through the gates and the police tried to push people back. Shrieks of metal and injury matched Brett's guttural cries. He laid on the horn, lunging and halting, again and again, breaching the crowd with brute force. The screaming sounds flashed back the moments in al-Hazjji Gezrit, his team dying on the retreat, the 4RAR guys dying on the defence, and always that burning anger. His weakness had caused everything, and he had to run.

All screams sound the same.

The crowd cleared, but a policeman advanced across his line of retreat, hands extended and hat askew. Brett wrenched the wheel hard, too late, and the cop bounced back across the road, his hat flying. Brett swung the wheel back the other way, tromping on the accelerator as the van scraped along the row of parked vehicles. Sparks and screeching metal, and then he was away, the road clear as he pulled out of the side street. He drove hard, running lights and using the horn to punch through the traffic, until he didn't recognise the suburb. Pulling over, he sat upright and pale, forcing his mind to run through the meditation regime he'd learned in the Regiment. He sat for a long while waiting for the adrenalin to ebb away, waiting for the pounding of his heart to slow, waiting for the urge to pass, the urge of the thing inside the small package from behind his wardrobe blowing the top of his head off.

Lawrie came back to himself when the banging on the front door grew insistent, a loud, commanding voice demanding 'Open UP!'

Looking around at the mess, Lawrie's first instinct was to clean up the shards of porcelain and mop the floor, but the pounding from the front of the house came again, louder. He paused at Jeena's bedroom, where the girl lay on her bed, head in her mother's lap, crying. Lise stared at him, thin lipped and tight-eyed, as she stroked Jeena's hair. Lawrie felt a deeper shame at having disrupted this fierce pair's private world, and he wanted to fix things, but didn't know how. He sniffed back his tears and wiped his cheeks with the sleeves of his shirt. The hammering on the door came again and Lawrie responded, pre-programmed, by turning the knob and opening the door.

Police and media crowded there, and the shouted questions of the latter erupted as the door opened.

“It’s him!” Someone shouted. “Brett! Brett!”

Lawrie, blinded by the camera-lights, stepped back and raised a hand. The crowd moved forward, and a thin line of blue uniforms tried to push them back. A tall blonde police officer, her hair coming loose from the tight bun under her hat, stepped into the doorway, beckoning Lawrie closer.

“Can we come in?” She shouted above the noise.

“This is not my house,” Lawrie replied, and pointed next door. “I live over there.”

Lise’s front garden was full of people, and Lawrie noticed the paramedics moving around in their green overalls, loading people into ambulances. He noticed the hostile faces of the crowd, sensing the angry, urgent energy that boiled just below the surface of civil behaviour.

“We cannot move you right now, sir, so can we come in?” Someone threw a bottle of water, which clattered off the veranda post, making Lawrie flinch. “There are a number of questions I need answered, and until the wounded are cleared away, I cannot move you to the station.”

Lawrie stepped back inside the house and the policewoman and two of her staff followed. The crowd voiced a collective shout of rage and surged forward. More missiles pelted the house, bottles and rocks and, oddly, oranges. Lawrie saw the coppers move into the crowd, batons raised, and wrestle with several people.

“Quickly, sir!” The policewoman pushed Lawrie back and one of the PCs shut the door. Lawrie turned to see Lise standing in Jeena’s doorway, the girl held protectively behind her.

“I’m sorry, Lise, I really am.”

“Ma’am,” the policewoman said, “I’m Deputy Commissioner Davina Hicks. Do you mind if we use your lounge-room for a little while?”

Lise nodded.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Part II

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

EIGHT:

Lawrie gasped for breath, the hood over his head coarse and suffocating. He'd been in darkness for hours, if not days; time moved on greased skids for the first few moments of his capture, and from then on dragged and dragged. It might have been days since the attack, the blow to the head and the sudden black terror of the hood.

The sound of footsteps moved to his left and he leant the opposite way, twisting his body to cover the ribs on that side. The kick caught him high in his crotch and he doubled over. His testicles felt like meteors as he curled into a tight ball. Lawrie bucked his shoulders, but the bonds around his wrists remained implacable.

Rough hands rolled him onto his knees, forehead on the floor. A knee pressed into his neck, keeping him bent low as the hood was ripped off. Lawrie still couldn't see: the tape across his eyes had been wrapped tightly. They always took off the hood before asking questions—before starting a new session of kicking—which always ended with screams and more than once a shameful set of wet underwear. Somewhere along the ride his nose had become clogged with snot and blood; Lawrie lost the sense of smell, of urine.

Someone took a fist of his hair and yanked his head backward, exposing his neck. Lawrie moaned, lips working like a goldfish on the carpet. His tongue was rough and oversized. It filled his mouth. The images from the news were bright in his mind, the person kneeling on the floor, the anonymous people wearing ski-masks holding long knives, the sawing motion, the spurting blood, the interminable moans and gasps, the grisly sound of bone and sinew against bright steel, the flopping lifelessness of the body and the slack smile of a now-severed, dripping head. Lawrie watched, horrified, the first couple of times the Sons of the Sunburnt Country delivered their awful message to a shocked and disbelieving Australia. Allison Louise Johnson died first, Assistant Secretary for International Engagement in the Department of National Security. Allison's funeral had been attended by politicians of all flavours and had been presided over by the new Governor General, Dame Judith Rogers. Dame Judy's predecessor, Major General Steve Ryan, had stood down in disgrace after expressing sympathy for the Sons of the Sunburnt Country in an interview that quickly brewed into the biggest vice-regal scandal since Sir John Kerr.

The Sons' propaganda received more air time, and the deaths of Allison Johnson, Justin Harkness and Adam James became embedded files in mail messages

and popular clips on bulletin-boards. The first few times the networks played and replayed this footage, their anchors and hosts seemed truly shocked that such tactics had emerged in Australia. Then they interviewed talking heads, specialists in terrorism and insurgency, who discussed the development in light of the disgrace of the Governor General and the schism in the Army. ‘Propaganda of the deed’, according to an academic from the ANU who lectured in political violence, and Maureen made clucking sounds and asked Lawrie to stop the clip. It seemed incredible to him now, but Lawrie had been one of those people who had searched for and downloaded these clips, sitting in revolted attraction as he watched Allison and Justin and Adam breathe their last. Adam’s defiant struggle—his screamed insults and outrageous will to live—became ‘a mark of true Australian-ness’, according to the Prime Minister, who spoke at Adam James’ funeral. For Lawrie, their moaning was the worst, especially Allison. He sat and watched and wondered about her dying thoughts, wondered what all their last thoughts were, wondering if they felt much pain and wondering if they knew that they’d be performing in the circus of the spectacle.

His captors kept him upright for a long time, his neck exposed, and the ache in Lawrie’s shoulders grew unbearable. He began to fight against the hand that held his hair, jack-knifing to the left and right, twisting side to side. His neck remained naked and Lawrie imagined the blade. He imagined the cut, and eventually he became aware of his own shouts, his begging wails. Now he became a passenger, back from himself, rebuking such pathetic cowardice and urging his baser self to behave with more dignity. But still he begged and still he wailed.

It was then that Lawrie got the insight he’d agonised over, the insight as to what Allison and Justin and Adam had thought about, their own heads pulled back, their throats exposed to long sharp knives, their own lives rushing toward finality.

* * *

Brett cowered in a side-corridor of the mall, down one of the short hallways that led to a fire exit or a loading-bay protected by a stout door that proclaimed ‘Employees Only’. His heart raced, the sound in his head was of a truck bearing down on a frightened kangaroo, a roaring rush of compressed air and rubber singing on bitumen. His shirt stuck to his back and his balls roasted as his hands clenched and unclenched,

clenched and unclenched. He squatted and tried to flatten into the pale beige concrete wall, his eyes glued onto the passing crowd, a riot of bright shirts and loud children, prams and strollers and green shopping trolleys filled with colourful boxes of Nutri-Grain and Rice Bubbles. He saw it all, in slow motion as they trundled past, waiting for one of them to turn and point something at him, something long and metal and very, very deadly. He wanted to run, but a strange gravity pinned him here, years of training shouting uselessly at him to move, to aim and shoot, to kill these bastards before one of them produced a hand-held detonator and charged at him, screaming ‘Allah-ahkbar’. Brett noted the strong urge to piss, but the too-bright lights and the tinny muzak of a half-remembered pop hit mocked him.

A blonde girl-child with pale eyes, her long golden hair held in pigtailed by pink ribbon and wearing a bright pink sundress, stopped at the end of the corridor. Brett watched her hands, stared at them, his peripheral vision soaking up the other details of the wandering throng as his ears strained to catch the *click* of something to which he’d need to respond. She held an ice-cream cone, a dripping ball of strawberry pink; it was smeared across the sides of her mouth. Brett eased further into the corridor, sliding along the wall, wanted to burrow deep into the concrete. He panted, and he felt the absence of his rifle as a profoundly urgent grief. He wanted a weapon, any weapon, but really he wanted something with a high rate of fire and a reliable magazine feed. He wanted to put the little red laser dot on this kid’s forehead and squeeze the trigger with a comforting exhale, spraying her dangerous little mind across the thoroughfare.

Watch their hands, the crusty old Sergeant had nagged about that, *watch their bloody hands*. “Hands kill,” he would bark, “with guns and explosives and knives. Watch their hands, always watch their bloody hands.”

In God I trust, everybody else keep your hands where I can see them.

On Brett’s first tour, into the mountains outside Moresby as the chaos exploded, the locals had figured out one Australian weakness, which was to engage with the kids. Diggers were more than happy to kick a footy, and they encouraged the kids to give them high-fives. The kids figured out that Diggers would give them little sachets from their rat-packs, tubes of Vegemite or condensed milk or foils of coffee or sugar, and the kids mobbed the Diggers whenever the troops patrolled. The floppies noticed this and began to convince the kids to carry parcels to the Diggers, little parcels of C4 and screws and bolts and nails wrapped in banana leaves. Fourteen Diggers died in three

weeks, in the hill villages outside Moresby and Lae and Vaimo, before the orders came from HQ—*keep away from the kids*. The floppies didn't mind using kids as weapons, and the kids never suspected anything, but it changed the dynamic of the deployment. By week four, the kids were conditioned into approaching the Diggers with smiles and outstretched hands, but the Diggers were suspicious and under orders. By week six of Brett's first deployment, three guys from his section were being met on an Australian tarmac by an honour guard, wearing their metal coffins draped in the flag.

Brett, like the rest of the Army, learned to shoot the kids that made a move toward him, and he hated the little buggers, their trusting smiles and outstretched hands.

The girl stood watching him with wide pale eyes, her ice-cream forgotten, which continued to drip onto the floor. Brett flashed back to the tower at Gezrit, that last bloody night less than a month past, with the mortar rounds pushing them down the stairs, the bodies of his troop wrapped in plastic on the ground. Jenkins was wounded, the Sarge was wounded, Big Dick and Little Dick were bleeding—no, they sprayed blood from fragmentation wounds as Odey the medic pressed firm, pointless hands against their throats. Brett remembered that and the tears came to his eyes, his breathing faster and faster, and the urge to put the pistol in his mouth to make these things go away was hard and bitter and the most necessary task of the day, of the minute, of the now. Brett remembered fragments of the knife-fight that followed, but only frantic, panicked shards that came in his nightmares.

The girl frowned and sniffed, her eyes shiny. Her lashes were wet, as she stood looking at him, and Brett wanted to kill her. He didn't need her pity, damned kid, but she cried for him anyway.

Then one of the ASIS suits, Agent Matthews, stood in the mouth of the corridor, his jacket open with his sunglasses on his forehead. Brett had glimpsed this guy several times today, through a shop-window or in the traffic, waiting for the lights to change, and now he was here, standing beside the little girl with the drippy ice cream. The suit's lips moved, reporting the sighting, and he moved slowly forward, hands wide and open. Brett reacted as he should: he turned and ran, barging through the door marked 'Emergency Exit – Door Is Alarmed', out into the carpark.

The sun, high and hot, cast a glaring blanket of noise. Brett stumbled into a family on the footpath, the father, wearing a blue singlet, carried a toddler and held his son's hand while the mother pushed an empty trolley. The mother, her fat face plastered

with garish makeup, shouted an obscenity as Brett fell into the gutter, his hands sliding painfully on the hot bitumen roadway. A silver car brushed his shoulder, its wind buffeting him as the driver beeped the horn. Brett got up and ran, his shirt-tails flapping as he scanned for his white van. Cutting left behind a large black four-wheel drive driven by plump complacency, Brett ran along row B4 and pulled the keyring from his pocket, pressing the unlock button. The van's lights flashed and Agent Daniels stepped out from the far side, a smile on his narrow face.

"We have to talk," Daniels said, still smiling, and crossed his arms and leaned on the van's rear doors.

Brett heard hurried footsteps; the reflection in the side window of the van showed Matthews slowing behind him. Brett felt the outer layers of surveillance, rather than spotted it, the casual way that the agents treated the situation as 'secure'. Maybe they had a drone overhead, and probably six other guys in vehicles converging on the van.

"What's on your mind," Brett said, picking at his raw palms. A jagged stone, embedded at the base of his thumb, released a trickle of blood when he pulled it out.

"Have you made any progress on our request?" Daniels asked, tilting his head.

"No, I haven't." Brett felt amazingly calm, despite the beads of sweat on his forehead. "I don't know where to start."

Daniels laughed, loud and honestly.

"Bullshit," Matthews said from over Brett's left shoulder. "We've seen your file. You're the Army's foremost expert at tactical counterinsurgency and counterintelligence: a year at Iron Gum, a tour on the Directing Staff at CERE, plus all those field operations. You rescued Azira from the Hezbollah firmbase in Damascus, and that snatch in Aviano, the Serbian. You've won medals for counterintel work."

"We know you have the skills," said Daniels, "and we know you have contacts. The Sons of the Sunburnt Country leadership is rooted in the SAS; the disloyal bastards started there, of all places. Imagine that, a cell of traitors deep inside the heart of the most trusted, most respected unit in the Army. It must have smashed your *esprit de corps*, having toe-cutter teams coming through, all that suspicion and distrust, after decades of unquestioned loyalty."

Brett knew the stories, had been through the interviews as a subaltern, when the insurgency began. Mostly he'd been deployed, in the deserts or the jungles of far-away places, and the toe-cutters would come through the rear areas. You'd sit down for an

interview, staring into the glaring red eye of some high-tech lie detector as an ADF Investigative Service monkey read a list of prepared questions and gauged your reactions. The ADFIS teams were detested, sure, but not as much as the disloyalty of the Sons. They'd besmirched the Regiment's reputation, they'd broken ranks with the code of honour and family that made the Regiment what it was. Worst of all, the actions of a single squadron had sown seeds of distrust within the Regiment itself; anyone could have been a member of the Sons. It might be the guy covering your arse as you breached a Sons safehouse in suburban Brisbane or the guy sitting piquet at 0300 hours as you rested up in the jungles of Sulawesi. How could you know? More importantly, how could you *trust* after that first batch of guys mutinied against the chain of command and set up their little domestic revolution? And, of course, others followed once they left the fold, individually or in small groups—from the Regiment, the Army and the wider ADF. It was true, however, that, unlike the vast majority of Australians, Brett not only knew how and why the rebellion started, but also several foundation members.

“Show him,” said Daniels.

“Show me what?”

“Get in the van first,” Matthews said, “it's too bright out here.”

Brett stared at Daniels, who indicated toward the driver's seat. Brett climbed in and rolled down the window. Daniels leaned on the door and handed over an active pad, but looked away through his sunglasses at the carpark: “The Sons sent you a message.”

Brett touched the screen, which lit, and a file sat open. Brett thumbed ‘Play’, and a video streamed. He recognised the setting immediately, having seen such tableaux before. A row of men wearing balaclavas stood in front of the blue and white Eureka Flag, each holding a gun, with a hooded person, kneeling, the floor covered with a blue plastic tarpaulin. The audio was clear:

“The Sons of the Sunburnt Country call upon all Australians to stand against this dictatorship and revitalise the egalitarian spirit of the nation. Our once-great country, based on ancient freedoms and the fair-go, has lost its way, lost to the infecting corruption of American whim and Chinese money. We refuse to be an outpost of imperialist domination any longer. Our time has come to take an independent path, to become the bold, strong and unique culture that is our birthright. You have one day.”

Brett soaked up the time stamp in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, his conscious mind refusing to associate those brilliant blue eyes with a name. If he made

that connection consciously, then he would be lying to these damned suits when they asked him who he thought it was. And Brett was reasonably sure that Federal Agent Daniels would be able to spot the lie.

The man reading the statement stared into the camera-lens before reaching forward to yank the hood from the kneeling man. Brett wanted to drop the diseased pad and he leant back, repelled. Lawrie's hair was tussled, and he had gaffer-tape across his eyes and mouth, but it was undoubtedly Brett's little brother.

"You see?" the masked man said, his intense blue eyes without fear or favour. "You have one day."

The video froze, and looped to the beginning. Brett breathed out, seeing now what Daniels meant. Agent Matthews chuckled.

Daniels just kept his placid investigator's face radiating trust and openness—a good trick for a field agent. "You see now? We received it six hours ago on a monitored bulletin board, an old Sons site that we took down last year. The site's sponsor is in our custody, but he's like most of the Sons: he knows so few people in the organisation as to be minimally useful to us as a source. But it's a message for you."

Brett felt a swooning dizziness spin the van's cabin around him.

"Your mother would expect you to save him, Colonel Bliss," Daniels said.

Brett tossed the pad onto the passenger's seat and spread his hands on the hot black plastic dashboard, staring at the blue Ford sedan parked nose to nose with the van. Would they really kill Lawrie? They'd obviously targeted him—the Sons knew enough about Brett and his family that the odds of a random snatch were highly remote. Old Blue Eyes certainly did. Why grab a lower functionary in the Public Service when there were literally thousands of higher-value targets out there? Especially if Daniels was telling the truth, that the Sons had posted this on a known blown site. They were sending him a message, sure, loud and clear: contact us inside 24 hours, or we neck your brother on national TV. And the Sons used the Australian intelligence community to send the message, which meant that they knew the ASIS/ASIO guys could contact him. And, if they were wrong, then a nobody died and the media backlash was non-existent, a truly loss-less scenario for the Sons of the Sunburnt Country.

The Sons must have seen his ignominious return to country on the news and decided that he was a prime recruitment target, a damaged and bitter man with highly

specialised and very useful skills. They saw the debacle at the house, which gave them Lawrie And they pushed a few buttons, and they knew it was going to work.

Iron Gum.

“What do I do?” Brett said, although he had already started to formulate a plan.

Daniels smiled. “They knew we would contact you, and they’re betting that they can lever you into doing their bidding. I’m sure they are right, but there’s one little thing they haven’t counted on, which is our ability to squeeze you even tighter than they can. We can sweep up your brother, probably dead, sure, but we can also reach out and touch your mother.” Daniels reached forward and brought a menu of items, and indicated for Brett to look through the contents of the files. Mum’s medical history, drug history, sectioning reports, commitment and treatment reports, doctor’s reports and Child Welfare reports. Against Lawrie’s name were computer traces, with video and picture files, and some surveillance footage. Brett glanced at several items and tried to keep his shock under his mask of indifference.

“It’s damaging, sure,” Daniels said, “but that’s not the kicker. I’ve read your service file, and several related items in the archives that seemed interesting. Apparently, as a minor, you were, to all accounts, the instigator in a nasty piece of action one night. The offences were serious enough to have you remanded to custody, but the detective assigned the case inexplicably dragged his feet. Turns out that he’d been in the British Army, a subaltern to one Reginald Lawrence Bliss. Your dear old pa asked him to hush things up, and the detective did. I wonder what your father had over him? Save his life once, or covered his arse? Eventually, the witness, an autistic girl living in a group home, refused to speak to police after changing her complaint. The other boys wouldn’t speak, and the entire little community sealed up tight. The problem went away. Except for the paper trail, of course; this is the government.”

Brett held his breath, his skin aflame.

“That sort of information, in light of your recent and so very public disgrace, would dishonour your family forever. Your father’s service: meaningless. Your grandfather’s heroism: erased. You are solely responsible for the family name, Brett. The damage to the Army would also be considerable, including serving and retired officers. Questions would be asked, perhaps even in a Royal Commission; given the current mood of the nation, it’s not too far-fetched. Of course, we can help you get Lawrence back alive, with our intel and access to the kit you’re used to, and we can

protect you and Lawrence afterward. We can keep everything hush-hush, if you're willing to help us help you."

Brett registered the negative space, the unspoken threat.

"We can protect your father's service record and set up your nice little estranged family somewhere far away from the Sons and the Regiment. They can squeeze you, as can we, but they cannot match the full suite of our inducements. My bet is that you've some residual loyalty to the nation, to your family, and that you will do the right thing by everyone." Daniels smiled, his canines sharp and white in the blistering sun. "Help us, Colonel Bliss, help us help you and all of your family."

Brett felt the squeeze and saw the logic. Would these suits really deliver the promise and then leave them in peace to play happy families? Brett thought it more likely that he'd find himself squeezed again and again, mission after mission, until he'd traded an honourable uniform for a dirty suit. But the suits held the cards, for the moment. He just couldn't see how to save everyone and get out from under.

* * *

Lawrie sobbed into the gag as his assailant breathed against his back. One of the captors pinned Lawrie on the floor, face down, while another wrenched Lawrie's pants down around his ankles. Then Lawrie's hips were lifted and his legs, ankles wrapped in tape, were bent at the knee and shoved forward. This forced Lawrie into a kneeling position, face still pressed hard into the floor, but now with the terrifying sense of having his anus exposed to the world. Hot water splashed across his buttocks, scalding his cheeks and scrotum. But Lawrie's struggles proved ineffectual as his invisible tormentors applied weight to his shoulders and back, pinning his knees hard against his chest. Through the hood Lawrie heard muffled laughter, but also some pig-squealing noises and fast, excited chatter. It was all indistinct, which only made everything more terrifying. Another splash of water, this more expertly aimed.

Lawrie briefly noted the bizarre pleasure of the hot water on the sensitive skin, contrasted with the kiss of cold air. He tried to squeeze his cheeks together, again twisting his shoulders and rolling his hips. The water had made his torso slippery, and Lawrie managed to roll away as the voices rose in volume and intensity. For an insane second Lawrie imagined this as his escape, an opportunity to rise and run.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

He would escape or, better still, wreak a terrible vengeance upon these people that had inflicted such abject humiliation. He would gut them with a knife as they pleaded with him. He would stomp on their fingers and break their bones with an iron bar. He would kick and kick and kick as they screamed in pain and begged for their sorry little lives, but he wouldn't listen as he paid them back. They would regret, however briefly, snatching him from the street and treating him this way. He would be powerful, and not the least bit forgiving.

A rain of kicks landed on his thighs and arms, and one caught him across the temple. He fell, slack. Rougher hands grabbed his arms and legs. Now Lawrie felt a new terror when insistent fingers slicked his anus. The unseen men laughed, hard and short, and then the worst feeling in the world hit Lawrie as something hot and hard shoved itself up into him. He screamed into the gag, a bitter sound muffled into meaninglessness. The hot breath returned to his back as the man prepared for another thrust, and Lawrie's conscious mind both accepted what was happening as it shut that awful truth away behind a heavy curtain.

The gushing spurts deep inside him came quickly, after just seconds, and that tiny part of Lawrie's mind that governed this nightmare hoped that it was a one-shot deal. That fragment of Lawrie that managed the heavy curtain in his mind gave up hope as a new panting breath and rough hands took control, and a new pressure built around his hips and anus.

Worst of all was the hardness of his own penis.

Then Lawrie just hoped that he would die.

* * *

Brett broke the last of Tuck's fingers, the thumb on his right hand, with a downward stroke of the hammer. Tuck screamed, the noise echoing inside the back of the white van. Outside, the empty fire-trail in the pine plantation remained still. Brett put the chicken-bone cracking sound of the thumb and the howling sobs into a box in his head, his detached smile serene in the face of Tuck's agony.

"Who ordered the pick-up?"

Tuck wrenched his head from side to side in denial, black cloth hood flopping around as Brett grasped the thumb and ground the bone-ends together.

Brett sighed and sat back onto his haunches. *He's tapped out.*

The trip to Tuck's flat in Heidleburg, across the road from the train station, had involved several other stops to ask lots of questions using similar tactics. Brett had kicked in the door to Tuck's first-floor Housing Commission flat and rolled inside, coming to his feet in time to duck as Tuck swung the cricket bat, which smashed open the plasterboard wall in a shower of dust and chunks. Brett aimed a punch and caught Tuck in the groin. Brett taped the man's mouth closed, tied his hands behind his back and bound his feet together with cable-ties before hooding him. Brett lifted Tuck across his shoulders and jogged back to the van—in and out in 45 seconds. He secured the prisoner by loosely wrapping him in a length of carpet and was back on the road in three minutes; much faster than any police response, although Brett doubted that any of the neighbours would have called Johnny Copper. Tuck had tired himself out trying to break the bonds on the drive north into the state forest, flopping around in the back of the van like a fish in a bucket on a jetty.

Each capture and interrogation, like those he'd carried out wearing His Majesty's uniform, went into a separate box in Brett's head. He pictured a white label on each box, a name on the label, and a datapad attached to the box with a stout theft-proof length of black cable. Each pad held the details of each interrogation, and the boxes were stacked in a solid vault. Brett learned this memory trick, the clustering of data and the emotional detachment from the gathering of data, from an American psych on exchange with the Regiment.

"Andy," Brett said, "you've got to give me something else, something to persuade me to stop. You've told me about Davis and Anderson and Shanks, but I've already spoken to them. They gave me you. You're the cell C2, but you've told me nothing that your men hadn't already revealed." Brett paused, breathing in and scanning again out the van's front and rear windows. Nothing moved. The heavy lump of his father's pistol in the small of his back was a comfort. "I let them live; you will live, too, if you help find my brother."

It wasn't true, of course; Brett had watched impassively as Davis bled out, he'd snapped Anderson's neck and shot Shanks in the face. Tuck had given him quite a lot more information than any of his underlings, but 'the power of hope over the human soul should never be underestimated', or so said the American psych.

Tuck, a man Brett had served with in PNG a decade before, a brother from the Regiment and a survivor of the Moresby debacle, shook his head. Brett couldn't see his eyes because the doctrinal response was to keep your prisoner hooded, keep them off-balance. Now he yanked the hood off and gripped Tuck's ears, staring into the man's pale eyes.

"I owe you a proper death, my friend, for that time outside Lae. Thank you for saving my life." Brett nodded toward the rear doors. "Climb out and I'll do it properly."

Tuck stared, then shook his head, so Brett brought the hammer up and across his body. Brett swung backhand and caught Tuck on the Adam's Apple. The man fell back and began to struggle for air. Brett reached back and opened the van's rear doors, climbing out. His knees and thighs burned. Tuck fought harder now, his face bright red and getting darker. His frenetic efforts to free his hands intensified.

And he hasn't pissed himself. Brett appreciated that his van wouldn't stink.

Brett grabbed the man's ankles and heaved. Tuck flopped onto the ground and rolled across the fire-trail. Brett slammed the doors closed and moved to the driver's door, scanning the tree-line and up and down the dusty track, his eyes avoiding Tuck's slowing commotion.

Nothing moving.

Brett tuned the radio to the local ABC station, a broadcast of the House of Representatives. Brett recognised the Prime Minister's nasal whine.

"—well might the Member for Wentworth cry 'Shame', but let all Australians remember that it was the previous government, his government, that approved the deployment of our vital national assets, the brave men and women of the Defence Force, to the Middle Eastern theatre, risking both the ire of dangerous Islamic terrorists and weakening, yes *weakening* our security at home—" The House erupted as backbenchers jeered. "—and the responsibility for the current unrest among the few bad apples, the radical minority, lies at his feet!" More jeers and cries of shame. "This proud government is dedicated to ensuring domestic security, and that is why I call upon all patriotic Australians to support this much-needed extension of the *Loyal Australian Act!*" The Opposition shouted and the Speaker fought for control, naming several members and warning others.

“Mr Speaker—” the uproar flared again, but quieted after a moment. “Mr Speaker, it is the Member for Wentworth and the previous government which has both a policy and Parliamentary record of un-Australian behaviour—”

As Brett drove away, the churlish behaviour a noisy background, he sorted through Tuck’s information, sifting the fact from the fiction and the supposition, assessing it against the material Agents Daniels and Matthews had provided, and then against what Davis and Anderson and Shanks had provided. All this went into the mental datapad secured to the mental trunk locked in the mental vault. The pine forest whizzed past, empty and alone, his passage marked only by a rising trail of red dust.

The answer was clear: his next stop was in Sydney. To Cronulla, where ex-SAS Sergeant Willie Gaunt ran a fish-and-chip shop, the Eureka Flag prominent in the window. Brett looked at his watch as he emerged from the forest and turned left. The evening sun kissed the horizon.

* * *

Lawrie lay numb, his backside and thighs covered with dried blood and scabs of semen. The cold floor was his friend. The hooded darkness was his friend. He waited to die.

He remembered the numbness of his father’s funeral, the numbness that lasted weeks as his mother fell sick and the bills needed paying. The organs of government supported him in-place (it was cheaper), and the neighbours pitched in to keep the tattered remnants of the Bliss family going. He was numb when Maureen went back into hospital, a longer stint with more invasive treatments, and he was numb when he visited her every day after school, sitting numb beside her bed where she lay drooling and drugged, catatonic and numb.

Lawrie was good at numb.

NINE:

Brett sat, handcuffed, in a suburban garage. The Victa lawnmower, the folded baby's cot and the red Coopers Sparkling Ale sticker on the beer fridge gave that much away. The dusty workbenches were cluttered with grimy tools and stained rags. An overflowing tray of kitty-litter stank up one corner, tiny grey pellets of clay spread across the concrete floor.

Brett sat on an upturned blue plastic milk crate right where the car should be, his handcuffed wrists between his knees. The weak overhead bulb cast more shadow than light. Willie Gaunt leaned against the smaller side door, his hands crossed on his belt-buckle, the 9mm pistol held with an easy competence.

Gaunt's watch tinkled the climax of the 1812 Overture. He aimed the pistol at Brett as the datapacket played out inside his glasses. The new Oakleys, their circuitry buried in the transparent lens, which also served as solar panels, had hit the civvie market with a huge splash.

"He's here?" Brett said.

Gaunt nodded. The door opened and Brett rose, his feet coming together and the familiar ramrod snapped his back straight. The slight, balding man, closer to five-feet tall than six, wore blue jeans and a dark blue polo shirt. Major General John Ryan, former Deputy Chief of Army, had been Commandant at Duntroon when Brett graduated, and had been CO of 1RAR when Brett was a promising young corporal. Ryan had signed, and fast-tracked, Brett's officer-candidate paperwork. The general's close personal protection team scanned the room, their weapons in sweeping arcs.

Ryan was public enemy number one, founding member and leader of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country. He called for the Army to resist illegal orders, moments after handing his resignation to the ambushed Minister of Defence during a press conference. The media scrum followed him from the building, and he spoke passionately as he walked, a piece of now-famous newsreel. His voice was soft, almost effete, with the twinge of a lisp and the drawl of rural Queensland. In his green uniform and surrounded by cameras and microphones, he marched, almost carefree and relieved, into a waiting car down at the bottom of Sir Thomas Blamey Plaza on Russell Hill, the giant concrete eagle a profound backdrop to his last public—and not under pain of arrest—speaking engagement. He spoke eloquently of values and leadership, of threats and enemies, and the need for a hard-eyed look into the heart of Australian democracy. Then his car swept

him away into the nascent insurgency, and ASIO and the Defence Security Agency suffered a Royal Commission at this egregious breach.

Now, the legend stood before Brett, his twinkling eyes ready to laugh.

“Good to see you again, Brett.” The handshake was firm and the smile genuine; Brett studied the man’s eyes.

“Sir, you’re looking well.”

“Fish oil, my son, that’s the trick. Omega fatty acids, in a high-folate meal.” Ryan’s diets were as legendary as they were faddish; no carbs, only complex carbs, egg-white omelettes, red wine and proteins, Super Atkins, and so forth. “Sorry about the bracelets, but you know the rules. You give me your word in a few moments, and we can dispense with the nonsense.”

Ryan nodded over his shoulder, his gaze locked on Brett’s face, and the three-man CPP team and Willie Gaunt withdrew and closed the door. Ryan indicated toward the milk crate and Brett sat. He watched the general soak in the environment, the soldier preparing to give the soldier’s five.

“You’re a true believer, Brett, you always have been. You understand the codes by which we live, the responsibility and honour of service. This country has a cancer, and it needs your help with a cure.”

General Ryan pursed his lips and ran an index finger up beside his nose in a sawing motion. “Our politicians are gutless, clueless weasels, and their choices represent an existential threat to those things we hold most dear: mateship, courage, teamwork. These are the values upon which this proud nation was built. I will not allow their disloyal cowardice to pass unchallenged.”

The general spoke with a calm passion, the effect of which was a sense of resolution. “When I was a boy, we celebrated our democratic, egalitarian right to call those who overstep the bounds of common sense an ‘idiot’. The flipside of the tall-poppy syndrome. The government looked out for those that couldn’t help themselves. That’s why we went into PNG, the Solomons before that, East Timor before that. But over the years, our nation’s blood and treasure has been wasted on fruitless appeasement of Washington and Beijing rather than doing the right thing, doing those things that will ensure the security of our nation and serve a nobler purpose.”

The general waved his hands as he spoke, emphasising points with a clenched fist or an open hand in a chopping motion. “We have the right to be independent, and

our leaders continue to weaken that right by trading away things we hold dear. Not just jobs and economics; these things come and go. No honourable or successful movement for social change is based on such facile things, and the Sons of the Sunburnt Country must be both honourable and victorious. I'm talking about values. Values that make us proud Australians, confident on the world stage and a beacon for those that need a hand up. We no longer care about a 'fair go'. It's been a long time since the egalitarian ideal meant anything. We used to protect our own, and this endless war has eroded our belief in ourselves. Our values are dying, now mere empty rhetoric for politicians to trot out at medals ceremonies and funerals for our dying sisters- and brothers-in-arms." Ryan shook his head, eyes downcast, before continuing.

"Look at your situation, Brett. Look at how they treated you in a politically expedient manner. Too much trouble to defend and honour, too easy to cast aside, and now mere fodder for media, commentators and the wider ignorance. You embody those things to which I refer. Your life is the example. You've bled in service of this nation, and received little in return except public disservice. You've done your duty, you've stood proud and strong, and then that scumbag in the Lodge has his lackeys toss you to the baying pack."

General Ryan paused to open the beer fridge. Inside, stacked cans lay on their sides in neat rows. He raised an eyebrow and Brett shook his head.

"No thank you, sir."

"Never on the job, right, soldier? I guess you and I are still on the clock, aren't we?" He reached into the fridge and took a beer for himself. Although the fridge advertised Coopers, it contained green VB cans. "However, being hunted by half the spooks and plods in this country means that I'm never *off* the clock, so bugger it, smoke 'em if you got 'em!"

He popped the can and sipped at the froth. "Promise me you killed Tuck and his men because the Feds geared you up and I'll take off those bracelets."

"Sir, yes, several meetings with Federal agents led me here."

The general nodded and pulled a small silver key from his pocket. He unlocked Brett's cuffs and put them in his pocket.

"You did that to Anderson to snag me?"

“I want my brother back, and wasn’t going to take the time to ask nicely. There are rules, and they’ve been broken. I wasn’t going to ask nicely, especially with the Prime Minister bad-mouthing me on the news.”

“And the Feds encouraged you to do what, exactly?” The General leaned forward. “They want you to kill me? Bring me to justice? They want you to infiltrate us? Get more evidence on me?”

“Your name never came up,” Brett said, “but why wouldn’t you be high on their target-list?”

“You’re not targeting me? I thought maybe you were, which is why Willie and I negotiated this sit-down. I wanted to recruit you, especially once this media storm started, sure, but getting to you ‘in clear’ was a nightmare. But this savage hunting? What’s going on?”

Brett paused. “You’re holding my brother, sir. I want him back, safe. He’s a civvie, and shouldn’t be involved—”

“No—” The general looked surprised, then angry.

“—I recognised Jimmy Phelan, sir. He wielded the sword on Allison Johnson, and I saw a recent Sons stream starring my brother, Phelan’s eyes and a naked sword. I want Lawrie back, now and safe, before that sadistic prick does his last bad deed.”

“No, we’re not.” The general shook his head.

“Sir?”

“I’ve been resisting the bombing campaign, and the disgusting beheadings.”

“But they’re Sons, sir, no doubt.”

“Insurrection, son, inside the insurrection. There’s a splinter faction tearing us apart,” the General said, with a bitter regret that sounded to Brett like an old argument often revisited. “I think it’s a Frank Kitson thing, personally: pseudo-gangs, beheadings, bombings and other such nonsense. I wonder if Phelan’s working for the Feds, to discredit us. Maybe he’s just a splinter, all hard edge and keen ideology. Either way, I cannot get him to stop. The Sons don’t have your brother.”

“Help me, then, please.”

The watch face on Evan’s wrist lit up and began flashing. Ryan made a ‘hold that thought’ gesture to Brett and tapped the face. He cocked his head, listening as his earbud spoke. Ryan spun and strode toward the door, hissing commands.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Brett grabbed the old axe-handle sitting on the benchtop. He thought about Federal Agent Daniels and about Lawrie, about fighting wars for brothers and fathers and the ideals of childhood.

General Ryan hesitated as the side door squeaked open, his right hand bringing a pistol from under his jacket.

Brett moved up behind him, comfortable with the weight of the oiled piece of wood. His choices were many, but the right move stood clear.

Willie Gaunt stepped through the door and fired. The two popping noises were loud in the ColourBond shed despite the silencer.

The general spun and fell, his own unsilenced gun reporting a deafening crack.

Brett swung hard with one hand, catching Gaunt's arms in a downward stroke. Building on the momentum of the swing, Brett pirouetted and swung again, the axe-handle collecting the side of Gaunt's head.

Brett snagged the general's weapon, kicked Gaunt's away and moved to the door in a crouch. He scanned the darkness, seeing only a vague man-shape lying ten feet away. He shuffled back and checked that Gaunt was still unconscious before moving to the general. Blood pooled on both sides of the body. Brett felt for a pulse, his eyes locked on the doorway through the sights of the pistol. His arm, straight and steady, could play this game for more than an hour.

The general's pulse was weak and jumpy.

Brett checked Gaunt, who was still unconscious, and took the Oakley Tacs. The seals automatically mapped Brett's head, which meant they were still set on default and Willie hadn't put in any codes. Tapping the frames to cycle the menus with his left hand, Brett's right arm pointed the pistol strong and straight at the doorway. Brett secured Gaunt to the shed's steel frame with the general's handcuffs. He snapped the light-switch off as he dived out the door and the Oakleys switched to infrared in the left eye and night-amp on the right.

The backyard was suburban: an old-fashioned Hills Hoist, patches of scrabbly lawn, and a concrete path leading up several steps to the backdoor. The body-like shape he'd seen earlier was a body, one of the CPP detail. In the infrared lens, the body changed from a purplish-blue toward black as the heat leaked from the corpse.

Brett grabbed the guy's collar and heaved him to the side of the backyard. Two small fir trees sat near the fence and Brett took basic cover. The glasses showed him nothing not normal; no unexpected heat signatures or moving shadows. Agent CPP had been shot in the back of the neck.

Gaunt carried a silencer?

His hands felt through CPP's pockets. Heart pounding, Brett's senses probed the darkness and the unknown. He pocketed two full clips and lifted the guy's wrist radio to whisper in it:

"Code, code, code, this location. Principal down, detail down, status unknown. One deceased, one shooter contained, code, code, code, this location."

Brett pulled the transmitter from CPP's jacket and triggered the panic button.

Better that General Ryan be alive and in custody than dead in a shed.

Brett vaulted the side fence with a fluid grace borne of long training. He sank low and kept moving, vaulting fence after fence, and had only crossed a few backyards when the first shouts and lights came from the scene behind him. He jumped into another yard, cut through to the other side of the block and hurdled the low side-fence, bringing him out on a different street. He heard a siren wail in the distance and strode toward the shadows on the opposite footpath.

You did this in Tehran, so tonight's a piece of piss, he told himself.

Perversely, Brett felt fantastic. His muscles ached and he had fear under control. His panic had no power in the raw life-love of combat. The surging of his senses and intuitions brought back the old Brett, the Brett before meeting that damned refugee girl, when he was just a simple soldier with a straightforward mission.

Find Phelan. The general hadn't said too much of use, except the comment about dissension in the ranks. Ryan's reaction suggested something to Brett, something he'd deliberately sown in societies near and far: the radicals were emerging, getting more violent as other means failed. This was Brett's expertise. The best special forces guys got sent on missions to live with hill-tribes and train warriors to become soldiers. They taught clans and villages to oppose the drug cartel or the corrupt central government or fight the Islamic fundamentalist regime. Brett remembered his Nazi history, and Hezbollah and the IRA and the Iraqi insurgency and every group similar to the Sons of the Sunburnt Country. Especially those that won.

A more radical splinter.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

With Phelan at or near the top, that's going to be tough.

Who'd work with Phelan?

Brett conducted his individual appreciation process, checking what he knew and his resources against the mission and the enemy. Deciding what to do next was just a matter of logic and planning: find Phelan, and save Lawrie.

Agent Daniels chuckled at Brett's request. The bank of public phones in the CityRail station was momentarily quiet during an ebb in commuter traffic. On the small screen, Daniels made some notes.

"Now," he said, grinning into the camera on his desk, "to answer your last question first: because you know the right questions to ask. That's why you. You know the players, you know the rules of the game. You've played in this league; you're one of Australia's starting eleven, so to speak. Until recently, I'd go so far as to call you the captain batting at number three."

Brett wanted to slam the handset into the screen, to claw this bastard's face off. Instead, he screwed his eyes shut, forced slow breaths and adjusted his blue Crows baseball cap.

"I need PIRs on those names," Brett hissed. The Priority Information Requirement was the up-to-date dossier on a given topic, and Brett doubted Daniels had the clearance to approve, let alone release, at least half of the PIRs. One he certainly knew Daniels wouldn't.

Time to find out how loose a game you're playing, you shithead.

"This is going to take some doing," Daniels said. "What the hell do you need to see the file on Tom haji-Muhammad for? Did you know his real name was Thomas James Jones, born in Broken Hill?"

"Thomas haji-Muhammad is the head of the homegrown jihadi. Maybe his agenda matches Phelan's, for a little while. Like Zarquarwi did in the Sunni Triangle."

"Fucking Staff College wanker!" Daniels scoffed. "You've got proof of a connection between Islam Australia and the Sons?"

"Of course not, don't be absurd. I intend on proving a connection between the Sons and *you*."

Daniels laughed, but still hadn't understood.

Brett sighed. Behind him, the corridor swelled with women and men in suits and children wearing uniforms and carrying schoolbags. “There’s lots of cross-over at the fringes. Someone I’m looking for lives there, on the fringe, but I’m not sure where. I know what their skills and interests are, and want look in the places they’d be best employed and most attracted. One of those places will be close to, very close to, Tom Muhammad.”

“Why not just give me their name?” said Daniels.

“Maybe they’re on the list already, and you don’t know who my suspects are.”

Daniels scanned his notes again, before smiling into the camera again. “May be. Does Tom Muhammad know that it was you who pulled the trigger on him?”

Brett shrugged. “Who knows? I doubt that he’ll tap me for it, though, given the change in circumstances. I expect that he’ll try to recruit me.”

“Like Ryan did.” Daniels said, not as a question. Brett hadn’t briefed Daniels on that, another answer to an unasked question. Brett had too many answers to questions he didn’t understand and hadn’t asked.

“So what about Ryan? Did Australia’s favourite general pull through? I like the old guy, and that prick Gaunt deserves whatever you can throw at him.”

“Can’t say.” Daniels shook his head. “Unfortunately, your ID was put at the scene, some DNA here and there, fingerprints, etc, which means you’re working your way through the public security alert systems as we speak. Every cop will have your face, and anywhere with CCTV linked into the network will tell them where you are in real-time. You know the drill, don’t you? You did well in Moresby, as the file reports it. Without time and no backup, no support, you fought on through to save the day. Nobody expected you to succeed, you know, let alone survive to see the dusk. Guess they underestimated you. Not me, though; I’ve read your file.”

Daniels laughed at nothing, waved a dismissive hand at Brett’s image on the screen, and said: “So your time to save your brother is running short, my friend.”

Brett felt his teeth grinding together, and it took an effort of conscious will to stretch the jaw wide and control his panting breath. “Can’t you stop it?”

“I may be able to slow it down, sure, but nothing stops national security. You should know. This vast machine has its own inertia, its own internal logics, and tracking and capturing potential terrorists is its *raison d’etre*. It must be used, or else it admits its own uselessness. Slowing your ID through the system is something I can do, but

stopping an emergent alert requires the full National Security Committee approval. And the Prime Minister, well—”

“That drongo hates me.”

“If he’s even aware of your existence.” Daniels laughed again. “Don’t mistake a politician’s words for actual thought or awareness. He sits atop a mighty beast.”

He’s been to Iron Gum! Brett froze at the sudden realisation. *Daniels was a proper field agent.*

Iron Gum was the training station outside Charters Towers, a hard slog in all directions, where soldiers, spies, diplomats and public officials from the US and Britain and Western Europe practised and studied the art of toppling governments, regimes, religious movements and revolutions. Cognitive warfare, old-fashioned statecraft, shaping and influencing with highly selective ‘direct action’. Beyond getting up close and killing people, which was always a vital role for the military, Iron Gum taught attendees about the role of economics and social media and youth and crowd dynamics and complex adaptive systems.

Brett, and many of his coursemates, chuckled and yawned their way through the first 50-minute ‘systems’ lecture, as the segment was called. After a week of painful exercises learning a new vocab, learning new ways of measuring and valuing social systems, the light went on for Brett. Not only did he see how to prompt the social herd, he quickly grew frustrated with the deliberate dullardness of the majority of his classmates. Brett realised that his course was a social group. After a night’s hard thinking and planning, he went into class the next day and offered a large bribe to the young Royal Air Force squadron leader. The guy was a fighter pilot, and took Brett’s challenge and the opportunity for the large reward with a smile and a solid handshake.

A week later, Brett stood before the Commandant of the Joint Services Schools to explain himself and the chaos he’d caused. The Brigadier scolded Brett, warning of the consequences of his cynicism and ‘over-eager initiative’, and awarded Brett the ‘Top Student’ prize and invited him back to join the Directing Staff. Thus Agent Daniels revealed himself when he lectured Brett about the Prime Minister, and used the phrase ‘atop a mighty beast’, which was the school metaphor for the fundamental focus of those in charge at all levels of power.

“How long for the PIRs?” Brett felt the snakey panic coming again, and the screechy-scratchy urge to get underway increased in volume. He pulled the Crows cap

lower to shield his eyes, the hood of the jumper tight around his face, and the Oakleys responded to the change in lighting.

“All approved.”

Already?

“Of course,” Daniels continued, smirking, “without your Regimental data nodes, you’ll have to collect a physical drop.”

Brett knew the place Daniels nominated, and set a time thirty minutes away. He hung up the phone and launched himself into the sudden surge of crowd as it swept upward toward the exits.

The streets of central Sydney were crowded, an early dusk of dark clouds low overhead lit orange from below. Rain, fat drops flying sideways, swept along the street. Hands covered faces, shopping bags and briefcases covered heads and umbrellas popped up here and there like fast-motion mushrooms. People huddled at lobby doors or the edge of an awning, and the red slate along George St became slippery with a day’s dust and a moment’s moisture.

Brett worked his way down the hill, towards the Mall, hands in pockets and cap pulled low. He didn’t stride, arms swinging and head on a swivel, side to side, side to side, highly aware and highly visible. Instead, Brett blended. He became grey, right to the middle of the herd, a soft breeze passing through a paddock. His wrenched guts and head full of static didn’t show in his gait or posture or breathing. He had compartments, in his mind, which took care of these things, until he sidestepped a grossly fat man waddling down the bricks and found himself amidst a crowd of Papuans, chattering away animatedly.

They were high-school kids, wearing uniforms of olive green and dark grey, with plump faces and white, strong teeth. Their Pidgin was dated, too formal in some constructions and still full of Australian English colloquialism. Something clicked in Brett’s head, a discrete slurring of perception. It’s what Brett thought getting shot in the head would be like, a topic he began to ponder years before, the very dawn of his first head-shot, 1500 yards through the downdraft of a hovering Osprey, its giant rotors creating a fine white water vapour. The fuzzy dropped, limp, his blood its own mist, and Brett’s spotter, SGT Biedermann, whispered ‘centre head, great shot’.

Now Brett wondered if he’d had a stroke or been shot in the head.

Everything’s leaking.

He was back in the mountains, freezing in the tropics. The Owen Stanley Ranges scrape the sky, high, sharp, and blanketed by swirling mists. Too much *wantok* in Moresby and Lae, too many eyes and ears on muscular and tanned Westerners to come in the easy way, so the team patrolled in from the west, from Irian Jaya, not that the Indons knew anything about it. Brett learned his counter-intelligence tradecraft in Moresby, running interference for ASIS and the CIA against the *raskols*, which put him at the top of the batting order despite his lack of age and rank. And his actions during the collapse of Moresby, and the horrors of the human suffering on all sides of the ensuing gunfights and evacuations, made Brett the soldier of renown, but that was in the future. Brett remembered that headshot.

The morning call to prayer rang out across the valley and Biedermann, the senior operator, patted Brett's legs.

"Breathing," he whispered. "Twenty seconds."

Brett began the breathing regimen, in and hold and pause and out. He felt the lurch of his heart, the way it back-pressured his blood vessels. He felt the pause, the reliably static point, the moment of zen when wind and target and breathing and the increasing pressure on the trigger would see the round leap away from the barrel toward its target. Brett knew in that moment of peace, of stillness and predictability, he was truly calm. His intellect told him that the image of the bullet, the trace, slowly spiralling in the cloud of expanding gases, was pure imagination. But his romantic heart refused that, knowing that he saw it every time, that the singular moment extended and extended. His zen focus let him see.

A week to sail out of Darwin in a rented yacht, the coast of Irian Jaya a forested green lump in the dirty greyness of the Arafura Sea. A week to patrol into position across spine-backed mountains from Indonesia, dodging border patrols and highland villages. They'd scouted the hide from the lay-up point three days ago, and crawled in yesterday as the calling darkness fell. Their man inside the compound reported as usual, a crackled narrow-cast via a server in the Maldives:

Usual.

The tango was still in the village, and still attending the newly constructed mosque. Tango always sat in the same spot during prayers, in the first row, and was a tall man, for a fuzzy. Some nerdy young suit in an office in Canberra, probably also an Iron Gum graduate, decided that he was the right thread to pull. According to the file

from Canberra he actually stood a chance of uniting these tribes. If Tango became a chief, then his brand of militant Islam would prevail and Australia would lose the last vestiges of colonial control to its northern approaches.

Brett, having worked hard during pre-deployment training, was being blooded by the CO. Biedermann pulled Brett aside after the final briefing; he was a tower of a man, broad and tall and all of it natural, no steroids. Brett expected a continuation of the tone delivered by the CO, but Biedermann just stared at him and said, deadpan: “Don’t fuck up.”

Another patrol from their squadron sat in the next valley, goading and guiding a small band of men from another village into attack positions. They’d spread His Majesty’s gold around the locals. It wasn’t pretty, and wouldn’t stand long scrutiny, but OP SLIPS CATCH only had a short window in which to succeed.

The call to prayer continued, and Biedermann worked the faces in the crowd with his scope as they moved through the mosque’s courtyard. The overhead drone fed into Biedermann’s goggles, and the team had previously covered the site with surveillance, which Brett kept fed into a small window in his left eye. The mosque, the imam’s quarters, the head-men’s living rooms, where the *wontok* played itself out in elaborate ceremonies of recognition and deference. The SAS had things rigged, realtime.

“Tango is in the building.” Biedermann said, re-calculating the trajectory and drop and flight-time of the round in Brett’s rifle. “Ten seconds.”

Brett heard the *thump-thump-thump* of the helicopters.

“Hold hold hold,” said SGT Biedermann, his whisper still patient despite the unexpected disruption.

Brett felt the zone open up. Time slowed down, his breathing perfectly under control, his very heartbeat under control. He flipped open the front guard of the primary sight and settled into the prone hugging stance, his arms holding his rifle as he would a woman. He caressed the trigger and adjusted his eye/brain to the new magnification. The sound of the chopper slowed, and it changed pitch. Biedermann’s words seemed a slow-motion slur:

“Osprey.” Biedermann said, tapping his tac-gloves in a sequence, opening a frequency on his radio: “HQ, HQ, this is Alpha Green; one V-22 Osprey, US Marine markings, is flaring for landing or insertion across the face of our op.”

The Osprey hovered over the centre of the village and ropes fell from the open doors. Villagers flooded from the mosque and scattered as men in uniforms slid down the ropes and spread out.

“I have Tango.” Brett felt his words moving too slowly to keep up with the man’s head in his sights. He wanted to take the shot, he had the clear background and a clean sightline. Tango began to jog toward a Landcruiser parked up the hill, and Brett tracked him, adjusting for changing angles and distances.

Brett waited as long as he could. Tango danced in the crosshairs, fading behind the helicopter’s misty downdraft, loping easily up the slope, just about out of reach. It’d taken months to flush out Tango, to set up the other village’s attack for some obfuscation and deniability. And now the bloody Yanks poodle-fake the whole deal.

Brett remembered a lecture, on the sniper’s course, when the topic of ‘time-sensitive targeting’ was raised by a visiting instructor. The instructor was an operator, a field man with the thousand-yard stare who sported a long black beard. He looked incongruous in his neat cams, but would have been homeside for a mission briefing. One of his friends or subordinates or superiors would have snagged him as a lecturer of opportunity. Then, in less than a week, this trooper would be back in the field, the Middle East or Africa or the Pacific, living rough and always a rollie-paper’s width from a capricious death.

“TST is exactly that.” The trooper stood before the course, twelve guys and two chicks, who sat in a horseshoe. “The nature of our operational command-and-control is that decisions are strategic, taken by the Prime Minister, and often the ‘hold’ will be on until the last second. You must not panic. You must not pre-empt the ‘go’. The Regiment is a strategic asset. TSTs are generally strategic targets, and that means strategic consequences for getting it wrong. Don’t panic, hold, but stand ready. The time-sensitivity is not just in the green of the tango, but also in the green of higher command. Your position requires that you wait until the tango is green and our elders and betters to agree with you. Often, you’ll have the cross-hairs clean and green, and for no explicable reason the Head Shed keeps the red card in play. Accept it. That’s TST, that’s strategic effect. You cannot know what the PM knows, or the OC or the CO, so don’t bitch about it and don’t fucking miss when that green comes at the last possible instant. Make your choice carefully.”

Brett made a choice.

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He adjusted the angle, his breathing a perfection of control, his heartbeat in sync, calm, and he squeezed the trigger with a deliberate evenness that meant he could watch the bullet leap out of the barrel and spear away towards Tango.

Down on the scene, with the attacking force, Brett's CO clicked on to the team's C2-net and said: "Green."

Brett came back to himself, confused and shaky.

He wasn't in the Highlands cross-hairing floppies and he wasn't in the desert waxing towelies.

Downtown Sydney during the evening rush wasn't the ideal time to lose it. Yet the crowded mall carried on without him, people jostling past as he stood staring at the shopfront. The heavy bronze doors were chocked open, and warm air and buttery light beckoned him inside. David Jones was as chintzy as ever, a genteel pretence of opulence with careful lighting, lots of reflective surfaces and gold trimming. A sickening gust of mixed perfumes covered Brett as he followed his feet inside, checking the clock in the top right-hand corner of his vision. Five minutes.

Where did the time go?

His panic close, Brett searched the mirrors for sign of a tail. He spent a couple of minutes working through the men's suits, waving away the tall, slender young man who offered his help. Hugo Boss and Armani mannequins duelled across the white marble aisle, and pretty men with perfect hair and distant stares loomed from overhead posters. This was a man's place, where men who cared dressed to compete with other men. The right tie to go with the perfect vest was an obsession for the beautiful and the rich, and Brett wanted the Sons to put bombs in here rather than suburban citadels where tradies bought flannelette shirts and Stubbies workwear.

The toilets were off to the side, tucked away behind the kitchen section, the entrance placed discreetly between electric frypans and a Dyson vacuum cleaner display. The appointed stall was empty and clean, yet the air still held a piss-tang despite the efforts of the vanilla air freshener. Brett locked the door and started the timer on the Oakleys with a finger-tap. He was later than he should have been; all too soon the door to the handicap stall next to his swung open and banged shut. Brett counted out the seconds with agonising slowness, his worse fears running amok.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Daniels could have sold him out. The CCTV net could have snagged his face and the cops could be gathering. The Sons could have an insider and called for his scalp. The lucklessness of things, Brett sensed, wanted to reach out and pay him back for decades of killing in the name of the national interest. Murder is still murder, even when sanctioned by government or cause, a realisation Brett had only begun to fully appreciate by being on the other end of the spear. The timer hit the appointed beat and Brett knocked softly, twice, on the wall between the two stalls. A manilla folder was thrust toward his ankle, and Brett grabbed it and exited the stall with unseemly haste. The bathroom was empty and the door to the handicapped stall remained closed. Brett hesitated for a second, desperate to know if the guy in there was Daniels. It seemed important, but the rules of such hand-offs were clear and absolute—tagging your contact would foul things across the board and pose unnecessary risks. He avoided his reflection in the long mirror opposite the stalls and trough, a shaking hand flinging the door wide as he exited back into the world of food processors and toasters.

Again the temptation came to divert from his exit plan and hang around to scope the toilets. He could browse the dining sets, looking at blue Wedgewood with one eye while spotting the live-dropper. Such moves were risky, for himself especially, which is why the always-preference was for a dead-drop.

With a spike of disgust Brett realised that the folder was still in his hands, in plain sight and not tucked into his jacket as it should be.

TEN:

Brett walked through the darkness and took the files to a corner of Hyde Park, the Cenotaph in the foreground and, across College St, the hill up Park St toward King's Cross as a background. Even at night people traversed the park; common wisdom had this as a dangerous thing to do, but the rhetoric of 'unsafe' and the reality were different. Sure, dumb luck and cruel fate always had a vote, but open eyes and an open mind could help the reasonable person from walking in front a taxi or barging through a group of young Lebanese men in a dark corner of Hyde Park while spouting racist epithets.

Keep to the lit paths, head up and aware, with dancing eyes that avoid staring at any one thing, keep moving and don't engage when people call out or approach, be polite and firm if they do engage you, and above all do not stop walking. Keep going, a smile fixed in place, and rough people have little reason to single you out. Too many suburban wankers, out of their neat yards and out of their depth in the concrete jungle, caused their own trouble with pointless bravado or ignorant affront. They get scared and do stupid things, pissing people off in their fright and confusion, and then they end up in the emergency room with a sharp blade in their guts or their neck.

In his well-lit corner, sitting on a bench in one of the groves around the outer edge of the park, Brett flicked through the files. The Oakleys registered the datacores in the manilla folders and slaved to them when Brett keyed the codes hand-scrawled inside each folder on a yellow Post-It. The codes were long and alpha-numeric, and designed for just one attempted use. If Brett screwed up, the files would not only lock but also scramble any wireless hardware in range. Once, in Honiara, Brett's team leader had deliberately mis-typed just such a code sitting in a van outside the compound of a crime boss. The guy and his tech were nailed shut tight in his compound, with a heavy entry unwarranted, but one of the Defence Signals Directorate girls, a hotshot young grad on placement with SOCOM HQ, had suggested spiking their servers with this as 'the killer app'. They'd fried mobile phones and digital TV signals for miles, but the target's computers went down for long enough to cripple his burgeoning online scams and havens. The Solomons had been working to establish itself as a secure data haven, free from the restrictive and intrusive laws of search and seizure that governed the Western world. After this op, eventually attributed to a denial-of-service attack from rival syndicate, the Sollies lost the edge in this field. A poor and riven nation to start with, a sagging economy saw another 'law and order' intervention, once again establishing

Australian dominion in the South Pacific. These days, of course, Honiara was full of Chinese yuan and the strategic threat of Chinese aircraft carriers and submarines running ‘training exercises’ off Australia’s east coast. Brett was careful as he keyed the codes, more concerned for his precious Oakley Tacs than the files themselves, let alone the wifi net-web that was downtown Sydney.

Daniels’ handwriting? Brett thought, pondering the Post-It. Would he do such a thing himself, or farm out the task to an expendable underling?

Possessing these files was a Federal crime, and Daniels would be sure to keep a stiff wall of plausible deniability around him. In fact, Brett getting caught with these documents in his possession would reinforce the stories and rumours that he’d gone off the reservation. And why would Daniels come forward to defend him? Why would anyone? Brett had no ‘people’ anymore—the loss of the encompassing warmth of the Regiment and the Army were constant stabs to the centre of his heart. His sense of brotherhood had been shattered, and for the very first time Brett was feeling the risks and threats of operating without a safety net.

It was strange, really, because his operational experience was often far from home, without backup or support, but the sustaining ideal of the brotherhood kept SAS members feeling safe, their arses covered, despite the distance to help and interposition of danger. The Regiment had its own association, housed at the barracks in Perth, designed to support the families of its members. The House at Swanbourne was well-supported for a drink after work and at the family barbecues on weekends, and became the living heart of a knowledge that any member caught out on duty would have their loved ones cared for, and not just with money. The Regimental family was large, as a glance at the property ownership around Cottesloe Beach would indicate; ex-members stuck close by, ready and on-hand to support and look out for a suddenly grieving and widowed mother with two toddlers and a newborn baby. Now, rudely, Brett’s entire family was gone, and he felt a fearful loneliness.

Brett set the Tacs to a skim-rate, his eyes grabbing titles and headings as the files flowed across his field of vision. He tagged several interesting pages as they passed, but didn’t stop to absorb or examine details. The big picture washed over him, a context from executive summaries and tables of contents. He’d lied, sort of, to Daniels: there was no specific person he was searching these for. The exercise had principally been a test of Daniels’ access and authorities. Brett had seen the haji-Muhammad file before,

when he'd been selected to cross-hair the guy, but that was years ago and more up-to-date was always preferable. Besides, Brett had to find a way into the organisation, and the lists of 'known and suspected associates' for the head man and his crew was the place to start.

There was always the possibility that some ex-Regimental guys had gone over to Islam Australia, and Brett could infiltrate through them. Guys coming back from deployments, particularly the messy stuff in the Greater Pashtu Kingdom, had a tendency to grease out with a religious conversion and pick up new lives and identities back home. Lots of guys wiggled out completely, which usually ended with assault charges and restraining orders in the best of cases and murder/suicides in the worst. The job was tough, and waxing ten-year-old boys tended to rift your serenity. Then they come back to Oz, demobbed, and were left hanging on the rough corner of Civvie Street with steel skills but clay morals. Poor buggers became easier pickings for both IA and the Sons, organisations that restored the sense of family, purpose and belonging. Of course, the psych screening picked up a few, but the alpha dog had trouble reporting himself to the vet. He wasn't going to self-report broken sleep and disturbing dreams, or lusting thoughts of suicide and death and hurting and bloody bloody payback. It wasn't manhood, it wasn't the warrior jism.

Suffering is to be endured, Brett figured, like sore feet and extreme temperature on a long patrol into enemy territory, and only gutting it out will see you safe on the other side, mission accomplished and the warm handshakes of mates offering you a cold Coopers at the House.

Hutch's name appeared a couple of times, and Brett tagged it for later searching. The Frenchman, Jan Porier, had his fingerprints across several recent files, as did Hanrahan and Dank and even the Double Peter. These guys were operators, always living on the hard edge of action. A more clinical diagnosis might describe them as addicted to adrenaline, but Brett knew to a man that these bastards loved having live iron in their hands and a task to which they must apply their skills. They're the opposite of office monkeys, people to whom the idea of sitting inside on a warm and sunny day was anathema when they could be climbing something or running up something or blowing something up. They were Army fiends, all early takers who'd been kicked out or softly shown the door when their psych profiles lurched too sharply to one side of the

graph. A joke, surely, when sanity only second-place in the beginning, way before the sound of a car bomb or the smell of arterial blood on cold steel became *de rigueur*.

A fat man in a business suit walked between Brett and the Cenotaph, right down the middle of the lit path. He was smoking a ciggie, apparently, but the breeze gusted the strong, sweet smoke to Brett's corner of the Park.

Bugger's smoking a spliff!

Brett had always avoided weed, right from high school when it first crossed his path. Dylan K, the scrawny little felcher, had nicked one his older brother's baggies and brought it to gym class in the 7th grade and the commotion in the locker-room was intense as the boys passed around the plastic Ziploc bag, inspecting the strange mix of fat twigs, tiny buds and crumbled leaves. The stench coming from the bag was distinctive. As captain of the cricket team, Brett led the charge to open the bag and sniff the contents. He'd rubbed some of the gear through his fingers, declared it 'good shit' in the tone his father used to describe the home brew he made in the shed, and handed the bag on. The lesser boys agreed that the shit was indeed good, and eventually Marty Brown decided to chew on a little bud. Marty was a try-hard little scrote that hung four paces behind Brett, and would fetch Coke or Fanta when ordered. Years later, sitting on the richly carpeted floor in a clay-brick house in the Greater Kingdom, Brett had smoked from a hookah, the multi-armed water pipe favoured in the Middle East exactly because it was a social instrument. The thick white hash smoke had filled his lungs, making him smile goofily at the village elder that sat across from him. It was a test of inclusion. The *basha*, his face deeply creased and yellow like parchment, had smiled a toothless grin in return while adjusting the red-and-white checked *shimargh* that covered his head.

"Mā šā Allāh", the chieftain said, and the other head-men sitting around them nodded in agreement.

God has willed it.

Brett, his beard long and his own clothing tailored to this exact meeting, had been working to achieve such words from the old man for weeks. The imam had delivered the *khutbah* today, at the noon Friday prayers, exactly as Brett, Insha'Allah, had led them toward the theme, the mosque full of receptive ears. The lesson, the *khutbah*, was an allegorical exploration of the Qu'ran, illustrated the proper social order and the need for headmen to be informed of the goings-on in their clans. Now, in this

smoky circle on the floor, the power-holders had agreed that reporting the enemies of Islam, be they foreign devils like Brett or the misguided locals that fought against coalition reconstruction efforts, should be reported to the United Nations mission in the city up the long strip of black road that cut through the desert. Insha'Allah.

If God wills it.

Brett's scalp had tingled as the hash-smoke worked its way through his bloodstream, and the world became detached behind a curtain of introspection. He'd had to fight to concentrate on the subtleties of the group, the tensions and power-alliances that were indicators of who was supporting which insurgents. His CO had frowned when debriefing Brett; drug use was anathema inside the Regiment, even if the wider Army had relaxed some of the prohibitions. But the outcome and the information supported the desired strategic effects, so the report was re-classified and sanitised for wider consumption. Of course, the original report remained in the system somewhere, covered in security caveats, safe behind the gongs and promotions handed out to the CO and the Divisional commander. Even Brett got a Meritorious Service commendation. So when the fat smoking man wandered past, Brett was once again thrown back into memory triggered by the sweet smell of the blunt.

He felt a twinge behind him, a tickle of paranoia that he always obeyed. He rose and turned, hands at the ready. He saw nothing in the darkness, so adjusted the Oakleys to split-screen low light and IR for the left eye and kept the data scrolling in the right. Perhaps it was the recall of the hash, but nothing suspicious gave him pause.

Brett grabbed the manila folder and moved off toward the Domain. He kept skimming the data as he passed St Mary's Cathedral. A soup-van was closing its shutters, the area full of stinking and shuffling indigent men wearing tracksuits or crusty denim jeans. The night, after the storm, was calm despite low clouds. It felt like a pause in the onslaught, but this crowded byway was exactly the sort of place into which Brett should be burying himself. The dirty and the deranged, the homeless and the helpless, unlikely to be ASIO, or worse. Brett noticed the discreet Eureka flag on the side of the soup van, and one of the shuffling men dropped a slip of photocopied paper that also carried the logo. Brett kept walking after he bent to grab it, skirting the homeless folk as they dispersed back to park benches and putrid alleys. Their gaze, the motion of their heads, reminded Brett of some of his guys on their last patrol, on the march back to al-

Hazjji Gezrit. These guys also had that distance-stare, of something in the future or the past that snagged the mind and kept the bloody here-and-now a safe far away.

It was a realisation that hit Brett hard. He'd never before considered his similarities to this kind of life: homelessness, mental illness, despair, hopelessness, helplessness. Like most Australians, he'd viewed the indigent as lazy or stupid or crazy. Surely they could collect welfare, get housing support, a shower every day and maybe a job. He'd assumed that they did not achieve basic security of income and shelter by choice. In his unquestioned opinion, they chose the life of filth and misery. Then he experienced the crumbling fort in the desert, the long centuries it had stood, probably once in great shape and fine repair, full of life and energy and solid surety against whatever tomorrow would bring. But the people who made it live had passed away, and eventually only the strongest of walls remained, and those crumbling and full of holes. The gaps that let the towelies in and degrade his squad to less than one handful wouldn't have been tolerated in the glorious past. But time eroded. Time, and neglect for the important small things. Were these people like that fort? Were they once functional people, contributing members of a society that let them fall so far? How had they, in their prime, viewed homeless people? Brett suspected that maybe they would look at them with the same mixture of disgust and contempt as he had only moments ago. Would the architects and builders of Gezrit feel the same way looking at the long-term outcome of their great work? Would they despair for the future, for the neglect and dereliction of legacy? And would Brett, his productive prime immediately behind him, also find himself so fallen? Fighting this nation's wars had eroded his strong walls. All the future held for him was a downhill slide, a quickening ride to madness and pointless despair.

Brett's feet carried him onward, knowingly sure in their direction, down through the Botanical Gardens. He skirted the lights of the Art Gallery and continued down toward the swimming pool. Potts Point and Garden Island were on his right. He'd spent many nights there, or at Victoria Barracks up and over the hill behind him. He'd run these paths and sidewalks every morning, his PT regimen both regular and ruthless, but exquisite beauty awaited someone running through the Herb Gardens and the rockery. The Regiment had a large but subtle Sydney presence, most of it out west at Holdsworthy with Tactical Assault Group—East, but also down here with the remnants of Maritime Command and HMAS *Kuttabul*. The old Strategic Operations Division had

been based here, in a glorified shed with air-conditioning, and the old-timers still clung to it as the east coast shrine.

Alone again, the late night isolating him, Brett paused the data-scroll and looked at the flyer in his right hand. It was a simple list of times and locations for the soup-van on the front, and a smattering of positive messages and helplines on the back. Very small, almost an afterthought on the bottom of the page, was the Eureka flag, the slogan **Australia for Real Australians**, and an attribution to Dorothea Mackellar:

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land—
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand—
Though earth holds many splendours,
Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.

Brett knew this poem from school: ‘My Country’. The poem had a more famous stanza, one that included that most iconic sentence: *I love a sunburnt country*. It was the point of origin for the Sons. Brett shivered in the night.

Sons of the Sunburnt Country.

This was the support network at play. Brett had a lightbulb moment. The Sons were doing good works in the community, filling a void. This is how Hezbollah and HAMAS started: build social reputation, legitimising themselves as belonging within their community by doing good deeds once the preserve of the Church. They were establishing themselves not only as right and justified, but also *needed*. General Ryan was a wily old rooster, across his lessons of history. Brett knew, now, as he reached Mrs. Macquarie’s Chair, the spread of Sydney Harbour before him, that the government of the day was lost. His Iron Gum training indicated that the Sons would soon be able to openly establish a political wing, a legitimate means to challenge the order of things. They would contest elections and win seats, with waves of hidden supporters turning out in numbers to surprise the commentators and the intelligence agencies.

Does Daniels know how far their influence has spread?

Did anyone inside the castle walls of government actually recognise the extent of their looming defeat? The Sons' victory was still years, maybe decades away, in the normal swing of time and elections, but today's world wasn't normal any more. The seeping poverty and crippling shortages destabilised the political and economic system that had existed, largely unchallenged and unchanged, since the end of the Second World War. The last time Australia's social fabric had been so under threat was the Vietnam Moratoriums, that orgy of idealism that the Boomers had brought forth. They achieved their political aims with minimal violence, and the mood of the nation had turned so quickly that real violence hadn't been necessary. Today, the passion had been building for a decade, slowly, as the waves of refugees arrived in boats and the unemployment numbers kept getting worse. Inflation sucked the oxygen from the economy, and petty crime and social dislocation spread, slowly, the perfect fuel for a successful insurgency. The Sons would win, especially if they limited their use of violence to highly targeted killings rather than indiscriminate bombings.

This was the schism that the General had been afraid of.

Brett sucked in the tangy gusts that came off the harbour. Fort Denison huddled in the harbour; beyond it lay the Heads and the open ocean. America, too, if you went far enough. The Harbour Bridge and Opera House were off to his left, but Brett wasn't interested in them. The shipyards glowed orange and white, and the sleek grey shape of the Air Warfare Destroyer hung low in the water. The beast was older, now, but still able to stick the knife into airborne incursions. The government used these things as floating early-warning platforms across the Top End. When linked to the Jindalee over-the-horizon radar network, they painted every aircraft and seacraft crossing the sea-air gap that 'protected' Australia from the dangers of Asia. The Indons couldn't or wouldn't halt the flow of boat people, most of whom transited through the archipelago to the north, making an obscene mockery of advanced jet fighters and ships armed with autonomous sea-skimming missiles. Successive governments and Defence ministers had been seduced by the high-tech wizardry of shiny things and loud noises, the mainstay of the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal Australian Navy. The Prime Minister of the day would bang on about Australian jobs and Australian industry and defence self-reliance while slavishly buying cutting-edge military hardware from the USA or European consortia. All the while the Army confronted the face of warfare, people on the ground. The fishing villages of Indonesia were the best place to stop the boats

arriving, and they didn't care about Australia's military build-up. The few thousand rupiah the people-smugglers paid was more valuable than shiny kit with radar-controlled this and network-centric that.

Once, in the mess at *Kuttabal*, a Lt. Commander had entertained the audience with his solution to the boat-people problem: torpedoes. The deplorable state of the boats meant that they were death-traps anyway, so why not make sure they don't reach Australian territorial waters? All these lethal new submarines, he said, could just render death from beneath the waves.

"We'd only need to sink a few," he said, "before word got around that the Aussies were playing it serious now."

People nodded, frowning at their coffee.

"They'll stop coming," he expanded, his cheeks flushed, "once they realise that a piss-poor life back home is better than drowning in the Timor Sea lit by flaming fuel oil and worm-riddled wood."

Brett had laughed along with the crowd, only later recalling the conversation and realising the horror of it. He'd killed, from a distance and up close, with guns and knives and his bare hands wrapped around the throat of an angry Aboriginal boy, and humans seeking a fresh chance at life in a safer country than their homeland did not deserve the cruel death the sailor promoted. The fools inside the fort couldn't see what was going on outside. It was Gezrit writ large.

Brett stopped on the steps of the Opera House to untie his shoes. He'd picked up a piece of bark in the Gardens, and now laid it carefully in his left shoe, which he then re-tied. As he headed back up the hill toward central Sydney, the bark gave him an indistinct limp. It wouldn't defeat the gait recognition software forever, but would buy him some time against Daniels' deadline for a system-wide security alert. He couldn't do anything about the facial recognition except keep his head down and hat pulled low, so that was just another risk to be mitigated while the rest of the files Daniels delivered were displayed, sorted, analysed and interrogated. Now past midnight, the empty streets seemed more threatening, and Brett fought the urge to scan every corner and backstreet. He found shadows and kept out of sight where possible, and every time a set of flashing lights and blaring sirens screamed past he found his heart-rate was up over the hundred mark. He'd force some breathing exercises, and found that slumping in doorways left him invisible to most passers-by. The security guys all walked with a plodding slap, and

Brett moved on before being approached by any of the rent-a-cops. They were as dangerous as real cops because of the real-time security network, which the State and Federal police monitored. Probably ASIO as well, but Brett still had hope that Daniels could do something about the alert from his end. That guy had too much invested in Brett to let him fail now. Or so he hoped.

Brett shut his eyes, buried in the corner of a short alley, and pulled the layers of cardboard into a defensive wall. His breathing evened out, and he snatched a few moments of forgetfulness. But then a scraping sound snapped him awake, and Brett's eyes were wide and roaming, his ears straining. Another scrape, and Brett jerked upright, half-twisting to look along the far wall of the alley. A rat, slick and fat, leapt confidently over the curb and climbed the drainpipe bolted to the outside wall. Brett's heart kept hammering away, expressing the fear that kept him alert and jerky toward sleep for the rest of the night. And his mind wandered.

What exactly did the Federal agent want of him? Was it as simple as tagging Ryan, dead or alive? The ease of getting the haji-Muhammad file indicated that Daniels wanted Brett to explore Islam Australia more than the Sons. Getting people inside Islam Australia would be tougher than infiltrating the Sons, purely because of the religious aspect. Supporters of the Sons were more obvious these days, as seen by the proud display in Willie Gaunt's fish and chippery. Many cops, state and federal, were at least sympathetic to the cause. However, cracking into IA would require someone exactly like Brett, in tune with Arabic and having at least read and understood the Qu'ran. It was just unfortunate that it had been Brett putting the cross-hairs on Thomas haji-Muhammad, the only serious time the government had gone after him. It was illegal for Brett to pull the trigger, according to many inside the SAS, and the assassination attempt was a big factor in the not-so-secret fracturing of the Regiment.

Targeting an Australian citizen in Australia, not in the commission of a crime, leaves a soldier open to a legal charge under both the *Crimes Act* and the *Defence Act*. 'Following orders' has not been a lawful excuse since Nuremberg, and military personnel are obligated to obey only lawful orders. But Brett followed orders almost blindly for most of his career, and, upon reflection, this was probably why he was chosen for the task. The old hands wouldn't touch the mission, except for Colonel Owen, it seemed, and he was ordered into the field to supervise Brett's efforts. For the Prime Minister to breach the King's rules, to order Defence to betray the oath sworn to the Governor-General as

commander-in-chief, was too much, especially as successive GG's had publically declared the use of the ADF to be strictly in line with traditional interpretations of 'aid to the civil power'. Floods, bushfires, cyclones, sure; as a strong-arm of the Federal government, no. But Brett had been the trigger-finger on the strong-arm.

In the shed, right before Gaunt had shot General Ryan, the older man had spoken of an insurrection inside the Sons. These would be the hardliners, well-trained in sowing dissent and confusion for the objective of turning an advantage. They would all be graduates of Iron Gum. Phelan and Gaunt and their mates would lead that splinter, and they were Iron Gum, and rightly dangerous bastards. Surely this is what Daniels wanted, a line into the splinter faction, a way to bust open a closed group. Being operators, Phelan's operational security would be world-class, a small cadre of dedicated professionals with long bonds of common experience and training. Everyone would know each other personally, and the group would be no larger than one hundred.

The night passed, and Brett couldn't decide who Daniels really wanted: Ryan, Phelan, haji-Muhammad, or Islam Australia.

Brett sat on a bench out the front of a McDonalds in a side-mall, watching the mix of early-morning suits and a younger crowd coming down from a night in the clubs and bars. A gaggle, clutching high-heels in their hands and with streaky makeup, cackled down the footpath. They wore short dresses and revealing tops, hair nicely made last night, but now tangled and rough. People looked around at the shouted obscenities and braying laughter, and that was a centre of attention that he'd easily avoid. Brett moved away, keeping his head down as he limped beneath CCTV cameras atop awnings and attached to building facades. He'd moved the bark to the other shoe, down under his toes, and his hips began to ache anew.

The clock on the Town Hall clicked on 7am, and more traffic filled the streets with a suddenness that seemed unnatural. Brett saw the backpacker hostel up ahead and crossed the street. A blonde couple spoke loud German and shared a cigarette out the front, standing in the gutter and checking the posters plastered on the bulletin boards and light-poles. Brett knew that such venues were closely monitored these days, the xenophobic impulse in the Australian heart once again beating strong and deliberate.

He found the bus stops that serviced Bankstown by reading overhead signs, and joined the loose queue. A woman in a burkha stood patiently at the curb, her feet sandalled and poking from beneath the long black fabric. A man stood beside her,

chatting animatedly and wearing a long white overshirt coming down to the knees. On his head sat a round, white knitted skullcap.

Brett's heart leapt as a car braked suddenly in front of the bus stop. A window rolled down, and a fat white boy, with sparse whiskers and blue overalls, leaned out and screeched with an excited girl-squeak: "Fuck off, camel-fucker, back to Arab-land, Australia is for real Australians!" He threw something, which hit the woman in the chest, and it fell to the pavement with a splat. He brayed laughter as the car accelerated, his mates in the back seat high-fived him.

Brett registered the Eureka Flag on the rear bumper, and the long white sticker across the rear window that said 'Australia is for *Real* Australians'.

Three young men, wearing track pants, T-shirts and white sneakers, had also been waiting for the bus. Now they sprinted after the fleeing car, swearing with broad Australian accents and making threatening gestures. One produced a knife, a long switchblade that flashed in the early morning sunshine. They looked Lebanese, with darker skin and coarse goatee beards, but Brett imagined them as second- or third-generation immigrants. At home, they'd be embarrassed by their grandparents clinging to the ways of Beirut or Tyre.

The car turned a corner, the lads still giving loud chase, and Brett saw an egg sandwich splattered on the footpath and down the front of the woman's burqa. She was distraught, and her husband did his modest best to calm her. Brett automatically moved forward, his hand going to the clean folded handkerchief in his pocket. Then he remembered the camera atop the bus-shelter, so he stepped back several paces and leant against the fast food frontage. He felt the adrenaline rush, the beating of his heart and the coolness of his thoughts as the action had exploded. The coursing call-to-action calmed him, made him detached and ready, which was much better than the strange emotions of recent days.

The chasers returned, sweaty and panting, the knife nowhere in sight.

"Fuckin' skippies." The shortest guy said, the one that had produced the knife. "Fuckin' racist white cunts."

"See them run!" his mate said, a big guy sporting a white Adidas logo on his T-shirt and baseball cap.

The man, his wife scraping away the muck with a Kleenex, nodded seriously at the returning lads, and the short guy threw a salute in acknowledgement. The man

murmured softly to his wife, taking the used white tissues from her and dropping them in the tall green metal bin that stood next to the shelter. Brett saw that the woman wore blue jeans beneath the burqa, and that her legs were long and slender.

The long, articulated bus arrived, already nearly full from the pick-up at Central Station, and was crowded with a mix of Middle Eastern faces. It was full of the clothing, the facial hair, the head-dress, of outsiders. The bus carried all the signs of ethnic and religious difference that drove Australia's pervading sense of threat.

Outsiders looked different, and many Australians had no qualms about blaming such people for the collapse of jobs and the tightening of welfare rules. Arabs were thieves and liars, Lebs rorted the courts to win payouts for made-up injuries, and anyone associated with Islam was a terrorist. The *Loyal Australian Act (2019)* had made terrorism a capital crime, and the return of the death penalty was something with which the vast majority of Australians were relaxed and comfortable. A web start-up, supported by aggressive advertisers and a consortium of pay-TV providers, had won the broadcast rights to the executions. Tens of thousands of Australians subscribed. Illegal downloads of these events proliferated, and the copyright owner had lobbied publically for the government to crack down in favour of its proprietary rights. The Communications Minister had stood in the middle of a lashing storm after she argued that the public good of spreading the 'zero tolerance to disloyalty' message outweighed the company's right of ownership. QCs duelled briefs at ten paces. Media commentators debated the merits of the Minister's words. The government's popularity numbers shot through the roof for several weeks. The Minister was talked about as 'leadership material'. More subscribers signed up. The executions continued.

Now the talk on chat-boards ran strongly in favour of extending the death penalty to other crimes and criminals, such as paedophiles and drug dealers and immigration fraudsters. The Sons released their infamous 'dole cheats' video. The clamouring for harsher penalties and stricter controls over 'unlawful non-citizens' got louder. Australia's overseas aid programs shrank to zero. Immigration applications from non-Western nations were no longer accepted except from the 'skilled professional' category. Family reunion visas were cancelled, and permanent residents had to sit new, tougher loyalty and English-language tests. Those who failed were jailed and deported. Those who fought back were charged with disloyalty and executed.

Brett swiped a cashcard against the scanner as he boarded, and noted the black plastic bubble above the driver's head. He kept his head low. Two more camera bubbles hung along the roof, one above each exit door, and Brett took a standing position directly beneath the last one, toward the back. He held on with one hand and kept his knees loose to counteract the surge and sway of the bus as it worked its way westward. Several stops at factories saw the bus almost empty as the New Australians went to cleaning and assembly-line jobs. These people often fled war and persecution, seeking a better life for their families in the safety and affluence of the Great Southern Land. Here they found exclusion and persecution. And a new war, of a sort, as this young society struggled to define itself in times hard and uncertain.

The Oakleys streamed GPS directions, and Brett rang the bell to walk the several blocks to the mosque. Lakemba, from waves of immigration and settlement, had become the glittering heart of Islam in Australia. Here was Australia's largest mosque, rebuilt after the bombing in 2019. That blast killed 37 people, including the increasingly controversial imam, Sheik Abdul al-Sadr, who had repeatedly called for the community to obey sharia law and for the New South Wales and Australian Governments to recognise these strictures and punishments as part of freedom of religious expression. It was, al-Sadr argued, no different from Aboriginal communities' right to mete out traditional punishments such as spearing. 'Let us rule ourselves', Sadr said on national television, 'to live the law of Allah, the one true God, and his prophet Mohammed.'

Three days later, late on a Monday night, a truck-bomb destroyed the mosque and fifteen nearby houses and businesses. Five firemen died when illegally stored gas canisters exploded. Media outlets quoted anonymous sources inside the investigation that said 'evidence of bomb-making equipment' had been uncovered, of which the gas canisters were part. The Sons called for immediate and public action to uncover the Islamo-fascist terrorists who plotted to turn Australia into a nation oppressed by sharia law. Joint Federal and NSW police raids arrested sixty-five people, live on webstreams, and pictures of police bomb-squads entering suburban houses were broadcast time and again. The *Loyal Australian Act* was invoked by the Attorney General, and a veil of secrecy descended on the investigation and trial, except for the few leaked statements about the extent and threat of the terrorist cells controlled from the Lakemba mosque.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Groups of Muslim youth sought revenge, smashing windows, burning cars and beating people on the streets. Muslims were attacked by groups of angry whites wearing Australian flags as capes and temporary tattoos of the Eureka Flag. Riots erupted across the country, each capital city finding itself locked down by a massive police and military presence to quell the violence. Sixteen people died, mostly innocent bystanders or the sick and elderly, although one Army patrol came under attack by a gang of youths throwing rocks; the soldiers returned fire, killing three and wounding eight. The Prime Minister stood in Parliament and defended the action by saying ‘any attack on our Defence personnel is an attack on Australia, and such attacks will be met with appropriate force, lethal where necessary.’

Two weeks later calm returned, although the resentment in the hearts of many, both white and Muslim, had been inflamed. The Lakemba community funded a new mosque, bigger and better-protected, and the perpetrators of the original bombing were never discovered. The youths leading the initial revenge attacks were found guilty and executed, despite the more than 100 000 people marching in protest of such harsh penalties. Opinion-polls declared that justice had been served.

As Brett approached the mosque he observed several likely surveillance locations. ASIO had been here for three decades, every day, gathering intelligence and evidence against everyone. They ignored the mosque’s bombers, and prosecuted charges against Islamic plumbers and cleaners who espoused their faith. ASIO would log his entry to the mosque, and part of Brett expected to be arrested the instant he left. But a doubt survived, that Daniels had cleared the alerts—if any existed.

Maybe he’ll kill me.

Thomas haji-Muhammad, a man he’d put in the cross-hairs. Fired upon.

Brett removed the baseball cap and scratched his fingers through his short hair. The thought occurred that he no longer had to worry about shaving and haircuts, that his wardrobe of casual clothes was outdated and small, and that a million small considerations that went with wearing His Majesty’s uniform were gone, and that he might even survive the next hour.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Part III

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

ELEVEN:

Lawrie scrunched his eyes closed against the glare, the stabbing pains easing slightly, but he felt a deep nausea. The hood and tape had been removed with little care for his hair or skin, but he drank in the coolness of the fresh air on his face. The plastic cuffs went next, and then a warm shower rained on him. The room echoed loudly after so long with his ears covered. Sounds came at him hard and sharp, and he risked more stabbing pain by squinting his eyes open.

White tiles.

The water pressure stung his shoulders, his scalp aflame where the hair had been ripped out. Lawrie squinted again. He was in an alcove, a blue plastic curtain to his left. He could make out the taps before him, and in a recessed dish at his right hip he found a bar of soap. He grabbed it with clumsy fingers, and it nearly escaped, so he gripped it tightly with both hands and began to rub it quickly over his body. Part of his mind expected the guards to yank him from the shower and kick him again. Lawrie lathered his hair, the soap stinging the torn skin of his face and head. He scrubbed with the soap again, still using both hands, his neck and chest and arms. His muscles felt both heavy and hot and his shoulders ached with the new movement as he tried to lather his back. The soap slipped away and Lawrie cried out, tears mingling with the water.

Lawrie put out his hands to hold up the tiled wall. His heart beat faster, a hot flush the only notice to the sudden vomit that filled his mouth. He tried to bend, the heaves from his diaphragm shuddering his body. The vomit splattered on the tiles. The hot water ran down his back, and a trickle worked its way between his buttocks.

A fierce headache settled into his skull, a shard of glass gouging at his brain. He opened his mouth and gargled the shower, his cracked lips bright stings. He spat and repeated the process. He concentrated on finding the soap. The drain between his feet was clogged with hair and chunks of yellow bile, and the yellow bar floated as the shower pan filled. He bent slowly, feeling all his muscles complain, and grabbed the slippery bar on the third attempt. He rose upright too quickly, and another round of nausea swamped him. He fought the vomit, and won. He scrubbed his thighs and crotch. With careful shame Lawrie reached around and probed his anus with a soapy hand, feeling the bruising and tearing. His hand came away bloody, and he scrubbed the soap hard across his fingers to remove the evidence. He felt the hardened crust of semen on his buttocks and the backs of his thighs, so he scrubbed again and again to make sure.

“Bliss!” A voice outside the shower-curtain boomed, and Lawrie felt his knees buckle. He leaned backward against the wall, his eyes wide and hands cupping his genitals. The shower-spray crazed his vision, the headache forgotten as the terror of another session in the hood squeezed his chest.

“Crack on, Bliss, time’s up. Your brother’s come to rescue you.” The voice boomed above noise of the shower. “There’s a towel out here, and some clothes. Then you’re leaving. Two minutes!”

What?

Lawrie froze, the impossible words worming their way.

He peeked. It was a suburban bathroom, toilet and mirror above a sink. On the floor in front of the toilet lay his white T-shirt and blue jeans, soiled and dirty and torn. Laying beside them was the short black snake of a plastic cuff. On the hand basin sat a blue towel and a pile of clothes. He stared at the closed door until he caught sight of the mirror.

A monster peered at him. Its face was lumpy and bruised. Its left eye was closed over in a puffy purple and black egg that came down its cheek. The monster’s nose was crooked, and a long cut along the line of its jaw trickled bloody water. He snarled at the reflection, and noticed a missing tooth on the top row. He probed with his tongue, the gum ragged and sore, and felt amazed that he’d no memory of losing it or spitting it out. The monster face held his thoughts, but it wasn’t him.

The bathroom door opened and Lawrie’s heart froze. A tall man stood there, holding a stubby black gun pointed toward the ceiling. Lawrie saw a row of perfect white teeth that reminded him of a shark.

“Hurry up, faggot,” the man barked before shutting the door with purposeful force.

Lawrie’s heart clunked back into gear.

This isn’t a trick.

Lawrie spun the taps off with stiff fingers. The silence of the room was punctuated by the dying trickle from the water-saver shower-head and the gurgling of the drain. Voices in another room came to him, and he risked a moment to listen before opening the curtain and stepping onto the cold tiled floor. He dried as quickly as he could, his nakedness its own threat. If it was a trick, Lawrie didn’t want to be caught naked. He avoided looking at the jeans on the floor, but his exposed buttocks triggered a

spike of shame. He ignored the multitude of bruises and abrasions as he pulled on the black track pants and the orange Country Road polo shirt. A pair of white rubber thongs sat underneath the basin, and he slipped into them. They were several sizes too big. Lawrie combed his hair with his fingers, and automatically smoothed out his eyebrows with his fingertips, exactly as his mother insisted. The door opened again, and Lawrie straightened from the mirror and turned toward the masked man with the gun. Male voices, louder now, came down the hallway, angry and raised.

“You look beautiful, princess, this way.” The man stood back and followed Lawrie down the hall, which opened into the lounge-room. It was filled with a big-screen TV and beige leather couches around a glass coffee-table. The stench of cigars hung low and oppressive, even to Lawrie’s ruined nose. Posters of snarling tigers and stalking wolves and Native American chiefs decorated the walls. A glass skull sat on the coffee table, which was covered with take-away food litter and empty Coke bottles. On his right, Lawrie saw the open-plan kitchen beyond the breakfast bar.

Brett stood there, wearing tinted sunglasses, with three other men holding the same sort of stubby gun as the man behind him. Brett faced off against the shortest. That man had piercing blue eyes. On the counter sat an ashtray, a thin cigar smoking upward in curly blue trails.

It’s a Wee William, Lawrie thought. *Dad smoked them with a glass of port.*

The man behind him pushed Lawrie into the room and everyone turned to look.

“Jesus, bro, you okay?” Brett said. His hand clenched as he saw his brother’s face and his limping walk. Again Brett longed for a weapon, something in his hands to sort out these bastards right now, but he couldn’t risk Lawrie.

Lawrie nodded, his eyes wide and darting. He opened his mouth but Brett held up a hand.

“Not yet, bro, let’s get going.” Brett backed out of the kitchen and took his brother by the hand, leading him as he’d done thirty years before.

“You promised, Samurai,” said the man with the blue eyes, “and I trust you to keep your word. It’s *Bushido*.”

The urge to leap across the room and twist Phelan’s head around backward flashed through Brett, and his testicles were high and tight. He balled his free hand into a fist, his eyes holding the surreal blue gaze of the small man. “I’ll ring you later, as agreed.”

The brothers reached the front door, and Brett turned to swing it open. He pushed Lawrie out first, then stepped out himself, his eyes sweeping the street before returning to the men in the room. Birmingham, the big guy who'd escorted Lawrie and a face Brett knew from his Duntroon days, moved closer to swing the door closed and flicked the deadbolt.

Lawrie kept ahead of Brett until the footpath widened out at the driveway. A shiny antique Holden sat there, as well as a nearly new Toyota Katana and a fat-bellied Harley-Davidson. Brett tapped the side of his sunnies and the Toyota's lights flashed as it unlocked itself.

"C'mon, Lawrie, hurry. We're not safe."

Lawrie winced as he swung himself into the Toyota, his leg muscles complaining and his coccyx shouting rude things. Brett thumbed the car into life and swung it expertly back across the street. The car's noiseless engine propelled them quickly down an average suburban street, short metal garden fences and concrete driveways. The houses had scruffy yards and rusty clunkers with cracked windscreens parked across desiccated lawns.

"Where are we?" Lawrie didn't recognise anything, and his sense of the surreal flamed higher still.

I'm free. It's over.

Lawrie felt a jumble of emotions, relief at being unbound, awe at the speed with which things changed again, anger and fear about the men in the house, and a dislocation that seemed to hold a layer of veneer over everything.

"Seymour. We'll be back in the big smoke in an hour, then we've got to go to ground."

"Why did they let me go? Who were they? What's the promise you made?"

"They're a splinter group of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country. Hard bastards, really nasty: they're the guys who beheaded the public servants last year. The short guy, the one with the blue eyes, he's ex-SAS. He got kicked out after some loose targeting came to light—he shot up a convoy of floppies in PNG—"

"What's a floppy?"

"Sorry, slang term for the locals up there. They used to be fuzzies, but since the droughts and the starvation, well, you know—anyway, Phelan was indiscriminate in his

targeting, but maybe it was executions as payback, so they kicked him out. He's bitter, blames the Government, and putting to use all his hard-edged skills. Stuff we taught him."

Lawrie felt a sharp pain in his chest every time he took a breath, and what Brett said took a moment to sink and connect. "Were you there?"

"Not that tour. I was doing some domestic stuff in the Territory. Hunting Islamists up north, in the Tanimi Desert; the rude buggers were setting up madrassas across the Top End, teaching the Qu'ran to our indigenous brothers and inspiring them to live by *sharia* law. It's really scary how easily the serious forms of Islam have taken root in the communities, separation of women, prohibition on alcohol and drugs, renewed emphasis on traditional punishments, that sort of stuff. The Land Councils have imams now, spiritual leaders that the tribal elders heed."

"Three decades of direct government intervention in their lives causes hardship." Lawrie said, after considering Brett's words. "But Islam, in the Outback? I had no idea."

"This country's in a lot of trouble, Lawrie, and most southerners have no idea how far things have moved along up there. Islam Australia is a potent force, thousands of angry young men, many Aboriginal, and now it has a radical arm."

Lawrie zoned out as his brother continued, the car eating the road and the gum trees whizzing past the window. He felt the numbness wrapping its arms around him, and the gentle motion of the car and the warm sunshine made his eyelids heavy. He adjusted his position and put his head against the side window, his breathing becoming long and regular.

Brett talked about patrolling through the desert, and about the beauty of a sunset in scrub country, and about how the Aborigines who'd found Allah prepared themselves for daily prayer in such a water-hostile environment. After ten minutes he heard the first of Lawrie's snores, reverberant, and he stopped talking and concentrated on driving. The mindlessness of highway travel let him free-associate about the promise he'd made to Phelan, about how to pull off such an audacious plan, and what the consequences would be for those concerned. Phelan *had* released Lawrie, and now Brett must decide whose side he was on. Should he warn the ASIO agent and risk his family again, or should he carry out Phelan's plan and be implicated? The trap for him lay on both sides. Daniels was a proven liar, but had the resources of federal agencies.

Brett couldn't see a way forward that didn't wreck his family or leave a trail of corpses. He was tired of killing, sick in the guts with the nightmares and the depression.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Too many of his targets were real people, not the tangos of the detached mission brief. Even the profiles that were his bread-and-butter during pacification operations in Afghanistan or PNG or Timor Leste were men with names and faces and families, but he didn't have to listen to their voices or see their eyes except through the scope of sniper's rifle. Killing an enemy you'd never met from a mile away with a single .50-calibre bullet was easy compared to being intimately involved with the killing of a federal politician. Someone whose smile he'd returned, someone who'd pinned a medal on his chest and shaken his hand. Phelan needed Brett's skills, and had pushed exactly the right buttons to obtain them, and now Brett was trapped by his own code of honour, the rationalising part of his mind that kept his sanity from being swamped. He'd made a deal with Phelan, who had delivered as promised, and it didn't really matter that Phelan had manipulated the whole thing to leave Brett no real choice.

My word is my word and there's nothing else besides.

A poem from school echoed through his mind, something about the arrogance of kings and a statue in desert. Brett couldn't remember the whole thing, or the author's name, but the final few of lines had stuck with him:

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Brett thought about al-Hajjii Gezrit, and its crumbling walls.

* * *

Lawrie woke and looked around. The low sun cast red shafts through the stand of gum trees. A tan wheat field stretched off toward the horizon, and Lawrie felt the urgent need to urinate. Brett stood on the other side of the car, in the trees, staring at the ground with his hands balled into fists. The car was an oven, even in the speckled shade. Lawrie opened the door and swung himself out. Everything hurt as he rose, muscles and bones and tendons all complaining, and Lawrie made that horrible old-person grunt that his mother made when she rose from her recliner or when she slumped into a kitchen chair at the end of an early morning and long day at the bakery.

"How you doing?" Brett approached the car, his face tight.

“Piss.” Lawrie said, his voice cracking in his dry throat. He coughed, and he felt something shift in the side of his chest. It stabbed at him, and he coughed again, which caused more pain. “Gotta piss.”

Brett popped the boot open. “Cold water here, when you’re done.”

Lawrie limped toward the closest tree facing away from his brother and the car. A dirt track ran as straight as a rule, and the only sounds were buzzing flies and the doleful call of a crow. The sun still held its heat, but the air was fresh and cooling as the breeze danced its way through the trees. His urine was dark as it splashed against a ghost gum, and the red bull-ants scurried around in a panic. The emptiness of the place frightened him, the isolation and its impending doom. In his rush to finish and get back in the car, to get away from the lump of fear in his chest, Lawrie spilled the last of his stream down the inside of his pants. He felt the warm trickle down his leg before he could register the thought of stopping. Lawrie tried to close his sphincter and withdraw his penis, the last of the flow leaked across the crotch of his pants. He stood, helpless and embarrassed, shaking the drops and his pants to eliminate what he could. Already the fabric had changed colour and the smell of fresh urine rose to overwhelm him.

Lawrie’s world cantered, and he was back in the blackness of the hood, smothered, the smell of stale piss and fresh jism invading his heart. He felt the torturing unseen kicks and the terror of unknown death. He felt the shame rise and rise and rise.

He felt to his knees and vomited, eyes pressed shut as he heaved into the dirt. Thoughts collided, thoughts of killing himself and pointlessness.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders, holding him. Brett crouched and held Lawrie, who flopped back with a rush of sobs. Brett felt his own desperate panic, but Lawrie needed him, and he was done with letting down his brother.

“Let it out, mate, let it all out.”

Lawrie felt another wave of sickness rise up, and he gave in to it, but found only the terrible empty heaving. He fought to control the crying, and the stabbing pain in his ribs helped him. It was a bright alternative, something to wrap himself around, a solid core that wasn’t something internal. The previous Lawrie was gone, and he knew nothing. He fought to control his breathing, and the searing in his side subsided.

Brett sat, with Lawrie leaning back into him, and hugged him. He’d seen insanely strong soldiers suffer this. He hugged his brother and unconsciously rocked back and forward. One summer, in the driveway at dusk, Brett had flattened Lawrie

with the tennis-ball off the long run. Lawrie had been batting well, blocking Brett's inswinger and ducking the chin music, which pitched shorter and shorter as Brett grew frustrated. Their father had expressly forbidden the bowling of bouncers, partly for safety reasons but mostly because so many tennis balls ended up on the shed roof. Brett, tall for a 16-year-old, played for the school first eleven. The fast full-toss smashed into Lawrie's temple, and the boy dropped to the ground. Brett's follow-through carried him straight to his younger brother's side. He cradled the boy, fear and shock and guilt rampant. Lawrie had looked up with unfocussed eyes, and Brett thought both that he'd killed his little brother and that his father would then kill him. Lawrie stirred, and Brett watched in dreadful fear as the boy came back to himself from somewhere a long way away. Brett's relief was tinged with the feeling of escape, that he'd had a close call. Today, Lawrie's need was more real.

"Get it out, bro, get it all out. Better out than in." Brett stroked Lawrie's hair and made calming noises. "Better out than in."

As the sun set through the scrub, Lawrie's breathing returned to a regular pattern. The stench seemed detached as the men sat together, but the ants and particularly the flies flocked to surround them. Brett rose, holding his brother's hand, and pulled Lawrie upright, leading him to the open car-boot.

"Let's get you cleaned up, mate. We've got water and fresh clothes and something to eat, if you think you could snack."

Lawrie's hunger was surprisingly strong, especially once he washed out his mouth with water from the little plastic bottles with a mountain stream on the blue label. Brett had packed several woven shopping bags; from a green Coles bag he produced a travel towel and a set of street clothes. He laid them out, lined up several more bottles of water, and walked away past the front of the car.

Grateful that Brett knew what he wanted and provided so much with so little conversation, Lawrie stripped off his clothes. His mother, their mother, did everything with maximum debate and endless discussion, more a stream of consciousness conversation with herself, but sometimes she'd get cranky when she realised that Lawrie wasn't really listening. Brett seemed much more like himself, few words conveying as much as possible.

Lawrie poured half a bottle of water through his hair, then repeatedly gargled and spat to clean his mouth and throat. He opened another bottle and wet the towel, a

glorified chamois, and scrubbed his face and body, re-wetting the towel to scrub his crotch and legs. The breeze chilled his skin, goose-bumps erupting on his arms and calves. He wiped dry with the other end of the cloth. The jeans, a faded black, sat snugly, and the red Holden Racing Team T-shirt fitted tightly, also a size too small. Lawrie gathered up his soiled clothes at his feet and ran his fingers through his hair, shaking out excess water. Brett hummed loudly as he approached, a gentle smile below frowning eyes.

“Feels better, yes?”

Lawrie nodded. “Want anything from here?”

“Grab a couple of those sangers from the esky. And a bottle of water, please.”

He reached into the boot and brought out a folding shovel. “Gonna just bury these, mate, load up. Moving out in just a sec.”

Lawrie packed the supplies into the shopping bag that his clothes came from, and re-positioned the esky and the bags in the wheel-well so that they wouldn't slide around. He moved toward the open passenger door and put the bag on the floor. He then sat sideways and knocked the sandy red soil from the white thongs and sat them carefully either side of the supplies bag. He brushed his feet one at a time, muscles yelling more distantly now, and swung himself around. He slipped into the thongs, shut his door and clicked the seatbelt. Behind him the boot-lip clunked shut and Brett climbed in behind the wheel.

“We're meeting Lise. I didn't know who else to call.” Brett started the car and swung the wheel right, the setting sun behind them.

“Where are we?”

“Outside Omeo, south of Bright. Lise has access to a farm north of Bairnsdale, she's bringing Jeena, and I want you all to hole up there for a while. Week or two, at the very most. Then all this will be finished.”

“Are you staying with us?”

Brett flinched at the fear in Lawrie's question.

“I'm taking the trouble away from you. It's my fault those bastards took you in the first place. I'm so sorry.”

Lawrie froze, uncertain. They drove on in silence, the fire-trail giving way to a single strip of blacktop, a dotted white line down the middle. Gum trees grew close on

each side of the road, and their branches clasped into a canopy. The noise of rubber on tarmac was the only sound the brothers heard.

Lawrie's stomach grumbled, and he reached down for two sandwiches. He unwrapped the cling film from the first and handed it to his brother. The smell of mustard filled the car, and Lawrie bit into beef and cheese, the hot English mustard round and fiery in his mouth. Lawrie doled out the other two sandwiches, these curried egg. The boys wiped their lips and fingers on tissues from the glove box. Lawrie opened a bottle of water for Brett and handed it to him. Brett sipped twice, his eyes never leaving the road.

"Thanks. We'll be there soon." The blue arrow on the navigator panel grew shorter, and read: Trip Remain: 12.7 km. Brett smiled. "Hey, what's the story with you and Lise?"

Lawrie raised his eyebrows. "Nothing, why?"

"She's hot for you, man. C'mon, you taking her out, with benefits, what?"

Lawrie shook his head vigorously. "Seriously, nothing." He blushed, "but it would be nice."

Brett laughed. "Mate, ten to one she's a firecracker. 'Nice' wouldn't even go close."

"She's not interested in me. Women in general, it seems." Lawrie shrugged. "Not my luck."

"Bullshit." Brett laughed again.

"What?" Lawrie said.

"I'm just saying that, from what I've observed, she's into you, man. Just nudge it in the right direction, respond to it."

Lawrie snorted. "What about you? Any Mrs. Bliss that we don't know about? Mum would have freaked if she was a grandmother and didn't know it."

Brett shook his head. "Not with my lifestyle, mate. Too often up and off, middle of the night before Christmas, for a family life. I'm a soldier, at the pleasure of His Majesty's Government. No room for anything else, not in my line of work. The life ruins marriages. And relationships. I've seen it time and again. There's always one party left sitting with tears in their eyes."

"Isn't that lonely?"

“You’ve got your mates. Your team is your family. The folks you work and live—and die—next to. That’s the job. Besides, it’s no lonelier than still living with your mother.”

Lawrie sighed. The navigator warned them to slow, that their next turn was 500 metres on the right. Brett braked steadily, and stopped at the white milk urn that served as a post-box; it sat atop a blackened tree stump. A gate stood closed, and the car crunched to a halt on the shoulder, facing up a winding gravel track. Lawrie unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed out. He unwound the short metal chain and the gate swung open. The breeze had increased, and his nipples hardened and he shivered. Brett drove through and Lawrie let go of the gate, which swung closed with a rattling clunk, and he carefully re-wound the chain. They drove up the hill, darkness wrapping the path ahead as the fireball sun sank below the ridge.

The old stone farmhouse, with ivy climbing across its front, sat high on the hill, near the crest. Galvanised sheds were scattered around, each connected to fat black plastic rainwater tanks. Every roof surface had a solar panel. On the upslope above the house a series of raised gardenbeds run wild with weeds. Long rows of firewood huddled along the wall of the carport, where Lise’s car sat. The front light was on, and smoke rose from the other side of the house, giving the air a throaty richness as the brothers climbed from the car.

Brett smiled at Lawrie. “This is great.”

A shaft of white light spread as the front door opened, and Jeena stood there for a second before shouting back into the house: “Mum, they’re here.”

From the back corner of the carport came the reply. “Thanks, J.” Lise walked forward toward Brett. “Welcome.”

Lawrie came around the car, afraid of the limp in his step, his eyes on his shoes, his cheeks flushing as Lise and Brett embraced. Lise wore jeans and a flannelette shirt over workboots and a floppy hat on her head. He wanted her, but felt tied into twelve million knots. She took his hands and leant up to kiss him briefly on the cheek. His blush intensified.

“Come out the back, we’ve got the fire-pit going and are just about to load up the hotplate.”

Brett took Jeena by the hand as she led the way. Lise held Lawrie’s shoulder, her gaze cataloguing his bruises and aches, and smiled at him. “You don’t have to say

anything because Brett' told me the major points. We were so worried when you didn't come home, and then the police found your car, keys in it and blood on the door. I cried for you, and then Brett rang and explained a couple of things and asked us to help you, so here we are. I'm here for you, Lawrence. You'll be safe here, it's a healing place."

Lawrie felt the knots inside him and wondered.

Jeena cleaned away the crockery and cutlery when asked, and Brett leaned back in his folding chair, feet close to the fire, and burped. Everyone laughed, and Lise followed with louder belch. Lawrie put down his glass of water as the others faced him.

"I'm a gentleman, and will not be joining your game of outrageous table manners."

Brett laughed, and Lise slapped Lawrie across the upper arm. She watched him flinch, and watched him recover quickly and smile, if a little contrived.

Physical or mental?

She watched the way both he and Brett kept looking around, snapping their gaze whenever a noise came out of the darkness. She observed their light banter, the way they both inserted pauses into their speech.

Both careful.

They were so very much brothers, despite the time and distance.

And they're both wounded.

"To answer your question, Lise, Japan was the coolest place I've seen. I was lucky, getting that posting, and able to immerse myself in their language and culture. The Japanese are both fantastically uptight and incredibly relaxed, in different ways. Different from Australia, I mean. We are also uptight and relaxed, but different from the rest of the world. I guess, it makes culture what it is."

"What's it like? Their culture and stuff? I've backpacked across southeast Asia and India," Lise said, "but never north Asia."

"There's this Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima, he was a weird cat. He wanted to be the last samurai. Anyway, the samurai compose a poem, a *jisei*, on the eve of their great battles. The kamikaze pilots did it, but so did the Diggers at Gallipoli and guys like Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and TS Eliot. War has always inspired poetry, but the Japanese do best, especially when they know they're going to die. Mishima wrote his

jisei before he committed *hara-kiri* after staging a failed coup in 1971. It's a beautiful bit of verse:

*A small night storm blows
Saying 'falling is the essence of a flower'
Preceding those who hesitate*

"What does it mean," Lise asked Brett, rapt. Lawrie saw her expression and a stabbing pain pierced his chest.

"Can fanatical baseball worship really replace one thousand years of warrior culture?" Brett paused. "Mishima didn't think so, despite living a very Western lifestyle himself."

Jeena came out with four small glasses and a bottle of port on a silver tray. The increasing wind huddled everyone closer to the fire, and ripped the smoke away from the chimney pot. Lise poured out three full measures and a half-measure for Jeena and handed them around.

Brett stared at Lawrie for a moment, making a small gesture with his hand, but Lawrie looked confused. Brett shook his head and raised his glass. "To Lise and Jeena. To sanctuary."

Lawrie felt stupid.

Lise beamed and raised her glass. "Sanctuary."

Lawrie and Jeena followed suit together, and everyone sipped the sweet wine.

"Nice," Brett said, picking up the bottle to read the label.

"Penfolds Grandfather port, from my grandfather's cellar. It's an old bottle, but what the hell."

The fire and the meal kept them transfixed until Brett sat up suddenly, exhaled deliberately, and stood. He said: "Time to crack on. We've got planning to do."

Lawrie had been thinking about the darkness of the hood, and about how he imagined light and shadow during his captivity. Thinking about how scared he'd been as these imaginings grew stronger, more real.

He'd hallucinated light and shadow and colour. One of those hallucinations had been of fire, crackling away.

Brett's command cut through the trail of his thoughts, and Lawrie shook his head to recapture the thread. *Fire. Why was I thinking about fire?*

Lise sat with her legs tucked underneath herself, but now she slipped her feet into her shoes and inched forward on the seat, eyes wide and focussed on Brett.

“Here’s the who, what, when, where and why.” He ticked each off on his hand.

He looked at the group in turn; Jeena was already nodding, Lise nodded, but Lawrie seemed to have faded out.

“Lawrie, you okay, mate?”

Lise leaned forward and Lawrie looked around and frowned, “What?”

“You’re drifting, buddy, you okay?” Brett stood still. “I need you here and now, then you can get a proper sleep.”

“I’m here,” Lawrie scoffed, and waved a hand at Brett.

“Thank you. Been a stressful few days, you most of all. I’m sorry about what you went through, although perhaps I don’t know the half of it. We’ve got to talk for a couple of minutes to get stuff sorted.”

He turned toward the fire and tossed on another split log. A brief shower of sparks rose upward to flare briefly before being carried away on the breeze, before Brett could drop the mesh back across the pit. Lawrie felt the tinge of a memory, from far away.

“Here’s the situation. The worst elements of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country kidnapped Lawrie—and certainly tortured him for the fun of it—in order to get me to do something for them, to promise something. Which I did and they let Lawrie go, with their word to leave him alone. Maybe they’ll keep that promise, but I don’t plan on giving them the option. I’m also being pressured by the Feds. One serious Fed, either AFP or ASIO, is riding me to get inside the Sons of the Sunburnt Country, so that’s what I did. I’ve figured out what everyone needs to do so that life can return to normal as quickly as possible.”

“Wait.” Lawrie held up a hand. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The spooks are squeezing me to get inside, and then rat on, the insurgency, and the insurgents want me to work for them, so they kidnapped you. I made a deal with both sides.”

“Ohh, like Becky El in *The Warrior*.” Jeena said. “She kicks ass.”

“You made a deal? To do what?”

“To kidnap the Minister for Foreign Affairs.”

“Why?” Lawrie looked confused and Lise looked sick.

“Probably so they can behead him on TV.”

“What?” said Lawrie.

“Agent Daniels—the ASIO guy I’ve been avoiding—threatened us. He’s a credible threat.”

Lawrie shook his head.

“Everything’s messed up, Lawrie, although I couldn’t have told you how much without increasing the risk to you.” Brett shrugged. “The Feds would have locked you up under the *Loyal Australian Act* and then you’re in a pit of hell. No lawyers, far fewer procedural constraints, the whole power of the government squeezing your balls.” Brett made a fist. “Literally.”

He sat upright, clutching the arms of the folding chair with white claws.

“I promise I’ll get them, mate,” Brett said flatly. The look between Brett and Lawrie lasted, and the stillness of the exchange ended when Lawrie nodded and slumped his shoulders.

Jeena looked away, into the fire, and Lawrie admired the way the firelight flickered shadows across her smooth cheeks. He wanted to throw her down and the ground and bite at her. He wanted to hear her cries. And the savagery of these impulses shocked him. Then the memory of being held against the floor, the memory of the violation, caused a rushing rage in his chest. He moaned and slumped into his chair, holding his violence to himself like a coat in a winter wind.

“Lise,” Brett said, “you’ve medical training?”

Lise nodded. “three in the emergency room of University Hospital.”

“Outstanding. Here’s what I’m asking you to do. Please look over Lawrie, before he goes to sleep; I think he’s got a cracked rib that needs binding, and abrasions. Probably light internal bleeding, but he’s still upright so there’s not too much wrong. You’ll see the swelling if it changes. Ring the ambos.”

“Stool changes.” Lise nodded.

“Thank you. Lawrie might have a crook couple of days, but he’ll improve quickly if you get him up and about. But keep yourselves local and low-profile.”

Lise nodded and Brett turned to Jeena.

“I’m sorry, mate, but this needs to stay between the four of us, okay?” Jeena nodded eagerly, and Brett continued. “You cannot tell anyone, no friends, nobody, because word gets around and everyone’s safety depends on it. Men may try and come

and hurt everyone. Your mum's safety depends on you not saying anything to your friends. Do you promise?"

"I promise," Jeena said, and Lise smiled.

"Lawrie, how you doing?" Brett's voice cut through Lawrie's thoughts.

Kill them, then myself—

"What?" Lawrie barked.

"Mate, please go with Lise so she can check out those ribs of yours."

"Bugger off, there's nothing wrong but some bruising."

"BS, Lawrie. I know what you're going through. You've been doing it tough, and you still are. It's bad, you're doing tremendously to get through today, but I need you now to focus on putting everything that happened before today in a little box, then close it and ignore it for the time being. Your main effort needs to be getting better, getting well. Lise can help with that, and it's why we came here."

"Please, Lawrie," Jeena said, "Mum's great."

Lise stood and walked to stand in front of Lawrie's chair, both hands out, palms up. She smiled, saying "Come on, let's take a look at these bruises."

Lawrie took her hands, feeling the warm softness of her palms as she helped him up. The pain in his ribs was real, and that deflated his need to argue.

"Jeena," Lise said, "Please get the medical kit from under the sink and bring it to the spare bedroom. Then teeth and get yourself off to bed, please."

Lights came on in the house, and Brett was left with the fire and his heavy thoughts.

There's no way to do this by myself.

He thought about how to bring Daniels into the game, and when, because too much notice would force Daniels to report the threat and thus blow the plan. Brett could imagine that Daniels might use the Minister as the tethered goat, a tempting target to draw the opposition into a prepared ambush, but too many other voices in the chain of command would veto such a risky move. But Daniels could summon the extra guns of the AFP's Specialist Response Unit if he took the Minister in Canberra or SAPOL's STAR Force in Adelaide, if the Minister was in his constituency.

Timing and location, that's the key.

Thoughts of the thick fort walls at his back and the towelies outside the perimeter seeped into consciousness. The red embers and swirling smoke lulled Brett.

His feet were warm, and he wanted to relax, to let the months drop away, back to the bar in Orlando with Jacko after the mission briefing with the liaison officers at Central Command in Tampa. The LO's had commandeered a US Army helicopter to fly them across Florida after wrangling VIP passes to Disney World. The Florida night had been alive with insects and bats, and Jacko had out-sculled the CIA's Afghanistan desk officer, and then staggered alongside Brett's steadiness through dark streets as they went in search of a cab after the bar closed.

"Pikers!" Jacko waved as the short haircuts of the US military guys headed off the other direction. "Softcock muppets!" He sprinted after and collided with Brett.

"Samurai, you're a legend." Jacko punched Brett's arm. "You always get me home safe, but once, by God, I want to see you drink something! Janine says it's because you drank too much, your first time out, and it put the fear into you!"

Brett smiled and kept on scanning the street for a cab, but still making the foot-slog back to the hotel.

It's only a couple of miles, and he'll sober up and feel better tomorrow for the walk.

Jacko laughed and slapped his thigh, bent forward. "You! Afraid!" He laughed again.

"I promised her that I'd get you home to see your little girl," Brett said. They'd been re-deployed en route from the mission rehearsal exercise, and missed the pre-operational leave. The withdrawal back to the archipelago around Australia had flared some resentment among the Americans, especially the US Army and Marine commanders used to having the SASR on their order of battle. These were highly respected units, flexible and tough and independent. The Americans loved them, and would miss more than the flag on the pole.

Jacko stood upright with such a look of sadness that Brett worried that he was crying. Jacko pulled out his wallet and opened the flap to reveal two small photos, one his pregnant wife and the other a sonogram.

"I want to be there, mate, and to hell with the Army."

Brett had nothing to say, his own emotions a choking knot in his throat, so he slapped an arm around his best friend and resumed the walk to the hotel—

Brett sat up with a jerk—

—*where's my weapon*—

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the memory/dream bright and real, and he felt shame for not having his rifle sweeping in tight arcs.

Brett's eyes darted through the darkness. His nostrils flared. He rose to his feet, fluidly. A plume of red embers came out of the chimney pot. The sound that woke him replayed itself, a cracking noise, from the fire. He backed up regardless, finding a shadow to fall back into, and no weapon in his hands to calm himself with. He slipped on the Oakleys and powered them. Nothing moved, and the fire-pit glared white and orange, but nothing else of significance. His hands began to shake. He wanted to cry, in relief and despair. His breathing came hard, as if something were crushing him, suffocating him. He clutched backward for the wall, and found the hot-water heater sitting on a raised concrete pad. Brett scrunched himself into the corner it formed and put his head to his knees.

—you fucking girl—

After a while, Brett found himself breathing easier. He felt calmer, too, but the waves of loathing remained as an echo.

Must get going.

TWELVE:

Lawrie woke, heart pounding, into the inky darkness of a country bedroom, without streetlights and passing headlights or the glowing sky reflected off low clouds to lighten the room. There was no red glow of an alarm clock. His mother had always kept a small night-light on in the toilet, and Lawrie hardly knew life without that fuzzy line of illumination at the bottom of his bedroom door. He'd been a sleepwalker, and that bar of light had often been at the centre of a hazy awakening, head pressed against the door and the plush-pile carpet. But this room was completely dark, with heavy drapes closed against the moonless night. Wind rustled trees outside. Lawrie's back was drenched in sweat, and he huffed away the dream with rapid breaths. The panic receded, although the sensation of being chased still lived bright, and the blankness of the dark bedroom took on the threat of his nightmare.

The hood!

He felt the malevolence under the bed, ready to grasp a dangling hand or foot. He reached out, arm jerking around, probing for what lay beyond the surface of the bed. His breathing sped up, loud panic screaming inside his head. He tried blinking, but the dream-fear kept him blind. He reached into darkness, and found nothing to hold on to.

“Ark!” Lawrie shouted, and toppled forward.

His legs, still tangled in the sheets and blankets, twisted this fall, and Lawrie collapsed to the floor between the bed and the wall. He came full awake with sharp pain in his shoulder and forehead. The overhead light came on, and he looked upside down at Lise, her hair mussed and falling forward as she bent over him.

Lise put her arms under his, hugging him as she squatted, then lifted with her knees. Lawrie flailed, trying to help but really just hindering. Then he was sitting upright on the bed, his T-shirt scrunched and twisted, his brow sweaty and flushed. Lise put her hands on her hips and leant back, admiring her effort.

“Whew!” she blurted, shaking a hand as a fan. “Wasn't that exciting?”

Lawrie's consciousness, still scrambled, answered with a firm “Nark!”

Lise laughed. “Too true.” Then she reached over and tugged down the hem of his shirt. “Let's get you sorted.”

Lawrie sat, mute and malleable as Lise smoothed out the bedding. Lawrie was still paralysed with the terror of his dream as the real world jutted in. It rose above him, threatening like a wave breaking on a reef. Lawrie hated surfing, having developed into

it one summer, long days of queuing up to take your wave, fighting the older boys who harassed you out past the breakers, and the men would just swim through you, or blatantly drop in, safe in their size and menace, swearing and threats hissed through clenched teeth. Lawrie hated physical confrontations, particularly fistfights, so he stopped going out, sick of the anxious march back to the road, his board clutched protectively against the other surfers, their gangs and taunts. The fear won over the pleasure of riding a tube. Lawrie had only ever fought one fight, but observed many others as part of the braying crowd on the school oval after the second afternoon bell with a setting winter sun orange against the cold and damp. Lawrie's fight, in the 7th grade, came on the day after Brett had run away, on the day after his father died.

A tearful cadre of the girl's close friends had spread their stories about what Brett had done, and the school was alive with the scandal. Brett was guilty by absence, and Lawrie started getting the shouts and stiff shoulders between classes after morning recess. Moments later, several older boys closed around him, shoving him back and forth. Billy Gibson and some of the school football team wore their jerseys over their uniform shirts, with a training session later in the day, flaunting the school's prescriptive uniform policy. Gibson, having a growth spurt, had challenged Brett's claim on the captaincy of the school cricket team. Gibson was rugby, strength and power, but Brett was pure Aussie Rules, long muscle-mass, speed and agility.

"Beat up girls, do ya?" Billy Gibson said. His was a second rower in the winter and opening batsman in the summer.

"Bliss, your brother's gonna hang!"

"And you're gonna hang!"

The bell rang overhead, and the tide of students left a gap for Lawrie to dive away into the passing crowd. The boys kept up their abuse, even when Mr. Wembley, the tall gym teacher, bounded up the stairs and stood staring at them with his arms crossed. Gibson, the smarter of the lads, covered his mouth and made a gesture. The boys laughed, eyeing off Wembley with sidelong glances and boisterous shoving and swearing. The Principal, Mrs. Cross, walked briskly down the hallway, her stout black shoes clacking on the tiles.

"Classes, please, ladies and gentlemen, back to class." She frowned at Billy and his cronies, and then Lawrie was down the corridor and up the stairs into Math class. The police moved through the school over the next half-hour, walking through the

corridors. Then Mrs. Cross came on the public address system and requested staff and students to remain in their classrooms until further notice. Lawrie sat in the front row, miserable as spitballs sprayed in from the back row, the teacher seemingly oblivious. Schoolyard rumours had Brett arrested, or dead, and the girl was dead too, or just in a coma, and the kids turned on Lawrie, led by Gibson and the rest of the rugby team. The cricket team polarised, and a fear rippled through the student body.

The night before, in the park with many of the first eleven, Brett became a hero, a man against a girl. Male power had been explored, taboo tested, naked force exposed; Brett always the first in his class or age group to try something new, something attractive and dangerous and prohibited. He led from the front. Yet, now a stronger, more frightening collective power imposed itself, taking names and asking questions, that of warrant and badge and cold white cells with hard seating. The school turned against Lawrie on the day after his father died and Brett ran away.

For one so long protected by his big brother's reputation, its removal brought Lawrie a new kind of suffering. Maureen, through blank, uncaring shock, had decreed a normal school day, but Lawrie dragged his feet to arrive through emptying halls after the long bell rang at the end of morning recess. Lawrie had double English first up, but he'd finished the novel and Mr. Sterling signed a week-long note for study periods in the library. Lawrie had used that time to search for Brett on the way to school, visiting the nest of bushes behind the dental surgery and the storm drain at the base of the raised train-tracks. Eventually, before lunch and in front of the Math class, Mrs. Cross escorted a policeman with a thin blonde moustache who called his name, and Lawrie dragged his bag through rows of hostile stares. The silence was total, and Lawrie's eyes burned.

"My office, please, Lawrie," said Mrs. Cross, and led the way. The copper picked up Lawrie's bag and walked behind the sad boy. They kept him there for three hours, unable to contact his mother. They didn't ask any questions, and nobody explained anything, and Lawrie grew more and more confused and terrified.

Is Brett dead too?

Is Mum dead too?

Lawrie fidgeted in the armchair in Mrs. Cross's office, and he watched the noisy, burbling tide of children leave school at the end of the day. The Principal's telephone rang often, but she mostly bustled around in the outer office with the police and government people, many of who had set up laptops in the executive staff-room.

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Lawrie flinched at the sudden shrillness from the office doorway:

“Go straight home, Lawrie.” Mrs. Cross barked. Lawrie complied, the afternoon damp and chilly after a the shower but glittering in the setting sun, drops of water freckling the light from every surface. Walking across the oval, the shimmering light from the multitude of droplets kept Lawrie hypnotised long enough for Gibson and the others to head him off at the far end of the concrete cricket pitch.

“We’re going to do to you what your brother did to that girl,” Gibson said, and Lawrie flinched back into reality with a start. He ran, fast. But Gibson tackled him easily. Gibson’s mates formed a rough circle around them. They pushed Lawrie toward the middle, shouting.

A slender American woman, out walking her dog, a fat brindle boxer that waddled and drooled thick white ropes, shouted an intervention. She was small, but her voice carried both command and intensity. The boys responded, and fled, Gibson last to go—he stopped to spit on Lawrie—before he joined the exodus. The American, purple glasses and exquisite blue eyes, smiled as she frowned and made an ‘aw’ noise and knelt down to help Lawrie. A teacher hurried up to them, phone pressed against his ear, and then a police cruiser, lights flashing silently, rolled across the oval. Lawrie felt disoriented, and the fussing crowd seemed separated from him by a layer of thick glass.

And here, with Lise fussing around the bed and the throbbing ache of his ruined face and broken ribs, he felt it again: numb, detached, frozen.

It’s not fair.

But he spoke anyway, from a need unseen and uncontrollable:

“Mum had a breakdown, when Brett left, because that’s when Dad died, and she couldn’t cope, so she tried to kill herself. I found her, one afternoon after school.”

Lawrie didn’t look at Lise, and he appreciated that she sat on the bed, a little bit away from him, and she didn’t say a word.

She’s listening.

He felt an easing, almost an absence, of the chattering that always hammered away in the back of his mind.

Lise was a silence, a stillness, the focus of the universe, waiting for him to speak again. Lawrie felt her stillness, her attention, and that made talking to Lise, plainly and simply, the most natural thing he’d ever known.

Winnie the Pooh pjs, Lawrie thought, and he wanted to giggle. As she bent to stroke his arm, her breasts pressed against the flannette, and her nipples poked against the material, and Lawrie wanted to kiss her and he felt guilty about his lust.

“And she would have succeeded,” Lawrie continued, “according to Officer Tracey Wells, the policewoman who drove me around that night, except that I got beaten up at school and Officer Wells took me home.” Lawrie shrugged. “I hated her for it. Mum. For being weak.”

Lawrie stopped, his eyes trapped on the backs of his hands and his mouth full of tears. But he wouldn't let the tears come. Lise again stretched across the bed toward him, her warm hands taking his in accepting silence, her eyes and forehead saying ‘I care’ and her half-smile saying ‘it's all okay’.

Lawrie fought to sit upright, to force his breathing to come deep and regular, to force the waves and waves of tears away. After some moments, he thought that perhaps the silence was uncomfortable for Lise, that perhaps he needed to say something, to do something, to thank her. As he thought it, she squeezed his hands. He squeezed in response.

“We can talk about it tomorrow,” Lise said, “in the sunshine. Go back to sleep.”

Lawrie lay down, and Lise sat beside the bed, stroking his hair. Lawrie couldn't imagine sleep would be possible, but he was out almost instantly, and Lise sat for a while longer, listening to his breathing lengthen.

He woke, tucked under the covers with a full bladder and a body complaining from every angle. Glowing sunlight surrounded the drapes. Lawrie struggled to get himself upright and facing the room, and then it was a matter of leaning and falling forward till his momentum met with the gritty burning lift of his quadriceps. Grunting, Lawrie straightened and shuffled toward the closed door. It was an old-fashioned farmhouse, with high doorhandles and higher ceilings. The floorboards squeaked and the round light-switch was made from chocolate-brown Bakelite. Lawrie stopped and turned to look at the dark mahogany bedroom set, the grey floral carpet, and the pictures on the walls in heavy frames hanging from a picture-rail. The room was a nostalgia visit to a memory; one of Mum's aunts and her museum house? He recognised that faltering genteel decline, trapped in decades past, an archaeology of meaning and kitsch and dust. He looked around, confused as to what he was doing, and what had interrupted him from doing it.

Lawrie shrugged, his bladder demanding relief.

After flushing, he turned into the adjacent bathroom to find Lise arranging a hand-towel on the basin. She looked up and smiled.

“Good morning, Lawrence, how are you doing this morning?”

Lawrie returned the smile and found an extra straightness for his back. He washed his hands and tried to smell how horrible his morning breath was.

“Fair to middling, thanks, Lise, yourself?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful outside! The sun is shining, and I’ve been enjoying that early morning life, with the birds going and the air so clear, it’s about the most beautiful place. I’ve been down to take care of the neighbour’s chickens, so we’ve got fresh eggs, and I’ve made a start on clearing out the veggie patch again.”

“This is your place?”

Lise nodded. “Been in the family since the turn of the previous century, x amount of fathers ago. The neighbours have been tending it for me, since it became officially mine a couple of years ago.” Lise turned her palms toward the ceiling: “Where does the time go? I’m so old!”

He made a scoffing motion.

“You ready for something to eat?” Lise said,

Lawrie realised that they still stood in the small bathroom, quite close to each other, and he felt foolish, lacking in something gallant, interesting, or even human.

“Eggs would be great, thank you.”

Lise led him into the kitchen, which hung on the back of the house. The floor was solid here, flagstones thick with the dust and grease of years galore. The two windows gathered the morning sun into themselves, filling the room with a golden light. One end was stove and fridge and sink, and the other end was the six-seat dining table, more dark chocolate wood with a history as possibly as long as white men in these parts.

“Where’s Brett?” Lawrie asked, looking out the windows, up the gentle slope, a rim of gum trees and craggy rock formations.

“He’s out and about,” Lise said, pointing to the pot on the benchtop. “Tea?”

“Please.”

“You sure you wouldn’t prefer coffee? I can cappuccinate in two seconds flat.”

“Tea’s excellent, please. Someone told me once about its wonderful restorative properties.”

Lise smiled at him but she didn’t laugh.

Moron, Lawrie thought, *you're embarrassing yourself.*

Lise cooked him breakfast while he drank his tea, the smell of eggs and bacon making his stomach growl, and Lawrie insisted on helping with the washing-up, and then he followed her out the back door and down the vegetable patch. She'd cleared a large section, and Lawrie bent his back to the task with great enthusiasm.

For an hour or more he crabbed along the outside as the sun climbed the sky, reaching in to grasp a weed by its stalk, right down close to the ground, and he pulled, dragging the pest's roots out in a clump of brown soil. He tapped each clump until the soil fell away, and he tossed the weed into a pile beside the garden-bed.

"Great thing about raised beds," Lise said, "makes this job that little bit easier!"

Lawrie straightened, with jaggling pains shooting up his back as he did. He made a face and said "Ouch, yeah, sure."

Lise laughed and Lawrie smiled.

"Excuse me for just a sec," she said.

He bent back down, and enjoyed the sun on his back and the breeze that feathered its way past every now and again. The soil was good here, rich and moist; the whole valley was green. Not lush, certainly, the drought had gone on and on, but this little corner of the world must catch the right winds to keep some light showers arriving on a regular basis. Not enough to bring out the lushness, but enough to keep the steel-grey look out of the gum trees that covered each side of the valley.

Lise returned, carrying a tray with a jug of iced water, two glasses, a silver blister-pack of small orange pills, and a large envelope. She stopped on the veranda and placed the tray on the coffee table sitting between two wicker chairs. She waved him into the shade and poured water. Ice cubes chinked as they tumbled into the glass. Lawrie climbed the two steps and entered the shade, plucking the baseball cap from his head and wiping his forehead with the back of forearm. He sat where Lise pointed and accepted the glass.

"Fluids, Lawrence, and please take two Nurofen."

He complied, taking big gulps from the glass. They sat, listening to the emptiness, the insects filling the background, a constant hum punctuated by the caws and screeches of magpies and kookaburras. Lawrie sipped the cold water, feeling its constriction along his throat, feeling the chill of the shade as a drifting breeze evaporated the sweat from his back and his brow.

Lise put a hand on his knee and said efficiently: “Brett’s gone, Lawrence. He took off late last night; he certainly didn’t sleep in the bed.” Lise handed the envelope to Lawrie. “He left that.”

A tangy disappointment in his mouth, Lawrie breathed out to force his thoughts to re-arrange. That little boy, all those years ago, he was still sitting here, hoping for his big brother to take care of everything, to fix the worst problems and always keep him safe.

“Brett runs, from family stuff.” Lawrie said it offhandedly, as if writing a report at work, not involved with the abstract numbers on the screen. “He always has.”

Lise watched the tremor of control as it crossed and re-crossed Lawrie’s expression. And she felt a twisting in her chest.

Lawrie tapped the envelope on his knee to give vent to the urge to scream obscenities at the horizon. He tapped gently, deliberately.

“I don’t care. We have nothing in common, anyway, and there’s too much bad blood between us. I barely know the man, and the boy who was my brother is long gone.” Lawrie shrugged his shoulders and forced a brighter shade of smile onto his face.

Lise wondered, and re-filled Lawrie’s water glass. “I’m feeling like going for a walk, shortly, up across the top paddocks, to check the fences and gates. Come with me?”

“Sure,” Lawrie said, turning his too-bright smile on her. “I’m feeling the need to stretch my legs.”

The morning sun again flooded Lawrie, and the steep incline started a gentle burn in his thighs, so familiar and longed-for. He set a conscious breathing rate, each stride long and purposeful. Beside him, comfortable and easy in her gumboots and jeans, Lise kept the pace without complaint.

As they crested the second rise, aiming for the clearing through the eucalypts, the valley dropped away and Lawrie worried that he couldn’t shake the stoniness from his thoughts. Brett had run away, again, and the hurt little boy in Lawrie’s heart cried out ‘unfair’.

“My grandparents had this place, before me, and I’m ashamed to say that I’ve let it go quite a bit in the wrong direction.”

Lawrie halted, awareness coming slowly that he should say something.

He frowned, looking at the slightly too-long grass. “But you live in the city.”

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“We get up here at least once a week. Sometimes twice, depending on my shifts. Less so over winter, when Jeena has school. There’s a lot of upkeep, and when the weather’s warm that increases.”

“You moved for her schooling?”

Lise nodded. “And socialisation. It’s very isolating, working the land. You spend long amounts of time alone.”

“Good for the imagination. Having this much spread to run around and explore would have been great fun, I bet. I spent my teenaged years in my father’s shed.”

“I came here most weekends of my kid-dom, working alongside Pop in the fields, driving the John Deere, or with Nan around the house and yard. Going into town to pay bills or stop in at the pub were real treats, but you’re exactly right, I had a pony and a motorbike and hundreds of acres as my own domain. There’s a stand of trees, on the back quarter, that I called the Witch’s Den. It was dark and overgrown, and the rabbit-trails let me crawl in. There were spider webs and Brutus—our blue heeler—wouldn’t follow me. He’d stand outside and bark, dancing around in that funny half-bow of his, wagging his thick tail.”

She shivered, and Lawrie sensed something.

“Come on,” he said quietly, “the wind is nippy and you’ve got to show me the places you loved.”

Lise smiled and led the way.

* * *

The map pinned to the wall was covered with transparencies showing red and blue arrows and a myriad of military symbols: form-up area, block, attack by fire, phase lines, objectives, long/lat coordinates, time hacks. Brett made notations in the map’s margins from the notepad on his knee. Timings would be the key, in both the snatch and the escape. On one wall was Canberra, on the opposite was Adelaide. The Minister’s schedule, burned into Brett’s brain, had been updated again this morning. Phelan, wearing black boots, black jeans and a black linen sports shirt, carried it in and handed it around. Each copy was numbered, and shred-and-burn was a constant task.

“How reliable is this?” Brett said, after scanning the paper without raising his head.

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Phelan smiled. “Very. A-1, Admiralty.”

Brett put down the load and movement calculator. Phelan preened, ready for the next couple of questions.

He’s got an insider. But he’s also an unstable ego. Brett smiled at the irony of his thoughts. “His Executive Assistant? Assistant to the EA?”

“Realtime. These updates are realtime, my friend; genuine, reliable, realtime HUMINT. You remember the fun in that, don’t you?”

Brett did, indeed. Often, killing was fun, a sense of living unobtainable any other way: the hunt, the chase, the contest. Worse, approbation and acclaim from your peers and superiors for hunting and killing men is a powerful and guilt-complex aphrodisiac. A key cognitive trick of their profession was to accept the reality of their emotional reactions to killing and being killed, to let the emotions flow through them and still hold a sense of purpose, detaching the excitement and the guilt and the shame into separate boxes from the names and faces of the targets.

The battle of the Stoic is one of careful expression.

Brett knew he’d lost that ability, and couldn’t face the terror of not getting it back. Of needing it, as he had his entire professional life, and not having it available.

He walled off the bouts of weeping as best he could, as he walled off the night-time ghosts and demons, the endless profound questioning of his own abilities. Such things, new and terrifying, debilitated Brett’s consciousness. His new reality, his new self, was much more complex.

Phelan roused in Brett a nauseous anger; he now fought to keep his voice neutral:

“I know the fun.” He tossed Phelan’s update on to the table. “This ain’t it.”

The battle of the Stoic is one of careful expression.

During leave at the conclusion of his Initial Entry training, the guys met in Melbourne and cruised the streets for beers before heading through the strip clubs and brothels. As the girl snaked around the brass pole on the stage, her absurd heels and tiny red g-string among the many pointless details Brett noticed around the tacky room, the eighteen-year old Brett felt no arousal. The endless parade of breasts and vaginas, accompanied by the repeated exhortations of the skinny Greek guy up in the DJ booth, seemed both pointless and ultimately degrading. Years later, he finally figured out that these women, doing that job, build a strong and sometimes brittle separate identity to

wear on-stage. Brett felt guilt at the girls' nakedness, and he searched their eyes and their smiles for the women inside, behind the facade. The girl from the park, just a matter of weeks past, stabbed at him.

Drinking and perving on semi-naked young women was part of the Army's culture, a subtle and powerful expectation intensified because Brett was single/no kids. The Singlies had a tighter circle because they weren't running home to families, and they hunted the single person's pursuits as a pack, watching each other's backs whilst egging each other on. Brett had visited many strip clubs, with mates out on the town, over a long military career, dotted with mid-deployment recuperation leave in fleshpots and sin cities around the globe, from Patpong Rd in Bangkok to Trompettersteeg, in Amsterdam's Red Light District.

The post-op recreation of soldiers, across time and space, history and geography, revolves around drinking and fornicating, and this caused Brett challenge. Since the events of his leaving home, so closely connected to everything about his army life, since the screams of the girl and the laughter of his mates in the darkened park at the end of their street, Brett had suffered a profound asexuality. He found only crushing pressure and crippling anxiety in sexual situations, his traumatic attempts at arousal and ejaculation ending in terror and confusion. He felt unmanly. A prostitute laughed at him, on his first operational deployment, a skinny little Timorese woman with flat brown tits and silver stretchmarks across her belly, after they'd tried for twenty minutes to get some stick into his dick. Brett slapped her away, her laughs turning to screams as he started punching and kicking. Brett stood outside of himself, enjoying her sounds of terror as the rage flowed and consumed him. That he could do such a thing scared him. That beating the woman bloody and whimpering gave him a hard-on scared him more.

So Brett developed the Samurai Monk; he went out with the Singlies, but he didn't drink and he didn't do girls or boys. He was the constant Designated Driver. He joked and teased, he laughed and rough-housed, he clowned and relieved his stresses within the safe confines of his comrades. A warrior feels intensely the extremes of emotion, but is proscribed in acceptable means of display. When pressed over a beer by a group of mates or in an interview with the chaplain or the psych, Brett would explain, in a soft and dedicated voice, "I never want to mix the dying and the living". The questions would stop and more than once people had nodded respectfully. Especially after Moresby.

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By the time his Lance Corporal stripes showed wear, the Samurai Monk was a term of endearment, not derision. Brett had read deeply into bushido during his first posting to 1RAR, nicknamed 'Big Blue One', and had questioned his sergeant and platoon commander about kamikazes and suicide bombers. Lieutenant Tugnall called Brett up to his office and offered him a brew before shutting the door and indicating to the spare chair. The officer's PT gear was on a coathanger on the bookshelf, and Brett sat stiff as his CO lectured him for a while about 'the existential warrior ethos'. Brett's head swam, but he saw some connections to what he'd read about honour and a beautiful death. He even managed a few observations and questions, which seemed to impress the CO. Brett braced, and then the officer extended his hand with a smile. Brett rushed to grab his gear for the field training activity, and the Sarge reamed him for being late, but also winked. The Lieutenant then sent a facemail to an academic in Defence intelligence, Dr Antony Trentini, a specialist on cultures of war. Trentini, who spoke with an archaic formality in his facemail, replied directly to Brett with a list of several books. The CO ensured that Brett consumed them, and he sought Brett out during Wednesday afternoon sport and on morning parades. Lieutenant Tugnall persisted with asking his obscure questions, and peppering in his own interpretations, and Brett's reputation as a true believer grew in line with his close-combat and tactical leadership skills. He'd drunk the Kool-Aid, and was promoted accordingly. Now, Brett stared at Phelan, who displayed exactly the kind of zealotry Brett once felt, a dangerous mindlessness both suddenly repugnant yet comfortable and familiar.

Brett's guts wrenched, forever changed by the bundle he'd carried across the desert, that girl with the brilliant eyes and dirty clothes, that dead girl he'd protected even as the towelies forced their way up the stairs of the ancient keep, picking off his guys one by one in the cold, Middle Eastern darkness. The Sarge had lain behind Odey's body, calmly firing, encouraging Jenkins to keep Brett shielded behind the leaking corpses of Big Dick and Little Dick, which she'd stacked to close off the corner furthest from the top of the stairs. Brett cried into the stonework, hugging the girl and whispering to her:

A small night storm blows

Saying 'falling is the essence of a flower'

Preceding those who hesitate

A beautiful death: Brett felt a profound irony at the battle for al-Hazjji Gezrit.

And still Brett huddled to protect that little dead girl, his fighting knife useless. The Sarge loomed, her knife a dream of terror, flashing and cutting and stabbing. The towelies came again, and now Brett fought, his knife his last breath, and he danced with the enemy to protect the dead girl. Then the Search and Rescue birds arrived, and Brett's mind collapsed as friendly troops moved closer. Brett listened, as Phelan droned on, thinking about the girl in the desert.

“We've got reach. We're re-making this nation, my friend, and reviving the spirit of Australia in the hearts of its people. We will uphold those traditions of our rightful heritage, even while the masses are enslaved by the chains of individualism and greed.”

Brett bit back the angry retort, and glued his eyes on the charts and maps in front of him. He wanted to flatten Phelan against the wall and scream into his face. He wanted to smash his fists into the other man's smug mouth. Instead, he breathed out slowly, unfocused his eyes and leaned back.

“We need a close target recce,” Brett said mildly.

Phelan laughed, shaking his head: “No goddam hope.”

Brett exhaled again, audibly now, and put down the pen and crossed his arms. “You say ‘no’ straight up, without a second's consideration?”

“Piss off. How stupid do you think I am?”

Brett ticked the items off on his fingers. “We have no recent video of the sites; the schedules are a dancing panther; there's no plan to hack the security net for camera and alarm access; and the CPP detail is unknown, even if we do know their TTPs.”

“The Protection tactics are ubiquitous, and red-team order of battle isn't important. Their best operators are all over on the Prime Minister's protection detail, and the liaison positions with ASIO and Defence and Homeland Security have sucked out the second-echelon guys. The Foreign Minister will have third raters, at best. Better still, we're making our move after the week-long overtime orgy of the Secretary-General's visit. They'll all be too tired from the United Nations party. Don't sweat about anything other than lucky young agents protecting the principal. Video, okay, yeah, we're light on that, and it bears further work. This is just Mission Analysis, not Decision and Execution, so ease up. Don't JMAP yourself around a tree; Staff College wankers always get too uptight about their precious Joint Military Appreciation Process.

You were much more relaxed as soldier, Brett, whereas umpteen years as an officer has made you linear and bound, somehow. You getting enough fibre?”

Phelan laughed, then continued. “As for the sigs op position on your team, we will have to see who wins the position. That group of potentials is off at another location, working themselves up on the problem, and you don’t need to know anything more than that. You’ll have the best the Sons has got.”

“And I guess you’ve got the same answer for the masses of manpower we’re going to need for this? Can you promise me a platoon of fully capable operators? When do we do mission rehearsal? I’m not running into this shit-pile of CPP—” and Brett slapped the blue-covered manual titled *Australian Federal Police Doctrine Publication 3-8-1: Close Personal Protection: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures*, “—without at least vetting the team.”

“You’ll do what we tell you. Nothing less. That’s what you promised me.”

“And I will. But it’s a suicide mission *without* all this pointless secrecy, and you’re making my job pointlessly hard.”

Phelan laughed, but short and hard, and his eyes stayed wrinkled at the edges. “Mate, for five years I’ve run the best insurgency operation this country’s ever seen, so don’t talk to me about pointless secrecy.”

“Bullshit.” Brett screwed his face up and shook his head. “General Ryan was the brains, not you. He had the political action, not just the police chase. You’re a thug, a psychopath, not a genius freedom fighter. Not a warrior.”

“Ryan was a sentimental old fool. He didn’t have the guts to do what is *necessary*. That’s why we used you to get him in the open, so that Willie Gaunt could clip him. Many people think that *you* clipped the old bastard.”

Brett didn’t know if Phelan knew that General Ryan had been alive when he’d left him in the suburban garage. *Makes sense*, Brett thought, *they’d have known that the old man couldn’t resist coming to Brett, to turn him.*

“Besides,” Phelan continued, “breaking the cycle of apathy in this country takes extreme measures, loud and shocking statements. By any means necessary.”

“Like bombing Coles and beheading innocent people.”

Phelan stared, thin-lipped. “There are no ‘innocents’, mate, you know better than that. Soft-hearted liberal wankers let people come to this country without adopting the language, without learning to appreciate our rules, and now *sharia* law is acceptable?”

No, thank you. I despise an Australia where whole streets in our cities don't have signs in English, but instead have signs in Mandarin and Arabic and Vietnamese. Not just shops, no, actual fucking *street-signs* have to be multi-lingual. The New South Wales government spent millions of dollars replacing street-signs in Cabramatta, just because immigrants are too lazy to learn English. How hard can it be? Yesterday, just yesterday, the SCG Trust announced that Chinese corporations, who are actually owned by the Chinese government, are buying the service contracts at the cricket ground, and then importing workers, who are probably prisoners or actual slaves, to fly in, do the job, and then fly back home to their labour camps.

“How fair is it that Australian jobs are taken from us by the corrupt? Remember, the ex-Premier is Chairman of the SCG Board of Trustees. And his protégé? He's the Federal Minister for Employment, now, isn't he? More inside favours and obscure deals to line the pockets of the rich and powerful at the expense of ordinary working families. Our leaders don't deserve our loyalty, and it is our right—and our responsibility—to re-take that power for the good of all Australians.”

Brett saw the flaws and contradictions in Phelan's rant, but fought the desire to go point/counter-point. He wanted to get outside, to feel the sun and breathe the air. The room stank, and Brett moved toward the door.

“You're right,” he said, turning back to Phelan. “This is just Mission Analysis, so once you've approved the broad outline—” Brett pointed at the wall, “—we can move on.”

“I want three courses of action at each location, and I want to complete COA Dev. by the close of business tomorrow. Prepare to brief me at 1700hrs.”

Brett paused. “What's changed? Course-of-action brief in 15 hours? With just me taking all the roles? How about getting me an S2 and an S4?”

“Use the boys.” Phelan waved toward the lounge-room down the hall. “They're here, they know the jobs, talk to your team.”

Phelan smiled as Brett came back into the room.

“That's right, Brett, me old china plate, Birmo is Int. and Reilly is Transport. Intelligence and Logistics taken care of: there's your 2 and 4. So yes, as you realise, your minders are your brick leaders. They'll operate the two teams at your side. Go meet the troops.”

“You bastard.”

“They’ll do what you tell them, within reason, and I’ll check up like any good CO, but you’re the boss on the ground. You’re in command, get the job done, and everyone walks away happy. I honour my promises, too, you fucking fairy; do the job and you’ll walk free. Then you can run back to your ASIO handlers and debrief them about everything.”

“By which time you’re swamped in publicity and already into a system of prepared safe-houses and transport options.” Brett shook his head. “I hate that guy, Daniels, he’s a nightmare. He tells me ‘do it, or your family name is mud’.”

How could I leave him like I did?

Daniels had his smug little secrets against the Bliss family, and Brett’s own secrets were in there, shining bright and ready to destroy his grandfather’s and father’s work of representing the Bliss name, of service and sacrifice, of heroism and manhood under fire.

His grandfather, Lawrence Reginald Bliss, served in the British Expeditionary Force at the First Battle of Ypres in the Great War. Although gassed, he refused transfer away from the front. He served in the forward HQ, and survived, never to speak of combat until the day that his son Reginald Lawrence Bliss, young and poor in the Great Depression of the London docklands, came home to announce that he needed his father’s signature because he wanted to join the British Army.

Grandfather Bliss attended every Armistice Day Service, but wore no medals and had no regimental friends. He drank too much, too often, and felt guilty all the time.

It was a different life.

He shook Reggie’s hand, disappeared briefly into the bedroom to fetch his suit coat, and then they walked from their cramped rooms above a tobacco shop on Stepney Way to the recruiting station in Whitechapel Road. On the walk, he told his son carefully and dispassionately about the dangers of war, of mates and bullets and blood. He talked of mud and crying for help. He talked, as he packed his brown pipe with Imperial tobacco, of the white clouds that made you cough and shit your pants.

Reginald followed along, amazed, at this rush of intimacy. He nearly stumbled as his old pa recited a poem, as one intones from the Book of Common Prayer:

“In Flanders Fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses row on row,

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*That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.”*

Then, his eyes moist, Lawrence grinned, as he struck the match and puffed life into the bowl, and declared that the greatest danger of war was falling in with Australians.

“Skiving bastards,” he said, puffs of smoke coming from his mouth and nose. “Never trust an Australian. We were moving to the north of Passchendaele, in ‘17, in the lead-up to Third Ypres. Five miles in five months, a colossal waste, but the II ANZAC Corps were mixing their lines with ours, and they stole all our kit, and our rations, and their officers told us to ‘clear off’ and whine to General Monash.”

His dad smiled.

“But they fought, God damn them, those bleedin’ Australians, they fought hard and died well. Poor bastards. We abandoned the position a couple of months later. A colossal waste, the whole bleedin’ thing. Now we’re getting ready to go do it all again, if that muggins Hitler keeps up his game.”

A light drizzle fell from the grey sky, and the foot traffic thickened as they turned the corner onto Whitechapel Road. When his old man stopped, Reggie Bliss saw an uncommon light in his father’s eyes, a gleam of tears and a smile of mates remembered.

“Do us proud, son.”

He sniffed.

“Do your duty, look after your mates, and come home alive. I’ve seen what shite you’re going to end up in, and all you have to do is your duty to your King and your mates, and come home to your dear old ma. And not in that order, despite the toff’s poncy oath.”

His dad signed the paperwork and the tall, grey-haired Sergeant nodding approvingly. The two old soldiers nodded at each other, a secret society of manhood to which they both belonged, and during the oath ceremony Reggie Bliss imagined that he saw a tear on his dad’s cheek.

“E’s a fine lad,” the Sergeant said, “and we’ll make a fine soldier of ‘im.”

Lawrence Bliss nodded and coughed. He withdrew something from his threadbare jacket pocket, something wrapped in off-white tissue paper. He unwrapped it reverentially, revealing a medal on a ribbon. It was tarnished bronze, two inches across, with crossed swords and a crown, on a red, white and blue ribbon.

“The Mons Star,” the Sergeant murmured, “with Clasp.”

Lawrence handed the medal to his son, who received it as if were the Crown itself, a look of awe on Reggie’s young face. He shook Lawrence’s hand again, and said: “Do us proud.”

Reggie Bliss kept that medal, preferring it above his own, later decorations. He kept it in his kitbag, and it travelled with him from Scotland to France. He performed well and became a Commando, winning the Distinguished Service Cross during Operation CHARIOT, the raid on the Normandie Dock in the port of Saint Nazaire. Against regulations, Reggie wore the Mons Star under his tunic. Brett later discovered the legend of his father’s war service, his dedication to serving the nation and its interests. Reggie was mentioned in dispatches and wounded on Sword Beach, June 1944, D-Day, but was repatriated back to Plymouth and thence to London for recuperation, but again joined his unit for Operation MARKET GARDEN. After the war, he used the DSC to get posted into the Territorial Army as a drill instructor for the rest of his career, and used his war pension for drinking and gambling on the nags, remaining a bachelor into his sixties, when cheap air travel to Australia coincided with his age-retirement from the TA. Then he left his rented flat, loaded the heavy sea trunks into the mover’s van, and flew to the new world, his father’s long-past warning of Australians and their ways loud in his ears. In the bottom of his hand-luggage, never more than a foot from his person, was his father’s Mons Star. As a child, Brett would

see his grandfather's medals on ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, where his father would rise in the darkness and ride his bicycle into the city for Dawn Service.

Mum had it.

Brett heard nothing of his father's wartime exploits until he met the Research Librarian at the Australian War Memorial, an older woman with an eye for the strapping young officers that filled Canberra's streets; he talked to her about that medal, and about Dawn Service, and she set about impressing him. She pulled some files from the archives and sent off to England and a couple of weeks later presented Brett with the information in two fat manila folders. She'd researched both his father and his grandfather, and Brett spent hours pouring over the photocopies and printouts, building a picture of these men, his family men, and the combat they saw. He learnt about this hidden aspect of them from the dry descriptions from unit diaries and personnel files. He never knew, until then, the extent of his father's heroism.

Brett imagined the heat of the Normandie Dock, an event that was used as a case study by today's Special Forces: the crumpling and tearing of HMS *Campbelltown* as it rammed the caisson at more than ten knots, and detonation of its explosives, and the Allied troops swarming the wharf to disable the dock facilities and strategically hamper the Nazi war effort. Brett imagined the metal storm of Sword Beach, and the mad push across Europe. Brett read about his father's mission into Arnhem, during MARKET GARDEN, and the massive slaughter that accompanied the seeking of 'a bridge too far'. Brett read the reports of his father, wounded again, parachuting behind enemy lines and attacking bunker positions in pre-dawn raids, to win more medals and more glory. By now, Brett had seen action in three theatres, and he could begin to understand why his father never shared these memories, and understood why he kept the medals close and locked away.

This is what got Brett in the guts, his father's example: heroic stoicism. This is what kept Brett upright, the last steel of his being, a fort yet surviving in the desert. This is what drove Brett into the heat of death, and what drove his secret acts of atonement.

"Mate," Phelan said, "family is the Australian way."

Brett felt a wash of disorientation, a slippage of reality as he agreed with Phelan and appreciated the sentiment, but it ebbed away quickly.

“Get outside, cobber,” Phelan said. “Get some sun on your back, do some stretches, then get back in here and grip up your team. I’ll get the lads assembled for thirty minutes time.”

Brett felt, perversely, a gratitude to Jimmy Phelan. He missed the boisterous bond of his unit, of Big Dick’s endless movie quotes and the bickering between Jacko and Plushy.

But Plushy bought it in the ‘Stan five years ago.

Jacko hated Plushy’s teddy bear, a miniature Paddington on a keychain, a deployment present from his kid and thus a good-luck talisman, and was constantly nicking Paddington and hiding him around the barracks or in someone’s kitbag. Plushy would then follow Jacko around, arguing and pleading to get it back, and Jacko would bear the tide with infinite patience, first denying any knowledge of the act and later, as Plushy got tighter and tighter toward punching someone, then admitting about hearing a rumour. Plushy would rush around all day, tripping across the Q staff in the warehouse or rifling through warming trays in the mess, much to the amusement of the contract kitchen hands, until the horrible little mite would get found. And in a couple of days, it would all start again, a missing teddy bear keychain and a frantic father.

Brett couldn’t recall when Jacko bought it. He had no memory of being informed, or seeing it happen, but he knew it did. Jacko was slogging it across the brown stuff, double-time marching as the towelies encircled them, and the arrival of the 4RAR Commandos that evened up the score.

I lost Jacko in the desert, saving the girl.

Brett was glad to see the Sarge again, she was such a professional operator and knew how to set a hasty defence in every circumstance, which he’d relied on in the field, under fire, the only place where things matter.

How did Jacko die?

Not well, or bravely, or any of the philosophy crap, but physically? Head shot? Bled out? Torn apart by explosives?

And why can’t I remember?

That gobbled at him, inside.

He was my brother.

* * *

Lawrie and Lise stood in the open doorway of the large steel shed at the back of the house. Half-exposed in the afternoon sun lay the long black body and dull chrome of a 1957 Chevy. Lawrie wiped his hands on his pants as he came around the front of the car and put his back to the sun.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

“No,” Lise said, running a soft hand across the bonnet and along the front guard. “Not until she’s washed and polished and running wild on the roads again.”

Lawrie stared as her hand moved, gently and purposeful, and he imagined something else, and he felt his cheeks flush.

“But Helen’s a long way from that.” Lise moved to the driver’s door and popped the bonnet.

Lawrie stood back, unsure, and Lise lifted the slab of metal, which creaked upright.

“Helen?”

Lise smiled. “It was my mum’s name.”

“How long has she been gone?”

Lise laughed. “Do you ever stop asking questions?”

Lawrie frowned, then shook his head. “Mum always reminds me of when I was little, about every word out of my mouth was ‘why’, and how I’d repeat it endlessly.”

“Good, obsessive curiosity will help get Helen running again. There’s a problem, somewhere, in the electrical system, and I’ve never had the time or the help to run it down. Now you’re here, I’m going to fix it, then get her back on the road.”

“How long has she been off the road?” Lawrie said, wiping the dust off the windscreen with his wrist to reveal a faded registration sticker.

“Three years,” Lise said, and laughed again. “God, I am, as Jeena points out, so old.”

“Well, you’re in a world of trouble, because I know nothing about cars and mechanical stuff.” Lawrie smiled, the sun warming his shoulders and the backs of his calves. The tromping across the fields, walking the perimeter of the farm in a couple of hours, ached in Lawrie’s muscles, although now his right knee and right hip throbbed. “I can sling a spanner and use appropriate screwdrivers, but car stuff, not me.”

“I’ll teach you.” Lise said it like had already happened. “And it’s more about having someone to talk to as you work. Helps pass the time as you get to know an engine. I was forever repairing my first bike, a darling little black Suzuki with a crap fuel system. And I know cars, and engines and running gear and all sorts of stuff. I lived with a guy that was big into cars; we often had a motor being rebuilt in the living room or transmission parts spread out in the bathtub. Wayne was a pain, in many ways, but he took what Grandpa taught me about the workings of internal combustion and made it into a passion. I can fix everything from the two-stroke whipper-snipper—” she pointed to the near corner of the shed, where a green Ryobi sat “—to Helen here. I don’t do diesel, and I won’t work on motorbikes anymore.”

There’s a story behind that, Lawrie thought, but didn’t want to interrupt Lise’s exuberance.

“First thing we are going to do is replace the spark-plugs, points and leads.” She touched or pointed at each part as she named it. “If that doesn’t work, which I don’t think it will, then we’ll remove the intake manifold and work our way inward.”

Lawrie raised his hand.

Lise stood up, grinning. “Yes, Master Bliss, you have a question?”

“What’s an intake manifold? And what are points?”

Lise paused. “okay, we’ll take smaller steps to begin with. Spark-plugs create a spark, which ignites the fuel, the force of which moves the cylinder, and makes the car go. The spark is carried by high-tension leads, because there’s a lot of electricity involved. If these leads wear, then not all of the electricity gets through and the motor won’t run properly. The points are a small mechanic device here in the distributor cap, and points have a gap, which opens and closes to control the electricity running to the motor. But little lumps grow on the inside surfaces of the points from all the electricity jumping across the gap. We need to replace the points and set the gap with a feeler gauge, which is like a thin metal spacer.”

“And that will make the car go, will it?”

Lise squinted, and then returned the smile. “You bastard.”

He returned her smile, and, for a couple of seconds, her gaze. He wanted to look away, to hide behind sunglasses, anything but this excoriating openness.

Kiss her, kiss her kiss her—

But he couldn’t.

* * *

Phelan entered the room, sat opposite Brett, and said calmly: “It’s going down in Sydney. Tomorrow night.”

I knew it. “Looking at the schedule, I’m not surprised.” Brett said. “He’s moving about a lot, and your cherished HUMINT isn’t sure which way the schedule is going to go. Plus, the first national emergency that comes along, and those plans change again.”

Phelan nodded. “You okay with that?”

Brett nodded. “I’m not getting work-ups, anyway, so the venue for the shamozzle isn’t really important.”

“You’ll be glad to know that we’re going for the Hilton Hotel.”

“George Street?”

Phelan nodded. “There’s a conference, something run out of the Lowy Institute, a dinner and speeches, but he’s staying at the Hilton. Didn’t you do that thing with Jacko there?”

Brett remembered that night training op, coming down the ropes off the BlackHawk. Sydney’s wind patterns were changeable. He chewed his top lip. “Could be messy.”

Phelan shrugged. “Take him alive, that’s the main thing. Collateral damage isn’t really important to mission success, but try to keep the casualties down.”

Brett laughed, head shaking. “Jacko was so right about you; you’re such a hypocrite.”

“Can you still do it?”

“I won’t enumerate the shortcomings on this poodle-fake,” Brett said, quietly. “If you can secure elevator and door cards, that would be ideal, otherwise we’re going in heavy and hard. We’ve got no time to prepare a room in the hotel, but we’ll still try, and lots of people will end up facing the sharp end. Let me sit down with the boys and sort out some details, then we’ll brief you in two hours.”

“Fair enough,” Phelan said.

Brett knew the Hilton layout, having practiced counter-terrorist manoeuvres there a couple of years ago, but he’d still need an up-to-date floorplan.

Was this Phelan’s plan all along?

Brett remembered the dark and plush corridors of that building, from the glass atrium lobby to the mess of tunnels and service-ways underneath the structure. He couldn't assume the layout was the same, and that was something to get the Intelligence team onto ASAP.

"Yeah," Brett said, noting on his pad: *PIR - Hilton renovations in the last three years?* "Jacko and I did—"

Three years ago, Brett and Jacko rappelled from a helicopter onto the Hilton roof, then breached the top floor and moved down the fire stairs to the hostage room. The public was warned that the exercise would be conducted, and not to fret at the low helicopters and men with weapons and camo paint on their faces. And Brett remembered Jacko in the desert, sprinting into the darkness, drawing away the roaring engines and harsh, deadly spotlights. The towelies had started using white Toyota Hi-Ace vans with .50-calibre gun cupolas modified into the roof.

"God knows who told them how to do it," Jacko said over the net, panting as he ran, "but it's a bloody good bit of kit." And he led the guns away from Brett and his mates and the clutch of surviving civvies.

Cycling through his team's biosigns with a series of finger-twitches, Brett's goggles revealed that everyone's stimulant implants were empty. He felt the fatigue as an invisible lead weight, but kept it in a separate compartment, in his mind, only to be monitored remotely. He could refuse the pain, the weariness, the urge to flop to the ground and gulp down lungfuls of air. His webbing rubbed around his waist, and a series of blisters had built and burst on his right foot. But these were trifles, locked in their own little boxes. And he monitored Jacko's biosigns for as long as he could.

Brett hitched the dusty bundle in his arms, adjusting the way his weapon hung down his side, and kept up the pace toward Gezrit.

"I can help her, too," Jacko had said, right before the last of the technicals came sweeping around the rocky outcropping, and its twin cannon opened up on the small group of Australians. He remembered Jacko's grin, wide and impish. He remembered cycling through the data later, in the fort, and the numb urgent panic of seeing the steady red lines and displays against Jacko's name. But he couldn't penetrate the blackness that covered the moments in between, the firing and the running and the dying. It was surreal, and horrible, and even beginning to remember it brought the rushing tears, so inappropriate and yet irresistible.

“Hey,” Phelan said, shrugging his shoulders, “Jacko was my mate too.”

Brett burned, and forced the logic of Phelan’s words into a reasonable sentence. “He was the best kind of mate.”

Phelan nodded.

“Remember Moresby,” Brett said, savagely, and Phelan intoned the reply:

“Remember Moresby.”

Years before, at the beginning of the explosion against Australian imperialism, as the manic street preachers put it, Brett and Jacko had gunned and run through alleys of corrugated iron and blue plastic sheeting, a Moresby heat-haze hanging low. Dogs and chickens kept getting underfoot, but all the kids were locked inside and calling out in Pidgin, usually insults. The fuse was lit on this backwater, and the ADF were running around trying to contain the violence before it all went aerosol.

Jacko changed out a clip and cocked the rifle, leaning back against a wall of stinking green garbage bags. His forehead shone in the broken sunlight, the humid slums an oven after midday. “Love this shit, don’t you—”

Brett squeezed off two rounds at the head and shoulders that appeared behind them, the black arms holding an AK-47. Jacko spun back, his weapon loose and at the ready, scanned the roofline and moved forward, covering the alley in small, precise arcs.

“—don’t you, Samurai?” Jacko smiled.

“Fucking hell,” Brett said, eyes dancing and his breath hard and short, “yes.”

He waved a hand in a chopping motion, and Jacko dropped to one knee, holding up a clenched fist. A filthy white dog, a mongrel Shepherd/Labrador, stumbled out from behind some crates. It lowered its ears, wagged its tail, and walked toward them with a smile. Jacko tensed, adjusting his aim, but Brett shook his head. Instead, he smiled at the dog, but shook his head and made an ‘away’ motion with a raised finger. The dog watched carefully, not making eye contact, and then turned and jogged away, its tail still wagging; it glanced back at them, but kept going.

Jacko rolled his eyes. “Show off.”

They kept advancing, Brett following the directional display in the left eye of his goggles and monitoring the decreasing time hack in his right, and the sounds of pursuit had died and there were people in the streets. Two running Australian soldiers caused the mothers to rush out and grab their children. Others shouted, others threw pieces of fruit or plastic drink bottles.

“Our time here is done,” Jacko said, sidestepping a half-eaten banana that a fat old woman had hurled at him on a stream of angry Pidgin. “Our imperial days were over the first time we shot the kids.”

And he was right. Within a week, the city ablaze in its orgy of violence and the morgues full of dead civilians, the Australian forces began the NEO, the Non-combatant Evacuation Operation. The Government sequestered QANTAS jets and tourist ferries and rushed north to get the tens of thousands of foreigners out of Papua New Guinea. The operation dwarfed everything the ADF had ever done, as the entire nation looked fearfully at its neighbour and quasi-child. The Islamist factions, recently united under the leadership of the intensely popular Brata Tirta Iambakey, organised street demonstrations and surrounded the Prime Minister’s house and the Police Headquarters.

Brata, which is Pidgin for ‘brother’, emerged from the Moresby mosque scene as a young and firebrand nationalist preacher, using the webs to distribute short videos of his raucous sermons, professionally produced broadsides at colonial interests and the elites that sold out PNG for knighthoods and the Prime Ministership. Brata, educated on a scholarship in Darwin and at Sydney University, blended Islam and *wontok*, freedom and submission, to an angry population straining under the banal yoke of evil men: Australian, Papuan, Chinese, American, Russian, Japanese, Indonesian. Businesses fled, mining interests and timber loggers and palm oil exporters all clamoured to leave. Brata exhorted his followers to act peacefully, but intelligence translations indicated that his allusions carried deeper meaning, and could also be interpreted in more sinister ways. And then there were persistent reports of gangs forming into trained militias.

So Brett and Jacko were tasked as part of an operation that would never appear in a press release or history text, to capture Brata and render him away. Brata had been a frequent and elusive visitor to West Papua, formerly Irian Jaya, so the Indons were more than happy for *Kopassus* to act as the receiving agents: they would land on the grounds of the Bomana War Memorial, up the road from Moresby, using the green avenue between rows of white headstones as a landing point. Somebody in the TNI had a sense of the grotesque. They wanted some quiet time with Brata, to see who he knew and what he’d talked about, and the Australian intelligence world clamoured for their liaison officers to ‘observe and advise’ the rendition and interrogation. ASIS had the lead, but Defence and the Federal Police had better ‘old school’ ties. Staff Colleges and operational deployments had soft-power advantages for coalition operations.

But somebody poodle-faked something, and Operation JUST HAND fell apart. A fuel spill at Jackson Airport grounded the helicopter insertion of the snatch team, and the column of armour had been halted by gangs of boys wearing ripped t-shirts and coloured headbands. Normally feuding colour-gangs joined together to throw sticks and stones at plate steel and high explosive. They fell back slowly, recovering quickly after the Australians poured warning shots over the heads of the crowd, to re-form and slow the convoy again. Media crews, often just a man wearing a black camera/sound rig on his head, streamed live to the webs, and the Australians troops dared not fire upon the crowds directly. The lines of communication between Moresby and Canberra crackled with electrons.

Brett and Jacko, in a hide overlooking the snatch site, waited patiently, reporting movements and keeping lasers pointed at all the important windows. A variety of drones, invisible and soundless overhead, tracked the reflections from those little red dots, and then Jacko tapped Brett's shoulder and pointed to the west. A black column of smoke rose, billowing and expanding in the still air. Another column billowed, a block to the west, and Brett adjusted the optics on his scope.

"Three males, Oluks, red head-bands, and a couple of barrels that are smoking heavily—"

"—they're lighting fires—" Jacko said to the command network.

As Brett panned around, half-listening to the conversation between Jacko and the forward HQ, he saw three more plumes head skyward.

"They're smoking out the lasers," he said, noticing the sudden crowd of men in the street in front of the target building, looking upward into the smoke. Several began pointing and jumping about.

"Shit!" Brett said, lunging forward to click the designators off.

"Shut them down," the voice from HQ shouted.

"We're blown," Jacko said, throwing himself into his pack. "Time to hoof it."

The flashing text of the FRAGO, the fragmentary order, scrolled across Brett's goggles: Extraction unavailable, air support unavailable, proceed on foot to FUP GREEN NLT 1515hrs ...

Brett recognised the coordinates of the pre-arranged Form-Up Point and cycled a menu with his fingers to have a terrain and directional overlay in his left eye, and countdown clock small in the upper corner of his right.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

No later than 3:15pm.

“Seventeen minutes, seventeen blocks, then they leave us behind.” Brett swept his rifle across the street below their window, and saw the ominous emptiness. “But the floppies know we’re here.”

Jacko opened the door of the office they’d occupied and called: “Secure, move.”

Word of the snatch was released to the media, a sombre Brata decrying the bully-boy tactics of the Australian military, and he showed vision of the Australian tanks firing their machine-guns, and of the crowd scattering, and of a bloodied local man in a busy local clinic saying he’d been shot by the crusader Australians while a local doctor dressed the head wound. The only white faces in these ‘press releases’ wore reflective goggles and carried large, scary machine-guns, the blue Australian flag on the shoulder bright against their camouflage body armour. Moresby exploded. Madang and Lae had their own orgies of violence, and the world spent a week watching in mounting horror at the impotence of the Australian Defence Force in a Third-World backwater right on its doorstep.

Brett and Jacko had made the extraction, hitching a ride with a convoy of engineers who were returning from the Highlands where they’d been stringing bridges across impassable valleys. That night, as Brata exhorted the people to rise up, the Australians played cards or video games and cleaned their weapons. The next morning, just as the early starters were lining up outside the Other Rank’s mess, a floppy drove an ancient Unimog truck through the base gates and across the sports fields, oblivious to the hail of automatic fire from the MPs, and into the side of the food hall. The driver, a fifteen-year old from Madang, detonated the ammonium nitrate and diesel oil, which tore a large chunk from the Earth’s surface. Sixty-five diggers died in that moment, another hundred over the next week. Six months later, PNG was a hostile nation, hosting Chinese warships in its harbour and PLA fighters at its airfields.

Remember Moresby.

“We can use the idea of a CT exercise,” Brett said, and Phelan looked puzzled. “It’s the Hilton, of all places. The CPP team will have secured an entire floor, so all we have to do is find out which, and hopefully in which room he’s putting his head on a pillow. It’s a piss-up trip, so at least some of the heavies will have alcohol, use up the beer tokens. The wagon-train will fly out first-thing, so we have to go in the middle of the night. We can get at least some of our intel at the front desk, when I go in, wearing a

suit and waving a badge, at the hotel's night manager. I'll say that we're doing a readiness test of the CPP. If the manager buys the cover, we've got access. If he doesn't buy it, then I force him to cooperate."

"Force him how? Would you execute one of his staff?" Phelan said, "Or just bluff it?"

Brett thought, briefly, before deciding to plough on regardless of taunts, asides or distractions. *Before he can figure you out.*

"We can hit them hard, Wild Geese style, if we get blown or pear-shaped; we just kill everyone, and then straight onto the harbour. We need a power boat, something big and fast, with range to either hop along the coast, or rendezvous offshore for air exfil. The strike team sheds at the harbour, and I safe-hand the tango through to your safe-house, or your helicopter, or whatever. But once I hand-off to you or yours, that's it, I'm out. I promised you to acquire and deliver safely, and that's exactly what you'll receive. Then you leave me and mine alone, forever."

"We'll keep our bargain, matey, don't you worry. People other than you have principles, you sanctimonious prick."

"But the plan?"

"That's a sketch, show me something in a briefing format."

"Did you have something else in mind?" Brett said coldly. "Speak up, because guessing what you want is killing me."

Phelan sneered at Brett. "Act like a professional, sweetheart, and you'll go home safe, and your fairy brother will be safe, and that fucking spook Daniels, well, I didn't promise not to make him the subject of scrutiny."

"Be my guest," Brett said, "He's a twat."

Phelan smiled. "Have you ever considered that he's working for us?"

Brett looked up, shocked. "Bugger me."

"He's not, but it would make sense." Phelan smiled at the ceiling. "Maybe he's ripe for recruitment."

"I should contact him." Brett rolled the dice, unable to guess what Phelan was thinking, whether he was serious or yanking him around. "Need to report my progress, and he's a cat's bum about protocols."

"Sound him out," Phelan said. "You know the drill better than anyone."

"He'd be a powerful ally, if you could trust him."

Nodding, Phelan tossed a pad to Brett. "Use that number, it's clean this morning. It routes calls through Singapore, to a packet-cleaner there, the full anonymiser."

"Seriously?"

"You want privacy, sure, let me leave you to it." Phelan moved toward the door. "We're moving locations in an hour, by the way; the boys will be in and out, packing up and shit, so don't be too long."

"Can I offer him a face-to-face with you?"

"Get him to offer details, and then come to me. Maybe." Phelan moved to the door, stopping under the lintel. "But you're right, I never served with him, under fire, like I did with you or Jacko, so don't know how much I can trust him." He left, closing the door.

Brett examined the pad, a small Sony with a black rubberised edge. He touched the screen, and pressed the box of numbers next to the envelope shape. It expanded across the screen to become both a dialing pad and a Qwest websearch box. Brett keyed Daniels' number, but he paused, and examined the pad closer.

There were no scratches on the screen or the moulded surround. There were obvious fingerprints on the screen, but no grit or fluff was worked into the seam where the screen met the surround.

It looks new. He must have a worm, something to record my call.

Brett realised that it didn't matter if Phelan knew what he said to Daniels. The spook would follow his training, and so would Brett. He wasn't lying to Phelan about anything, and wouldn't need to. Same with Daniels; he could tell the whole truth and sound utterly convincing. Neither of his 'handlers' had thought about the subsequent stages of their respective operations, about 'what would come next'. But Brett had, during his long discussion with Tom hajji-Muhammed. Phelan and Daniels, almost opposites in the shadow-world, hoped for the best, and probably had plans to deal with the worst case. Both expected to be able to deal with the in-between, to adapt to the inevitable unpredictability. They both staked their professional identities on being able to adapt quicker than the other guy, in the heat of the moment and under fire.

I'm going to take you bastards down, and that right hard.

He dialled.

Daniels answered almost immediately, audio only: "Daniels."

"It's Bliss."

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“Brett, mate, good to hear from you.”

“No face?”

“I’m on the train.”

“So is this secure?”

“Mate, nothing ever is, but do your best.”

Brett didn’t plan what to say, just let his mouth do its thing. “I’m nearly inside, they’ve got me prepping for a job, so it’s probably an audition. If I do this like you said, to my utmost, I’m not going to tell you what we’re up to, because I promised Jimmy Phelan I would do my best to complete this job. So there’s a conflict; I cannot figure out the ethics of obeying your order and plain old common sense.”

“Do your best by them, Brett,” Daniels said after a pause. “We need you on the inside. Make that happen.”

“But you threatened my family, and that’s not going to wash. I’ll be breaking that promise to you, and I want to know that you’re not going to take it out on my family.”

“But that was then, mate, and you’re doing as we asked. Keep getting inside, find me some people to turn around. If you want, I can send a protection detail to sit on Lawrie, if that makes you feel better.

“Please.” Brett crushed the flare of hope that Daniels’ offer fired. *Can I trust him?*

“Look, mate, you’re my number-one best shot, the first in three years that’s got Buckley’s of doing what we need. We’ve got nothing, especially on the hardcore. Sweeping up the flag-wavers at rallies and demonstrations against the government creates paperwork, not real intelligence, and we’re not making headway. That’s why I tried to rope you in the first place.”

“Convenient for you.”

“Not really,” Daniels said. “Keeping you off the nets and watch-lists has been a nightmare.” He exhaled, loud in Brett’s ear. “Yes, you were a boon opportunity, and I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if I didn’t try. If I can provide some overwatch on Lawrie, sure, I will make that happen, if it’s going to focus you on the task at hand. But, most importantly, we need to get someone inside. They’re tearing this country apart.”

Brett understood Daniels, at least. He was a rules man, but maybe he understood the need to bend them to get the job done. The rise of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country started many years before, slowly and at the grass-roots, below the radar of the security

forces. The switch to violence by splinter factions had tied the government up in knots. ASIO, bollocked in the subsequent Royal Commission, was given singular attention. The public grudgingly conceded civil liberties to ‘counter the nation’s enemies’, and intelligence agency budgets skyrocketed, but the early days cemented a voice. The many and the poor turned away from apathy; Democratic Socialist discussion groups and nationalist ‘Australia Proud’ gangs clashed in demonstrations, which led to street riots. “So you support the Prime Minister’s push for martial law?”

“The guy’s called ‘Ironbar’ for a reason,” Daniels said.

The Prime Minister had asked the Governor-General to dissolve Parliament because the Opposition blocked the bill on the basis that martial law required a direct vote by the people, a plebiscite or referendum. The High Court fired up, the media fired up, and foreign and domestic wars were strangling the economy.

“He’s a dirt farmer from WA,” Daniels continued,” and running scared against a threat he doesn’t understand and doesn’t know how to combat, so no, not particularly, I don’t support him.”

“Yet we’re His Majesty’s servants.” Brett said it, seriously, like he would say to a mate in uniform: ‘Remember Moresby’.

“Exactly. So what’s the plan?”

“First: cover Lawrie, as soon as possible. Maybe Phelan knows that I’ll keep my word and maybe he’ll keep his. Second: get two soldiers for me, to Sydney; ring your liaison guy at Bungendore, and have them ready. I want some backup, operators I know and trust, giving me support to reduce the bodycount. You may also want to talk to Brigadier Charlie Owen.”

“Let me get my pen,” Daniels said.

* * *

“Darling, you’re a mind-reader.” Lise pulled off her mechanic’s gloves and dropped them onto the workbench. “Good job.”

Jeena returned Lawrie’s smile as she carried the tray of morning tea into the shed.

“Pleased to please,” Jeena said, placing the tray on table after Lawrie moved the shop manuals and a notepad. “Should be steeped nicely. I’m off to hang out the last load.”

“Thanks, honey, we’ll be down to make lunch in an hour or so.”

“Right Mum.” She left, and Lise poured. Lawrie wiped his hands with a rag from the cardboard box under the bench.

“Excuse me, Lawrence, but I’m going to speak plain,” Lise said, handing Lawrie the thick ceramic mug of hot tea and facing down the hill toward her retreating daughter. She smiled at him, hand raised to shield her face from the sun, and sipped her tea. “You had nightmares again last night. You woke Jeena. So we’re going to talk plainly for a couple of seconds.”

“I’m sorry,” Lawrie said, hot shame hidden behind the move to add sugar to his mug. As he stirred, the spoon clacked around in the mug.

Hard to even shut my eyes.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, sweetie.” Lise squeezed his hand. “But you look like a zombie again this morning, which means you barely slept at all. That’s three nights in a row.”

Hard to even shut my eyes.

Lawrie shut his eyes, the panic squeezing his chest, and he felt Lise’s hand on his forearm. He stood still, forcing his breathing, clinging to the image of plowing down the lane at the pool, regimented kicking and breathing and the calming roar of water washing him forever clean. Against that image, even here, with her, with his eyes closed, the ghastly, ghostly memories of his capture, his torture, glassed the surface of reality closed against him. Everything was denied.

“We’re here for you, but I’m worried about you. I want to help.”

Lawrie felt a wave of pause, a moment of stillness, when the idea of being dead came first to his conscious mind.

The smell of oil and a strong cuppa, the sunshine on his face and the twittering and screeching of birds flung him back to his father’s shed, the day of the funeral, a glorious Melbourne morning, and a flock of distant relatives had descended upon him and the house, upon Maureen and proper grieving. Lawrie wanted solitude and thus escaped into his father’s shed. Lawrie didn’t want the endless and painful sympathy from people who didn’t understand. Nobody mentioned Brett. Lawrie had been in a fugue, swept away by events, and at the tender age of 13 decided to kill himself. Lawrie knew where his father kept the service revolver: top shelf in the shed, behind the homebrew, in a small beige metal box.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Dressed in his most formal pants and blazer, Lawrie had struggled for ten minutes to get his tie done in the proper double Windsor before heading into the shed. Auntie Jean, who lived next door, had given Lawrie the black tie and a watery smile as she squeezed his hands, and Lawrie dreaded telling anyone that he didn't know how to do it up properly, that Dad had always tied them, loosened them, and then handed them to Lawrie whenever the rare occasion arose that required a tie. Brett, of course, had been schooled long, hard and early in the art of ties. But Lawrie was his mother's son, not his father's.

Proper tie tied, shirt and pants neatly ironed, black Bata shoes polished and gleaming—another gift from another auntie for this horrible, horrible day—Lawrie opened the side door to the shed and stood, transfixed, as the smells and memories of what he'd just lost. The packet of Drum sat inside the door on the end of the bench, in a small wooden tray that also held matches and papers and a small yellow bag of Rizla filters.

End the pain.

Lawrie wanted to cry, more than anything, because it was expected. He couldn't find tears, and had no other measure of how to express this awful chasm in his existence.

He couldn't cry, and wanted to. His father never cried, rarely showing any emotion other than anger. His mother cried all the time, and shouted and threw plates and food and caused everyone to tiptoe around.

End the pain.

Lawrie wanted to run away, to discover a hidden treasure and travel the world, to live with the sea gypsies on the Indonesian archipelago, floating on rafts made of bamboo and twine, sailing from island to island. But tears would not come, so he came to this den, this personal place. Lawrie expected his father to shout at him: 'get out of my bloody shed'.

"Brett's not coming back." Lawrie said, "and this is now my shed." Something important changed. Now he felt numb "I have to look after Mum; it's my job now."

Lawrie made the clear choice, with spreading acne and a sometimes still-squeaky voice, to be the man of the house and to forego the revolver. He became harder, detached, on the day of his father's funeral. He put aside thoughts of being free from pain and instead comforted his mother and played host to the flurry of visitors at the wake. He kept the kettle running and the food served and distributed. He tasked his aunts to help him, and they complied, impressed with his grown-up ways. In the following weeks, Lawrie kept the family and friends engaged in supporting Maureen

and the household: meals were delivered and the lawn was mowed. He kept up his schoolwork and improved his housework. Those months were hard, but he was busy and focussed and dedicated. He managed the household and tended his mother and became an adult, in his father's image and in his brother's shadow.

Lawrie, with Lise's hand still on his arm, remembered thinking *it's my job now*. And now dying seemed to be his new job. He could end his suffering at his choice, now he was a real adult and thus freed from his responsibility; he could choose. He had that freedom left to him, a last way to fight back.

Having chosen, as with becoming his mother's 'tough little guy', Lawrie calmed into the role.

"Thank you, Lise." He looked down at her, a crippling sadness in his heart that twisted his smile. "I'll be fine, just sometimes the whole thing becomes overwhelmingly surreal."

Lise nodded. "Like you've dropped sideways into an alternative reality, or onto a movie-set of your life, and you're waiting for the director to call 'Cut' and reset the scene. 'Take 2'."

Lawrie smiled his patronising smile, the one he kept for placating his mother.

Lise pretended not to notice and continued. "As a rape survivor, I know what you're going through." She paused, and moved toward the bench, and gulped her tea before putting it down with a rattle and returning to Lawrie's side.

"You feel a glass wall between you and everything else." Lise spoke quietly, her voice that of a girl, not a woman, and Lawrie's new-found resolve was dented by her vulnerability. "You want to curl up and let the world do its worst. You want your sanity to break completely, to let insanity rule. You despair. You want to escape. You want to die. You want an earthquake to strike or God to smite you or heal you, or kill you in an act of mercy, but most of all you want to forget. You want nothingness."

Taking Lawrie by surprise, Lise hugged him and he responded, his arms encircling her waist. Her hips and buttocks were firmly plump and warm, and Lawrie hated the way all these things smashed together in his head. He craved a focus, a singularity, but experienced nothing but a fragmentation into a million selves. Mostly, he wanted Lise to hold him, forever.

"But you have to survive, Lawrence, because you're young and strong and you've seen hard times before and you know how to get through the days, and after a

while things aren't so black, and then one day you realise that you're happy." Lise released him, but Lawrie held her close for another second. Lise stepped back, wiped a tear from her cheek with the heel of her hand, and turned away to blot at her nose with a tissue. "Jeena did that for me, and I love her for the better person she's made me. She's taught me strength and patience and dedication. And you already have those, Lawrence, and you can use them. You're grieving for your mum, and you've been cut off from friends, and in general your situation is way off-kilter. But it is what it is. I care, and I want to help."

Paralysed, he couldn't speak.

Lise returned to her tea, the silence long.

Lawrie wanted to say something, to say anything. His thoughts gridlocked. He wanted to talk about his rape, but also didn't want to. He wanted to talk about her rape, but also didn't want to. He wanted to talk about his mum, but couldn't. He stood, frozen in the warm sunshine.

Spinning. Spinning, spinning.

Lise drained her cup and returned it to the tray. "She says he'd be proud of you and Brett."

"Everyone's proud of Brett." Lawrie's voice cracked.

Lise pulled on her gloves. "Well, she specifically said he'd be proud of you. She talked about you all the time, about movies you watch and how you play cards every Monday night with Donna and Henry from number forty-three."

"She didn't get out much."

"We went shopping a few times, what a treasure she was." Lise laughed. "okay, finish your tea because we're going to take out the master cylinder and hone it."

Lawrie looked around quickly, finding that he could breathe again.

"She's told me about her illnesses, and how you kept it together. How great you've been to her, and for her."

"We kept it together, through the hard times," Lawrie said, breathing out slowly between phrases. "But she'd done it tough. Her dad died of a heart attack, too."

Lise handed him a spanner and they moved to Helen, Lawrie running a thumb along her front guard.

"That's the main brake cylinder, and these hoses carry brake fluid to the slave cylinders at each wheel. We'll get back to them later. It's a pressure-system: push the

pedal, the piston pressures the fluid, which forces the brake-pads onto the drums. Friction increases, and thus the car slows.”

Lawrie nodded. “And we’ve been seeing evidence of softening pedal, which indicates a leak in the system, a seal somewhere.”

“Or the wall of the main cylinder has been pitted by moisture. They need to be done anyway, if I want to ever get this thing running safely again.”

“Hey, don’t forget that yesterday morning you turned the key and it started first go.” Lawrie frowned. “You seemed very happy at the time.”

“Big muscles to swap out the motor was what I really needed, all thanks to you.” Lise shrugged. “You’re right, of course, but it took me two years to get ready to drop the other block in.”

“A woman of many talents, and not easily discouraged,” Lawrie said.

“You’re so sweet. I hope that by tonight or tomorrow, we can take her out on the road.”

Lawrie relaxed, the car under his hands and the shop manuals bright in his mind. “If we make it so, then it happens.”

“Good outlook. Right, undo those bolts and lines, and see how much more we can get done before lunch.”

“A plan,” Lawrie said, “let’s crack on, as my dear old Dad would say.”

They removed the main cylinder, talking casually all the while. After lunch, during which mother and daughter teased Lawrie mercilessly, and many laughs crossed the sunny kitchen, Back in the shed, Lise showed Lawrie how to disassemble, clean and recondition the piston and pushrod and gaskets and valves.

“Brett makes me mad,” Lawrie said from underneath Helen, as he traced the brake lines and touched and silently mouthed the names of all the elements of the brake system. “But he could have visited, or at least rung Mum more than once a year at Christmas. That’s only been the last few years. Once he became an officer, he grew up a bit.”

“And you couldn’t contact him?”

“There’s a rigmarole about duty officer to commanding officer and blah blah blah. Once he became special forces, that nightmare multiplied. The Defence Department sent back our first two Christmas cards with a red stamp that said ‘Insufficient Address’ and Mum cried and cried. Later, when Mum went into hospital the second time, I rang and rang and was transferred around and nobody took me

seriously and nobody returned my phone calls. Evidently, the word got through. She was out of it, whatever they were medicating her with, and she didn't remember—or didn't want to remember—him coming to see her. I was doing home-schooling with my aunt, who was a retired principal, and I saw his name on the visitor sheet at the hospital in the afternoon. The nurse said that Brett only stayed a few minutes. He came to the house after visiting her, but didn't wait around to see me or leave a note. That's his own way of saying 'screw you'."

"I don't know Brett well enough to judge that, Lawrence," Lise said, over at the bench fitting the power-drill with the honing attachment. "But I know what your mum's told me, and I've watched your reactions and emotions for four days, so I also have an outsider's view. But he looked terrified last week, coming home. Distraught. For someone like Brett, I would guess, however, that showing emotions would be its own nightmare." She looked over her shoulder as she tightened the three-headed honing attachment into the drill. "Just release the tension from the bleeder valves, don't undo them all the way."

"It takes time to grieve, for the big things." Lise said, "and maybe he's just beginning to feel things from so long ago. He couldn't do it when he was younger, it was too painful. Plus he's a soldier, and they're right pricks about weakness and emotions. I've dated soldiers, and they're a weird mob."

Lawrie grunted, his head under Helen's front end. He agreed with Lise, but had been focused on the spanner in his hand. He'd read the greasy and dog-eared shop manual that Lise produced from the shelf, read it straight through the night before last, but a couple of days with a spanner or screwdriver in his hand, put everything into its proper context. Plus Lise was an excellent teacher. Reading was one thing, doing it with his own hands an entirely better proposition, and he loved it. The bleeder valve on the wheel cylinder was beyond tight, and the bolt was stripped. He strained more, and the spanner slipped and he smashed his fingers against the brake-drum. The spanner dropped onto Lawrie's nose with a clunk and then onto the concrete floor with a ringing clatter.

"Fuc—" Feeling blood on his cheeks he sat up and cracked his skull on the chassis.

"Ouch!" Lise said, and bent down on one knee. "Don't move, wait," she tugged him sideways, the floor trolley sliding easily. Lise grabbed a handful of rags from the

bench and knelt beside Lawrie, who looked around without focus. A large egg sat beneath the skin of his forehead, and blood trickled from his re-broken nose. “Oh, shit.”

An hour later, with ice and bandages applied, and several pills Lise produced from her handbag, Lawrie sat at the kitchen table and didn’t feel much of anything. The stove radiated a prickling heat, and he felt stupefied by the drugs and the closed atmosphere.

“I’m sorry, Lise.” He felt the gauze packed into his nostrils.

“What about?” Lise paused, the cup at her lips.

“About messing up your time with Helen.” Lawrie yawned. “She’s very special to you, and you’re stuck taking care of me, again.”

“Honey, no, there’s nothing to be sorry about.” Lise put her teacup into its saucer and reached over to take his other hand. She squeezed, and he squeezed back. “We don’t need to worry about the car, sweetie, it’s just a project to get you up and about, to let you do something with your hands while you find your bearings again.”

Lawrie nodded. “Bearings.”

Lise smiled like a question, and said: “It’s not just about healing the outside. Take your time, and think about your thoughts and feelings. The stuff we were talking about this morning. Because what goes for Brett pretty much goes for you, it seems to me.”

Thoughts and feelings?

It struck odd to Lawrie. He said: “But I want to keep working on Helen, if I may.”

“Of course you may, but perhaps not today. You should be resting. Stretch out on the couch.”

Lawrie regarded the long brown leather couch with a detached gaze, as if considering it to save his life in an emergency. “Sure.”

Lise came from the sink with a yellow ceramic mug, which she put on the side-table. “Here’s some water.”

Lawrie kicked off his shoes and stretched out, and he felt the tickling warmth from the stove on the soles of his feet. After a few moments, where Lise moved around the kitchen, Lawrie said: “This is nice.”

Lise moved to boil the kettle, and Lawrie shut his eyes.

He drifted, warm and medicated.

“It was horrible, Lise, what they did to me.”

Lise paused, her automatic reply stilled on her lips.

“Tell me, Lawrence, please. I want to help you.”

Lise’s phone rang, and she swore silently. She unclipped it from her belt and flicked it wide. Brett’s face projected upward from the handset, and she carried over to Lawrie, who struggled to sit upright.

“Hi, Brett,” Lise said, “Lawrie’s right here.”

“Jesus, bro, what has she done to you?”

“She’s taken care of me,” Lawrie said gruffly. “He had an accident in the shed; the underside of a 1957 Chevy.”

“Oh, fatboy,” Brett laughed and Lawrie’s annoyance spiked again. “You plonker.”

“How are you?” Lise said. “When are you coming back?”

“All good here,” Brett laughed again. “May be a week or more, so sit tight. I’ve asked the Feds to send down a protection team. They’ll stay in town, you may not even know they’re around. Contingency stuff, nothing to worry about, just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“We’ll talk about it later, over a beer, and have a laugh.”

“What’s going on, Brett?”

“We’ll figure that out later, bro. I’ve gotta scoot, so sit tight, keep getting better, bro, and thanks heaps Lise.”

“Is Jeena safe here? Brett?”

“Safer there than anywhere, Lise, keep that low profile we talked about and everything will go according to plan. And Lawrie, stay out of the bloody shed.”

Lawrie smiled, and Brett laughed and hung up.

THIRTEEN:

The reception desk at the Sydney Hilton faced the glass doors, with a cafe in one corner to the left and elevators off to Brett's right, past the arrangement of lounge chairs and sofas and coffee tables with folded newspapers.

Newspapers.

The archaism struck Brett, but he kept moving, the dark blue suit tight around his chest and arms. He carried a black leather compendium, and wore black horn-rimmed glasses. "The duty manager's office, please, it's urgent. It's about a guest, and it's confidential." Brett held out his military ID, and the skinny Chinese boy, Ricky, according to his nametag, nodded and pointed around the corner.

"Come with me, sir, I'll show you through to where everyone is set-up. They've only been here a few moments." The lad, although he must be older, entered a code into the keypad, which Brett memorised, and they walked five paces toward several offices with open doors. Lights were on, and the noise of a crowded room.

Something's wrong—

Two men, both wearing suits, walked out of the first office on the left, talking earnestly. Both men looked up and registered Brett. They paused, and the weaponry in the small of his back made Brett tingle with delicious fear. But he'd been walking into the hot jaws of danger for twenty years, and the juice calmed his nerves and focussed his mind.

The Manager's Office, open at this time of night?

Brett saw the lapel pins and smiled, nodding to the men. "Excuse us, please, gentlemen," and kept walking, the compendium in his left hand, an excuse for a businessman.

The taller of the men spoke into his collar-mic: "Roger, Two-One, continue patrol and we'll send a team up. Two-Alpha, there's an open fire-door on 12, get me eyes on it."

The plain office, occupied by a florid middle-aged man, was fastidiously tidy and organised. His flamboyant tie and vest combination assaulted Brett. The nameplate said 'Ara Armenian'.

"Yeth, Ricky? What'th up?" The man's lisp seemed deliberately camp. "Who's on Reception?"

Brett fought down laughter as Mr Armenian huffed scaldingly.

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“I’ll get back there,” Ricky said, and turned and left Brett standing.

“Mr Armenian, my name is Lieutenant Colonel Bliss,” again Brett held out his ID card, “with the Special Air Service. May I close the door?”

Armenian nodded, and Brett did. He stood as Armenian folded his hands delicately on the desk. “How can I help you?”

“You have a special guest tonight, and the Prime Minister authorised us to test the protection detail and the reaction-times of the state police. Do you remember the Sheraton raid in Melbourne, all those years ago?”

Armenian nodded, eyes wide.

“Good. One of the lessons of that activity was to enlist the support of the staff and management before the exercise. However, this exercise requires utmost confidentiality by the staff, so you are the first and only person to know about this test, and we need to keep the information from the Federal Agents.”

“We thought it unusual that the Prime Minister would come here, especially without the usual preparations. It’s caused quite a stir—Lieutenant Colonel, was it?”

Brett nodded, the man’s words still processing.

“I have a team outside, but we need to move quickly to keep the element of surprise.”

A knock on the door lurched Brett’s mind around, his heartbeat rising. He turned with the handle, and another slender young employee opened the door enough to lean forward into the room.

“Ara, the kitchen’s sprung a leak,” the young man said.

The telephone on the desk rang, and Ara held a palm up to Brett.

“Ara Armenian.” He listened, then replied: “Shut the water down, ring the contractor. Yes, you know this, so just do it.” Armenian looked up at the newcomer. “Walter, go down and hold Orlando’s hand, pleasth.”

As the door closed again, Armenian sighed. “It never ends.”

“Sorry to create the extra wrinkle in your day, Mr Armenian. Your help is greatly appreciated.”

“You are welcome, Colonel. What do you need from me?”

“Well, today we are simulating a kidnap attempt. In the scenario, I’m the leader of the hostile force and I’ve captured you at gunpoint and tortured you and your staff for information and access.”

Armenian giggled, his hand fluttering. “Please don’t hurt me.” He giggled again. “Oh, I’m terrified.”

Brett smiled. “If you could confirm for the location of the Foreign Minister, and perhaps issue me with pass-cards for the lifts and floor-doors?”

Armenian’s hand went to the fob pocket of his vest. “He’s in the Master Suite, top floor, but the agents took all the spare keycards. They’re right next door, Colonel; with the Prime Minister’s arrival, everyone’s scrambling, so let me—”

“Wait, please.” *The PM’s here?*

Brett reached behind his ear and opened the channel to the team, up top and down below: “The Prime Minister is with the Foreign Minister, top floor, Master Suite, go heavy, go heavy, go heavy.”

Armenian looked puzzled, his hand dancing around the knot of his tie. Brett heard ‘ack’ from Phelan, and undid the last button on his jacket. He pulled two grenades from the harness on his back, from where they hung near the waistband of his pants, and transferred the two spares into his pant pockets. Armenian squealed, and Brett shot him with a pencil-taser. The startled manager twitched and dropped to the floor. Opening the compendium, Brett took a sleek black machine pistol, two clips of ammunition, and two plastic ties, trussing the man with the latter, and gagged him with his own tie. Brett searched Armenian’s pockets, taking the keycard and a bundle of keys.

“You don’t deserve to die, today.”

Brett pulled the pins from the grenades.

Another knock at the door, and Walter entered the room in hurry. Brett drove a knee into Walter’s crotch, who dropped with an ‘ooff’. Brett checked that the grenades were set to impact/anti-personnel, and released the strike levers, which popped across the room with two flat clangs. With both bombs in his left hand and pistol in his right, Brett swept out of Armenian’s office, striding deeper along the empty corridor toward the noise of men.

The next room was the security office, with six or seven suits standing around the counter, hands on hips or in pockets. Automatic weapons slung over shoulders. One operated a touchpad on his forearm. A pile of bags near the door. They all looked up as Brett swung the grenade toward the ceiling. One managed to half-draw a weapon. Two shouted. Brett kept moving, arriving at the third and last doorway as the first grenade exploded with the crackling zap of high-voltage discharge.

“Breach—” Brett said clearly for the broadcast.

Someone screamed behind him, in the security office.

The lights dimmed and flickered with the power surge.

Damn.

“—breach, breach.”

The last room was a staff room, wide and filled with tables and computers and suits with guns just getting their shit together. Brett hurled the grenade and danced back into the corridor. This discharge flared purple and white through the open doorway, and died. Brett swung back into the room, arcs of his pistol covering the bodies.

The room stank of ozone and the bladders and bowels of the unconscious men. None moved. Brett paused, the first tremor of panic tickling at his scrotum.

Don't. Don't tap them.

He put a solid aim on the nearest man and hesitated.

Tap them and move on. Tap them to be safe, to do the job.

But he didn't want to, frankly couldn't.

Won't.

These were Australians, serving their country. The hit on Thomas haji-Muhammad, where Brett saved Owen and first killed a child and won a medal and a handshake from a Prime Minister, taught him something profound about men of power, something he thought he understood and accepted: the need for rough justice. National interest and urgent need. The Sons became a reality, on that day when a young Trooper Bliss carried his bleeding CO across the Queensland scrub. The Governor-General, the blunt old digger, condemned the operation before its failure, which made him a reputable voice of opposition after the debacle. The troops trusted their officers; the calculated gamble by the chain of command backfired, and the toecutters gutted the Regiment with its excoriating investigation.

And Brett, the Army's hotshot young sniper, had pulled the trigger. And he'd missed.

Brett ran back down the corridor. He sprinted past the surprised desk clerk, whatever his name was, as the white Transit van disgorged troops into the deserted lobby. Each wore black overalls, a balaclava, and tac goggles. Birmingham, the rock-ape grunt from the safe-house where Brett collected Lawrie, was his section-leader, and

tossed Brett the Oakley Tacs. Then he handed over a Heckler & Koch submachine gun, which Brett slung, preferring the machine pistol.

Brett waved them up the flight of steps toward the business centre, and around the corner to the bank of elevators. He swiped Armenian's card and the lift doors dinged open.

The car filled and Brett swiped the card through the reader on the panel, pressing the 'P' which sat atop all the other buttons.

Brett dialled the Oakleys into Phelan's tac-net and opened several windows in his left eye, helmet cams and a motion-map.

"Roof breached, moving down the fire-stairs."

"Five seconds," Brett said, and his guys tensed into game-face. The doors opened onto a reception desk, where a pretty blonde woman with her hair in a severe bun wore the corporate wardrobe like a million bucks. Her face blanked as the formation of soldiers erupted from the lift. Brett followed his own directional cues across the space, when a movement in his right periphery spun him sideways. His pistol rang twice, three times, and a man in a suit with a lapel pin fell limp. Then gunfire started everywhere as the protection detail kicked into action.

"Contact," Brett called.

Heavy suppressing fire came from the hallway Brett wanted, and Phelan's detail at the other end of the building were meeting resistance, nearly trapping them in the stairwell.

It's already pooching.

Abernathy, one of zealots of the group, rushed the CPP detail with his weapon running on full auto, a bowel-loosening battle-cry reverberating across the room. Brett tore off after him, waving his guys forward. Abernathy reeled from a hit, and Brett emptied his clip along the plush hallway, puncturing a fire extinguisher, which whooshed white clouds along the walls and floor. Birmingham dropped to one knee, another guy at his side, as they protected the rear and waited to link up with Phelan, who was to secure the lifts.

Abernathy limped through the gushing snowy fog of the extinguisher, his hand reaching for his pistol when his rifle went *click*. The other two boys charged after him, weapons firing measured bursts downrange, and all return fire ceased. Brett hugged the wall and scooped along it, his cupped hands holding the pistol in line with his eyes. The bodies and the blood—

Don't spew.

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But he did, in the corridor, at the sight of Federal agents, shredded and bloody, clustered around the door that proclaimed in large gold letters, 'Master Suite'.

Birmingham shouted: "Breach that door and capture the target."

Brett heaved again, the bile hot and acidic, and he coughed, but his hard training kept him moving closer as Abernathy laid small shaped charges around the door and detonated them. Phelan arrived, panting, his small frame laden with webbing and weapons and webcasting gear.

"Smile, Brett Bliss, you're on Terrorist TV, you weak fuck!" He shoved Brett into the shattered doorway. "Go get them for me!"

Brett stumbled through the smoke, the klaxon of smoke alarms ringing loud and rough. The gunfire of Abernathy's entrance had died away, and he called 'clear' after executing the sole agent in the room with the two top politicians in the country. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, one a greasy cartoon character and the other an imperious and condescending richboy, cowered in the lounge area of the suite. The latter, a banker turned social activist, way back when, stared at the dead Fed for several seconds, his mouth working soundlessly, and fainted.

"Hey, Brett," Phelan called, "he's weak like you."

* * *

Ming's Chinese restaurant in Omeo had faded red curtains and a lone carp floating in a murky green tank. The Laminex table-top, once orange, now had swirling wear patterns scrubbed into its ancient surface.

"Nice," Lawrie said, rolling his eyes.

Lise laughed, stifling her mirth as the old Chinese woman came over to squint at them.

"Order now?" she said.

"Number 4, to share, a number 17, and a number 35."

"Fry rice?"

"Please. And tea."

The old woman scratched at her notepad with a blue Bic pen, smiling and nodding all the while. She soon returned with two small white bowls and a pot of tea.

She poured the first round, smiling and nodding, and Lawrie thanked her before raising his cup to Lise.

“To doing better.”

“To doing better.” The cups chinked and both sipped the hot, pale liquid.

“It’s not a bad drive, through the hills, less than half an hour for authentic Asian delicacies.”

“Lawrence, stop, you’re horrible. And you’re poking fun at my treasured childhood places.”

His smile faded, and his gaze went to the window.

“You’re thinking about Maureen, aren’t you?”

Lawrie nodded. “I was planning a trip to Broome, this year, a four-week drive around the north coast of Australia, camping as I went, but with bombs going off, now I just want to get home and settle in for a while.”

“Understandable, given what’s been happening.”

“You don’t think I’m hiding?”

“What’s wrong with hiding?”

“Christ,” Lawrie said. “I haven’t called work.”

“You’re a public servant, and you’ve got the note from Doctor Elliot. Give your boss a ring, give him some details, and tell him that you’re taking your annual leave now. Instead of Broome, you’ll get rural Victoria, the farmer’s life for a month.”

Lawrie considered that idea, of shedding the upright, uptight public servant life and spending quality time walking across paddocks and digging through the veggie patch and sitting in the sunny kitchen with Lise, like they did this morning, her reading and him staring out the window as the magpies and mynahs fought in and around the banksia. Jeena moved around outside, the thunk thunk thunk of wood-chopping a pleasant counterpoint, and the pair enjoyed their silent moments like a guilty pleasure shared.

“I’d love to.” Lawrie felt the sunrise. “Sounds wonderful.”

“Make it happen, then.”

“You’re trying to keep me here, aren’t you?” Lawrie chuckled, and leaned back as the satay sticks arrived. The thick brown sauce was spicy, and Lawrie waved the woman over and asked for a VB, and Lise ordered one as well. After that, when the main course arrived, both ordered another beer and the volume of their chit-chat rose.

* * *

The Prime Minister, hooded and cuffed, struggled as Brett and Phelan rushed him toward the lifts. Two cars, with doors held open, beckoned. For a second, Brett thought it was nearly over, when the stream of automatic fire from the re-grouping agents down the hall knocked Brett down.

The carpet rushed to meet him, and that sensation of falling triggered a memory in Brett, of a nightmare. The rushing fall, the endless drop, being pursued off a cliff, high edges and stumbling scrabbles for something, anything, to stop his plummet. It was a recurring nightmare, and as the carpet rushed to meet Brett, he thought: 'I've dreamed this. Here it is, at last.'

A hand grabbed his upper arm and heaved Brett to his feet. Phelan shoved the PM into the lift and tossed a handful of micro-grenades toward the contact. The Foreign Minister went into the second car with the rest of the team. Brett felt the numbness, knew the shock, and couldn't flinch as a run of bullets screamed across the wall and carpet, passing within Brett's whispering range. Instead, one of the black-clad Sons popped open his skin and threw blood around.

Where's Abernathy?

The explosions rolled like firecrackers, and Brett forced himself to run to the lift, and he grabbed the PM's arm. Breathing hard, gobs of vomit and blood on his blue suit, Brett re-loaded the machine pistol and stuffed it into the harness on his back. He cracked the action of the submachine gun to confirm the first round was in the chamber, and checked the safety.

The pain in his side flared with each breath. *Bastards shot me.*

With the wedge removed, the lift doors closed and the car dropped swiftly. The flashing red alarms created a funhouse effect.

"You okay?" Phelan asked, inspecting the wound.

Teeth clenched, Brett barked: "I'm fine."

"Looks like it went clean through. We'll med you on the exfil."

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

"Time?"

"Two and a half minutes."

“Abernathy didn’t make it.”

“One KIA is a bloody good innings, don’t you think?”

Phelan slapped Brett on the shoulder, flaring the pain up Brett’s ribs and across his chest.

“Boon time, today, hey, Monk? Two for the price of one.”

“Do I get twice the fee?”

“You can have whatever you want in 30 minutes, Samurai; you’re fifty percent of the way through the mission. With this guy on our broadcast, we’ve got the attention of the nation.”

“Try showing compassion.” Brett wheezed, the shock wearing off. “Listen to what General Ryan’s been telling you, Jimmy. Now’s the time to win the people’s sympathy, not their outraged condemnation.”

“We’re here,” Birmingham said, each syllable round and slow.

The lift doors opened and Brett saw that their team down here still held the lobby.

As a pack, with the two hostages in the middle, the group moved swiftly through the lobby and out into the covered driveway.

“Take him as planned,” Brett said, pointing to the Foreign Minister, “and I’ll run with this one in the van.”

“Give me your word,” Phelan said, after a beat. “or Lawrie gets it for good.”

“I promise.” Brett shrank inside. “We’ll rendezvous at Rushcutters. I’ll take Birmo and Ryan the Younger.”

The overwatch sweeper at the far end of the driveway, on Pitt Street, shouted: “Visual contact.”

“Ack. Contact, overwatch,” Brett said over the tac-net, “Attack by fire. Prepare for exfil.”

Four Kawasaki quad bikes roared into life, and Brett pointed Birmo to the driver’s side of the white van.

“Good luck,” Phelan said, and the sweeper fired three quick shots.

Brett helped the kid, Ryan, secure the PM in the back of the van before slamming the doors and jumping into the passenger’s seat.

The van accelerated away, and Brett pointed left. “Left, first left onto Park, straight run, no time at all.”

The quads roared away, turning right onto George, weaving through stopped traffic and zipping along the footpaths. Flashing lights declared the arrival of the police.

“Shit,” Ryan said, “they’re everywhere.”

“Go easy,” Brett said to Birmo, “let them do their job.”

The coppers, a mixture of state police in marked cruisers and unmarked AFP cars, quickly bogged down in slowing traffic as the quad bikes gained the advantage.

“Just wait,” Brett said, his eyes scanning the road.

The quads disappeared to the north, and the police ran reds, barging their way through.

Brett tried calling Phelan, but the tac-net was non-responsive beyond the other two in the van, which meant the network had been crumped by the Feds. He mapped a route and send it to Birmingham’s goggles.

“Scan for choppers.” Brett swept the sky. *Drones are the problem, and impossible to see, and we’re in a shiny target.* “I’ve lost the tac-net.”

“We knew that would happen,” Birmo said. “Jimmy will make the boat, easy.”

Brett scanned the skies again, and willed the cars ahead of them to move whenever a light went green or even orange.

Yeah, but will we?

The flashing lights and sirens dropped away, and the normal flow of traffic carried them east, up toward the Cross. Brett watched the growing time hack in his field of view, and fretted over the need for emission control. Behind them, the forces of the government would be stirring into life, a momentous beast of great inertia shocked rudely awake.

Roadblocks, lockdowns, search-and-sweep.

But Brett’s plan, tossed together over the last two days, was working brilliantly.

Birmingham made the left-hand turn into New Beach Road, toward Rushcutter’s Bay Park, and the bobbing masts in the marina made him smile.

“Nearly there, boss.”

“Any sign of them?” Ryan squirmed around in the back.

Everything’s going to work out.

Brett shared their eagerness.

If the Sarge has come through, everything will work out just fine.

* * *

From Ming's Inn, Lawrie and Lise walked the few streets of Omeo, her arm through his. The streets were dark and empty, although most of the houses had a front light on and the blue ghostly dance of TV through curtains. But Lawrie hardly noticed anything beyond Lise. She floated along beside him, and as they waited to re-cross the Great Alpine Road, she rested her head against his shoulder.

"You will have to drive home, Lawrence, because I'm feeling the effects."

"Okay."

"It may have been the chicken, or the beer."

"Or both."

Lise nodded. "Both." She released an echoing burp, and laughed, covering her face with her hands. Lawrie pretended to be shocked and disapproving, looking around at the imaginary crowd and wagging a disapproving finger.

They walked some more, the breeze fresh.

"I'd like to live out here," Lawrie said, "away from the noise and the crowds and the congestion."

"Away from the bombs and the riots."

"Yes," replied Lawrie, "yes indeed. I don't remember this tension in Australia when I was a kid, the fear of foreigners or the fear of bombings and kidnapping and executions. Now we fear our government and we fear ourselves."

"Powerful motivator, and fear makes people act out. In good times, people are apathetic. Now, the Prime Minister wants the Army to be the police. That's not what soldiers do, not what they're trained for. They kill; they use lethal force. That's not the police's job. Martial law will see an increase in what is essentially state-approved murder. It makes 'peace' into 'war'. It's Orson Wellian, it's *1984*."

"I loved that book in high school," Lawrie said. "*George Orwell* is a fave."

Lise hugged his arm. "I think sometimes that it's coming true, the endless war and the enemy within, government against and in spite of the people."

"I'm a very small cog in that machine," Lawrie reeled at that thought. He rarely heard an overtly political discussion, not in his house, because Mum's word was law. Inviolable. Papal. Absolute. And Lise seemed so knowledgeable about such topics, and he'd loved the conversation with her tonight, in a rural Victorian town away from

everything. In fact, today his ribs hadn't hurt so much and the bruises were changing colour and his muscles didn't ache all the time. The fresh air inspired thoughts of romance, of love and marriage.

Is this what being married to Lise would be like?

He imagined that it would.

Oh my god.

Acting on the impulse, he took Lise's hand in his and smiled into her eyes. They stopped, standing close.

KISS HER. The impulses screamed at him. *KISS HER.*

He felt naked, revealed, and felt her probing his mind, his soul, if he had one.

She smiled, her eyes ready to spill tears, and laid her palm on his cheek, her fingertips on his ear. "Everything in its time, darling, and there's no 'buts' about it. You can have both, in the right measures. And I know what you're feeling, because I'm feeling it, too. I have for some time, since you cooked me dinner that first time, actually, and you're so shy."

"Thank you."

They stood, gazing into each other's eyes, and the breeze left them to it.

Lawrie bent toward Lise, and their lips touched, softly.

"What do we do now?" Lawrie whispered.

"Nothing. We be. We walk slowly back to the car, chatting about whatever the conversation dictates, and let whatever happens, happen. Go with the flow."

"Okay."

They strolled, arm-in-arm, and Lawrie smiled into the sky. He wanted to shout with joy and leap about. He saw a perfect wedding, a brood of children, and a golden age. The silence wasn't awkward, although the shy glances intensified as they walked in silence twenty paces past Helen.

"Oops," Lise said, and Lawrie released a belly-laugh that swept her along with him. Now he was grinning, his heart pounding in the best way, every cell on his body alive with the music of the spheres.

"Tomorrow," said Lise, opening the passenger door but leaning across the roof from him, "we'll have Helen ready to be inspected for registration."

"Happy about it, aren't you?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Thanks to all your help."

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

“Stop it,” said Lawrie, climbing in behind the wheel. Lise joined him and they both buckled up. “Take the credit you deserve.”

“You helped a lot.”

“I helped a tiny bit, but you’ve been working on the project for how many years?”

“There’s that ‘but’ again.”

“Hey, who said you could change the topic when you’re losing an argument?”

“I did!” Lise laughed again. “Now drive me home, my darling.”

As their taillights disappeared down the road, another car started up. Lawrie and Lise hadn’t seen the man in the car, or the interest he’d shown in them and their vehicle. They certainly didn’t see him follow them back to the farm.

* * *

Standing beside the van, one hand holding a compress to his wounded flank, Brett looked around as the tac-net icon in his glasses began flashing green.

“Phelan?”

A video-window opened in Brett’s glasses. The scene bobbed around. In the background, Lawrie heard the roar of the powerboat under full revs.

“Brett, we’re under hot pursuit, cancel the RV.”

“We’re already here.”

“Scratch that. South to Cronulla, and we’ll RV there.”

“I’m done, Jimmy.” Brett felt the truth of his words as he said them. He was nauseous and light-headed, probably from blood loss, and the wound in his side throbbed constantly. “I achieved and delivered, including a bonus jackpot prize beyond belief. My contract ended once you got on water. That’s what we agreed. I’ve exceeded what you asked of me.”

Brett heard rounds hitting the Phelan’s boat, and the scene danced around as Phelan was tossed about by the evasive manoeuvres.

“Just do it, Bliss, or I’ll have your brother greased inside the hour.”

“Go to hell, Phelan, you’ve pulled that crap before, and I’m not buying it. Lawrie’s safe. You better come get this guy from me or I’ll ship him back to town with a Return to Sender sticker on his backside.”

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities

Phelan shook his head and pulled a data pad from his vest pocket. He dialled a number, and spoke loudly into the pad. “Danny, mate, how’s it going?”

“Good,” came the reply, audible over the thundering engines. “Tango identified. He went out to dinner tonight, into Omeo, squiring around some short chick with a great rack.”

Phelan laughed. “Good work. Now, if you don’t hear from me in two hours, execute the tango, Sons style. And the chick.”

Brett heard the voice on the other end of the line say ‘roger, wilco’.

“And, for the doubter, tell me the name of the town.”

“Doctor’s Flat. Not much of town, just a wide idea.”

He’s still got me.

Brett deflated, his bravura evaporating. *He’s still got me.*

“Thanks Danny. Stay frosty.” Phelan clicked off the pad, watching Brett in his own goggles. “What do you say, mate? Deliver your package, or brother rock-spider gets the special Sons double-tap: two up the bum and one in the head.” He laughed, and Brett’s frustration grew.

What can I do?

Could I have saved the Foreign Minister and Lawrie?

Could I now, with the PM in the game?

Phelan didn’t wait for an answer. “Tell Birmo to go to Contingency B. He’ll show you the way, but I’d hurry, the coppers are getting organised quicker than we thought. Out.”

Brett didn’t have the fight in him. It was easier to comply, to do as he was bid. Besides, he still had the Sarge and Jenkins. *I hope.*

That has to be enough.

Must.

“Birmingham, contingency B.”

“Yessir.” The van did a u-turn and headed south.

C’mon, Sarge, I need you now.

FOURTEEN:

Walking away from Daryl's Wholesale Meats, Brett buckled under the weight of what he'd done. The two most powerful government ministers, kidnapped. Judging by the stories dancing among the men in the back room of the butcher's shop, dozens of Federal agents, state police and innocent bystanders were dead. His was the only face not covered by a mask, which would make him national enemy number one. Worst of all, Brett had been clinging to the idea that Daniels would get the Sarge and that she'd be here, ready to help.

But she's not.

Had Daniels lied? Had she refused him?

She blames me.

With the kidnapers standing around the stainless-steel counter in the back room, breath frosting in the chilled air, Phelan humiliated Brett by taking his glasses and weapons. Birmo opened the side door leading to the stack of crates and a large green Dumpster.

"Get out of here," Phelan said, "and forget what you know. We can reach out and touch you whenever we want. Do nothing, say nothing, and we'll leave you alone. Anything else, and it's the Sons special for you and your brother."

So Brett, cast out, wandered the streets, the wound in his side aching. Loneliness, black and infinite, settled into his skin. It evaporated his focus, gobbled up the vestiges of his worth. His gamble, his delicate plan, was a failure.

Brett stumbled, and worked hard at watching his feet. He limped, aimless, through the twinges of dawn, sometimes a seabreeze beckoned him. He searched for the sound of crashing waves, of a beach in which to lose himself. He wanted to be clean.

But effort and concentration eluded him, and the loneliness ate deeper, through his heart and into the black inner depths. The streets passed unnoticed, and eventually the land dropped away to reveal the steely grey ocean beneath a lightening sky spreading toward him from the horizon. Following the view, Brett moved downhill, until he started to recognise a building and signs and street names.

Willie Gaunt. His fish-and-chip shop.

It seemed as good as anywhere. The white van, the one Lise bought for him and that he drove from Melbourne, that he'd left to meet with General Ryan however many

days ago, would be long gone, either stolen or impounded. The cops would have scoured this suburb after arresting Gaunt.

They might still be watching. Time's short. They'll arrest me any second. Suspect One.

Brett wanted to cry. He'd given in to Phelan, unable to trust Agent Daniels, to keep Lawrie alive. That would change over the next hour or so, as his name and face were filed and sorted and released to a hungry media. News would leak, if it hadn't already.

Arrest, torture, trial, and execution.

When could I say 'no'?

But he knew the lie of the question. He knew that he could have said 'no' many years ago, right back where this all began, in the hallway watching his father die. He could have done the right thing, any time in the hours before that moment, to take the responsibility he'd shirked.

For twenty years, Brett congratulated himself on his military successes, hoping that his father would approve. As would the long line of Bliss men that answered the call to duty, the call to arms, in defence of the realm. He was paying them back. He was erasing the look of shame and disappointment on his father's dying face, the police recently gone, a girl in the emergency room, raped and beaten. But it was lies. He couldn't erase his guilt; it visited upon his brother. He couldn't save the girl. He couldn't even stop Phelan. He couldn't keep Jacko safe.

He had no support, no weapons and probably very little time before Phelan moved the hostages again. He'd fulfilled his word to the Sons, to General Ryan and to Phelan and to Agent Daniels. But a hard and bitter kernel of himself refused to leave things as they were.

'They'll execute them,' Brett thought, 'and it's my fault.'

But Daniels didn't want the entire government hostage. Daniels was his last hope, now that the Sarge wasn't here.

And Daniels suspects that the Sons have moles in the AFP, in the Parliament, in the Cabinet.

His side throbbed, and a cold trickle down his side told him that the wound was bleeding again. He felt nauseous. Brett crossed the street and turned the corner, expecting everything from an empty road to police cruiser or a take-down team ready to put a red

laser dot on his forehead with a 7.62mm round ready to leap through the dot and splatter him to the freshening winds. The white van sat by the kerb, where he'd left it.

It's still there!

"You bloody beauty," Brett said aloud, a trace of a smile on his face, and the throbbing in his side seemed dispelled. The morning light was grey and misty, just like it had been how many days ago? In fact, it seemed like he'd just arrived. The trickle of blood increased, tickling him.

Had any time passed at all?

It was the day I drove here?

Didn't I just arrive?

Brett looked around, confused and out-of-time, dislocated.

He'd just driven here, just this moment stepped out of the van.

He hadn't met General Ryan, he needed to find Phelan.

These things hadn't happened.

I still have to do them!

He'd been granted a flashing insight, a preview of the future, of how things would go down.

'See, the light is the same, the gentle mist in the still air, the yellow streetlights and a barking dog.' Brett's confusion accelerated as he spoke aloud. His head pounded, and his thoughts were treacle.

I'm just tired.

I've just driven here from Melbourne. I just killed Tuck and his crew.

Brett felt faint, his reality collapsed, and the ache in his side flared. He gasped as his hand came away bloody and wet, like it had when he'd reached out for Jacko, in that damned desert fort.

Jacko, I'm so sorry, mate—

The Sarge arrived and caught Brett as he slumped against the side of the van.

"Jesus, sir, you're in it again."

Brett let his knees give way, and let the strong arms of the Sarge move him to the curb.

"Gotta save them," he mumbled. "Daryl—"

"We know, sir, Daryl's Wholesale Meats, yeah, we know."

The dawn, which had grown lighter and lighter, ran away from him. Brett followed it into the dark tunnel.

A musty carpet was Brett's first thought, based on the roughness under his cheek and the dust in his nose. He opened his eyes and tried to sit, but strong hands held him down. Panic, like hot bile, until the Sarge's face, underneath a blue-and-gold Parramatta Eels beanie, snapped reality back into place.

"Sarge—"

"Take it slowly." She handed him a bottle of Bundaberg Ginger Ale, which he sipped. The spicy bite and fizzy swell began to restore him immediately. His nausea faded, and the sugar perked him up from the first blast.

"You came," he croaked.

"I was at Holsworthy, doing WO2 courses, when your boy Daniels rang through the duty officer. Then I read your data packet, so I spoke to some of the boys in 2 Commando and 6th Aviation. Things got done, off the books, and we were overhead, watching for you, when Jimmy Phelan bolted to the Harbour and climbed aboard the biggest powerboat I've seen since the old days off Broome. But we couldn't tag you. So we stayed on Jimmy and I called in Daniels. His boys put up a good fight, for civvies, even for coppers, but Jimmy's got sharp skills. When the word hit the streets, the Civil Aviation Authority shut down the airspace, so we had to resort to vehicles to trace the tac-net signal from your Oakleys."

Brett touched his empty face, missing the comfort of the glasses. "Phelan took them off me. Too much tactical intelligence."

"I know, which is how we found Daryl's Meats. Lucky for us Jimmy Phelan is such a prick. So I've been driving around the streets of Cronulla, using the Mark I eyeball, and there you were, hotter than death but not by much. You've got serious internal injuries and have lost a shitload of blood. I've pumped you full of what we could scrounge from the med centre, and a couple of field kits that went missing from the Q store."

"You'll lose your career."

"Nah, might even get promoted."

"Sarge, out in the desert, thanks."

“She’s sweet, sir.”

“I lost it, and I’m sorry.”

“General Owen left you outside the wire for far too long.”

“General?”

“Yeah, announced yesterday at morno’s at Duntroon House. The Chief had the ceremony widecast. Part of the CDF’s damage control measures. I blame them, anyway. ’Nuff said, I reckon.”

Brett mused on Charlie Owen climbing higher still. Then he noted the light flooding into the back of the van.

Mid-morning?

“What’s the time?”

“Just after 8am. Don’t sweat it, boss. Pup is sitting overwatch. Phelan’s moved again, and he’s running a standard safehouse plan, so we’ve got a few minutes before he relocates. Then we’ll hasty into position, and hit him when he next moves. I’m assuming you don’t want to ring the Feds right away.”

“Right you are.”

“Cool,” said the Sarge. “The good news is that I managed to ‘borrow’ a heap of kit from the base, meeting all the requirements in your datapacket.”

“Groovy,” Brett said, “let’s go be heroes.”

Phelan moved again, on the schedule the Sarge predicted, and Pup drove a Toyota Evolve and the Sarge tagged off him in the white van, with Brett keeping low in the back. They easily kept up with the convoy of large black cars, slipping ahead and turning off, racing lights and zooming down backstreets to keep a rotating tail, until a dead-end in Gynea left them cold. Circuiting the neighbourhood, Jenkins saw two of the convoy cars, black Range Rovers, at a service station, filling their tanks. Brett connected through the goggles the Sarge provided, and ID’d both drivers, Gerlach and Reilly, as part of the Hilton team. The Sarge pulled over into a bus zone, hazard flashers blinking, as Jenkins pretended to vacuum his car in the bay on one side of petrol station forecourt.

“They’re moving,” Pup said, climbing back into the car and starting the engine. He pulled out ahead of the Range Rovers, and let them pass him. The Sarge picked up the tail, but the two vehicles turned left down the next sidestreet, so she slowed and tossed Brett her datapad.

“Get me video,” she said. Brett scrolled through the icons until the camera flashed green-ready.

The Range Rovers blocked the road as they reversed into the driveway of an ordinary suburban house. Brett filmed the environment, both sides of the street, from inside the van. He kept low, raising the pad only high enough for the lens to clear the windowsill.

Phelan came out of the house and waved the drivers inside. The Sarge, her headwear pulled low, drummed her fingers on the steering wheel like any frustrated delivery driver; Phelan glanced at the van, at the driver, but didn't react to anything other than the slowness of Gerlach and Reilly as they lumbered inside. Once clear, the Sarge continued down the road and took the first right, looping back to park two streets over. Jenkins pulled up behind them, and came around the van to stand on the footpath.

“We've got vision.” Brett said, reviewing the tape. “Phelan's there, so at least one of the hostages is. Have to be the PM. The house directly across the road is no good for us; there's a car in the driveway and kids' toys on the front lawn. But the house next door, the red brick, is shuttered down like a working family would leave it. Base of operations?”

The Sarge nodded. “This side fence, that's a good shooting position. The other cars aren't here, so they either split up the hostages or they're standing part of their force ready somewhere else. I'd do both.”

“Right, but they're under pressure.” Brett raised a finger. “Why else use the guys from the raid on filling the vehicles? They should be bunkered down, out of sight, not cruising the main drag looking for a Caltex.”

“Let's go jump some fences, sir, if you're up to it, and get a butchers.”

Brett nodded, and they sorted through weapons and ammo, loading carry-bags and backpacks. Each took two bottles of water, and Brett felt solid on his feet. His bleeding had stopped although a light-headness danced with him. The street was deserted, and the walk around to the next block was punctuated only by the sound of barking dogs and the whir of a postie on his red bike, weaving up the street on his mail run.

“See how many of these houses are displaying the Eureka Flag.” The Sarge pointed at the front window of the house as they passed. “It's the third one in this street.”

“Stronghold country.” Brett thought it through. “So their other lay-up point isn't far away, and pretty much everyone is a potential hostile. How long till the next move?”

“Hour, maybe more.” The Sarge looked along the street, and then led the charge across the front lawn of a white Spanish bungalow, its garden a mixture of hardy natives and gum trees. “This is the one.”

The six-foot fence had weathered grey wooden boards. The Sarge crouched, slinging her hands. Brett swallowed the protest and dropped his bag, stepping onto her hands and riding the boost over the top, being sure to keep his arm tight against his wounded side. He landed awkwardly and rolled. The stench of fresh dog shit hit him, and he gagged.

“Shit.”

Pup slithered over the fence, with proper form and economy, and crouched beside Brett. He whispered: “You okay, sir?”

“No,” Brett hissed, “there’s dog shit everywhere, and I landed in it.”

The Sarge tossed over the bags and landed lightly next to both men. “What stinks?”

“The officer.” Jenkins moved away to scan the adjoining backyards before either could reply.

“Smart kid,” Brett said.

“Aren’t they all?”

The piercing cry of children at play kept them low, and Jenkins indicated with his hands as he spoke softly. “That’s our observation point, over that fence. No sign of occupant there. No dog toys or water bowls. There’s a sliding glass door, with a security screen. Same for the kitchen window. Toilet window is standard aluminium frame, half-open.”

“So where’s this dog?” the Sarge said, wrinkling her nose.

“Let’s not wait to find out.” They repeated the fence procedure, but this time Brett felt a tug deep inside, and a warm trickle of blood ran down his belly. They ran to the back corner of the house, and swiftly moved to the side fence with the view of the Sons hideout across the street.

“Sir, you okay? You’re sweating.”

“It’s hot.”

“And bleeding again.”

The Sarge motioned for Pup to grab the water, which Brett guzzled while the other two laid out the weapons. Brett picked up the sniper’s rifle, an SR-25. It was a

beautiful gun, tough and reliable. After attaching the scope to the Picatinny rail, Brett raised himself up and swept the front of the house opposite. Red brick with a white veranda, white ColourBond roof, concrete driveway with two black cars and a dusty front lawn. The low front fence was red brick and white iron. He changed magnifications, examining details and access points. Then he crouched down, and the Sarge worked the scope video through the datapad.

“What, ten guys inside?” Brett asked.

“At least. No fewer than five, and we only know of three. We’re outgunned, outmanned, out of position, and surrounded by hostiles. Sounds like Gezrit all over again.”

“Or the ‘Stan. Or Moresby.” Brett said.

“Remember Moresby,” the Sarge intoned, and Brett nodded, his lips tight.

“Why can’t we call in TAG–East?” Pup said. The Tactical Assault Group–East were the SAS’s East Coast operation, short-notice capability for the conduct of offensive domestic counter-terrorist operations and hostage rescue. “We know that they’ll be sitting in the air, somewhere, geared up and ready to go.”

The Sarge raised an eyebrow.

Brett nodded. “It’s better than the Feds, who are compromised, according to the agent with whom I’ve been dealing. Or the NSW Police.” He took the datapad and rang the TAG–East watchkeeper. After a brief conversation, which included name and rank and ID number, and then some codeword verifications, he ended up on the phone to Charlie Owen.

“I’ve located Jimmy Phelan, who is holding a hostage, probably the PM, at a house in Cronulla.” Brett reeled off the address. “Get the TAG here within 30 minutes, or Phelan will move again and we’ll lose contact.”

Charlie Owen stared at him from the datapad, repulsion on his face, until the magnitude of Brett’s words started ringing alarms. “All the footage, you traitor, shows you leading the way, pulling the trigger, and I know that you devised the plan that snatched him. You *disloyal* bastard.”

“If General Ryan were alive, he could corroborate me. Charles, everything’s too complicated to explain simply, and you have a time-sensitive target in the here-and-now, so get cracking on making the calls. We need backup.”

“Who else is there?”

“Make the call, right now, General, because I saved your life.” Brett hung up.
“You pole-climbing shitbag.”

Pup snickered.

Brett’s thumbs keyed out a message to Daniels, but he never got to send it. From behind them came the low whistle of a field hail, the call used by those in the bush when they were approaching their own position.

Everyone turned, Jenkins and the Sarge raising weapons and taking sight. Brett couldn’t be bothered—his lethargy over-rode his combat skills.

Agent Daniels, of all people, crossed the backyard toward them in a crouched run. He carried a long silver rifle in his hands, which appeared ridiculous against his black suit with the bright blue armoured vest under the jacket.

“Couldn’t get anything inconspicuous?” Brett said, before realising that he too still wore a suit and carried a gun.

“We’ve got the same tailor.” Daniels hunkered down, whispering and offering his hand. “Federal Agent Daniels, AFP.”

The Sarge looked at Brett, who shrugged.

“You rang him?” Brett said.

“No, she didn’t,” Daniels said, showing his shark grin. “But my mate Trooper Jenkins, well, he’s been keeping me in the loop. You’re supposed to be doing that, Brett, so don’t sour on Jenkins because he understands lawful authority. Anyway, what’s the situation?”

“Phelan’s in there,” Brett said, indicating. “We’re going to sit tight until TAG-East will kick in the door and recover the PM and the Foreign Minister. At that point, I want a quiet chat with Phelan. By the way, he’s got people on my brother—did you set up a protection detail?”

“Of course, standard 4-man team, but strictly stand-off observation, no interaction, so Lawrie won’t know they’re there unless he’s looking. Why, have you heard more?”

“Several hours ago, Phelan’s guy, name of ‘Danny’, was sitting on Lawrie last night. Saw him out and about in Omeo. No mention of a protective detail. So, Federal Agent, you promised me and it seems like you didn’t follow-through.”

Daniels looked surprised.

Jenkins whistled softly and motioned across the road. The trooper had positioned a small camera atop the fence, and everyone crowded to watch the datapad. Brett wished for his Oakleys, and his heart sank. He watched as Reilly came out of the house and started both vehicles, opening doors and leaving them wide. Gerlach appeared, carrying a gym bag that sagged against its handles.

“They’re moving already,” Jenkins said, and the Sarge patted him on the shoulder. “The other 4WDs can’t be far away.”

Daniels pulled a phone off his belt and dialled. Brett redialled the datapad, hoping to get Owen to hurry.

Or even listen.

The sound of yelling children from next door rose, and the men across the road looked over, concerned, until the sounds registered their normality. Reilly and Gerlach didn’t look hurried or nervous, and they didn’t scan the skies like the tribesmen in so many Third World shit-holes had learned to do over the last twenty years.

“If it comes to gunplay, we’re short,” the Sarge said.

“I’m qualified for the .50 cal,” Daniels replied, phone pressed against his ear, and Brett raised an eyebrow. “I was a choco for six years, while I was going through uni, and I took the marksmanship award at Kapooka.” A choco—the derogatory slang for reservists that meant ‘chocolate soldier’, therefore wrapped in gold and melting in the heat of battle—actually went through the same *ab initio* training as the rest of the Army. But in the power hierarchy of the military culture, they were still questionable, despite decades of deployments and integration with regular Army units. Chocos had deployed and won medals, been wounded while displaying bravery under fire, and they’d died on active service, but they were still not ‘true blue’ Diggers.

“Infantry?”

Daniels held up a hand as his call answered. “Position on this contact, expedite Operation Snatchback.” He listened, barked a couple of orders, and hung up. “Corporal, too, so I outrank Trooper Jenkins.” Daniels hefted the large rifle he’d arrived with, and worked the action with professional deftness. “Of course, I’ve been AFP Marksman of the Year for the last 10 years, and I represented South Australia in the national rifle championship from the age of nine and Australia at the Junior Olympics.”

“What ammo you got?” The Sarge looked closely as Daniels worked the bolt and ejected a round. She held up a long, brass casing without a discernable bullet. “Try these—fresh off the Tenix production line.”

“What is it?” Daniels rolled it through his fingers.

“A Tesla round; an EM pulse. It will incapacitate a vehicle plus its occupants. Aim for the engine block.”

“Stop drooling and load up,” Brett hissed. The Sarge handed Daniels three Teslas, which he loaded into the magazine and chambered the first round.

“I fire first.” Brett said. “Daniels, target the rear vehicle with a Tesla. Pup, the lead one, then both march your fire toward the centre. The Sarge and I will work through the hostage guards, closest to the hostages first, and then everyone targets anyone left standing. Sarge, I’ll take the first hostage out the door, you the second; we must prevent the Sons from executing them. Backgrounds matter, and for Christ’s sake leave Phelan alive. Hopefully, TAG arrives before the convoy—”

As Brett spoke, another three black 4WDs entered the street and slowed. Gerlach shouted a warning, and seconds later a crowd emerged from the house. The hooded hostages had a man on each arm, and were loaded into the first car in the driveway, with Reilly behind the wheel.

Jenkins and the Sarge moved apart along their patch of fence, and Brett sighted for the guards, choosing the man with short blond hair. Brett breathed out, feeling his pulse, timing the shot.

“On my shot,” he said, and fired.

The top of the blond man’s head evaporated, and he released his grip on the Prime Minister’s arm.

Had to be the PM in the first black hood, Brett thought, he’s so short.

Pup and the Sarge fired, each hitting their targets, but Daniels missed the last car on the street, and it zoomed around the vehicle Jenkins had disabled. The men in the yard dropped low and raised their weapons. Brett fired at the guard on the PM’s left arm, spinning him to the ground. The Sons returned fire, and heavy rounds punctured the fence.

Phelan shoved the PM into Reilly’s car as the *thudthudthud* of rotor blades filled the air. The gunship zoomed down the street, roaring thunder and lashing metal as its cannon tore up the roadway. The convoy disintegrated.

TAG, Brett thought, you're it.

"Air support," the Sarge shouted, working her sights and taking down the Sons on the veranda and the front lawn. The second hostage took a round to the back.

The scene moved in slow motion for Brett. He put the crosshairs on Reilly, but the shot went wide as the vehicle leapt forward across the street.

"TAG's here," the Sarge said, then a bullet took her in the throat.

Brett could see the helicopter overhead and the black-clad troops forming up down the road. The Sarge clutched at the thick arterial blood spurting from her neck. Reilly gunned the motor and threw the Range Rover at their position. It roared toward the fence and Brett fired again at the windscreen. His thumb switched the rifle to semi-automatic. The car lifted off the ground as it ran across the curb and lawn and raised flowerbed, and burst through the wooden palings, its spinning black wheels just clearing the prostrate Sarge. Daniels and Jenkins had swung out of the way, but Brett stood in his firing stance and unloaded a stream into the 4WD's front door.

Phelan's in the rear, with the hostage.

The gunship zoomed low, and the TAG East boys sprinted down the street. The Range Rover, its motor screaming and its wheels hurling clumps of turf, ploughed through the back fence. Brett sprinted after it, unwilling to risk firing again.

The car swerved across the next backyard, where Brett had landed in the dogshit, heading toward the driveway. Brett chased as it crashed through the green ColourBond gate next to the green ColourBond shed. For a second, the metal gate-post snagged the rear of the vehicle, and Brett almost reached the tailgate when it tore free with a screeching wail. The car leapt away, bouncing down the driveway, and slewed into the street with squealing tyres. Brett fired a single round at Reilly, whose blood sprayed across the inside of the windscreen. Phelan sat up and pointed a pistol. The bullet took Brett across the chest, and spun him to the ground.

Daniels ran toward the car, which sped off toward the main road. The AFP Marksman of the Year took a stance, the long silver rifle a steady beam, and he fired as the car turned left into the thoroughfare.

Engine block.

Brett rolled to his feet in time to see the round hit the car. A blue Jacob's Ladder engulfed the vehicle, sparks crackling and leaping from roof to door pillar to the dull metallic roof bar on the front. Its engine died. Daniels lowered the rifle and ran toward the

car. Brett forced himself upright, his brother's name hot on his lips, and he staggered toward Daniels and salvation, a numb hand pressed against the pouring wound in his side.

Federal Agent Daniels opened the rear door, his pistol covering Phelan's inert form. He swung a set of plastic cuffs from his jacket and locked Phelan to the door frame. Brett saw him pat down the hooded man, checking for wounds.

He's competent.

Phelan stirred. Brett reached past Daniels and searched Phelan's pockets.

"The hit," he wheezed, "I've got to call it off."

"I've got guys on it, Brett," Daniels said.

But you lie.

"Too late," Phelan croaked, "you're too late."

"Brett, don't, he wants you to kill him—" Daniels took a firm grip on Brett's arm, to pull him away.

Brett's skills reacted, sharp and burning. He twisted sideways, despite the searing pain in his chest and side. His arms come up as he stepped back, and he drove a fist up into Daniels' face. The agent bounced off the car and hit the tarmac.

"Ha!" Phelan cackled, "too late!"

Brett found Phelan's datapad and scrolled through the logs. He dialled the number and held the pad to his ear, his right hand jamming the muzzle of his gun against Phelan's head, and said: "Better not be, mate."

* * *

Lawrie jerked awake as the door opened, the nightmare bright and angry on his lips. The shadow in the doorway was short.

She's come to me.

Gratitude flooded Lawrie, his cheeks flushing, as his angel entered the room.

She'll kiss me, and then we'll make love until dawn.

Lawrie longed to sleep in Lise's arms, her warmth on his back as they spooned and cuddled. But the nightmare, of being chased and being hurt, refused to release its grip.

It's them, and Lawrie chilled.

"Lawrie," came the voice, and it was Lise's voice, "there's somebody outside."

Lise/Not Lise.

“Jeena?”

“I was going to the toilet, and there’s somebody outside. I heard them try to open the sliding door, and they went around the front.”

Lawrie sat up, more awake than he’d ever been before. *They’ve come back for me.*

He wanted to scream and hide under the blankets. “Let’s go wake your mum, very quietly.” Jeena took his hand and led him to the next bedroom. Only the nightlight in the bathroom cast any glimmer, and Lawrie’s world was formless shadow. He brushed the doorknob, and stubbed his toe against the end of Lise’s bed. Fighting the urge to yelp, he heard her sit upright, and Jeena whispered: “Mum, there’s someone outside.”

“Lise, they’ve come back to get me.”

“Shh,” Lise said, and Lawrie heard the covers being thrown back. “In the wardrobe, wait, I’ll open the gun safe.”

Lawrie realised that he was only wearing track pants. “I’m getting a shirt,” he said, and grabbed his hoody from the end of his bed, slipping into it as he went back to the women in the corridor. He caught a gleam of long metal in Lise’s hands.

A scratching, metallic noise came from the front door, and Lise crossed to the door as it opened with a sighing squeak. Lise flicked on the front light, and the sudden beam revealed a large man wearing goggles. He held a sawn-off shotgun, but clutched at his eyes as the goggles magnified the unexpected light.

Lise pulled the trigger, her own shotgun spewing sparks into the man’s chest. He fell backward, outside, and Lawrie pulled Lise away from the door and toward the floor.

“There could be more.” He wrapped an arm around Jeena’s shoulders, pulling her close, and everyone waited for their ears to stop ringing.

The phone—

Lawrie reached across to the entryway table, where Lise had keys and pens and her handbag.

“Your phone.”

Lise handed Lawrie the shotgun and took her handbag. The man outside the front door groaned. The faint sound of a voice came from outside, like music from someone else’s headphones.

“It’s his radio.” Lawrie kept the shotgun pointed at the doorway, and said: “Lise, look out the curtains.”

She did. “There’s headlights at the bottom of the drive, moving up here slowly.”

“Let’s go,” Jeena said.

“Up the hill,” Lise whispered, “up to the shed.”

Lise pulled at Lawrie’s sleeve, and he backed away from the door, fearing that the man would lunge upright and come chasing them.

Like my premonition.

His hands began to shake, and Lise took the gun from him and cracked it open. “Got to reload.”

Jeena peeked between the vertical blinds at the firepit outside the back door. “Can’t see anybody, but it’s dark.”

“Laundry window,” Lise said, and opened the door leading to the washing machine and dryer. She slid the aluminium window wide, and popped out the screen with a shove of her hand. Lawrie clambered out first, peering into the gloom, and Lise handed him the gun. He waved it from side to side, looking at every shadow and shape. His balls climbed high inside him. Jeena and Lise climbed out and pressed themselves against the watertank.

“Follow me,” Lise said, and darted straight across the veranda to the screen of shrubs that surrounded the house. Lawrie remembered that the veggie patch was this way, and that the shrubs continued in a straight line all the way there. He followed, scanning side to side, but saw nothing except the blazing headlights coming up the drive. As they reached the freshly dug mounds, the headlights swung across them. Lawrie felt a desperate exposure and he froze, eyes wide.

His heart pounded and his bare feet were aching cold.

The nightmare’s coming true. I dreamed this.

Doors opened, and loud voice called “Australian Federal Police.”

A shot rang out across the night, and the three of them sprinted up the hill to the shed. More shots, as if people were shooting at each other.

Who is shooting who?

“They’re cops!” Lawrie hissed as they crested the rise to the shed.

Lise shook her head. The gunfire ceased. “Could be a trick. Why else would they block the signal to my phone?”

Lawrie looked at the screen she showed him, its glowing face a scramble of junk letters and nonsense.

“Wow.”

“We’re taking Helen,” Lise said, “and going to the cop shop in town.”

Lise opened the side door and went into the shed. Jeena and Lawrie followed, and Lise opened the driver’s door and turned off the interior light. “Jeena, get in the backseat.”

Lawrie helped Lise open both main doors, their well-oiled and balanced hinges offering no noise or resistance.

“Jump start, Lawrence,” Lise said, climbing behind the wheel. “We’ll roll as far as we can.”

Lawrie, standing outside the passenger’s door, the window rolled down, pushed Helen forward, his hands against cool metal. Nothing happened, so he heaved harder, and Helen moved forward. He kept pushing, his ribs an agony as the bones ground against each other, but he kept pushing. Helen’s nose emerged from the shed, and her front wheels dropped off the concrete slab and into the dirt ruts that led down the hill.

If I slip, I’m crushed or left behind.

Helen moved faster, unstoppable now. He scurried, yanking on the door and throwing himself inside. Helen quickly picked up speed, and soon they passed the car with its headlights aimed at the side of the house. Lawrie remembered arriving there, just days ago, but now he saw two men laying on the ground, and blood pooled beside them.

“Jesus!” Lise yelled as she flicked on the headlights. Lawrie turned forward to see another man standing on the driveway, wearing goggles and pointing a gun at them. Lise didn’t swerve, couldn’t, with gum trees close on both sides of the car, and the front bumper took the man’s knees and threw him into the trees with a deadened thud. His gun clattered onto the bonnet, bounced, and fell away into the darkness. Lise popped the clutch and Helen jerked and coughed into life. She gunned the motor and fought the car’s desire to fishtail. The gate stood open. With a thump, Helen bounced onto the bitumen road and roared throatily toward town.

“On our way, honey,” Lise said. Behind them, another pair of headlights came on, and Jeena whimpered. Lise looked up into the rearview mirror, at her daughter and at the car closing quickly behind them. “It’ll be fine, sweetie, I promise.”

The car zoomed to their back bumper, seeking for a way past on the narrow country road. Lise moved Helen from side to side, reading the bends of the road to make the old car impossibly wide.

Revvng engines fought with the chatter of a machine gun. Lise jammed the brake-pedal to the floor, and the new drums heaved Helen to a stop. The car behind ploughed into them rear, punting Helen across the road. She ploughed into a gum tree. Lawrie's head smashed onto the dashboard, and he blanked for a moment.

There was no sound except the ticking of the motor and moans from the backseat. Beside him, Lise had a bleeding gash on her forehead. Lawrie saw the other car impaled, its bonnet and its boot embracing another gum tree.

He climbed out, stiffly, his ribs flaring and his neck an agony.

Whiplash.

The shotgun, remarkably, was still in his hands. He stumbled toward the other car.

They'd hurt Lise.

Rage tore through Lawrie.

"Dead meat!" He screamed, and waved the gun at the form slumped behind the wheel. "You're dead meat!"

The man looked up, blood flowing down his face. "Garg," he said.

Lawrie shoved the shotgun barrel through the shattered window into the man's face. "You did this."

"Lawrence," Lise said, faintly, twisting in her seat. Lawrie crossed back to Helen. Lise stumbled from the car, and Lawrie held out a hand, unwilling to relinquish the shotgun.

"Jeena?" Lise said. Lawrie wrenched open the rear door and Jeena tumbled out.

She's dead.

But the girl moaned, and Lise fell to her knees beside her daughter. Lawrie lifted Jeena and propped her against the car, and Lise crawled to her side. Jeena opened her eyes and looked around.

"What happened?"

Lawrie heard a scuffing noise, and turned to see the driver of the other car advancing on him, a knife glittering in Helen's bright headlights.

She's still shining.

Lawrie felt pride in the old girl, and he fired the shotgun. The kick shoved the butt painfully into his shoulder. The man fell to the ground. He made no sound, however, and his eyes brightened.

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Lawrie's nightmare, still fresh and ghosting behind reality, came back to him. "Did you kidnap me?"

The man glared at him, so Lawrie shoved the barrel into his face. He brought the barrel down onto the man's head. It made a hollow *clunk*.

"Yes," the man gasped. "I did."

"And did you torture me?"

"Yeah, and I enjoyed it." The man moved.

"Did you rape me?"

"I fucked you in the arse," the man laughed at Lawrie, crawling toward him, "and you got a stiffy, you faggot."

The frigid shame of Lawrie's most awful secret crumpled something in his mind. He knew that he was going to kill this man. He wanted to kill him. He had to.

Lawrie aimed the shotgun, his finger going back to the trigger.

Jeena meowed. "Ouch, mother!"

"Don't, Lawrence," Lise said.

A sob, deep and violent, wrenched itself from his chest. "He raped me, and I got a hard-on!"

Lawrie's hands trembled, and he couldn't make them stop. His shivered, as if he were sitting in a walk-in freezer. But the hate in his heart screamed for him to shove the gun forward and keep pulling the trigger. His feet twitched and tremours ran up his legs and through his torso.

The man on the ground snarled, closer still, and Lawrie clenched his teeth. He sniffed, and again, but the tears kept coming, streaming down his face. "He deserves it, and I deserve to do it. So why not?"

Lise's hand on his arm, and the smell of her, a fresh scent, cut through. "Killing him will cripple you. Please don't."

I'm freezing. The thought took a long time to form. The snarling man reaching for the gun and the shaking barrel were alone in a tunnel with Lawrie.

A tight, black tunnel.

Blinding light bathed the scene.

Dad's here, Lawrie thought, and a great calmness filled his heart. "He'll take care of it," he said, "Dad—"

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But his words were torn away by the roaring engines of a descending aircraft. It floated over them, its spotlight blinding Lawrie. It dropped to the right of where he stood.

Hot exhaust and the rising scream on the engines pushed him lower, and Lawrie dropped the gun and pulled Lise into his body, turning his back to screaming, squat black shape behind its looking-at-the-sun spotlight.

The wind became a hurricane of dust and dirt that clogged the eyes and nose, and Lise burrowed into Lawrie's arms, Jeena behind them, and then the noise died and the wind scurried away.

* * *

The ringing in Brett's ear continued, and he saw TAG guys advancing on them, weapons raised.

C'mon c'mon c'mon.

The morning traffic backed up, and flashing lights and screaming sirens formed an expanding cordon.

C'mon.

The ringing stopped and a voice, no video, said "Hello?"

Everything around Brett seemed hushed, expectant.

"Danny, mate?"

Phelan laughed, so Brett moved away from the vehicle.

"And?" the voice said, guardedly.

Daniels groaned.

"Danny, message from Jimmy, scrub the mission."

Brett held his free hand high, waving the soldiers forward with the 'urgent' hand signal.

"Who are you?"

The thudding boots of the soldiers rose up through Brett's feet. "I'm with Jimmy's mob," he said.

Daniels stumbled to his feet, waving the soldiers forward with his badge.

"What's your name?" the voice said, and Brett panicked.

Who am I? Am I me? Am I Ryan the Younger or Reilly or Gerlach? Am I Birmingham?

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Soldiers ran toward Brett, shouting: “On the ground!”

“I’m Brett Bliss,” Brett screamed into the phone, his pain incandescent, “so don’t hurt my brother!”

Somebody shot him with something, and Brett never saw it coming.

FIFTEEN:

Daniels nodded, and handed Brett the phone. "It's one of our guys; the protection detail swept up Phelan's mob; Lawrie and Lise and Jeena are safe."

Brett laughed, and shook his head.

"Let me give you something for the pain; talk to your brother, mate, your time is nearly over." Daniels waved to another agent.

"Lawrie," Brett coughed, blood bright on his lips as his brother's face appeared on the screen. "Good to see you."

Daniels stepped back and a paramedic bent forward and injected Brett with something.

"What the hell happened to you?" Lawrie's eyes, with black bags underneath, opened wide.

"Tough day at the office." Brett coughed again, the spear of pain forcing a wry smile of his face. Numbness spread. "How's everything there?"

"Agents everywhere. We're being moved, but Lise is doing her 'nana. Jeena's banged up pretty bad, but she'll be okay, according to the doc. Lise's kicked his arse until he organized a helicopter to take Jeena for BSI scans at Sale Base Hospital. She's back now; Lise made the helicopter wait to fly us back. She's phenomenal: takes no prisoners. We want to stay here, Lise's farm, I mean. Hell, I want to live here, forever. Lise says it's good for the soul."

Brett smiled. "You kiss her yet?"

"Oh, mate." The brothers laughed, but Brett ended with more coughs. The whole street buzzed with suits and combat uniforms and everyone carried a gun on their hip or over their shoulder.

"I got them, bro, those guys." Brett wiped his bloody lips with the back of his wrist. "Like I promised."

"Thank you." Lawrie's gratitude shone on his face.

Brett smiled again. His head spun, dizzy and high, and he knew time was short. He couldn't feel his legs. The mid-morning sun did nothing to warm him, but a kind soul, maybe it was Daniels, had given him a pair of shades to cover his eyes, but he took them off so Lawrie could see. A photographer moved around, capturing video and stills. "And you had some fun your end?"

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“I think I lost it,” Lawrie said, “before the police arrived in their magic jet. But Lise and Jeena are safe. But I lost it.”

“Happens to us all, bro.” Brett felt the world easing away from him, leaving him behind in a spasm of change.

I’m old-world.

The mountains and that fort, with its crumbling walls and the small bundle in his arms, seemed closer than the street-corner where he lay.

Brett saw Daniels frown, looking at his watch, and then he held up two fingers. Brett swallowed, and took the leap, tears running down his cheeks. “About Dad, bro.”

Lawrie’s face hardened. “What?”

“I killed him.”

Lawrie shook his head, but his mouth was pursed tight. “No, he was old.”

“I’m sorry, bro, I’m so sorry. I shamed him to death. It was my fault.”

Lawrie’s face didn’t change.

“I raped a girl,” Brett said, “the night before that cold morning, me and some guys from the cricket team. The desk sergeant knew Dad from the RSL, and drove me home. They talked while I sat in the police car, locked in the back, in the bracelets and everything, and then the copper let me out and drove off and I dragged my feet slowly toward the old man. I walked so slowly, like it would help me. He stood in the doorway, parade straight, and I was afraid. No, I was terrified. He stood aside, and I walked in the front door and he went to close it. Then it happened. Then he grabbed his chest, his face was so white, and he fell. The door was half open, then you came out of your room, down the hallway, and you looked at me. God knows how long we stared at each other, but then I stepped over him and ran away. I actually stepped over my old man’s dead body to escape, that’s how shit I am. I should have stayed. But I ran away because I was afraid.”

Brett remembered that hallway, his father’s face, the old hand clutching the old chest. Brett remembered Lawrie’s face, that young Lawrie, and he re-lived the fear, and the urge to run. He remembered the park, with his mates in the darkness, coming across the girl. He remembered the lust, and the power, and he remembered the deep shame that followed him for the rest of his days.

And then, in the glaring morning sun in Cronulla, Mishima’s words filled Brett’s mind:

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A small night storm blows

Saying 'falling is the essence of a flower'

Preceding those who hesitate

“Brett,” Lawrie’s voice snapped reality back into place around Brett. “What happens next?”

“Next,” Brett said, and he felt Jacko nearby, and tears ran down his cheeks. Each hitching sob speared fresh pain, and his wounds opened. “You go on, bro, you go on and make a new life, better than the old one you had, with someone, Lise, by your side—”

—*Jacko, mate, help me—*

“—you make a family and grow old.”

Brett paused, seeing Jacko in the front bar of the Grand Hotel, laughing over a pool table. He felt the heft of that bundle, the girl in the desert, and the impelling need to save her. And he felt his father’s hand, rough and giant, the old man looming tall, the pair of them walking through the park on a cloudy day, the soccer ball waiting to be kicked back and forth, the old man clapping and encouraging Brett in his clipped British Army accent. “You tell your kids about their ancestors, about battlefields and bravery and doing the best you can. Not just the wars overseas, but also the ones at home, in *our* hearts and minds. And you keep doing the best you can, like you always have.” Brett cried, freely, wanting that family for himself, knowing that he had only the bond of brothers.

“But I haven’t done anything.” Lawrie’s voice trembled. “Brett, I’m not a hero like you.”

“Don’t *do*, mate, *be*.” Brett knew his father’s combat record, the long list of mentions in dispatches and impressive acronym soup of awards and commendations. He also knew his grandfather’s record, also a Lawrence, and he suddenly recognised the now-pointless anger at not being named after his father’s father. That anger, a profound bitterness, had been with Brett ever since Lawrie came home from the hospital, and that Reggie started talking about the baby and Grandfather Lawrence in the same sentences. “Be the best at being you, that’s all there is. Make the best of the worst, like you did with Mum. You’ve done a great job, and I’m so proud of you.”

Lawrie sniffed, and his hand wiped his eyes. “When are you coming back?”

“Can’t, mate, can’t be done. I’m—”

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Not gonna make it. Brett thought about al-Hajjii Gezrit, the fort in the desert, and its crumbling walls. That bitter last stand remained elusive in his memory. He had fragments of the action, images and sensations, but nothing more. He recalled Big Dick laughing, and then the mortar round shredding him. Someone told him about the incoming air support, a voice in his earpiece, but the futile *clickclickclick* of the empty Browning swamped the joy with a dread calm. There was a flashing blade, stabbing and stabbing, and his arm and face were covered in the heavy, hot blood straight from a major artery. He thought he remember Jenkins, pushing him down as a rattle of assault rifle fire raked overhead. And he remembered the Sarge, bless her, telling him that Jacko had succumbed to wounds.

“Lawrie,” Brett whispered, “Job done, and time for a rest.”

And Brett felt Jacko’s hand on his shoulder, the hot Port Moresby sun beating down on their heads, driving them insane, running through back-alleys and slotting floppies, terror cold and hot behind their cool detachment.

“Remember Moresby,” Brett said, and his eyes closed and the datapad slipped from his fingers.

“Brett?” Lawrie’s voice seemed so far away, so full of sadness. “Brett?” Daniels reached in and broke the connection.

Lawrie looked around, and Lise stood in the doorway, smiling her gentle smile.

“I think he’s dead,” Lawrie said, and burst into tears. “I’m all alone.”

She stepped to him, and they embraced, Lawrie stiff and trembling.

“No, Lawrence, I’m here.”

Lawrie buried his face into the crook of Lise’s neck and couldn’t fight the stinging in his eyes any more. The leaking tears become a torrent, and Lise held him as the sobs ripped.

Lise hugged him and stroked his hair, whispering and whispering.

After a couple of minutes, Lawrie pulled away to wipe his eyes on a fresh handkerchief, and he blotted the tears off Lise’s shoulder as best he could. He then blew his nose, twice, loud.

“I’m sorry,” Lawrie whispered, “but I need you.”

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“Shush, silly, nothing to be sorry about.”

He pulled her close and squeezed her tightly, whispering: “I want to tell you about what they did to me, when they kidnapped me, but I’m afraid.”

“You can,” Lise murmured, “when you’re ready.”

He squeezed her again.

SIXTEEN:

“Good job, Brett,” Daniels said. “Now we fix you up. You feel like death, but that’s just what we injected you with. Junkies call it ‘Reaper’. You’ll be fine.”

The medic returned, injected again, and Brett felt the bleakness lift slightly, and his vision recovered a little. His past, so immediate and pressing, eased away.

“What about the Sarge? Jenkins?”

Daniels shook his head. “She didn’t make it, but Jenkins did. I’m seconding him into my office, starting today, to help with a project I’m working on. He’s a smart kid, and handy with the tools of the trade, and I’m hoping that he will move into our field operations division.”

Brett knew that Daniels meant to recruit Jenkins into ASIS. But the Sarge didn’t make it, and Brett struggled to box that emotion, to put it aside and detach from the profound sense of loss.

“She’s a hero,” Brett said, and Daniels nodded.

“We’ll have her recognised,” Daniels said, “in some way, depending on how public this goes. If it’s fully public, then we’ll make her the centrepiece and award her a VC.”

The medics fussed, injected Brett with painkillers and sprayed coagulant onto his wounds. They poked an intravenous drip into the back of his hand, and after a while death’s cool gaze moved on.

Daniels stood above him and smiled. “Time for you to meet the future.”

A car with blackened windows pulled up, and the rear passenger window rolled slowly down. Inside, Brett saw Major General Ryan.

“He’s with us, now, heading up the new Iron Gum.” Daniels said, looking back over his shoulder. “He wants you with us, too.”

Brett shook his head again.

“Either that,” Daniels said, “or we leave you here on the road to bleed out. Things have changed, mate, since you’ve been away so long. Iron Gum’s different: the Minister is one of us, and he firewalled us. We’ve got an operational arm. We’ve gone beyond just wargaming and training ASIS and SASR. We’re doing direct action now, inside Australia, and the polities are out of the loop. They have no say because we have no oversight. The new Iron Gum is taking responsibility, and we need your help.”

Brett lay unbelieving, his pain growing. General Ryan approached, and hunkered down.

“There are several cancers, Brett, which we need to excise.” Ryan plucked at his trousers. “The politicians are one, Federal and state. The splintered Sons are another; Phelan was just the most immediately toxic, but he was not alone. There are splinter cells all around the country, not least in this neck of the woods. Some are Sons, off reservation, and others are wannabe copycats, operating in the gap between law and chaos. Some are criminal, some ideological. They need cleaning up. The Chinese have been building connections from Beijing into the Triads, especially in Melbourne and Darwin, mostly through Singapore and Hong Kong, which opens all sorts of horrible doors when Australia confronts that rising power. Then, in the background, is Thomas haji-Muhammad and his mob of Islam-loving radicals, and they are growing strong. Sharia law is in western Sydney now, and whole swathes of the tribal lands north of Port Augusta. That is the nightmare I dread the most, more than anything, because they have a righteous claim. Hajji-Muhammad is a young, smart, terrifying enemy.”

Brett nodded. “I saw him, in Lakemba.”

“I know. I watched the ASIO feed.” Ryan winced. “That took some big balls, Brett, to front Tom Muhammad like that. Did you confess your crime? What did he say?”

How did Ryan watch the ASIO feed? “He shook my hand. Nice bloke, really. He sorted me out on a couple of things, and helped me get to where I am today.”

“I want to debrief you on him and his, if you come to us.” Daniels looked around, noting the agents had pushed the secure perimeter back three blocks. Flashing lights from police cruisers filled the street with a sense of doomsday. “I want a full description of that conversation, of what you promised him and how you’re going to pay him back.”

“He did help me, when no-one else could or would.”

“My hands were tied, Brett,” Daniels said, raising his palms. “*Mā šā Allāh.*”

God has willed it.

“Brett, Agent Daniels is helping you now. And the differences between me and him are not so much, anymore, in the face of these other threats, many of which are *existential* for this nation. Hajji-Muhammad, he must be brought to account for what he has done, or he will radicalise an entire generation of Australian youth, black and white. You should see the projections on his passive-supporter base among the white middle-class late-teen and young adults. They think he’s some sort of poster boy for freedom of

expression; you know, like those wanker uni students who wear T-shirts of Che Guevara or Chairman Mao. We want your help with that. Once we get you patched up.”

“And the PM? He’s not going to be happy.”

Daniels smiled. “There’s a strong possibility that his party will ask him to resign in the near future, as some inconvenient facts come to light. We’ve got the dirt, and with you and General Ryan working as our plausible deniability, we can Iron Gum the government of the day.”

“Brett,” the General said, in his calm and reasonable voice, “come and be my Adj. at Iron Gum. I’ve been building a coalition, outside the SAS and the AFP, outside of the Public Service and most certainly outside the realm of ASIS and ASIO. We have a few people here and there, in each of those organs of government, and we have organised informally and decided that we have a greater responsibility to take more deliberate action to shape this country’s future. You will not be a political tool anymore, used and abused by over-promoted schoolteachers and weasels elected to the highest offices. No longer will advisers and pollsters determine the nation’s strategic and military decisions. They’ve done nothing as PNG has fallen into corruption and tribal dissolution, a haven for every sort of transnational criminal network. They stood aside and watched as the Indons radicalised and fractured into warring Islamist parties, raiding our sea lanes of communication and exposing the northern approaches to the kinds of disruption that would have made the 2nd Independent Company proud. Now we have the People’s Liberation Army conducting wargames and training operations in Fiji and the Solomons, for God’s sake, and the hand-wringers in Canberra, from Capital Hill to Bungendore, do nothing. They will not even use harsh diplomatic language to Beijing for fear of causing affront. Washington’s buggered off. Wellington’s terrified. The threats are real, and close, and directly aimed at this country’s survival. Our leaders have traded our obeisance to Washington for a different master: fearful inaction. But *we* are not hollow men, caught between the idea and the reality. We are the Shadow. Our new Iron Gum will address these issues, Brett, by taking the principles of the old Iron Gum to the logical extreme: we will re-make the face of Australia by any means necessary.”

“No more fanning about,” Daniels said, his frown real. “Propaganda. Manipulation. Targetted killings. The exercise of power, ‘Creation’s final law, red in tooth and claw’, to quote Tennyson.”

Brett smiled, imagining Agent Daniels in a first-year English literature lecture.

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“Quite,” the General said, nodding. “Or, if you prefer Yeats: *And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*”

Brett always enjoyed the poetic bent in the old soldier. One day, he would get the General to read Yukio Mishima.

“Not the democratic ideal,” General Ryan said, climbing back into the car. “But it’s what we’ve got for the moment. We know where this country needs to go and how to get it there. With you, Brett, we’ll shape the future. We will make Australia whole.”

The flashing police lights swirled around, red and blue, and Brett didn’t think about it, knowing that he’d already made up his mind:

A small night storm blows

Saying ‘falling is the essence of a flower’

Preceding those who hesitate.

Writing Hegemonic Masculinities:

An Exegesis on *My Brother's War*

**INTRODUCTION:
Writing about Writing**

Writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse
—Margaret Atwood¹

This exegesis details the process of writing this PhD, and therefore it encompasses both itself and the partner artefact, the thesis entitled *My Brother's War*. There is great folly in conceiving of these works as individual entities; they are more than twins, more than different sides of the same coin. They must be examined in the context of the other, and this understanding is vital to what unfolds in these pages. They are each clones of the other. To create one is, in the conception of Daniel Dennett, to murder the other.² Searching for the 'I' of one costs the other clone its very life. To critique one without the other, or to consider them independently, is to become a murdering twinmaker. Thus, these two items create each other and flourish together.

The exegesis is the map of the journey of writing *My Brother's War*, as well as the guide and the interpreter. However, in the famous words of Alfred Korzybski, 'the map is not the territory'.³ He goes on to note that 'An ideal map would contain the map of the map, the map of the map of the map, endlessly ... We may call it self-reflexiveness'.⁴ The self-reflectivity in the exegesis maps a writing process—my pre-writing, writing, and re-writing of the accompanying novel, *My Brother's War*—and offers insights into the interaction between creative writing and critical research. This body of work is inter-relatedly and interdependently dynamic; *My Brother's War* stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the exegesis, a brother-in-arms.

The material underpinning the exegesis comes from a range of theoretical and scholarly fields, from across the many genres of the Academy. Creative writing and scholarly research underpin the thesis as well as the exegesis, and the exegesis highlights both the writing process and, as the Australian Army says, the 'lessons

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002, p. xvi.

² Daniel C. Dennett, 'Introduction', in Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*, Basic Books: New York, 1981, p. 3.

³ Alfred, Korzybski, 'A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics', a paper presented before the American Mathematical Society at the New Orleans meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, December 28, 1931, reprinted as Supplement III in *Science and Sanity*, 1933, p. 747–61, quoted in David Gerrold, *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 2001.

⁴ *Ibid.*

learnt': 'Theory cannot be accepted as conclusive when practice points the other way'.⁵ The exegesis uses *My Brother's War* as a referent and, like that thesis upon which it reflects, draws in practical material that deals with literary and narrative theory, explorations and contestations of genre and audience, and approaches to creative, academic, and research writing. Along the way, several concepts, including the exegesis itself, are explored, defined, and deployed.

I write speculative fiction, and recently I've come to understand why the material I write has a common tone, common themes, and common fabulations of reality, and why so much of what I read and enjoy in both fiction and non-fiction shares such pleasurable familiarity. But that's the substrate to this exegesis, the writing of which won me the realisation in the first place. First, however, I need to demonstrate the origins of the research problem, the beginnings of the journey upon which I've launched.

My original thought, when writing the PhD proposal, was to examine the way that modern Australian men learned how to be men.⁶ This interest came about from several events. The reading journey, examining the fiction that I saw my creative work sitting alongside, started with Sean William's *The Resurrected Man*. The book starts with an epigram from David Dennett about the 'murdering twinmaker'. This was the first book I read in the review of fiction literature, placing and aligning myself, and I started it sitting on the back verandah of my parent's house in Adelaide. I was visiting, then, the start of an increasingly frequent commute across the Hay Plain to sit with my father as he died of malignant melanoma. His excisions had failed, his chemotherapy abandoned, and so the family sat down for the awful wait. I used those horrible days and weeks to read for my PhD, and tried desperately not to think about my father's impending death. With that context, does it become obvious how I used that pain in *My Brother's War*? But that is not the only cause of my focus on Australian manhood. I was volunteering in a mentoring program for youth at risk at the time, and our monthly meetings dealt with the ideals of mentoring and raised our awareness of the issues our

⁵ Charles Edward Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, NE, 1996, originally published 3rd edition by His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1906, p. 270.

⁶ See, for example: Daryl Adair, John Nauright, Murray Phillips, 'Playing Fields through to Battle Fields: The Development of Australian Sporting Manhood in Its Imperial Context, c. 1850-1918', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 51-67; Burgess, Ian, Edwards, Allan and Skinner, James, 'Football Culture in an Australian School Setting: The Construction of Masculine Identity', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2003, pp. 199-212; Tony Coles, 'Negotiating the Field of Masculinity: The Production and Reproduction of Multiple Dominant Masculinities', *Men and Masculinities*, October 2009 12: 30-44; Kathleen Engebretson, 'Identity, Masculinity and Spirituality: A Study of Australian Teenage Boys', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006, pp. 91-110.

mentorees faced, as well as some of the issues that we as mentors would face.⁷ My mentoree at the time was raised by a single mother, his father having long abandoned them. Thus, my research interest comes from real life.

Those experiences sparked a series of questions about ‘being a grown-up man’: How did I become me? And how should I mentor, teach, and model those behaviours I considered proper? What were these ‘proper’ behaviours? What did I consider a young Australian man needed to know for the modern world? I had to understand my influences and how I negotiated an identity for myself. I looked around, and noted that the paragons of Australian manhood were either captain of the Australian Test cricket team—in my case, Alan Border and then Steve Waugh—or media stars such as Jamie Durie. I had neither outstanding sporting skills nor physical beauty.⁸ I was never going to captain the Australian cricket team or be a Manpower stripper cum TV personality. By that very clumsy metric, I’d failed to be an Australian man.⁹ Who was I, and how did I get here? This was the foundation question of my search, and my drive to creative expression meant that writing a novel was my preferred medium. I set about crafting a fictive piece substantially informed the by idea of ‘hegemonic masculinities’, which are defined as a ‘social theory of gender ... a configuration of practice’ that is constituted through, but not preceding, human action.¹⁰ This is the seminal idea that I wanted to explore through fiction. And I could find no reference in the academic literature to the use of hegemonic masculinities as an explicit tool of fictive work; here, I discovered, was a greenfields site for my research output. I had discovered something new, and had the freedom to explore this unknown territory.

Infusing theory into the substrate of creative fiction is at once problematic lest the writing becomes leaden and turgid, polemical and didactic. This was a challenge to be addressed, and I kept in mind the requirements of fiction: character, conflict, setting, and point of view. That is not so that fiction overrode theory; instead, *My Brother’s War* is enriched by theory, in the same way that I feel enriched by having engaged with it

⁷ Geoff Munns, (et. al.), *Motivation and Engagement of Boys: Evidence-Based Teaching Practices*, A Report submitted to the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, Australian Government, Canberra, 2006; Denis O’Donovan, ‘Moving Away from “Failing Boys” and “Passive Girls”’: Gender Meta-Narratives in Gender Equity Policies for Australian Schools and why Micro-Narratives Provide a Better Policy Model’, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Vol. 27, Issue 4, December 2006, pp. 475-494; Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, ‘Crossing the Divide: Bridging the Disjunctures Between Theoretically Oriented and Practice-Oriented Literature about Masculinity and Boys at School’, *Gender & Education*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, Dec. 2003, pp. 407-423.

⁸ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p. 37.

⁹ Later, we will look in greater detail at body image, especially in the sportsman or the surf-lifesaver, and the profound role of male body-image stereotypes.

¹⁰ Demetrakis Z. Demetrio, ‘Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique’, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 3, June 2001, pp. 340.

directly. Each section of this exegesis works with theory by demonstrating the ways in which theory informed the writing and the written.

The first section examines the process and practice of writing the exegesis. Section One is a working through of the exegesis; this is a necessary step because each exegesis is personal to the writer. So this section explains how I set the boundaries of my examination, and the principles by which I would proceed. It is a discussion of ‘framing’, of the outside borders of my conceptual space. It considers the institutional constraints of the creative thesis/exegesis model, defining the terms and expectations held by the academic setting in which I operate. These are important factors because it is these considerations that validate my efforts with the award of a qualification and, as any good writer knows, the demands and anticipations of the audience are prominent to the point of dominant.

Section Two establishes the validity of my research process. The utility of creative writing as academic research is established, based around the notion of practice-led research. Here, the artist-researcher develops an artistic structure in their medium of choice as a means of expressing their theoretical questions and findings. Central to my use of practice-led research is the qualitative research methodology of autoethnography. The concerns of the practitioner in autoethnography are the driving force of the examination, and this section spends some great effort to establish the validity and usefulness of the approach. Although a challenge to traditional conceptions of research, an autoethnographic practice-led approach opens up new avenues to knowledge by centering the researcher in their project, making their lived experience a valuable method of contextualizing their questions, answers, analyses, and conclusions.

Section Three discusses the research findings. I used a writing journal to capture the autoethnographic research data, and analysing these results revealed a much stronger understanding of my personal dedication to a writing/questioning/researching process. Despite the apparent linearity of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, what the research data actually reveals is that these are simultaneous steps of an iterative feedback process. By recognizing the orders of magnitude in the researching and writing processes, from the word at the small end to the overall project at the highest end, I reveal how this seemingly linear writing process is concurrent and ongoing across a multitude of levels. While I write one sentence, I’m pre-writing (by preparing the groundwork) for the subsequent sentence, and I’m also re-writing what has just been written.

Lastly, Section Four serves a dual purpose. Superficially, it serves as an extended literature review. Here I explore and explode the terms of my exegesis and thesis, looking at their creation, alteration, and enaction. From ‘hegemonic masculinities’ to queer theory, I trace the evolution of these terms. I also, in this section, relate those terms to their interaction with the fiction. The strongest focus lies on hegemonic masculinities, being the core concept of this project. But the section also demonstrates how these terms and ideas are used in the creation of the fiction. This section makes explicit how a writer-researcher uses theory to enhance and concentrate their fictional efforts.

Overall, a close reading of *My Brother's War* makes many sections of this exegesis sensible. While the exegesis and thesis components may be read separately, they operate much more effectively as a small team, each leaning on the other. Each deals with issues and ideas not accessible through the other's medium; sometimes, fiction is required to reveal truth, and sometimes theory is needed to question reality. While this remains the case, the writer-researcher needs both approaches to properly parse their concerns that, in this case, are my musings on the nature of Australian manhood.

SECTION ONE:

Data Collection and Framing the *Problematique*

... the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate

—Roland Barthes¹¹

Introduction

This section describes ‘What I’ve Done’. It introduces academic efforts applied to creative practice, with the intent of creating new knowledge. In doing so, the section utilises my writing of *My Brother’s War* as data. Further, the section draws strength from the writerly reflections captured in my writing journal, which serves as a repository of creative process and research practice. Dominique Hecq asks the most pertinent question regarding this form of practice-led research: what knowledge is only accessible through the writing journal?¹² The answer, grounded in autoethnography, lies in the metacognitive awareness of the writer/researcher.¹³ The answer is expressed in the metadata of my writing journal and mining the writing journal reveals the substrate of embedded reality in the research data. This metadata, derived from and a byproduct of writerly metacognition, is the nexus between the artefact and the formal exegesis.

Also reflected in this section are definitions and the differentiation of key concepts, resulting in a large-scale map of the terrain for the reader. From there, the section narrows its focus, driving straight toward my *problematique*.¹⁴ The section—with this contextualizing method of formulating research questions—frames my approach to research. It is here where my original and significant contribution to knowledge lies, in the fusion of a range of tools and approaches that guide the reader’s journey. The outcome is a map of how I came to research and write Australian speculative fiction and depict ‘manhood’. The section suggests methods to approach the questions asked and answered in subsequent sections—beyond the writing of *My Brother’s War* and the exegetical effort—of ‘how do we become Australian men’, ‘why is it so’, and ‘why should we care’? My relevance is personal and performative, my contribution contextual, and my reward relational; I am unique hegemonic

¹¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen*, No. 5+6, Item 3, accessed on 8 June 2009 from <<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>>.

¹² Dominique Hecq, ‘Interactive Narrative Pedagogy as a Heuristic for Understanding Supervision in Practice-led Research’, *New Writing*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2009, p. 42.

¹³ Neil J. Anderson, ‘Metacognition in Writing: Facilitating Writer Awareness,’ in A. Stubbs and J. Chapman (Eds.), *Rhetoric, Uncertainty, and the University: How Students Construct the Academic Experience*, Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, Regina, 2007.

¹⁴ A ‘*problematique*’ is a contextualizing method of formulating research questions (see p. 229).

masculinities. Firstly, however, I must digress to define terms, to provide the key to the map. I must explain how to read the map, and thus how to traverse the terrain; let us now self-reflexively address the exegesis.

To say 'I wrote the exegesis', or even 'I wrote *My Brother's War*' is, according to Barthes' subject/predicate formulation, a contradiction. Both 'I' and '*My Brother's War*' come into being with the act of writing; we are both *of the verb*. Yet this section, by necessity, locates me in time and space, and locates me before, during and after the scripting of my artefact. *Scriptum Ergo Sum*: I write, therefore I am. For Ernst Bloch, 'I am' does not mean possessing yourself, rather 'The *am* of *I am* is within. And everything within is wrapped in its own darkness'.¹⁵ The 'I' must emerge from the darkness organically, exteriorizing itself. Self-reflection leads to self-knowledge: 'by virtue of what lies without, does the inner self come to know itself'.¹⁶ I write to externalize; re-reading and re-writing enables the self-knowledge that Bloch indicates. Already there is a tension in my approach, in that I only achieve liminality *by writing*, and then attempt to share those insights by creating something *to be read*, a process over which I have a tendentious control at best. How does the creative writer explore the pathetic fallacy? Thus, this section illuminates, but not resolves. The section lights the way by examining itself, by reflecting upon the ways in which the exegesis came to be, and by using 'me the scriptor' and *My Brother's War* as the examples.

I can question myself, my methods, and my influences, as well as how those forces played out in the creation of *My Brother's War*, but concrete answers along the definite lines of scientific enquiry may be more problematic. Claude Levi-Strauss reminds us that 'The scientific mind does not so much provide the right answers as ask the right questions'.¹⁷ And I do love posing questions, much more so than giving definitive answers. So, against this theoretical backdrop, where do I as the writer sit in relation to the written? And exactly how much credit can I claim for its creation? Am I the book? Is it me? Can theory tell the difference? Can I? These questions are good ways to explore the data that forms the primary source material. These questions demonstrate exegetical self-reflexivity. Keeping such questions in mind is also a guide to proper academic scholarship and, thus, strong evidence of such skills becomes the indicator of academic success: the creation of knowledge.¹⁸ The answers to those

¹⁵ Ernst Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, Herder and Herder, New York, 1970, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 7.

¹⁸ 'Preface', in J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives*,

questions just posed lay, of course, in the false dichotomy of subject/predicate that Barthes exposes. The subject/predicate reduction is too false, too simple, in my direct experience, for the complexity of the creative process, both thetically and exegetically.

The Exegesis

Considerable time, effort and worry accompanied me on this exegetic journey, and the greatest single issue was ‘what is the exegesis?’ I am not alone in this perplexity.¹⁹ That such a question could dominate this project, from inception and commencement to the present moment, staggers me. Not questions of masculinities or literary theory or worries about completing a coherent (and hopefully interesting) novel, but a question of exigence. The definition of ‘the exegesis’ from Swinburne’s Research Office is: ‘an account and/or defence of what was done which must include reference to the processes involved and the significance for practice of what was learned, and what was produced’.²⁰ The advice to examiners that explains the exegesis for my PhD program states that ‘The exegesis is a written document of between 20 000 to 30 000 words, which documents the provenance (history and context) of the work, and the praxis (theory and process) which provides insights into the work which a reading or viewing of the work cannot provide’.²¹ Yet these definitions do very little to increase my understanding beyond the measures of success. But at least I learned that ‘provenance’ and ‘praxis’ should be prominent.

Another pertinent question, implicit in the above definitions of the exegesis, is ‘what is *research*’? After spending six years working in a research institute, I now realize that I’d narrowly realized the scope of that activity. Research, as a day-to-day activity, was the process of discovering and citing sources and linking them together to enhance a pretense of scholarly competence, an image of *ethos*.²² However, as my exegetical journey unfolded, its profoundly transformative nature equipped me with a deeper understanding of ‘research’. My original position is reflected in the definition

Methodologies, Examples and Issues, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Donna Lee Brien, ‘The Problem of Where to Start: A Foundation Question for Creative Writing Higher Degree Candidates and Supervisors’, *TEXT*, No. 3, Special Issue: Illuminating the Exegesis, accessed on 3 September 2010 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue3/brien.htm>>.

²⁰ Swinburne University of Technology Research Office, *Research Higher Degrees Policy*, p. 6, accessed on 23 July 2010 from <<http://policies.swinburne.edu.au/ppdonline/showdoc.aspx?recnum=POL/2008/294>>.

²¹ Swinburne University of Technology, *Guidelines for Examination of a PhD*, p. 1, accessed on 08 August 2010, from <http://www.research.swinburne.edu.au/higher-degrees/documents/guidelines_for_phd_examination.pdf>.

²² See, for example, Michael J. Hyde, ‘Introduction’, *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 2004. Hyde notes that *ethos*, for Isocrates, is about the rhetor demonstrating from personal example their responsible and exemplary existence; on the other hand, for Aristotle, *ethos* becomes less about ‘a person’s well-lived existence and [more about] an understanding of *ethos* as an artistic accomplishment’, p. xv-xvi.

from Swinburne's Research Office, which declares that 'the essential characteristic of a research activity is that it leads to publicly verifiable outcomes which are open to peer appraisal'.²³ However, the writing of research is more challenging, because it requires a synthesis of existing positions to forge an original understanding of the material that must be *transmissible and verifiable*. Swinburne's Research Office goes on to specify that research activity can be seen as 'Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society', an activity 'characterized by originality' that leads to 'the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications'.²⁴ Thus, my provenance and praxis need to be explicit and clear, verifiable and original. My thesis and exegesis are both the journey and destination. I now have word limits and some key terms: history and context, theory and process, provenance and praxis.

So what is *my* exegesis? What is the 'history and context, theory and process, provenance and praxis' of my project? With comprehensive and detailed research on the topic, with visits to libraries and trawling through electronic opinions, I am left with the understanding that the exegesis is personal, and deep into the realm of the subjective.²⁵ And, for Barthes, I am written as the work itself is written. I am written as the artefact is written, and again (and differently) as the exegesis is written. Further, according to Bloch, it is this organic self-growth that can and will provide the personal perspective.²⁶ Only by writing the exegesis can I discover what it contains. Only by writing the exegesis can I map its terrain, only by writing can I understand who 'I' am. Because it is not yet complete, I am still writing my understanding. Because it is unwritten, my understanding is also incomplete. I write to discover.

Writing the exegesis leads me to understand the greater notion of what it is 'to write'. Jacques Derrida directly addressed exactly this question: 'we tend to say "writing" ... to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible ... And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general'.²⁷ Therefore, writing this

²³ Swinburne University of Technology Research Office, 'Research Collection Eligibility', accessed on 21 January 2011 from, <<http://www.research.swinburne.edu.au/researchers/researchactive/publications/eligibility/index.html#researchdefinition>>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For example, Gaylene Perry, 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis', *TEXT*, Vol. 2, No. 2, October 1998, who says that 'The subjective essay is increasingly popular with creative writers, and could be a suitable model for a variation of the exegesis.' See also Nigel Krauth, 'The Preface as Exegesis', *TEXT*, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2002.

²⁶ Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, p. 99.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, p. 165.

exegesis entails the entire suite of writing activity, which includes the research, the thinking, and reading and reflection upon many words about many subjects. Shortly, I explore a writing process of ‘pre-writing, writing, and re-writing’, but it is worth foreshadowing the idea here because it illustrates Derrida’s point: there is more to writing than just scripting words. The example of the moment is the exegesis itself, which we now know entails reading (history), thinking (context), defining (theory) and writing (process); to sum, its provenance and praxis.

Let us explore those multi-modal exegetic terms—provenance and practice—by deploying (at unfortunate length) two definitional poles posed by Jeri Kroll.²⁸

At one end of the spectrum, the exegesis might bring to the conscious level what a student has done in a novel or poems. It discusses origins, possible options, explains why certain paths were followed rather than others. It might set the work in a contemporary context, comparing it to that of other writers. The exegesis might explain the creative product’s weaknesses, referring to the student’s developmental stage. At the conceptual end, the exegesis might offer a coherent theoretical appraisal, proving how the student has incorporated theory into practice. It will cite others working in the field, discussing how the student’s approach varies from that of his or her predecessors.²⁹

So the exegesis could be instrumental, a tool or process that locates the writer in the provenance. At the other end of the spectrum, theory is more explicit, more directly driving the practice to create praxis. Either way—including the myriad of variation in between—the need remains to contextualise the trinity of writing, the writer, and the written. Nothing in the quote precludes what I want to incorporate into my exegesis, and it seems to me that a competent job should address *at least all* those positions Kroll mentions. Yet with word space at such a premium, the question (as always) remains that of selection for inclusion and exclusion. The exegesis, then, is the site of revelation, whereby the scriptor demonstrates the artistic process, which also includes identifying issues and outlining the methodology that helped the scriptor create as well as overcome problems arising from and within the process of creation.³⁰ Hence, the artistic process in my case includes the explicative, exegetical activity of describing the interaction

²⁸ A declaration of interest: Dr Jeri Kroll was my creative writing Honours supervisor at Flinders University in 1999.

²⁹ Jeri Kroll, ‘Uneasy Bedfellows: Assessing the Creative Thesis and its Exegesis’, *TEXT*, Vol. 3, No. 2, October 1999, accessed on 29 November 2009 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct99/kroll.htm>>.

³⁰ Paul Dawson, ‘Writing Programmes at Australian Universities: Creative Art or Literary Research?’, *TEXT*, Vol. 3, No. 1, accessed on 29 November 2009 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april99/dawson.htm>>.

between theory and practice: praxis. And the exegesis is built around a *problematique*, to which we will now turn.

The Problematique

A *problematique* is a contextualizing method of formulating research questions. A *problematique* explicitly includes illuminating various aspects of the issue, as well as the theoretical frameworks ‘that contains in itself the criteria for the relevance and formulation of research problems’.³¹ A *problematique*, therefore, ‘does not simply consider the theory as the name of real things, but as a tool in a specific praxis’.³² The important point is praxis; theory informs an active research interrogation, a practice of research that includes writing both the thesis and the exegesis. Praxis recognises the limitations of theory, and promotes the researcher to engage with both the theory and the artefact, with the problem and the solution. For my purpose, the *problematique* includes theoretical frames around ‘hegemonic masculinities’, but also demands that I do not merely engage with that theory, but use it as a means of further and more personal exploration. I write, according to Barthes and Bloch, therefore I am also my own *problematique*.

Consequently, this exegesis serves as its own *problematique*, a contextualizing exploration and explication of the issues surrounding, including, and contained within *My Brother’s War*. I-the-scriptor am both the subject of the interrogation and the interrogator. *My Brother’s War* is not the *object* of the interrogation, according to Barthes, but instead becomes both the questions I ask myself and the reasons that I give. In the next two sections, the methodology of writing *My Brother’s War* becomes explicit, illustrated by a discussion of many of the problems I faced and choices I made. Before we get to that destination, that waypoint on the journey, I need to explore how I came to frame my praxis.

Writing the Problematique

In formulating my *problematique*, I began by reading the fiction literature in my genre field.³³ While reading for genre, however, especially as I considered theoretical discussions, I discovered the term ‘*récit*’, which is defined in *The Concise Oxford*

³¹ Anna Sierpiska and Jeremy Kilpatrick, *Mathematics Education as a Research Domain: A Search for Identity: an ICMI Study, Book 2*, Vol. 4, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Norwell, MA, p. 535.

³² Thomas Højrup, *State, Culture and Life-Modes: the Foundations of Life-Mode Analysis*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2003, p. 73.

³³ Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative, Autumn 1980, pp. 55–81.

Dictionary of Literary Terms as: ‘the French word for an “account” or narrative of events. As used in modern French narratology, the term refers to the actual narrative text itself, as opposed both to the story and to its narration’.³⁴ Indeed, the term in its French usage is more applicable to a type of novel, a technique of presenting the facts through narrative. And it strikes me that the exegesis serves as a *récit*. It is a woven narrative of events, a textual story, an accounting that forces a new voice into my mouth. For Jeri Kroll, the many voices of the exegetical writer are bounded by a fundamental choice: ‘Candidates are aware that since they are creating a new type of discourse that addresses a complex audience they have to consider—in a way no straight academic MA or PhD does—how they position themselves as narrators’.³⁵ The exegesis is a narrative revelation, a *récit*. So I choose this exegetical (as well as novelistic) persona, this method of address, indeed this entirely unfamiliar discourse, with which to explore the exegetical *problematique*.

Thus, I have a form and a name, a method of approaching the blank page of the exegesis, to untangle the knotty confusion, and have earned a way to meaning. Armed with this bare-bones understanding of the term, I immediately record in my writing journal a recognition and recollection of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*,³⁶ an autobiographical book describing a physical journey through diverse landscapes and an intellectual journey through two thousand years of philosophy. Pirsig uses the term ‘Chautauqua’³⁷ for his journey through the self, which is the distinguishing feature of the novel.³⁸ The narrator of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* converses with the reader, enacting a Socratic dialogue while breaking ‘the fourth wall’.³⁹ How better to achieve that than a personal, self-reflective journey through the books and the theory that shaped my thinking? As my journal records, the protagonist in *Zen* suffers, at the climax, a breakdown of artificial personality, one created in a mental hospital; Brett, in *My Brother’s War*, suffers a similar break, but at the outset of his journey. Pirsig’s protagonist earns catharsis by his break, whereas I

³⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 283.

³⁵ Jeri Kroll, ‘The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer’, *TEXT*, ‘Illuminating the Exegesis’, Special Issue No. 3, April 2004, accessed on 11 August 2010 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue3/kroll.htm>>.

³⁶ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: an Inquiry into Values*, Corgi Books, London, 1974.

³⁷ John C. Scott, ‘The Chautauqua Movement: Revolution in Popular Higher Education’, *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 70, No. 4, July-Aug., 1999, pp. 389-412.

³⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Perennial Classics, New York, 2003, p. 23.

³⁹ ‘The effect of this touch of ruthless realism [breaking the fourth wall] ... was the instant destruction of all sense of reality.’ Darlington William Aubrey, *Through the Fourth Wall*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1922, p. 11. Orson Scott Card, in *Characters and Viewpoint*, says: ‘Even though you, the author, may be maintaining a fourth wall between your characters and your readers, he, the narrator, is not keeping that fourth wall between himself and the audience he thinks he’s telling the story to.’ *Characters and Viewpoint*, Writer’s Digest Books, Cincinnati, 1988, p. 146.

chose to have Brett's break only as the inciting incident. My writing journal records my excitement at making this connection between *récit* and Chautauqua. This exegesis, it seems to me, borrows method from both.

Hence I developed my *problematique*, my organon of research—the set of principles that guide scientific or philosophical investigation.⁴⁰ The principles require that I embody a spirit of the scientific method: observation, analysis, and reporting through replicable means.⁴¹ Indeed, Gregory Peterson argues that the 'quantitative and experimental features of physics and chemistry have been and are still widely seen (arguably wrongly) as the gold standard' of science, even for those conducting research outside the sciences.⁴² Stephen Banks declares that this 'dictatorial canon ... assumes the possibility and necessity for objectivity; it demands and simultaneously assumes writerly authority; and it prescribes textual uniformity and positions scholarly writing as a distinctive, nonliterary mode of expression'.⁴³ For my exegesis, this means that I need to support my observations of writing with academic references, to engage with scholarly debates and contest concepts about writing and self-reflexivity. This is one purpose of keeping a writing journal, to generate a data-set against which to test my hypotheses. Such a set of data, and the concomitant testing of hypotheses within theoretical frames, buttresses my claims to contributing original knowledge. They add gravitas. They demonstrate my practice-led research.

However, this does not mean that I am an advocate of 'scientism', the idea that 'science is the sole source of knowledge and reality'.⁴⁴ My writing journal (which is also the repository of my research notes), and the steps it captures, details a process of imagining an audience and positioning myself in the marketplace of ideas (and perhaps the marketplace of sales and publishing contracts and literary agents and such other

⁴⁰ An organon is: 'an instrument for acquiring knowledge; *specifically*: a body of principles of scientific or philosophic investigation', accessed on 14 June 2010 from <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/organon>>. The term is most closely associated with Aristotle and his followers, who used the term as the collective title of Aristotle's six works on logic: *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *On Sophistical Refutations*; Nicholas Rescher, 'Aristotle's Theory of Modal Syllogisms and Its Interpretation', in Mario Bunge (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Science and Philosophy*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1999, originally published by The Free Press, 1964, p. 154.

⁴¹ The Australian Research Council uses the Macquarie Dictionary's definition of science: 'The systematic study of humans and their environment based on the deductions and inferences which can be made, and the general laws which can be formulated, from reproducible observations and measurements of events and parameters within the universe', accessed 3 September 2010 from <<http://www.arc.gov.au/general/glossary.htm>>. See also Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 4-5.

⁴² Gregory R. Peterson, 'Demarcation and the Scientistic Fallacy', *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, December 2003, Vol. 38, Issue 4, p. 755; see also Sorell, *Scientism*.

⁴³ Stephen Banks, 'Writing as Theory: In Defense of Fiction', in J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples and issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, pp. 156-157.

⁴⁴ Peterson, 'Demarcation and the Scientistic Fallacy', p. 752.

good things that indicate the presence of ‘a real writer’). The writing journal and its metadata reveals an awareness of the ‘discourses’ to which I belong: ‘Reflexivity in research is meant to trace the presence of the researcher onto the research context, marking their interference, their participation, their desire. It is both an epistemological statement about the connected nature of knowledge and a political statement about the non-innocence of research’.⁴⁵ The key word is desire. I am a writer for both the Academy and for the Public, and a reflexive writing practice disputes the positivist (and normative) claims by the Academy that research should be done with objective distance, with a break between subject and object.⁴⁶ Treating ‘knowledge’ as a discrete, disparate externality fails to account for the profundity of cultural production, of artistic practice.

So, as an artist I want to except myself from the strictures of science, at the same time that I embrace them. However, reaching for ‘the language and explicit conceptual frameworks of the social sciences repudiates the very reasons moving a scholar to turn to fiction for expression in the first place’.⁴⁷ I need the fiction to explore the cultural expressions that caught my initial interest, and I need the social science/humanities imprimatur for the exegesis. I need both cultures—the scientific and the literary—to explore my topic. Neither will suffice unless both are present. In terms of current debates about knowledge production in the academic environment, writing the exegesis has clarified for me that I am both researcher and data, objective and subjective; the false dichotomy does not apply, only the imperatives of being both things simultaneously. I find myself in a messy human predicament, the self-awareness of postmodernity.

‘The Messiness of the Human Predicament’

The state of postmodern wisdom, for Zygmunt Bauman, is being aware ‘that each local, specialized and focused treatment ... spoils as much, if not more, that it repairs’.⁴⁸ It’s the murdering twinmaker. I cannot deny the need to provide analysis and references, to be scholarly and detached, and neither should the needs of artistic and creative expression preclude it. Each can be accommodated, which was the impetus for C.P. Snow’s provocative 1959 Rede Lecture at the Senate House in Cambridge. Snow

⁴⁵ Elizabeth de Freitas, ‘Interrogating Reflexivity: Art, Research, and the Desire for Presence’, in J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, p. 470.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* For a discussion on normative expectations, see Josie Arnold, ‘The PhD in Writing Accompanied by an Exegesis’, *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2005.

⁴⁷ Banks, ‘Writing as Theory’, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 1993, p. 245.

declared that, ‘By training I was a scientist: by vocation I was a writer. That was all’.⁴⁹ Snow’s career as a public intellectual, by this point, had been long and distinguished. Snow understood that words conveyed the truths exposed by physics or mathematics or biology, and that manner of expression was as important as the matter being expressed. Indeed, in light of F.R. Leavis’ subsequent criticism, Snow revised his statement to make more explicit the distinction of his terms of comparison: the scientific versus the literary.⁵⁰ And yet it is Leavis, despite (as well because of) his trenchant rebuttal of Snow’s lecture, which provided the more insightful position: that humanity needs to protect culture from ‘the reductive forces of a crude scientific rationalism’.⁵¹ I find myself agreeing with both men. I prefer the literary to encapsulate oblique truths, to expose and reflect upon the ‘the messiness of the human predicament’. Thus, I prefer creative writing as a means to critique and comment upon the foibles and frailties and fantastic possibilities of the individual and cultural forces. Science can only explain, dissecting and reducing as it goes; it does not praise or celebrate. But I still need to use both creative practice and the scientific method, and so the literary is primary, supported by the methods of science. This understanding is heightened in my research, where I am both object and subject, and thus this section is about the writing journal, and the data it contains, and the quest to please the twin masters of academic and poetic truth.

The point, in the end, is that many sub-cultures inform the larger culture; in my case, my education in many schools of the Academy prepares me to formulate an argument (*logos*: literally, ‘the word’), to support the *logos* with *ethos* and *pathos*, and to contribute to knowledge through my unique and personal synthesis.⁵² Moreover, this cross-disciplinary training empowers my fiction writing. According to Banks, ‘Fiction writers, like their non-fiction cousins, use extensive research to create the “social science-like” sense of verisimilitude’.⁵³ In *My Brother’s War*, for example, I draw in the various understandings of insurgency, military hierarchy and terminology, and the importance of strategic leadership, gained from postgraduate study at the Australian Defence Force’s Command and Staff College, and also from postgraduate study at the Australian National University, where I learned about the nature of rebellion and

⁴⁹ Charles Percy Snow, ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’, in CP Snow, *The Two Cultures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Sorell, p. 99.

⁵¹ Quoted in Roger Kimball, ‘“The Two Cultures” Today: On the C.P. Snow-F.R. Leavis Controversy’, *The New Criterion*, Vol. 12, February 1994, accessed on 3 September 2010 from <<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/-The-Two-Cultures--today-4882>>.

⁵² Antoine C. Braet, ‘Ethos, Pathos and Logos in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: A Re-Examination’, *Argumentation*, Vol. 6, No. 3, August 1992, pp. 307-320.

⁵³ Banks, ‘Writing as Theory’, p. 155.

resistance. These fit nicely with my undergraduate study in Politics at Flinders University, also the institution where I first studied creative writing under Dr. Jeri Kroll. The effect is to outline the social discontent and dislocation that leads inevitably to the insurgency of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country. I learned from sub-cultures, and write into the larger culture, transgressing boundaries as I go.

Conclusion

It is precisely the interface between creativity and scholarship that this exegesis explores.⁵⁴ Ways to knowledge are personal to the researcher, and artistic expression reveals insights denied to instrumentalist researcher. Elliot Eisner supports my earlier contention for the *récit*:

The deep strength of using the arts in research may be closer to the act of problematizing traditional conclusions than it is to provide answers in containers that are water-tight. In this sense, the products of this research are closer in function to deep conversation and insightful dialogue than they are to error-free conclusions.⁵⁵

How I come to knowledge is personal and subjective, and useful to ‘me the scholar’. If this understanding writes a stronger, more dynamic cultural artefact, then the value to my culture is that much improved. I become a contributing artist.

Most importantly, this section (and the data upon which it is based) is about my personal education as a writer, the implied (subtextual) purpose of the thetic/exegetic process. By reading widely, and relating what I read back to the research question I set initially, using the journal as a record of fact and opinion, I framed and contextualised a diverse data set. Margaret Atwood wrote that ‘If the process of the act of writing charts the process of thought, it’s a process that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints’.⁵⁶ The exegesis is the tracker, following the footprints. The subtext of the exegesis is the metadata contained in the writing journal. So what I have done is bring together a range of reading, from philosophy and science to philosophy of writing, to

⁵⁴ Professor Arnold describes this interface: ‘the methodology of the “subjective academic self” as also in a liminal space between the known and accepted academic “voice” and the ways in which narrativity may be employed in academic nonfiction’; ‘The Liminal and Apophatic Voice of the Writer in/as Autobiography: A Subjective Academic Narrative’, *TEXT*, Vol. 14, No. 1, April 2010, accessed on 3 September 2010 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april10/arnold.htm>>. See also Leila Green, ‘Creative Writing as Practice-Led Research’, *Australian Journal of Communications*, Vol. 23, Nos. 2-3, 2006.

⁵⁵ Elliot Eisner, ‘Art and Knowledge’, in J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 158.

understand myself and the processes I use to write both fiction and non-fiction. The artefact and the exegesis are the demonstrations of the learning; in the best tradition of creative writing, they 'show' my journey more effectively than me 'telling'. So I am the site of knowledge production, and in the spirit of science I must next reflect upon the methods I used to come to this self-reflexive understanding, which is contained in the next section.

SECTION TWO: How I've Done It

Discourse in general, and scientific discourse in particular, is so complex a reality that we not only can, but should, approach it at different levels and with different methods.

—Michel Foucault⁵⁷

Introduction

This section details the methodology of writing the exegesis, which is also the methodology underpinning the thesis. What I will demonstrate is that, despite different end-points and emphases, the process underlying these divergent tasks is the same: pre-write, write, and re-write. I read, think, compose, and revise. I may do those steps consecutively or concurrently, but they all occur in the realm of active research writing. First comes a definition and exploration of creative writing as research, which draws conceptual and theoretical power from the ideas of practice-led research and autoethnography. Then, in the next section, I will use this understanding to explore the writing process (pre-writing, writing, and re-writing) with regard to the thetic product, *My Brother's War*, and demonstrate how this creative artefact incorporates and exemplifies practice-led research.

Creative Writing as Research

In the academic tradition, both qualitative and quantitative research methods must derive from the *problematique*, the issue or concept under examination.⁵⁸ Indeed, with my undergraduate training in the humanities and the social sciences branches of the Academy, I was acculturated into both these traditions. While lacking the 'hard' methodology of the sciences, where the search for a singular and fixed truth is the end, with the means being the replicable process of the scientific method, this social science training and education meant that I approached the PhD with the desire to set a penetrating question and then answer it definitively. Moreover, according to Foucault, this discourse (and its inherent power and ideology) is socially constructed and *inherently untrue*: 'In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures,

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, p. xiv.

⁵⁸ Brad Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, theme issue 'Practice-led Research', No. 118, p. 3, accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/3999/1/3999_1.pdf>.

whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers'.⁵⁹ Hence my desire for the certainty of 'science' is but a dream. It is an unachievable ideal, part of the indoctrination inherent in power/knowledge: 'When we take cultural norms for granted, we are blind to the ways in which they act to empower one group over another or to enact one series of behaviors and activities as "natural," thereby marginalizing as "unnatural" all who are different from them'.⁶⁰ Yet I must meet the demands of the Academy, so I strive to understand that ideology, to subvert it where possible, but still to accommodate its demands. Therefore, this exegesis reflects upon itself and the thesis, critiquing each against institutional norms of research leading to knowledge in tension with artistic practice.

Creative writing is research; it offers an approach to examining and discussing observations and analyses that 'traditional' research precludes. As Josie Arnold has written:

"textuality" and "discourse" have a new meaning in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These words and their correlative underlying concepts no longer refer to publications and oracy that clarify and reveal social, personal, and cultural givens: they indicate that every aspect of human existence is open to problematization and to re-thinking.⁶¹

The texts I write, and the discourses with which they engage, offer greater scope and richer potential than an otherwise dry dissertation about writing. Normative claims about what is 'scholarly' and 'academic' are weakening as diverse voices are heard and acknowledged—increasingly from outside the club of 'dead white European males'.⁶² According to Arnold, peeling the layers from our 'cultural imperatives' reveals that final, definitive meaning is 'tentative'.⁶³ As we will see in the following discussion of practice-led research and autoethnography, the praxis of understanding ourselves as researchers—and our wider cultural positions—embraces broader definitions of textuality and discourse.

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, 'The Discourse on Language', Appendix, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1982, p. 216.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Josie Arnold, 'Some Social and Cultural Issues of English as the Global Language: Everything is Changing, Everything is Going, Going, Gone Now', *Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 2, accessed 12 November 2009 from <<http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/2006spring/arnold.pdf>>.

⁶² John Searle, 'The Storm Over the University', *The New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990, accessed 10 August 2009 from <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1990/dec/06/the-storm-over-the-university/>>.

⁶³ Arnold, 'Some Social and Cultural Issues of English as the Global Language', p. 2.

Creative writing is a unique discourse, one that generates a text explicitly tentative. This is the crux of Barthes' distinction about the death of the author as God; modernity summons the reader as a co-producer of meaning:

the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.⁶⁴

Writers produce texts, which readers enliven into discourses.⁶⁵ The readerly writer sets the scene, employs the actors, and seats the audience, and then invites the audience's reception of the play, what Sally Bushell describes as 'a decentralized model of language' that is an 'open, ceaseless system'.⁶⁶ The audience shapes their own reading experience, consciously or not, reflecting individually and collectively the mores and presuppositions of their culture. In the words of Roland Barthes, 'the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world'.⁶⁷ The creative writer opens up a new avenue to understanding, for themselves and their reader, otherwise closed by narrow definitions of research and knowledge. They do this through their practice, 'the infinite play of the world', to which we now turn our attention.

Practice-Led Research

My journey is to understand the *process* of power/knowledge while being embedded within its constraints. Achieving this goal requires an understanding of myself, an ability to reflect back across the writing practice that created *My Brother's War* and interrogate my assumptions and biases, and how these sometimes subconscious influences shape my actions and choices as a writer and as a researcher.⁶⁸ Attempting to understand the desire to be a good social scientist reflects my desire to

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen*, no. 5+6, item 3, <<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>>, accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁶⁵ Josie Arnold, 'Meeting the Platypus: When Fact Equals Fiction', *TEXT*, Vol. 11, No. 2, October 2007, accessed on 7 December 2010 from: <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct07/arnold.htm>>.

⁶⁶ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'. See also Sally Bushell, who describes the 'textual process', the end-to-end creation of a text, which also encompasses the spaces and allowances made for readerly interpretation; 'Textual Process and the Denial of Origins', *Textual Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Autumn 2007, pp. 100-117.

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Richard Miller (trans.), Hill and Wang: New York, 1974, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Jan du Preez, 'Locating the Researcher in the Research: Personal Narrative and Reflective Practice', *Reflective Practice*, Vol. 9, Issue 4, November 2008, pp. 509-519.

absorb the hegemon, to explore my own cognitive and creative structures. But these are ‘extra credit’ points in regard to my primary area of research interest—the way that modern Australian men learned how to be men, the exploration of which is my creative thesis. The idea of resolving that question as part of the thesis/exegesis process seemed both alien and frightening. Yet this what my project required: a double-loop learning process.⁶⁹ This means that while devising research questions (and attempting to answer them), a second, higher-order process continues, one that questions the research process itself, questioning the metadata for accuracy and correctness.⁷⁰ And it is what my project produced.⁷¹ My writing/research project evolved, growing organically into a mature being with its foundations deep in this research methodology.

So what is practice-led research? How is it conducted? Obviously, the primary constituent of the method is that the researcher *practices*. Leila Green specifies that practice-led methodologies are performances ‘in relation to the writer’s craft: the research is embodied in the written work’.⁷² The practitioner/researcher uses their medium of expression to configure and unveil their findings. Thus, *My Brother’s War* is the fictionalisation of my understanding of what makes the contemporary Australian male. The researcher in this sort of project, for Brad Haseman, embodies “‘an enthusiasm of practice’”: something that is exciting, something that may be unruly’.⁷³ Further, such researchers insist that their research findings are presented in the genre and style of their chosen art, ‘through the symbolic language and forms of their practice’, not in the ways prescribed by the qualitative/quantitative traditions.⁷⁴ A poet creates poetry, the painter paints, and the novelist generates a form of longer fiction. Graham Harper provides a useful definition: ‘Creative writing practice can be defined as actions or a set of acts, often referred to as ‘process’ and leading to the completion, partial completion or sometimes the temporary or permanent abandonment of a piece of creative writing’.⁷⁵ My practice is scripted as *My Brother’s War*; indeed, the program in which I am enrolled specifies a quality requirement for that practice. The artefact must

⁶⁹ See Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1978.

⁷⁰ Huba Wass de Czege, ‘Mission Command and the Contemporary Battlespace’, in Scott Hopkins (ed.), *Chief of Army’s Exercise Proceedings*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Study Paper No. 309, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, ACT, 2007.

⁷¹ Paul Dawson, ‘Writing Programmes at Australian Universities: Creative Art or Literary Research?’, *TEXT*, Vol. 3, No. 1, accessed on 29 November 2009 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april99/dawson.htm>>.

⁷² Leila Green, ‘Creative Writing as Practice-Led Research’, *Australian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, Nos. 2-3, 2006, p. 177.

⁷³ Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, p. 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Graeme Harper, ‘Creative Writing: Words as Practice-Led Research’, *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2008, p. 161.

be ‘a publishable written document’, and this accompanying exegesis must provide a significant and original contribution to knowledge.⁷⁶ Hence, my practice is a novel about two brothers struggling to be better men, and that text stands with this one, a self-reflective piece that details the provenance and praxis of creation.

The second defining element of practice-led research is that it makes a substantial contribution to knowledge. As Foucault states in the quote that opens this section, the ways to knowledge are many. Harper details the practice of creative writing as contributing to knowledge precisely because it is ‘a creative human practice that carries with it knowledge and ways of approaching the world, has truth-value, and incorporates a communicative philosophy often moving between individuals and groups, people and cultures, articulation and reception’.⁷⁷ Only I could have written this novel, and that same part is proud of the sometimes subtle and clever ways in which the theory of hegemonic masculinities is embodied in the text of *My Brother’s War*. By writing about and within my cultural situation, and presenting that writing for public (and especially academic) consumption, I create new knowledge and thus contribute to culture.⁷⁸ Recall the words of F.R. Leavis about ‘crude scientific reductionism’; new knowledge I create cannot be counted and weighed simply, as one would measure results in a scientific experiment. Leavis goes on to locate the value of literature as being a way to address the emptiness of existence, as a means of questioning: ‘What for – what ultimately for? What ultimately do men live by? These questions are in and of

⁷⁶ Swinburne University of Technology Research Office, *Guidelines for Examination of a PhD*, p. 1-3, accessed on 08 August 2010, from <http://www.research.swinburne.edu.au/higher-degrees/documents/guidelines_for_phd_examination.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Harper, ‘Creative Writing’, p. 171.

⁷⁸ See, for example: Elizabeth Barrett, ‘What Does it Meme? The Exegesis as Valorisation and Validation of Creative Arts Research’, *TEXT*, Vol. 8, No 1, accessed on 12 January 2007 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue3/barrett.htm>>; Leila Green, ‘Creative Writing as Practice-Led Research’, p. 177; Dawn Bennett, ‘Creative Artists or Cultural Practitioners? Holistic Practice in Australia’s Cultural Industries’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 31, Issue 90, 2007, pp. 133-151; Christopher Crouch, ‘Praxis and the Reflexive Creative Practitioner’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2007, pp. 105-114; Robert Davis and Mark Shadle, “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking”, *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 51, No. 3, February 2000, pp. 417-446; Paul Dawson, ‘The Function of Critical Theory in Tertiary Creative Writing Programs’, *Southern Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1997, pp. 70-80; Rachel Garfield, ‘Articulating a Position Through Research: The Practice-Led PhD, a Case-Study’, *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2007, pp. 221-234; Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, ‘A Connective Model for the Practice-Led Research Exegesis: An Analysis of Content and Structure’, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2010, pp. 31-44; Jeri Kroll, ‘The Resurrected Author: Creative Writers in 21st-Century Higher Education’, *New Writing*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2004, pp. 89-102; Maarit Mäkelä, ‘Knowledge Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practice-Led Research’, *Knowledge, Technology and Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2007, pp. 157-163; Pete Mann and Davina M. Clarke, ‘Writing it Down–Writing it Out–Writing it Up: Researching Our Practice Through Action Research’, *Action learning: Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 2, September 2007, pp. 153-171; Kaye Shumack, ‘Learning as Experience: A Model for Teaching the ‘Reflective Exegesis’ for Communication Design Practice’, *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2008, pp. 59-72; Helen Yeates, ‘Embedding Engagements: The Challenge of Creative Practice Research to the Humanities’, *The International Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2009, pp. 139-147.

the creative drive'.⁷⁹ What remains, however, is to explore the personalisation of practice-led research, which is best termed 'autoethnography'.

Autoethnography

Lastly, on this preparatory leg of the *récit*, comes a methodological discussion relating to 'autoethnography'. Autoethnographies 'are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding'.⁸⁰ Hence, there is a vital role for first-person voice, something anathema to traditional, high-brow scholarship and academic writing. Autoethnographies challenge the exclusionary strictures of 'science', which delimits 'what is knowledge' and prescribes how knowledge can be achieved and judged.⁸¹ Most importantly, autoethnography valorises reflexivity, which is where 'the researcher pauses for a moment to think about how his or her presence, standpoint, or characteristics might have influenced the outcome of the research process.'⁸² Autoethnography prizes the previously mentioned double-loop learning, self-reflexivity, by which the research questions themselves and the research practice both refine the process and produce new knowledge. This exegesis is autoethnography, with the direct mode of address in the first-person 'I', and the self-reflexivity of examining ends, ways and means of my writing process that leads to *My Brother's War* and its accompanying exegesis.

Questions inevitably arise about the validity of research data created by practice-led research generally and by autoethnography specifically. In her critique of autoethnography, Sarah Wall writes that it 'is less of a method and more of a philosophy, theoretical underpinning, or paradigm'; she finds that descriptions of 'how to' conduct autoethnographic research lack specificity and concrete process instructions.⁸³ Elliot Eisner identified several potential weaknesses with qualitative approaches such as autoethnography. Firstly, the primary data is often invisible and unobtainable to the critic and the reader.⁸⁴ How much of the primary data is actually

⁷⁹ F.R. Leavis, 'The Significance of C.P. Snow', *Spectator*, 9 March 1962, p. 302, quoted in Tom Sorell, *Scientism*, p. 102.

⁸⁰ A. C. Sparkes, 'Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 2000, pp. 21-43, quoted in Sarah Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* Vol. 5, No. 2, 2006, pp. 1-12.

⁸¹ Sarah Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,' pp. 144-160. See also Nicholas L. Holt, "Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2003.

⁸² Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,' p. 148.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁸⁴ Elliot Eisner, 'The New Frontier in Qualitative Research Methodology', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1997, pp. 259-274.

‘spin’, that skewing of facts and opinions to cast a better light on the researchly self? There can also be problems of relativism and its cognate, generalizability.⁸⁵ One way to address these questions is to critique or problematize the ‘persuasiveness’ of the data and its subsequent interpretation.⁸⁶ Eisner declares that the questions posed and answered, both in quality and quantity, give the proficient reader an idea as to the material’s persuasiveness.⁸⁷ Also useful is a methodological triangulation, whereby different methods of analysis seek to validate or invalidate data and conclusions drawn.⁸⁸ Steven Scrivener notes that ‘the term research is not an absolute: that it is socially constructed and its meaning shifts depending on the community using the term’.⁸⁹ It has become acceptable to view creative activity as viable academic research—of which autoethnography is but one approach. With a recognition of the subjective nature of the humanities, particularly that ‘knowledge’ is always contextual, incomplete, and implicated, then differing means to knowledge beyond the scientific or reductionist can be as—if not more so—valuable to the researcher.

It is clear that criteria are needed to evaluate texts such as this thesis/exegesis combination. Laurel Richardson details five criteria against which autoethnographic writing can be judged:

- (1) *Substantive contribution*. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
- (2) *Aesthetic merit*. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring?
- (3) *Reflexivity*. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?
- (4) *Impactfulness*. Does this affect me emotionally and-or intellectually?
- (5) *Expresses a reality*. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Does it seem true—a credible account of cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real”?⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*. See also: Paul Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self*, London: Sage, 1999, and Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, Michael Holquist & Vadim Liapunov (Eds and Trans), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990. Bakhtin’s dialogic view of authoring demonstrates a way to engage with a self-reflexive moment, to bring awareness of the ‘I’ into the written space.

⁸⁶ Eisner, ‘The New Frontier in Qualitative Research Methodology’, p. 260.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Laura L. Ellingson and Carolyn Ellis, ‘Autoethnography as Constructionist Project’, in James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (Eds), *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, New York: Guildford Press, 2008, p. 446.

⁸⁹ Steven Scrivener, ‘Reflection In and On Action and Practice in Creative-Production Doctoral Projects in Art and Design’, *Working Papers in Art and Design* 1, 2000, accessed on 23 July 2010 from <http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol1/scrivener2.html>.

⁹⁰ Laurel Richardson, “New Writing Practices in Qualitative Research”, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2000, pp. 15-16.

I test the autoethnographic validity of *My Brother's War* against these criteria in Sections Two, Three, and Four. Richardson works from an understanding that 'writing is always partial, local, and situational', that the writerly self (with inherent biases and *caesura*) is always present, 'no matter how much we try to suppress it—but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves, too'.⁹¹ The challenge for the researcherly self is to remain as aware as possible of such elisions, oversights, understatements, prejudices, and self-deceptions, and to recognise (and indeed celebrate) the context of our intertextuality. The creative writer uses these challenges to create interesting fictions, such as withholding information from the reader for dramatic purposes; perhaps the scholar needs to do the same.

Autoethnographic Creative Writing as Research

Autoethnography, for Susanne Gannon, 'with its omissions, disguises, and representations of reality', borders on the fictive, 'with a novelist's attention to character, plot, setting, and dialogue'.⁹² I write my experiences, both real-life factual and research-informed fictive, to create human stories, using the tools of the creative-writer's kitbag. Hence my early choice for the use of a *récit*, which shares these characteristics. Creative writing, coming from the personal spaces of the researcher/writer, expresses a cultural position and a human perspective because, according to Armstrong, 'storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to our understanding of not only what it is to be human, but how it is we are human'.⁹³ The writerly self and the researchly self share a need to craft a narrative. Hecq specifies that 'writing is a practice of the letter'⁹⁴; as I practice my craft, I improve both as writer and as researcher. The diverse and formative experiences of my daily life come together in a fictional text, and the role of the exegesis is to highlight this confluence. Indulge me now as I provide an example of the complex interplay between research and the personal pronoun, the way that my lived experience shapes both my artistic choices and my research interests and biases.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹² Susanne Gannon, 'The (Im)Possibilities of Writing the Self-Writing: French Poststructural Theory and Autoethnography', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 6 No. 4, November 2006, p. 477.

⁹³ Luane Armstrong, 'First Reader: Learning to Teach Creative Writing', *Educational Insights*, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 5, accessed on 21 June 2010 from <<http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n01/pdfs/armstrong.pdf>>.

⁹⁴ Dominique Hecq, 'Writing the Unconscious: Psychoanalysis for the Creative Writer', *TEXT*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2008, accessed on 14 January 2011 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct08/hecq.htm>>.

My Brother's War, to be effective as a speculative fiction thriller, means writing in a realist mode, accurately reflecting upon my world and its inhabitants. To write with verisimilitude, a key feature of realist fiction,⁹⁵ I needed a personal education in the ways of men's hearts, of domesticity and killing in the name of a cause or a flag. I've not killed for my nation, nor died for it, so where (as a novelist) do I encounter the people that do? These sometimes-harsh lessons came with living my life as a public servant in the Department of Defence and paying attention to the stories of those around me. At the Australian Army's Land Warfare Studies Centre, where I served as Research Assistant, Research Editor, and Publications Manager, I edited journal articles and monographs about combat stress and human reactions to violence and killing; these covered all the major conflicts of the twentieth century, and included civilian as well as soldierly reactions.⁹⁶ I coupled these stories to my internalized experiences of existential questions, such as Bauman's 'messiness of the human predicament' or Heidegger's *Angst*, what I term *the suffering of awareness*.⁹⁷ Only in writing the thesis, the creative artefact, however, do these diverse influences come to be. As Nicholas Holt declares, 'qualitative researchers need to be storytellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes'.⁹⁸ I did not deliberately record these observations with the intention of (in the future) incorporating them into narrative. But I will write them for the sake of verisimilitude. Yet these are exterior stories that I bowerbird into fiction; there remains that mainspring of the novelist's material, their own experience of the suffering of awareness, which forms the greater part of their creativity and inspiration, to which I now turn.

My own suffering comes from personal, human experience, banal to reveal but intensely personal and private: sexual assault at the hands of predatory males. Male

⁹⁵ The writer's invocation of verisimilitude, rather than truth, works only because of the reader's complicity; see Lilian R. Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995, p. 41. Furst goes on to quote Todorov, who said: 'Verisimilitude is the mask that is assumed by the laws of the text and that we are meant to take for a relation to reality'.

⁹⁶ My understand of the military experience came not from personal military service, but from immersion with military personnel. Some friends, officers and soldiers in the Special Air Service (SAS) are the basis for the character of Brett Bliss. Their stories, and others with whom I worked, enriched my understanding and aided my attempts at verisimilitude. See, for example, Paul Jordan, 'Witness to Genocide: A Personal Account of the 1995 Kibeho Massacre', *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 2003, pp. 127-136; Robert C. Stevenson, *Not so Friendly Fire: An Australian Taxonomy for Fratricide*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Working Paper No. 128, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006; and Robert C. Stevenson, *The Human Dimension of the Hardened and Networked Army: The Lessons of Friendly Fire*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Working Paper No. 130, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006.

⁹⁷ *Angst* is about 'nothing and nowhere', where the 'recalcitrance of the innerworldly nothing and nowhere means that *what Angst is about is the world as such*'. Heidegger goes on to say: '*Angst is anxious about being-in-the-world itself*'; (emphasis in original). Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, SUNY Press, New York, 1996, p. 175.

⁹⁸ Nicholas L. Holt, 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 2 Issue 1, Winter 2003, p. 5.

rape. The autoethnographic exegetical effort cries for more detail, for more honesty and revelation. The artist, for Atwood, must be both cold-eyed and cold-hearted: ‘The eye is cold because it is clear, and it is clear because its owner must look: he must look at everything. Then she must record’.⁹⁹ It is the novelist’s job to reveal such minutia, the experiences of their life that are transmuted from personal horror into fictionalized narrative, usually only through the lives of their characters.

Let me provide one example: Lawrie’s emotional journey, of intense experience and critical detachment, during and after his rape at the hands of his captors. These are not emotional and psychological insights I glean from reading textbooks, but personal demons exorcised through the writing of fiction.¹⁰⁰ Writing that scene took a strange dislocation; I sat in a barracks room at an Army base outside Wellington, New Zealand, in 2008, with bed-bug sores itching madly and a ten-pound hangover from spending the previous night’s ‘beer tickets’ with a selected cadre of high-flying officers from several countries. I had planned that rape scene, and delayed its writing through fear of re-confronting the event and mining memories for artistic purposes. Yet the emotion of being out-of-place, of being among strangers on a week-long military exercise with the New Zealand Staff College, cracked open the self-protective armour long enough for me to force the writing of that passage in one excoriating effort, a session powered by painkillers and rock ballads streaming from my Defence-issue laptop. The Army and Air Force personnel with whom I toured (I was the only civilian) did not understand this self-imposed isolation, as they sought to ease their own sore heads with follow-up visits to bars and night-clubs. They engaged their culture: hang with mates, party hard when on tour, and fall into bed with the room spinning. So I used the sense of alienation, of dislocation and detachment, to permit myself emotional closeness, to re-engage with that which had been walled off behind my veneer of masculinity. I used the angst of ‘being-in-the-world’ to explore the suffering of awareness. Like many a writer before me, I wrote what I knew, adapting fact to fiction, for the sake of artistic prose.

The outcome, I hope, is an emotionally engaging scene for the reader, where they can change their mind about Lawrie, moving him from a slightly distasteful ‘other’ character to the centre-stage of their celebration. Of course, the title of the thesis does

⁹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 121.

¹⁰⁰ Fiona Sampson, ‘Writing as “Therapy”’, in Steven Earnshaw (Ed.), *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007; Donna Feldman, ‘Beyond the Classroom: Writing as Therapy’, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, Vol. 24, No. 2, June 2011, pp. 93-104; and Fred McKinney, ‘Free Writing as Therapy’, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, Vol.13, No. 2, Summer 1976, pp. 183-187.

not specify which brother is at war. Both are in combat but, as the narrative unfolded, I became less certain that the title referred to Brett (as initially conceived), and more certain that the textual exploration was really about Lawrie. I identified more with Lawrie, and the lives of the reader are probably closer to him than to his brother. Lawrie is the contemporary Australian man, the Everyman. I did not understand this as I started to write; the process of creation, including the interaction of text with theory, brought me the understanding.

Henry James wrote about creating characters, about getting inside them, that it was ‘A beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature; the act of personal possession of one being by another at its completest’.¹⁰¹ I wanted Lawrie principally as a contrast to Brett, to highlight the latter’s status as the hegemonic ideal. But I’ve come to sympathise and identify more with Lawrie, and I hope the Model Reader does, too.¹⁰² Umberto Eco describes this Model Reader as ‘supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them’.¹⁰³ By pouring myself into Lawrie, much more so than Brett, I infused him with a starting point, and a lively narrative allowed him to totter forward, gaining confidence with each step, until he becomes his own man. And this, I think, is achieved by the end of *My Brother’s War*, where Lawrie has summoned the courage to be emotionally open with Lise; we think his war is over, and he’s not just inherited his manhood from his dead father, but earned himself an entirely unique one.

I could not give Lawrie his masculinities, he had to earn them himself through his own context and performativity. Oscar Wilde said, ‘To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim’.¹⁰⁴ This brief example demonstrates the interaction of the writing process, of autoethnography and my theoretical frame of hegemonic masculinities; next. I will unpack some of these interactions and search for verifiable research outcomes.

¹⁰¹ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, with an Introduction by J.P. Blackmur, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1962, p. 37.

¹⁰² See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994 (c1979); Helen Rothschild Ewald, ‘The “Model” Reader: Audiences Within Genres’, Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (37th, New Orleans, LA, March 13-15, 1986), accessed on 17 August 2011 from <<http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED269801.pdf>>.

¹⁰³ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Oscar Wilde, ‘Preface’, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, quoted in Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 77.

Theory and Autoethnographic Creative Writing

So how does theory inform creativity? Does research contribute to—or, indeed, *constitute*—creative writing? My writing practice is informed and guided by the need to produce research outcomes, both the thesis and the exegesis. Further, the theory of hegemonic masculinities informs my characterisations and plot points, as will be examined in greater detail in Section Four. And this is only the specific theory surrounding hegemonic masculinities. In a broad reading for this project, I have delved into Theory on genre, narrativity, autoethnography, science- and speculative-fiction, and epistemology. Yet I must focus on a singular thing, something demonstrable and relevant to my *problematique* and my discipline, so I re-visit my writing journal and sort, sift, and refine the ideas therein. I trawl through the data, and begin to see an emergent property of that information, the metadata of the journal comes forth and points the way to my evolving understanding of my writing process.

Writing, as a total process, is visceral, and I need to feel an experience to process it, to bring it to life and make it real. I write for the emotions I experience when writing, and to be able to convey them in such a way so that the reader can see through my character's eyes. And I read for the same reason, for that connection to 'another'. According to Eisner, 'Words, except when they are used artistically, are proxies for direct experience'.¹⁰⁵ Words, used artistically, become the direct experience *for the reader*. Eco declares that 'every type of text explicitly selects a very general model of possible reader'.¹⁰⁶ Eco's 'Model Reader' must be kept in mind for the readerly writer. For Roland Barthes, effective writing and imagining the reader are the same process:

Our evaluation [of texts] can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write: what is within the practice of the writer and what has left it ... What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the *writerly*. Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.¹⁰⁷

Writers-for-readers allow space for the reader to be a co-texter. In reality, keeping the awareness of co-creativity makes the writer 'readerly'. The writer is thinking of their

¹⁰⁵ Eisner, 'Art and Knowledge', p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 4.

audience, and imagines a reader for their work. The readerly writer, to which I aspire, keeps the reader foremost in their thoughts, deliberately.

Rohman identifies the necessity of the writer, and of writing, as a deliberative act: “Without a person at the center, the process is meaningless”.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, as the next section demonstrates, understanding the steps of my writing process enhances the effectiveness of my writing by increasing my deliberative awareness. Examining the metadata of my writing journal reveals that I discovered and mapped a writing process of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, not previously brought (consciously) to my understanding of writing. I used these steps, as evidenced by the metadata, but dragging the steps into the light and focusing upon them demonstrates my self-reflexivity, and hopefully improves my effectiveness as a writer of thesis and exegesis.

¹⁰⁸ D. Gordon Rohman, ‘Pre-Writing the Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process’, *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 16, No. 2, May, 1965, p. 107.

SECTION THREE:

What Academic Thinking this has Led Me To

[I]f you haven't, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven't the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured; but that if you are *so* armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal.

—Henry James¹⁰⁹

A Writing Process

My writing journal reveals the underlying evolution of my understanding of the process and the project of my PhD, its provenance and the praxis. As I wrote and edited the exegesis, I used a writing journal to capture my thinking about the novel and the theoretical/academic material I read and their interaction in the writing process. I kept a log of reflective writing,¹¹⁰ a data-pool of research activity and of creativity. The journal is a necessary—but not sufficient—requirement for original knowledge: 'The studio practice, regardless of creative arts discipline, requires documentation'.¹¹¹ According to Davis, my reflective synthesis with theory completes the production of significant new knowledge: 'These capture the first person moment and ... are then used by the researcher to exemplify, interrogate, or amplify the practice'.¹¹² My journal is the site of interaction between the theory I read and the novel I created and, also, for Gaylene Perry, the place to record my contribution to knowledge.¹¹³ In the journal, I would pose questions to myself about my characters (and their characterisation), adapting and adjusting my understanding of these people as my understanding of theory deepened and evolved. The journal is a log of developing thinking and changing details.¹¹⁴ If the exegesis is a vehicle of self-reflexivity, then the writing journal is its engine.

Of course, writing about writing invokes an almost inevitable circularity. In my experience, a passionate writing session evaporates time and transports the writer. The writer exists with their characters, usually fictional, *as if real*. This almost schizoid

¹⁰⁹ James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 78.

¹¹⁰ Green, p. 177.

¹¹¹ D. Davis James, 'A Working Model for Postgraduate Practice Based Research Across the Creative Arts', in Design Research Society, *3rd Doctoral Education in Design Conference 2003*, accessed on 4 September 2010 from <http://www.idemployee.id.tue.nl/g.w.m.rauterberg/conferences/CD_doNotOpen/DED/d_final_paper/d_02.pdf>, p. 20.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ 'A writer's journal could be compatible with the aims of the creative work, and would contribute to writing-theory by providing original reflections on writing and the writer's self.' Gaylene Perry, 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis', *TEXT*, Vol. 2, No 2, October 1998, accessed on 23 July 2010 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct98/perry.htm>>.

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Colbert, 'Accommodating the Experiential Within Practice-Led Research', *Margins and Mainstreams: Refereed conference papers of the 14th Annual AAWP Conference, 2009*, accessed on 4 September 2010 from <http://aawp.org.au/files/Colbert_0.pdf>, p. 3.

detachment makes rational, post-writing reflection a challenging contradiction in terms. Margaret Atwood expresses the dilemma thus:

I hate writing about my writing because I have nothing to say about it. I have nothing to say about it because I can't remember what goes on when I'm doing it. That time is like small pieces cut out of my brain. It's not time I myself have lived. I can remember the details of the rooms and places where I've written, the circumstances, the other things I did before and after, but not the process itself. Writing about writing requires self-consciousness; writing itself requires the abdication of it.¹¹⁵

There's an analogy in physics for Atwood's point. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, or the Observer Effect, is where the act of observing (the position or velocity of an electron) changes what is observed (the electron's position or velocity).¹¹⁶ The position or the momentum of the electron can be observed, but not both. Observing one changes the other. To relate this to writing—using Atwood's explanation—the writer can either immerse themselves in the writing 'flow', in the act of writing, or they can hold something back to monitor the flow itself, to observe the writing process. But they cannot do both. It's an interesting proposition, and one with which I somewhat agree. However, my writing journal acts as an intermediary between these poles, a third way that falsifies the dichotomy. I can write with flow, in the moment of the created world and its inhabitants, but with a map and repository for observations, which forms the basis of my contribution to knowledge.

The information technology fused my practice in a decreasing cycle of reflection, investigation, clarification, creation, and revision, what Stephen Banks called a 'generative research practice'.¹¹⁷ More on this shortly; for now, let us note this phenomenon and move back to the issue of writing, or writing about writing. It was only by reflecting upon my practice did I make explicit this change in my writing behaviour; I've gained new knowledge about myself and my writing process.

¹¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose, 1983–2005*, Carrol & Graf, New York, 2005, p. 106.

¹¹⁶ Werner Heisenberg, *The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory*, trans. by Carl Eckart and F.C. Hoyt, Dover Press, Mineola, NY, 1949, pp. 13-15. This advanced mathematical concept entered popular understanding in the paradoxical thought experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat, where the cat is sealed in a box with poison-gas mechanism and a decaying isotope that has a 50% chance (at any point in time) of releasing the gas, thus killing the cat. Without a means of observing the cat, at any point in time its life-status is defined by quantum superposition, the combination of all possible states of the system. The cat is *simultaneously* alive and dead.

¹¹⁷ Stephen Banks, 'Writing as Theory: In Defense of Fiction', in J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples and issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, pp. 156.

So writing exegetically about writing creatively forces a new level of consciousness. The exegetical writer needs to identify their process. Atwood's point about the abdication of self-consciousness refers to the creative writer, although writing about writing is still a creative act. Hence, her binary breaks down. Writing fact or fiction, writing creatively or about writing, is still writing. For Banks, 'This means [that] the act of writing, done self-reflexively, that is, accounting for itself, becomes theory'.¹¹⁸ The act of writing had a process, as I discerned by reflecting upon my writing journal and its data. I discovered an understanding of a writing process: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing.¹¹⁹

When writing *My Brother's War* entirely in the electronic realm, the three-step writing process would often be concurrent; pre-writing, writing, and re-writing are different phases acting upon different parts of the text. This writing process allows me to describe not only what I know, but also to refine and define as I work.¹²⁰ My first act upon starting any writing session would be music through the headphones connected to my laptop, from a Playlist titled 'Writing' saved on Windows Media Player. I would read what I'd written previously, to pick up the thread of the story. And that sentence, left off, and sometimes hanging, would be my start point to energise the narrative flow. But that is generally not where I'd start writing again. As I read what I'd written, I would cast an editorial eye, filling in missing words and correcting spelling, keeping the surface material in mind. My subconscious mind had been keeping track, and the intellectual 'me' could be hijacked by the emotions created by the music in my headphones. This re-writing of the just-written is a re-drafting in action, a sign of a living organism that I feed and live off, for I am symbiotic with the text. So, let us now examine each of these steps in turn, imagining that my basic writing process is linear.

Pre-Writing

A formal definition of pre-writing is: 'the stage of discovery in the writing process when a person assimilates his [sic] "subject" to himself'.¹²¹ Writers often need

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Donald M. Murray, 'Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery', in Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (eds.), *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL, 1978, pp. 85-104.

¹²⁰ See M. Torrance, G. V. Thomas, E. J. Robinson, 'The Writing Strategies of Graduate Research Students in the Social Sciences', *Higher Education*, Vol. 27, No. 3, April 1994, pp. 308: 'More experienced writers often use the writing process not only as a means of telling what they know, but also as a way of exploring and developing their ideas about the topic'.

¹²¹ Rohman, p. 106.

some time and mental effort to translate their initial conception into a fleshed-out text. Henry James, for example, wrote about the genesis of *The American*:

I was charmed with my idea, which would take, however, much working out; and precisely because it had so much to give, I think, must I have dropped it for the time into the deep well of unconscious cerebration: not without the hope, doubtless, that it might eventually emerge from that reservoir, as one had already known the buried treasure to come to light, with a firm iridescent surface and a notable increase of weight.¹²²

The mental effort—the ceaseless workings of the subconscious mind on the germinal idea—cannot be relied upon, although a skilled writer learns which ideas will return with the ‘notable increase of weight’. Hence, the activities of pre-writing prompt the subconscious and help writers move an idea forward.

Pre-writing is preparatory work, the laying of plans and foundations. The point of pre-writing is to prepare the ground for the writing effort. Often, much of the material created in pre-writing does not make it into the final text. Theodore Sturgeon said: ‘The writer has to know what is in every nook and cranny of the story. You don’t have to write it all down, but if you know what’s there, it’ll show’.¹²³ Ernest Hemingway also wrote about the importance of understanding more than is revealed in the text:

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.¹²⁴

The reader needs to trust that the writer has the seven-eighths of the iceberg in mind. Pre-writing, honestly and with the Model Reader in mind, is a sign of a readerly writer. In *My Brother’s War*, I conceived an entire career path for Brett, and sought advice from a range of Army officers to help me map out the postings he would have held to become the ‘Jedi Knight’ I wanted to present. It would be impossible to detail all those jobs to the reader, but I still needed to convince them that I’d studied his career, seen how he advanced through the ranks to become the highly respected officer he was. This is reflected

¹²² James, *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 22-23.

¹²³ Quoted in David Gerrold, *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Writer’s Digest Books, Cincinnati, 2001, p. 20.

¹²⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, Scribner, New York, 1999 (1932), p. 154.

in the opening scene of the novel, where both the Sarge and the Lieutenant discuss Brett in respectful terms, from different operating environments. The Sarge served with Brett in the field as well as in staff postings, and the Lieutenant reveals to the reader that Brett held a training and mentoring position at Royal Military College–Duntroon, the school that trains Australia’s Army officers. By understanding through pre-writing where Brett had served, I could allude to previous, outside-the-plot times, and build a sense of ‘roundedness’, a sense that my protagonist existed outside of the text.¹²⁵

Pre-writing helps the writer define their character and round out characterisation. Part of the readerly writer’s job is to enable the reader—to make the reader’s effort rewarding. To do this, the writer needs to understand their characters and each character’s story. David Lodge highlights this importance: ‘Character is arguably the most important single component of the novel ... nothing can equal the great tradition of the European novel in the richness, variety and psychological depth of its portrayal of human nature’.¹²⁶ Virginia Woolf wrote that ‘I believe that all novels ... deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved’.¹²⁷ With characters being the center of novels, Hemingway’s ‘hollow places’ indicates that the writer has produced an incomplete characterisation. Thus, pre-writing helps the readerly writer enliven their characters; this is a process that adds flesh to bone, that puts a third and fourth dimension to an otherwise flat character.

In *My Brother’s War*, the opening scene begins a process of revealing character to the reader by testimony. As the novel unfolds, the main characters’ interior landscapes are exposed, making the reader an eyewitness. David Lodge notes that:

the creation of a novel rarely begins with the penning or typing of its first words. Most writers do some preliminary work, if it is only in their heads. Many prepare the ground carefully over weeks or months, making diagrams of the plot, compiling c.v.s for the characters, filing a notebook with ideas, settings, situations, jokes, to be drawn on in the process of composition... For

¹²⁵ Lodge notes that ‘Modern novelists usually prefer to let the facts about a character emerge gradually, diversified, or actually conveyed, by action and speech. In any case, all description in fiction is highly selective; its basic rhetorical technique is synecdoche, the part standing for the whole.’ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, p. 68.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹²⁷ Virginia Woolfe, ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, 1923, quoted in Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown’, *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (eds), Scarecrow Press, Landham, MD, 2005, p. 120.

the reader, however, the novel always begins with that opening sentence ¹²⁸

For maximum ‘readerly-ness’ this means leaving gaps and elisions for the reader to ‘write’ their own character-frames.

There are several pre-writing activities open to novelists. Depending upon the novelist’s disposition, as I did with *My Brother’s War*, they may construct a storyboard, showing the main plot points and associated character arcs. This means that, as I began to write, I knew where I wanted to end up. One of the basics of military strategy is to first define the ‘end-state’: the set of conditions that indicate victory. It is the selection of a destination before undertaking a journey. David Gerrold writes that ‘A story is about a problem. The person in the story, the character, is the demonstration of the problem. The protagonist is the *expression* of the problem ... How a character deals with crises and challenges reveals who he or she really is’.¹²⁹ It quickly became obvious that Brett and Lawrie’s emotional journeys, their problems, would be very different; Brett would fall, from being the paragon of manhood to a broken man. Lawrie, by contrast, was starting from zero; he was a stunted character who would, for the first time, flourish. I created a timeline of events, which shows in just a dozen or so words the broad scope of each man’s life. This ‘character map’ helped with planning the events of the narrative; when would Brett be wounded, when would Lawrie confront his personal fears regarding adult intimacy, and where would these brothers find themselves at the end of the book? I found this pre-writing activity to be extremely helpful in conceiving of the text as a whole, and gained a sense of security from knowing that all I really had to do was to flesh out the story elements.

A related pre-writing activity for novelists is character sketching. Here, the novelist frames scenes for their main characters, outside of the timeframe or action of the novel, to discover how their protagonists and antagonists talk and behave. For example, I wrote character sketches of Brett’s previous military life, both in headquarters and outside the wire (in combat). Some of the ideas created in these sketching exercises found their way into the novel: several allusions are made to Brett’s attempt to assassinate Thomas haji-Muhammad, the radical Aboriginal leader who is building an Islamic front inside Australia. The background material came from the ongoing Northern Territory Intervention, and I watched several factors at play—Noel Pearson decrying members of his own people for the dependence upon alcohol and

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²⁹ Gerrold, pp. 33-38.

drugs, and the deployment of the Australian Army as ‘aid to the civil power’ for the Northern Territory Intervention as well as in times of crisis, such as natural disaster.¹³⁰ A little-known concern in military and legal circles regards the use of Australian military forces inside Australia; this became the basis for Brett’s history, and indeed Brett’s actions as a young soldier prove to be the catalyst for the revolt within the Army against the increasingly draconian nature of Australia’s security apparatus portrayed in *My Brother’s War*.

The character sketch I created related to Brett’s debriefing after the attempted assassination, during which his commanding officer, Tim Owens, was seriously wounded, and explored Brett’s emotional and intellectual reactions to what he’d done and how the people around him reacted. This activity created a subtextual element for my novel, a dimension that serves several functions. First, it grounds the narrative, a foundation layer of tensions and relationships that exist before the story commences. Second, it adds a complexity to Brett’s character; as the writer, I have now imagined some of the actions that Brett has been involved with, and this understanding, in an Aristotelian sense, helps me frame and intensify his emotional journey.¹³¹ For example, Brett’s sense of belonging to the profession of arms is shattered when it becomes politically expedient for the government of the day to scapegoat him for the failed mission that opens the novel; his overwhelming guilt at his emotional breakdown during combat is intensified because he loses another pillar of his manhood, his adopted family. Lastly, this character sketch allows me freedom as a writer to return to Brett in the future, to perhaps novelise his pre-history, to narrate the mission to assassinate Thomas hajji-Muhammad and then the fracturing inside the Special Air Service. Thus, this pre-writing activity of creating character sketching opens many narrative avenues. By understanding (through pre-writing) my story and its actors, the narrative and character, I’m becoming a readerly writer. Having explored how I pre-write, we must now examine the next step in the writing process: writing.

¹³⁰ For more details on this debate, see Michael Head, ‘The Military Call-Out Legislation: Some Legal and Constitutional Questions’, *Federal Law Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2001, accessed on 8 December 2010 from <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/FedLRev/2001/11.html>>; and Australian Parliamentary Library, *Bills Digest No. 13, 2000-01: Defence Legislation Amendment (Aid to Civilian Authorities) Bill 2000*, Parliament of Australia, accessed on 7 December 2010 from <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2000-01/01BD013.htm>>.

¹³¹ See, for example, Malcolm Heath, who says: ‘So when Aristotle talks about character he is not talking about the quirks of someone’s individuality, but about the structure of their moral disposition in so far as it becomes clear through what they say and do’: ‘Introduction’, Aristotle, *Poetics*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p. xliii.

Writing

Having detailed the often-rigorous planning that I used to enable (pre-write) *My Brother's War*, I must also reveal the anxieties and hesitations I felt when writing the novel. This understanding reflects back to Atwood, and her conception of writing as negating the self, whereas writing about writing puts the self as the object and the subject. Jacques Derrida declares that the self only comes into being during the act of writing.¹³² Anxious not to lose myself in this labyrinth of subjectivity, I must use my thesis as a map to help me and my Model Reader find a way forward in this exploration. Kevin Brophy describes this anxiety:

[Creative writing] is about those sometimes vivid moments of confusion, uncertainty, dilemma, confrontation. And it works best when the writer, it seems, does not know yet how to find a way out of the dilemma so foolishly entered into - and is willing to let the writing go where it will. This is the secret joy of writing, one that few writers will talk about, perhaps because it is so different every time.¹³³

At the beginning of the exegetical process, the writing questions were broad and open: who are these people I am writing about? Where are they going? What happens to them along the way? How will they end up? These are big questions, and rightly frightening for any writer, especially when answering to the twin masters of narrative and academic quality. So I began to write, sucking in the fear, pressing on blindly into the undiscovered country, like as the settler/explorers of the fearsome, unknown *Terra Australis*. I chased rumour and supposition, sought water and sustenance from the terrain, and followed a compass direction that, while straight and unwavering, paid little heed to the realities underfoot of each step forward.

Yet, as I worked through what Henry James called 'the fruitless fidget of composition',¹³⁴ I realized that many of the big questions just asked had been answered by my pre-writing. By pre-writing, I'd answered the questions and now the characters had very little choice in their fates, having written their own histories for me. But this left another anxiety: the need to be consistent in characterisation and narrative detail, which was a terrible closing of horizons. The once-boundless borders of my narrative

¹³² 'the "I" does not exist, it is not present to itself until what involves [*engage*] it in this way [occurs], and which is not it. There is not a constituted subject which commits [*engage*] itself to writing at a given moment for such or such a reason. It exists through it [writing]'. Jacques Derrida & Francois Ewald, 'A Certain "Madness" Must Watch Over Thinking', *Educational Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Summer 1995, p. 279.

¹³³ Kevin Brophy, 'Some Things About Creative Writing: Three Stories', *TEXT*, Vol. 2, No. 1, April 1998, accessed on 29 November 2009 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april98/brophy.htm>>.

¹³⁴ James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 40.

now pressed urgently, and I needed to consciously plot each move within the free pleasure of the creative moment, the abdication of self-consciousness of which Atwood talked earlier.

The closing of narrative options was not mourned, however. According to the Aristotlean view of storytelling, a quality plot unfolds *inevitably*, where events ‘come about contrary to expectation but because of one another’.¹³⁵ Chance can play a role, but the audience experiences greater tragedy (and subsequent catharsis) when an inexorable logic plays itself out onto the lives of the characters. Any *deus ex machina*, convenient for a lazy or inexperienced writer, reduces the emotional impact by failing the reader. Such a fiction, an imitation, leaves the audience feeling cheated.¹³⁶ Planning, therefore, helps the writer write in several ways. The writer must have a system of recording ideas to be implemented, as well as a way to keep track what has been done already. As previously discussed, my writing journal (whether pen-and-paper or electronic) served these functions. Further, a good writer uses a method to spur on the creative inspiration, to defeat the urge to wait for a creative muse. It is to this question, of how to begin to write each day, to address the blank page, that I know turn.

Starting each writing session is the perennial ‘war stopper’ for many writers: addressing the blank page can become filled with fear and frustration. I used to take this as a literal statement, imagining a whole blank page, but now I realise that ‘the blank page’ begins where the novel left off. Sometimes the blank page starts in mid-scene. Sometimes, depending on the previous writing session, the blankness starts mid-sentence. Who says and does what next? Where was I going with this scene, dialogue, or section? Atwood points out that the writer is a new person with each entry into the text: ‘you never step twice into the same paragraph’.¹³⁷ Thankfully, the writing journal comes into its own. It provided not only a memory of the journey but also a stockpile of fuel to continue. So my writing journal captures the notes, jottings and musings, and stirs the fingers into action, and words begin to flow like water from a hose-pipe.

Let me present here an entry from my writing journal, which demonstrates the interplay between my writing soundtrack, the material being written, and the way I used the writing journal as both a place to explore narrative theory issues (such as plot and character), as well as exegetical repository of self-reflective musings. Once I began to understand what data I needed for the exegesis, my writing process became self-

¹³⁵ Heath, ‘Introduction’, p. 17.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 35.

conscious, and I took notes on the interplay between the words under my fingers and the songs in my ears. This selection shows how the emotions of the songs in my ears contribute to the production of words, both in the production of the writing journal and the thesis:

13/12/09

I've just re-edited my Windows Media playlist, a series of songs from the last 30 years, but lots from the mid-to-late 90s, and I've put Dire Straits' 'The Man's Too Strong' as the opener, and it's great writing fuel. The songs in my ears appear in square brackets.

Today I'm throwing myself into the climax, the confrontation of Brett back in action, and his emotional (non-?) reactions. [Phil Collins, 'In the Air Tonight'] I've got Lawrie poised to drop his guard and allow some natural feelings grow for Lise, and throw them through some combat between Sons and AFP—Lawrie will have a gun in his hand and his rapist at his feet:

"Why shouldn't I kill him?" His hands trembled, and he couldn't make it stop. His body wracked with shivers, as if he were sitting in a walk-in freezer. But the hate in his heart screamed for him to shove the pistol forward and keep pulling the trigger. His feet twitched and tremours ran up his legs and through his torso.

The man on the ground snarled, and Lawrie clenched his teeth.

"Because I'm falling in love with you, and killing him will cripple you. You're a good man, and doing a bad thing for revenge is not what good men do. They feel like killing, but their better self accepts that desire, and defeat it by choosing a better path. [Limp Bizkit, 'Behind Blue Eyes']. Please don't."

I'm freezing. The thought took a long time to form. The snarling man and the shaking gun were alone in a tunnel with Lawrie. *But I want to kill him.*

And the decision is ['?' Or '—']

Blinding light bathed the scene.

Dad's here, Lawrie thought, and a great calmness filled his heart. "He'll take care of it," he said, "Dad—" [Moby, 'God Moving Over the Face of the Water']

But his words were torn away by the roaring engines of the descending aircraft. It floated over them dropping on the right of where he stood.

Hot exhaust and the rising scream on the engines pushed him lower, and Lawrie dropped the gun and pulled Lise into his body, turning his back to screaming, squat black shape behind its looking-at-the-sun spotlight. [Seal, 'Crazy']

The wind turned briefly into a hurricane of dust and dirt that clogged the eyes and nose, and Lise burrowed into Lawrie's arms, and then the noise dropped and the wind scurried away.

I write it here, when the thought is fresh, and transfer it straight into the novel. This is the proper use of a writing journal, although the inclusion of academic and theoretical material ensures that the writing researcher stretches beyond the confines of their world into the informative and multitude ways of being. This is Cixous's plea to the *Écriture féminine*. And this remains a specific call to being, beyond 'being uniquely true to yourself'. [Eminem, 'Lose Yourself'] It's a classification, a subdivision, a differentiation. Selecting facets, however, leads to multiplicity, as Jagose and Grosz and Irigaray and Kristeva and Connell, all of whom see gendered identity as contextual and many. My genre draws enrichment from outside, from Sophocles or Shakespeare or *Spooks*, and the writer can be seen as a unique 'genre', a changing collection of tropes and archetypes and culture.

And such traces of passage, 'sign', as the SAS term the broken twigs and trampled earth that reveal an enemy in a game of stealth, are the journal itself, twisting into different genres of theory, and different media for examples. Today I declare the audio, and the text I write alludes to plays and TV alongside theoreticians and practitioners in different scholastic fields, which makes this text, this terrain, a separate genre from that which is I the writer. And because I am aware of the role of difference and unknowability and subjectivity, I must forego the tag of 'author'—these men write their own lives, and I just create the initial conditions of the experiment and they guide me into themselves and their times.

Note that last sentence: 'And because I am aware of the role of difference and unknowability and subjectivity, I must forego the tag of 'author'—these men write their own lives, and I just create the initial conditions of the experiment and they guide me into themselves and their times'. My self-awareness of the reader, as well as the independent life of my characters, with me-the-writer being merely a recorder of their thoughts and changes, demonstrates that I've shaped my writing toward the readerly. Further, this is evidence that I'm synthesizing theoretical positions into narrative outcomes, that I'm conducting practice-led research; a later research project will develop the idea of the writer as a genre.

When writing, I begin with the music. Then I re-read what I'd written last, a page or two, to pick up the thread; as I type these words now, it is the same process I've followed. Two minutes ago I clicked 'Play' on C.J. Boland's 'The Prophet', and began re-reading and re-writing the previous section of my exegesis. I made a few corrections, strengthened voice and tone and vocabulary and clarity, and typed the previous sentences, beginning with 'as I type these words now ...' This is the little example of getting started. When I re-read, although I might have only written the words yesterday, I found that I was 'reading' them for the first time. This is what Henry James meant when he declared that 'The teller of a story is primarily, none the less, the listener to it,

the reader of it'.¹³⁸ In that re-reading and re-writing, I discovered my heading (because of my pre-writing), and re-reading them gives me an insight into where the reader may be. Are they lost? Are they thinking about another character, off-page? Are they bored or confused? This pre-writing read-through, both a re-visioning and a revision, moves me forward in my grasp of the narrative moment. Then I came to the point where I had left off, and then I am writing again. Of course, as the plot unfolds and the characters reveal themselves, I am also pre-writing what I'm about to write (the next word, sentence, paragraph, or section). If I have been foreshadowing, that is pre-writing what is to come. However, I am also engaged in researching what I'm writing, and this is where I want to concentrate now, on the interaction or writing and research. For a specific example, let us look to the history of Lawrence Reginald Bliss and his son, our brothers' father, Reginald Lawrence Bliss, the grandfather and father to our two protagonists, Brett and Lawrie Bliss.

When writing this section of *My Brother's War*, this history of Bliss men, the naming of characters almost came too easily, with the transposition and transmission of the names 'Reginald' and 'Lawrence'. Lawrie, with the family name, became the Father in his mother's house. Lawrie fills his father's shoes—in the thesis, Lawrie claims his father's shed on the day of his father's funeral. He becomes the man of the house when his mother suffers the first of her breakdowns. Brett is not named for the Father, despite having more in common with his forebears through military service. That thread is vital to the reader's understanding of Brett's motivations: trying to live up to the family's military tradition. Thus, to help the Model Reader understand that tradition, I needed to write a scene that revealed the 'glorious service' of the Bliss men to the Crown. So came the journey of the boy-man Reginald to the Recruiting Centre in London's East End to enlist for the Second World War, his war-wise father Lawrence passing on to his son the Mons Star, the medal won in his own First World War combat. The physical medal acts as a symbol, and handing forward of tradition and expectation. Lawrence the father exhorts his boy "Do us proud, son ... Do your duty, look after your mates, and come home alive".¹³⁹ Lawrence also recites a poem to Reginald, 'In Flanders Fields' by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae,¹⁴⁰ and quickly changes the track of the conversation toward comic relief lest emotions become too pronounced; it was (and still is) unmanly to cry. Lawrence struggles to avert any loss of masculinity. The lightheartedness

¹³⁸ James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 63.

¹³⁹ *My Brother's War*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁰ John McCrae, 'In Flanders Fields', in Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, Blackwell: Oxford, 2007, p. 133.

relieves their tension, and shows the reader the emotional dynamics in which the young Reginald grew up. Thus, it also demonstrates what Brett and Lawrie could expect of their father's emotional range: he was to be distant and closed-off, as was his own father. This exchange, from a seemingly omniscient point-of-view, helps the reader understand the family dynamic without having it explained directly. This showing, not telling, by employing a 'flashback' technique more familiar to cinematics, demonstrates a readerly text.

Yet the writing of the scene involved several diversions into the World Wide Web, and this provides a singular example of practice-led research. With my background in military history, I knew that Lawrence Bliss (the grandfather) could only have won the Mons Star (with Clasp) by being in combat under fire from Axis forces as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), which lasted from the declaration of hostilities in 1914 until the end of the First Battle of Ypres, 22 November 1914.¹⁴¹ The First Battle of Ypres, which presaged the beginning of trench warfare and strategic stalemate on the Western Front, destroyed the BEF. The Belgium town of Ypres is the centre of the Flanders region, and thus the poem 'In Flanders Fields' is very important to Lawrence Bliss. I briefly describe the battle in *My Brother's War*, based on the pictures I found through Google. With several hours of web searching and note-taking, I'd compiled a service history for both Lawrence and Reginald Bliss, the paragons of military manhood for Brett Bliss. They are his exemplars, the standard to which he must aspire (and, being a military man, exceed). I know which units these men belonged to, where and when they saw action, the names of their higher commanders, the location on their bodies where they received wounds, and the impact of their service on their family. For these two minor—yet critically important—characters, I wrote their lives and their personalities. I knew, in Hemingway's terms, the seven-eighths of the iceberg.

I researched and established thorough life-histories for my characters, and knew them as people. I also had the broad sweep of the plot mapped out graphically, with the major points of character development cross-referenced against plot development. This, I hoped, would make each character arc seem most natural and logical because they would be linked to inciting events; moments of great stress, or relief of stress, to allow change and growth. I knew that Brett would start high in his manhood, and be brought

¹⁴¹ See the Royal Decree for the awarding of the honour at: The National Archives (UK), accessed on 7 December 2010 from:
<http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=%22Extracts%22_from_Army_Order_361_of_16th_October%2C_1919_%221914_Star%22_-_Grant_of_Clap>.

low, whereas Lawrie's trajectory was to start from a low base and grow as events unfolded. When it came time to write, therefore, the writing came easily. I knew these people, and I knew the direction I wanted them to go. Utilizing the power of the information age, writing and researching have a short feedback loop.

I used Wikipedia to confirm spellings on Arabic terms such as *Insha'Allah* (God Willing), and the terms relating to the conduct of Friday prayers and the lectures therein. Wikipedia also served to educate me about the nuances of the clothes that characters wear, such as the difference between a *burqa* and a *chardour*. This became important in *My Brother's War* when Brett moves across Sydney, as a fugitive, and he waits at a bus stop. He eavesdrops on a couple, and a car full of 'larrikins' hurls an egg at the woman.¹⁴² Describing this immigrant couple meant using the correct terms for what they were wearing, and I needed to confirm my understanding of their outfit and the proper spelling. I'm indicating racism but not explicitly lecturing against it; I'm fictionalising it, and making the fiction real by getting the small details correct. I'm using web resources such as Wikipedia to make fiction into fact. Wikipedia centralises the diffuse knowledge of Google, the latter serving as a reference- and fact-checking backup. Google confirms what is known; it helps the researcher fact check. Writing, therefore, becomes a research process according to the needs of the narrative. Solid research, including extended referencing, is available for those that seek to improve their text with such details. Realist fiction, interestingly, needs to be grounded in verisimilitude, which reinforces the importance of researching knowledge before presenting it.

Google and Wikipedia are persistently useful tools for the researcher/writer. For example, my previous knowledge of the ADF's School of Languages allowed me to mention it in full as part of Brett's education, but I needed to confirm its geographical location. I knew it was in Victoria, and a ten-second Google scan confirmed it as being located in Laverton, outside of Melbourne. More importantly, I found that the School of Languages was situated in RAAF Williams, which means that readers familiar with Melbourne will identify the Laverton suburb, and any military- or Defence-minded readers will gain verisimilitude from the mention of Williams, and perhaps even know the building in question. These small details increase the sense that the other facts and opinions I present are true and correct, which actually serves to blur the distinction between those things that are real and others that are speculative or invented, such as the high-technology items like Oakley Tactical glasses or the SAS operations around the

¹⁴² John Rickard, 'Lovable Larrikins and Awful Ockers', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 78-85.

world. This is part of imagining the Model Reader: details that satisfy them. Such knowledge, to the general reader, means little, and they expect me (as much as the insiders) to get these facts correct.

So writing *My Brother's War* is a process of deploying fact to buttress fiction, to use the real-world to support the truth-value of the imagined one. Writing, for Jacques Derrida, designates 'not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible'.¹⁴³ Writing, then, is also pre-writing and re-writing, but also the research that underlies the writing. In the context of this thesis and exegesis, writing encompasses the act of producing words, as well as the associated cognitive processes, such as pre-writing activities and the methods the scriptor uses to propel the words from the inchoate subconscious onto the page in some form of physical reality. Derrida notes that writing is 'not only the system of notation secondarily connected to these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves'.¹⁴⁴ In this context, then, it must be recognised that there exists a fundamental interconnectedness between pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, that last element of the writing process, to which we now turn.

Re-Writing

For T.S. Eliot, 'the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing'; in essence, re-writing.¹⁴⁵ Committing words to paper is only the first half of the battle, and it is not the decisive half. This means that the writer must also cast the editorial and self-critical eye, and be skilled with its deployment, for 'this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism'.¹⁴⁶ The readerly writer needs to read their own work as an editor reads: full of desire to improve clarity of expression and meaning. This section offers insight into the practice of re-writing, and what I learned about the practice, as applied to my creative artefact. Put simply, good writing is re-writing.

¹⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, p. 165.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'The Function of Criticism', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot (ed.), Frank Kermode, Harcourt, Inc., Orlando, FL, 1975, p. 73.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Upon completing the first draft of *My Brother's War*, I put it aside to let the impressions settle from my mind, to gain editorial distance and detachment from the created product. The passage of time between writing and re-writing is important; I discovered—as part of my undergraduate and graduate studies, and in my role as Editor of the Land Warfare Studies Centre—the crucial role that time plays in forming critical distance. The writer needs time to forget the words they imagined they wrote; a too-soon re-reading has the writer's mind projecting their intended constructions, and the editorial eye struggles to see those words actually inscribed. Writers, when editing themselves, suffer a cognitive blindness that projects their internal, intended meaning over the top of the words on the page. We see what we thought we wrote, what we meant, instead of what we actually wrote. Time enables the cold, critical eye and diminishes this projection, thus revealing the words-as-written, not the words-as-intended.

The same process applies to the exegetical writer. For the creative researcher, it thus becomes important to declare ourselves exegetically.¹⁴⁷ Such declarations promote 'the editor's eye': is what we think we are saying actually written legibly? Does it convey meaning? Declaring myself exegetically, as I do in this sentence, in this paragraph, is to declare my ideologies, and expound upon them, *récit* and honest. The 'authorial me' gets to address the audience in a mode other than allusion and allegory. The 'writerly me' thinks of the reader, thinks about 'showing not telling', and considers plot and characterisation. But the urge to editorialise, to expound and lecture, is strong in many writers. Having made a living editing the words of others, editorialising is great fun. It's the best form of criticism, because often the bruised writer keeps their feedback to themselves. And an editor should be compassionate, but sometimes the writer hasn't thought of the reader, and hasn't considered the distinctions inherent in the terms 'authoring' and 'writing'. The readerly writer thinks nothing of doing this, and it also makes an editor-friendly experience. Eliot noted that 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry',¹⁴⁸ which means that the writer/editor needs the editorial detachment to overcome the emotional surge of having their work, and thus themselves, found wanting. The responsibilities of being a readerly writer are legion; addressing all these concerns, however, is the requirement. Recognising

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, Routledge, London, 2003.

¹⁴⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Bartleby.com, New York, 2000 (London: Methune, 1920), accessed on 21 July 2010 from <<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>>.

the responsibilities, and taking writerly and editorial actions to move the text in a direction cogniscent of the reader's requirements, is both the journey and the destination.

Re-writing *My Brother's War*, keeping the Model Reader in mind (which also implies considering the Editor) means that I should critique macro-level issues such as narrative structure, and then intermediate-level concerns such as paragraph and sentence pacing, then delve into the micro-world of word choice, spelling and grammar, etc. Let me exemplify the preceding discussion. I cast the editorial eye over the first draft of *My Brother's War*, after a period of it lying fallow. I discovered that I tended to write (wrote) in the passive voice: 'His shirt was stuck to his back'.¹⁴⁹ I noted this (or similar) constructions many times. I corrected these into the active form: 'His shirt stuck to his back and his balls roasted as his hands clenched and unclenched, clenched and unclenched.' This is active, stronger, and direct. So part of my continuing editorial duty is to search for the passive voice and re-write into the active (context warranting). Breaching that rule needs to be an 'authorial' decision, or the contextual demand of the narrative. My default setting as a writer needs to frame more for the active, which saves words and builds a more immediate text for the reader. Another example, from the next page, is: 'She held an ice-cream cone, a dripping ball of strawberry pink, and the sides of her mouth were smeared the same colour'. Upon revision, this becomes: 'She held an ice-cream cone, a dripping ball of strawberry pink, smeared across the sides of her mouth'.¹⁵⁰ Thus, I re-write with an editor's eye, seeking to craft a better, more readerly, creative artefact.

One of my initial goals of the PhD process, having identified the genre of speculative military thriller and outlined the plot and main characters (as detailed in the pre-writing section, above), was to craft a text accessible to women readers. The marketing assumption is that this genre, at its most basic known as the 'airport thriller', is aimed at a male audience. Women readers are more numerous than men—some estimate that 'Men account for only 20 percent of the fiction market'¹⁵¹—and therefore I wanted to create a text that was not gender-biased and exclusionary. Simple economics tells me that I need female readers. But is this possible? Hélène Cixous, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', notes that 'woman must write woman' and men must write men: 'it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once

¹⁴⁹ *My Brother's War*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵¹ Eric Weiner, 'Why Women Read More Than Men', *National Public Radio*, 5 September 2007, accessed on 22 March 2011 from <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14175229>>.

men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly'.¹⁵² So can men write women convincingly? Should we care, beyond the attempt at being true to the narrative and to the reader? Cixous' implication is that I cannot write women convincingly until I've come to understand the interplay between my masculinities and femininities.

Moreover, my women readers will only identify with my female and male characters when I translate my self-understanding as characterisations.

So when I re-write *My Brother's War*, one element constantly foregrounded in imagining my Model Reader is to imagine Her the Reader. This is made significantly easier by several factors: the people to critique my novel thus far, including both my academic supervisors, Professor Josie Arnold and Dr. Glenda Ballantyne, are women. There is also my fabulous wife, Rebecca, and her mother, Valerie Ludlow. These women have a passion for reading, and the latter two have a distinctly different literary taste from mine. These become my Model Reader, in a way, for they are the women to whom I'd like to sell my artefact. They are the 'Everywoman' who supports writers by buying novels, when men rush to the nonfiction section.¹⁵³ Critical feedback from these readers, therefore, is the most important external feedback that I receive, and becomes the basis for my re-writing efforts. Previously, I discussed that self-critique is a writer's primary task, but a close second is the first flush of feedback that indicates to the writer what an external audience perceives as right, wrong, or indifferent.

The re-writing effort saw particular attention paid to characterisation and portrayal of the emotional undercurrents between characters. With a military thriller, the expectation is that action is the thing and that flat characters will prevail. But I wanted to write a complex, literary book that includes action as well as pathos. Why should they be mutually exclusive? Lawrie's journey, for example, is primarily an internal battle of coming to terms with his capture, torture and rape. So my re-writing focus targets Lawrie, to ensure that his physical description gives insight into his emotions. His scenes, particularly those with Lise, needed bolstering so that I show the growing attraction between the two, and convey the struggle he faces in expressing that attraction. My intent was always that Lawrie would end up with Lise, and my re-writing effort kept that goal in mind. That relationship needed to grow naturally, and not seem forced or contrived. Such a change, taking Lawrie from an initially quite creepy

¹⁵² Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer 1976, p. 877.

¹⁵³ Weiner, 'Why Women Read More Than Men'.

bachelor who lusts after the teenaged girl next door to one that the reader barracks for, required close attention to characterisation.

I did not know about Brett's military heritage until I started writing into an existing section of the manuscript, where the Bliss family name is under threat by Lawrie and Maureen and Brett's own histories. Brett reacts to Lawrie's fascination with young-girl porn as his father may have: distancing, detaching, and disapproving, but he is in the middle of his own revolution of the mind, and feels that his own actions, especially cracking in combat and getting his team killed, are a far greater shame. Brett's motivations for joining the Army, and succeeding exceptionally well, are built around trying to impress a father that could no longer approve. The same father he feels the guilt of killing, the shock of the police visit after the rape of the girl in the park bringing on a heart attack. So Brett's motivations to 'do a righty', do the right thing by his family (alive and dead), propel him through the rest of the book. The ending remained a question: Brett alive or dead? Should his death redeem his sins? Can it? It seemed a reasonable character arc, one planned for. But Brett's end was not as I'd planned, and demonstrates a different side of re-writing: the role of reader feedback.

Let us now consider the importance of the reader and the re-writing that led to the conclusion of *My Brother's War*. As a late-teenager, I was taken with Tom Stoppard's formulation of tragedy, from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*:

PLAYER. There's a design at work in all art—surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUILD. And what's that, in this case?

PLAYER. It never varies—we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

GUILD. Marked?

PLAYER. Between “just deserts” and tragic irony we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (*He switches on a smile.*)

GUILD. Who decides?

PLAYER. (*Switching off his smile.*) *Decides?* It is *written* ... We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions. There is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead: a Play in Three Acts*, Samuel French, Inc.: New York, 1967, p. 63.

My understanding of poetics and tragedy meant that my first draft had Brett dying at the climax, as a redemption for his (mis)deeds. All great heroes die; this is Stoppard's 'aesthetical, moral and logical conclusion'. Brett's story, of his life and his redemption, and his death, was a tragedy. I debated the 'poetics' of the ending, considering the needs of pathos and logos, as well as the needs of the story and the reader.¹⁵⁵ My writing journal has many entries where I debate whether or not to kill Brett. So I let the narrative flow decide, and kept typing. And he died. I cried when I wrote Brett's death. Real tears filled my eyes. I suffered the loss of this man I'd known intimately. I also felt the honesty *of the writing*, and recognized what the feeling meant. I was a reader, moved by the story, the writer's primary goal. So why did this ending change in the re-write? Why does Brett remain alive?

Professor Arnold, a writer of voice who also understands the bigger picture of publishers and agents, recommended it. As my first reader, hers is a voice that must be heard. Rightly, she pointed out that Brett has many stories, and it would be foolish to foreclose potential books. Publishers, it seems, like lively characters, especially characters that offer the writer a series of works. Sean Williams told me exactly the same thing in 2001 during my *Voiceworks* mentorship. I was not obliged to act on Professor Arnold's insight, but I did. So I re-wrote the ending to keep Brett in my created world. Now, he's alive and working with, almost beholden to, elements of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country and the loose cabal within the Federal Government's security apparatus. Brett becomes a quasi-legal instrument of 'doing the right thing with extreme violence', but at the cost of not being able to communicate with his family. To the world, Brett is dead. There is a poetic in this outcome: Brett avoided talking to his family for two decades, only achieving a *rapprochement* with Lawrie in the concluding pages; now, he absolutely cannot contact them. And I have a character who I can keep running around in my created world, doing nasty things in the half-light of insurgency and revolution.

So, my re-writing addresses my creative text on multiple levels, dealing with the progression of the narrative, the evolution of the characters, as well as the nuts-and-bolts of writing as a craft, such as active voice. As I re-wrote, I worked hard to keep the reader foremost in my mind. Stephen King relates a discussion with one of his first editors, who told him "When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story," he

¹⁵⁵ Braet, 'Ethos, Pathos and Logos in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: A Re-Examination', pp. 307-320.

said. “When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are *not* the story.”¹⁵⁶ The re-writing process, Eliot’s ‘critical labour’, fully foregrounds the reader, and the readerly writer must keep this awareness in mind. If Atwood’s concern that writing is the absence of self-consciousness, then re-writing is self-consciousness attenuated. Re-writing well invites the writer to become the reader.

Conclusion

Imagining a reader forced me to consider the many aspects and facets of novel writing. Part of my pre-writing process involved the production of a publisher’s proposal. I explicitly considered the markets to who I could sell a publishable book. The research for this included reading genre and literary fiction. This helped me imagine myself as an agent in the marketplace, and contextualised my understanding of what I wanted to produce. I witnessed the competition. Inside the text, the product that I hoped to take to market, I considered the amount of dialogue and description to include, and what to leave out, to have a lively and engaging text. I considered the lives of my characters, and made sure that I represented them honestly. Becoming the readerly writer involves more than just scripting words; it requires the application of a range of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing skills.

Overall, this section demonstrates that I’d learnt both how to target and then achieve that fleeting moment of delicious pleasure when a reader feels the writer’s intent through the character’s plight and the narrative resolution. I’ve become, even if briefly, the readerly writer. So if I identify those steps that create such emotions within myself—and what is more narcissistic as a writer than positing myself as the Model Reader—I practice the craft of the successful writer: pre-write, write, and re-write. In more colloquial terms, I fake it till I make it. The writing journal and, ultimately, this exegesis, are expressions of that education.

¹⁵⁶ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2000, p. 37.

SECTION FOUR: Reviewing the Literature: Theory and Genre

An awareness of the inherently creative potential in the [literature review] process can create a real shift in perspective—it can make the literature come alive because it stops being a “thing” and transforms into a creative relationship.

—Alfonso Montuori ¹⁵⁷

Introduction

In this section I review the academic and scholarly literature that complements and challenges my research effort. Many writings, writers and genres comprise both creative productivity and scripting an academic thesis. My understanding of the literature review, therefore, is that it demonstrates my engagement with academic debates, not merely providing a list of what I’ve read. The literature review is its own map of the exegesis, as well as the journey of writing and researching *My Brother’s War*. Only the seminal and germinal texts can receive considerable attention, although a diverse range of articles and books are marshalled to enter into the debates that the key texts illustrate or launch. Therefore, multiple sides of these debates are highlighted and engaged, providing both insights into the nature of the related academic debates as well as my analyses of these debates with regard to my own work. With my initial PhD problem looking at ‘manhood’, it is to this topic that we turn first.

Theory

The seminal theoretical work locating this exegesis, its fundamental spermatozoa, is R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities*, a work that crystallised the interdisciplinary understanding of the ways that men make and remake themselves as social agents. ¹⁵⁸ Connell’s work forms a theoretical core of this exegesis, and as such it will receive the most scrutiny. Moreover, it significantly informed the characterisations of the people in *My Brother’s War*, both men and women. It shaped how I wrote Brett and Lawrie and Lise, and it influenced why they behaved as they did, why they felt and chose as they did, and what it means for me the writer.

One of my primary goals for Brett and Lawrie Bliss was to examine their emotional landscape. I wrote for them a journey through their existential angst, through

¹⁵⁷ Alfonso Montuori, ‘Literature Review as Creative Inquiry: Reframing Scholarship as a Creative Process’, *Journal of Transformative Education*, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 2005, pp. 377.

¹⁵⁸ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

to individual cathartic moments, and thus reflect upon Australian society and manhood by using creative writing, informed by theory, as a research tool. Brett's rigid Army culture, the foundation of his adult, socially derived self, prohibits emotional displays for men, and yet his vocation infuses his being with actions and circumstances that create intensely emotional responses. Similarly, Lawrie's experiences at the hands of his captors pressurises him; as his scriptor, I doubt that he could have achieved emotional intimacy with Lise had he not had that trauma so near. Their emotional experience and reaction, as men under pressure, is the topography I want to map.

Thus, gender norms and their means of transmission and reception interested me, not merely to me as 'the researcher', but also as 'the writer' and as a discrete social agent becoming and becoming and becoming. As social beings, my characters felt constraints and impellations, and to be fully rounded characters I needed to learn who these people were and why they behaved as they do. As the Author, I may overestimate how much I am in charge of these characters, and need to understand them better to create realistic, believable beings. Theory, in its broadest terms, helped me understand how to characterise the normalising forces and behaviours, of my protagonists and others, and what needed to change to bring about their catharsis.

Gender

Investigating the academic literature on 'manhood' brings the scholar quickly to gender studies. One of the realisations of scholarship into gender is that definitions such as 'the masculine' and 'the feminine' are socially constructed; we see this in the way that normative qualities ascribed to these labels change over time.¹⁵⁹ Lynne Segal notes that 'Bourgeois ideals of Christian manliness in the early nineteenth century, for example, stressed spiritual, cerebral, and moral attributes', whereas, at the end of the same century, 'these [attributes] were contested and superseded by the dominance of a more muscular, militaristic masculinity that was opposed to any aesthetic or emotional display'.¹⁶⁰ It is my social situation and enculturation that set boundaries and expectations as to how I behave and what is acceptable because I am a social agent. Further, I used that understanding, of limits and taboos, as I wrote the characters of *My Brother's War*. Gender studies, therefore, informed my writing practice.

¹⁵⁹ Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Hutchison, London, 1987, p. 29.

¹⁶⁰ Lynne Segal, 'Changing Men: Masculinities in Context', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities, Oct., 1993, p. 626.

So how did I engage gender theory as a writing tool? The linkage between manliness and emotional accessibility noted by Segal is relevant to Australian culture: real men don't cry, and they don't eat quiche.¹⁶¹ Siedler notes that men hide/deny their emotions and dreams, believing them to be 'bad' and 'ugly':

Within Protestant cultures, men can often be haunted by a question of why they should want to share their emotions if we know that their emotions are "bad" and that their dreams are "ugly"—is it not quite understandable that men conceal their emotions when they know that they are going to be judged negatively if they reveal them?¹⁶²

For Lawrie, because of his later discourses with Lise, relinquishes his attraction to young girls, living the emotional responses of what becomes his confessions. Lise has emotional reactions (of the mother, of the woman, of the older woman), but negotiates her feelings and insights to accept Lawrie's expressions. She helps him create a space to acknowledge, explore and reconcile these emotions, where his dynamics of performance adapt to newer realities and acceptance.

Australian settler society evolved across the nineteenth century, moving from the frontier to the city, and thus an urban sensibility came to prominence. The militaristic manhood certainly survived, as can be seen in the characters of Archy (Mark Lee) and Frank (Mel Gibson) in Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli*.¹⁶³ Also note, more importantly, their emotional bond, and the film valorises the competitive dynamic of sport and war, and their on-screen behaviour reminds us of the 'larrikin'. This is a film looking backward, steeped in myth about a foundational national experience: 'the ANZAC sacrifice on the beaches of Gallipoli in 1915 ... dominates Australia's conception of modern nationhood'.¹⁶⁴ The description of the larrikin suits Brett's middle-class competitive teenage *ennui*—drinking, flirting, casual violence and a gang-style of clothing.¹⁶⁵ The larrikin is both physically and verbally aggressive, tending toward the boorish 'ocker', but without the maliciousness of the latter, and

¹⁶¹ Conversely, real men do eat 'egg and bacon pie'; on the serious side, contemporary medical literature examines the need for health professionals to better identify and intercede when men present with symptoms of depression, where 'Gender differences appear not in the experience of depression *per se*, but in the expression of depression', Suzanne Brownhill, Kay Wilhelm, Lesley Barclay, and Virginia Schmied, "Big Build": Hidden Depression in Men', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, October 2005, Vol. 39 Issue 10, p. 921.

¹⁶² Victor J. Seidler, 'Masculinities, Bodies, and Emotional Life', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 1, July 2007, p. 18.

¹⁶³ Theodore F. Scheckels, 'Australian Film', in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer (eds), *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*, Camden House, Rochester, NY, 2007, p. 497.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Evans, *The Tyranny of Dissonance: Australia's Strategic Culture and Way of War, 1901–2004*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Study Paper No. 206, Department of Defence, Canberra, 2005, p. 34.

¹⁶⁵ John Rickard, 'Lovable Larrikins and Awful Ockers', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 78–85.

Brett's youth, rebelling against a patrician and older father, leads him to both reject and enact the lessons of the hegemon. Brett's outlet was on the sports field, matches to which his father never came. Brett sorted himself out from a young age, cycling or catching the bus, building both the strong sense of self-reliance and burning core of inadequacy. The sportsman element reflects the larger undercurrent in Australian society, the primacy of the physical, the pretty and the bold, all, of course, safely contained within strict boundaries of social convention (even in the breaking of convention). This playing with conventionality to disrupt conventionality reminds us of the egalitarian and conformist nature of Australia's cultures: the tall poppy syndrome, the uneducated's glee in ignorance, and the refrain of 'getting ideas above your station'. The larrikin is both resistant to and desirous of domesticity: 'His is a masculinity whose strength and charisma mask a core of inner uncertainties'.¹⁶⁶ In the modern world, the classic half-restored car in the garage is the symbol and goal of freedom and retrograde style, all with the new Toyota in the driveway for a reliable and cost-effective drive to work.

But my observations of contemporary Australian men, the meat and substance of the creative writer—turning observation and intuition into prose, of mining the personal, what Estelle Barrett locates as the 'intrinsically emotional and subjective dimensions of the artistic process'¹⁶⁷—shows a potential shift between my father's generation and that of my friends and my brother and cousins. We demonstrate emotional intimacies, and display them publically. Has something changed in Australia's culture, or is this a silence in men's shared experience?¹⁶⁸ This observation is something that I write about, and use theory as a method of helping me intellectualise and problematise the intuition.¹⁶⁹ So the major elements of the field of 'gender' need to be detailed to fully map the terrain of my examination and to contextualise Connell's work and its

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁶⁷ Estelle Barrett, 'Foucault's: "What is an Author?": Towards a Critical Discourse of Practice as Research', in E. Barrett & B. Bolt (eds), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, I.B. Tauris & Co, London, 2007, p. 135. See also Carolyn Ellis and Michael C. Flaherty, who locate subjectivity as 'dramatic events and barely noticed trends through which we come to know ourselves': 'An Agenda for the Interpretation of Lived Experience', *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1992, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶⁸ See Bob Pease, 'Moving Beyond Mateship: Reconstructing Australian Men's Practices', in *A Man's World? Changing Men's Practices in a Globalised World*, Bob Pease and Keith Pringle (eds.), Palgrave, New York, 2001; and Anthony McMahon, 'Blokus Domesticus: the Sensitive New Age Guy in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 147-157.

¹⁶⁹ Julie Kristeva quotes Hannah Arendt: 'The chief characteristic of this specifically human life ... is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story', and calls this 'the very being of the desiring subject in narration—in events as narrated': 'An Interrogation of Hannah Arendt', *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, Fall 2008, p. 353. See also: Antonia Pont, 'Inaccurate Autobiography – the "true-invention" of a life', *TEXT*, Vol. 15, No. 1, April 2011, accessed on 21 May 2011 from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april11/pont.htm>>.

importance to my thesis and exegesis. First, I needed to understand feminism's pivotal role in shaping gender studies.

Feminism

Early feminist scholarship explored the relations between men and women, the ways that women were conceived and perceived as less rational and less capable, based on biology.¹⁷⁰ Feminist scholarship questioned the foundations of Western society and revealed the intimate linkages between gender and power. Simone de Beauvoir declared famously that 'She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other'.¹⁷¹ The woman is 'not man', the Other, which posits her as a binary opposition. We (as men, in traditional, patriarchal Western scholarship) are the norm she does not live up to. Men are the natural and the normal, women are Outsiders, Others, and therefore unnatural and abnormal. Predominantly, women are repressed by this exclusionary social force, as are the poor. The poorest of the poor are women. The most repressed are women. The most abused, exploited and victimized are women.¹⁷² The other effect of this Men/Other binary is to make a silent, unquestioned space around men and manhood. At the pinnacle of power, feminist scholarship reveals, are men, usually white, rich, and Western. Some criticism against feminist theory notes a strong 'Western' flavour, that many of the assumptions and conclusions are derived from and suited to Continental Europe or North America rather than women's experiences in non-Western settings.¹⁷³ However, a more detailed examination of this area of scholarship lies outside the scope of this exegesis. Yet a basic feminist critique, that gendered language creates normative cultural assumptions about women and men, remains a foundational element of gender theory, including that of Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinities. But how are these social norms enacted? And by whom? Connell extensively quoted Judith Butler, and I followed the trail of references backward.

¹⁷⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, A. J. Matsell, New York, 1833, published electronically by BiblioLife, 2010, accessed on 27 July 2010 from <<http://books.google.com>>.

¹⁷¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Bantam, New York, 1961, p. xvi.

¹⁷² World Health Organization, 'Violence Against Women', Fact Sheet No. 239, November 2009, accessed on 14 August 2011 from <<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>>.

¹⁷³ See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Routledge, New York, 2002.

Butler and Performativity

Judith Butler's germinal *Gender Trouble* (1990 & 1999) parsed the notion of gender and built upon her earlier concept of 'performativity', which is an individual's 'stylized repetition of acts through time'.¹⁷⁴ This means that we, as social beings, enact ourselves, through a series of repeated actions that accord with our understanding of culturally acceptable ways of being and becoming. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler highlights that such actions may change over time, and that each enaction differs from previous iterations. We become our gender selves over and over again, but always slightly differently: 'gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction'.¹⁷⁵ Thus, there is no stable or essential 'self', no singular subjectivity that we re-enact. Rather, we become anew with each social performance, always striving to fulfill our own gender expectations, which derive from our limited understanding of our society's demands and ourselves.¹⁷⁶

For *My Brother's War*, this understanding of gender means that my characters have the potential to become new people, to change and adapt to new circumstances and social expectations, *by changing their own actions*. For Lawrie and Brett, it means breaking free of their previous constrictions. Lawrie, addicted to Lolita porn, matures to desire adult women. Brett, realizing that the Army (and the nation he served) scapegoats him based on a moment of psychological damage, chooses not to cooperate with the Parliamentary inquiry.¹⁷⁷ The idea of performativity underlies the way I scripted my characters, and allowed them to grow and change. Both brothers struggle to enact 'truer' versions of themselves. Both struggle toward an expression of being that increases their happiness, even when this challenges their respective social demands. It also frees them of my strictures, because they become unexpected people, ones I had not initially conceived, as their unique personalities and identities unfolded through narrative. The

¹⁷⁴ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, December 1988, pp. 519-531.

¹⁷⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 138.

¹⁷⁶ See, for example R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6, December 2005, pp. 829-859; Annamaire Jogose, *Queer Theory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1996; and Cliff Cheng, 'Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction', *Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring 1999, pp. 295-315.

¹⁷⁷ Thanks to LTCOLs David Schmidtchen and Robert Stevenson, who did significant work on the effects of 'being outside the wire' for sustained periods, and the psychological damage done to the individual. David Schmidtchen, *The Rise of the Strategic Private: Technology, Control and Change in a Network-Enabled Military*, General Sir Brudenell White Series, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006; . Indeed, discussions with LTCOL Schmidtchen about Brett's narrative and character development led me to a psychological injury, rather than physical wounding, and I owe him a debt for indicating this much richer vein.

ways in which my characters define themselves, in their social world and against my wishes, demonstrates their ability to queer efforts at social constriction. This also shows the power of theory working with practice.

Queer Theory

As feminist theory evolved, one critique, dubbed ‘queer theory’, highlighted the false dichotomy inherent in early theoretical conceptions of gender, of man or woman. Exemplified by the work of Annamarie Jagose and Elizabeth Grosz, queer theory problematized ‘heteronormativity’, which is the normative power of heterosexuality.¹⁷⁸ Stemming from the work of Michel Foucault,¹⁷⁹ queer theory problematizes gender and views it as ‘an oppressive system of classification’, whereby ‘heterosexuality and homosexuality come to be understood as merely “artificial categories”’.¹⁸⁰ Heterosexuality, for Jagose, is assumed to be a neutral or ‘unmarked’ form of sexuality, and ‘has long maintained its claim to be a natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation’.¹⁸¹ Queer, as a theoretical frame, revels in multiplicities of desire: it ‘describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire’.¹⁸² Of course, these are discussions about very individual experiences, about the iterative definitions and re-definitions of ‘the self’ and ‘identity’ made by people coming to terms with who they are and what they want. Queer theory accesses one of the more profound elements of how we define ourselves in the social world.

Identity, then, for Jagose, is at the core of questionings about ‘queering’ gender. It is ‘a process rather than a property’ whereby the sexual self is a product of discourse wedged into ‘available cultural categories’.¹⁸³ It is the discursive practice that interests me, one that is open to ‘intervention and resignification’.¹⁸⁴ Gender identity is recursive, a feedback loop reinforcing itself and normalizing the subject. It is not something the subject does, but that which is formative, constitutive, and *a priori* normative. The derivation from Butler’s conception of performativity is clear. The real benefit of queer

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Routledge, New York, 1995.

¹⁷⁹ Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Penguin Group, Camberwell, 2008. See also: Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1999.

¹⁸⁰ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1996, p. 42.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁸² Annamarie Jagose, ‘Queer Theory’, *Australian Humanities Review*, December 1996, accessed from <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html>>, on 1 June 2006.

¹⁸³ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 84.

¹⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 43.

theory for me as a writer came through the expansion of my characterisations of both Bliss men.

Lawrie does not choose to find teenage girls the target of his lusts, but his circumstances and conditioning, his personal history, make him that way. Kristeva highlights the interaction between the sexual and our (self) construction as social subjects: 'Sexual difference—which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction—is translated by and translates a difference in the relations of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language and meaning'.¹⁸⁵ For Lawrie, his attraction stems from his alienation from adult women; at an early age, he was thrust into the role of head of the household with his mother's illness. Lawrie's sexual identity stopped developing at age 12, and thus that age is his lustful target.¹⁸⁶ Of course, the teenage girl is less threatening and more vulnerable to an insecure man.¹⁸⁷ Lawrie became the eunuch husband to his mother, and his sexual outlet remained focused at the age when he froze.

Similarly, Brett's formative sexual experiences close off his sexual being in the hypermasculine military environment, and in their own way lead directly to his psychological breakdown. More than just 'fetish' fields like bondage or S&M, there are non-sexual people who do not experience sexual urge or attraction.¹⁸⁸ Initially, Brett was to be a gay character, but that seemed too easy a way to contrast Army culture, which is strongly heteronormative. So, after much reflection and discussion with other writers, I decided to make Brett both hypermasculine (outwardly) and asexual (inwardly). The exception, of course, is his experience with the Timorese prostitute, where he became sexually aroused because of his violence. I included that incident, and did not comment upon it further in the novel, as a mechanism to show the complexity of Brett's inner (sexual) self. The rape that precipitated Brett's leaving home, and brought on his father's heart attack, plays a pivotal role in his psychology. His attraction to saving the girl at the start of the novel, where he carries her dead body across the desert,

¹⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* Vol. 7, No.1, Autumn, 1981, p. 21.

¹⁸⁶ R.W. Connell, 'Growing up Masculine: Rethinking the Significance of Adolescence in the Making of Masculinities', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, December 2005, pp. 11-28.

¹⁸⁷ See Deborah L. Tolman, Meg I. Striepe, Tricia Harmon, 'Gender Matters: Constructing a Model of Adolescent Sexual Health', *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Feb. 2003, pp. 4-12; and Sharon G. Elstein and Noy Davis, *Sexual Relationships Between Adult Men and Young Teen Girls: Exploring the Legal and Social Responses*, Center on Children and Law (American Bar Association), October 1997, accessed on 18 January 2008 from http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/PublicDocuments/statutory_rape.authcheckdam.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Eric J.H. Meuleman and Jacques J.D.M. Van Lankveld, 'Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder: an Underestimated Condition in Men', *BJUI: Journal of the British Association of Urological Surgeons*, Vol. 95, Issue 3, February 2005, pp. 291-296.

is an echo of that rape, a seeking of forgiveness to escape guilt, and an indication of his deteriorating mental state.

Importantly for me as a writer, queer studies revealed the potential multiplicities of sexuality. Brett and Lawrie—as well as Lise and Maureen—are shaped, bonded, and freed, paradoxically, by their social *milieu* and journeys toward greater self-awareness. They suffer and enact bonds of social power, discursively and recursively *becoming* as contextual beings. The desires of the brothers, often subconscious, significantly affect upon their larger social selves. Once I understood how these formative experiences shaped the characters, I could write for them a satisfying (to me the writer and thus the Model Reader) emotional journey.

Hegemony

Marxist examinations illuminate the importance of ‘power’: who wields the means of power, for what ends, and the ways in which such power valourises some and disenfranchises others.¹⁸⁹ This is ‘hegemony’. The nature of modern human existence, according to such analyses, is one of hegemony by physical, emotional and institutional means.¹⁹⁰ It is the hegemony of patriarchal power that posits the feminine as ‘the Other’. For the purposes of this paper, ‘hegemony’, and its role in masculinities, is the critical concept under consideration. Brought to common usage by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, the concept differentiates between civil and political society; the civil is embedded in consent and ‘collaboration’, whereas the political derives from the state’s monopoly over the use of force (‘dictatorship’).¹⁹¹ Gramsci’s time in prison (at the hands of Benito Mussolini’s Fascist Party) allowed him space to reflect upon Italy’s political culture, and to derive a deeper understanding of the forces at play. Gramsci introduces and discusses the importance of alliances in a radically new way, the role of intellectuals and education in manufacturing consent over corporativism, and the significance of ideology in constructing social, economic, and political power, as well as its reconfiguration into domination. In other words, Gramsci sought to move from the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ to introduce the ‘hegemony of the proletariat’.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., ‘The Changing Nature of World Power’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 2, Summer 1990, pp. 177-192.

¹⁹⁰ Scott Lash, ‘Power After Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mutation?’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007, pp. 55-56.

¹⁹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 9-21.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

The civil hegemonic power is ‘active’ and, from the view of the body politic, freely subscribed to: it is ‘voluntary’. This aspect of voluntary subsumation underlies the notion of ‘the social contract’, an idea traced from Thomas Hobbes, through John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through to noted political philosopher John Rawls.¹⁹³ The social contract deals with the interaction between the individual and their society. The social contract underlies the application of political power, which Rawls defines as ‘a right of making laws with penalties of death and, consequently, all less penalties for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the commonwealth from foreign injury, and all this only for the public good.’¹⁹⁴ This position relates to the idea of *force*, the social application of power, and how a polity constitutes its laws and subscribes to them voluntarily. By highlighting dictatorship as the binary to consent, Gramsci exposes the role of Marxist ideological practice (dialectical opposition) in his thinking, which of course reflects the spirit and times—he co-founded and led the Italian Communist Party—and the fact of his subjugation to a state apparatus (effectively for the rest of his life). Richard Howson, in his fine study of the concept of hegemony and its development, sums the idea with the dual terms of ‘consent and coercion’.¹⁹⁵ People allow themselves to be subsumed under the ideology of the dominant; they do not need to be forced. In the words of Louis Althusser, ‘there is no ideology except by the subjects and for subjects’.¹⁹⁶ Taken together with the sections on gender, this leads the discussion to R.W. Connell’s work on ‘hegemonic masculinities’, with the publication in 1995 of *Masculinities* (2nd edition, 2005), which proved to be a seminal text in the field of masculinities broadly and my PhD journey specifically.

Hegemonic Masculinities

Hegemonic masculinity, put most simply, is a ‘social theory of gender ... a configuration of practice’ that is constituted through, but does not precede, human

¹⁹³ John Rawls, *Lecturers on the History of Political Philosophy*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2007, p. 33.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁹⁵ Richard Howson, ‘Hegemony in the Preprison Context’, in *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, Richard Howson and Kylie Smith (eds.), Routledge, New York, 2008, Introduction and Chapter 2, especially pp. 25-31.

¹⁹⁶ Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)’, in Meenaskshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (rev. ed.), Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2006, p. 84.

action.¹⁹⁷ The linkage to Butler's performativity is clear: we become by enacting. Masculinities are relational and contextual; they emerge through everyday social interactions. I practice the manhood I embody. It is what I do, not an essential characteristic; Connell's work, based within life-history studies and research, is fundamentally informed by practice.¹⁹⁸ Hence, I change my masculinity, depending upon the performative context, as the relational and contextual elements play out. But this is only half of the story.

Connell extended the already-discussed ideas of Foucault and Butler, critiquing power structures and the interactive potential therein for multiple expressions of gender and identity. *Masculinities* cast new light onto how men and their power structures perform as a cultural metanarrative.¹⁹⁹ Social change, such as the 'waves' of feminism, problematize and thence challenge masculine power. Being men, of course, we view this through the frame of a zero-sum game.²⁰⁰ By enacting this cultural binary, men lose if women are empowered: 'The upheaval in sexual politics of the last twenty years has mainly been discussed as a change in the social position of women. Yet change in one term of a relationship signals change in the other'.²⁰¹ For Connell, the societies of men have the most to lose because of such social change. Understanding the internal dynamics of 'the great invisible'—Lyotard's 'metanarrative', the stereotypical normative yardstick against which all are unquestioningly compared—becomes a way not merely to understand the way and means of power and oppression, but also presents the opportunity to actively resist and subvert it.

I began my PhD journey, at the behest of Professor Josie Arnold and Dr. Glenda Ballantyne, with Connell's *Masculinities*, and it has proved to be highly useful in originating and driving my understanding of my characters and my own social agency as a writer and as a man. Internalising its analysis created a change in my self-awareness, one that accepts the ongoing evolutionary process of my life. My evolution reflects that of my characters, from their conception to their current selves as embodied in *My Brother's War*. So let us now draw together the elements of gender, power and

¹⁹⁷ Demetrakis Z. Demetrio, 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 3, June 2001, pp. 340.

¹⁹⁸ Nikki Wedgewood, 'Connell's Theory of Masculinity—Its Origins and Influences on the Study of Gender', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, December 2009, p. 334.

¹⁹⁹ Jean Francois Lyotard, 'Introduction', *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 10, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. xxiv.

²⁰⁰ A zero-sum game is one in which the gains made by one player come from the losses of the other player. See John Nash, 'Non-cooperative Games', *The Annals of Mathematics*, Second Series, Vol. 54, No. 2, September 1951, pp. 286-295; Prajit K. Dutta, *Strategies and Games: Theory and Practice*, MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 139.

²⁰¹ Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell, and John Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 5, September 1985, p. 551.

manhood and reflect upon my writerly realisations, which is the substance and purpose of this exegesis. Let us now dig into Connell's ideas a little deeper, and then draw out some threads of how I deployed this concept in scripting *My Brother's War*.

Connell began formulating the idea of hegemonic masculinities during his field research with children in the 1970s. Interested in class, feminism, gender, and inequality, Connell's observations sprang from the school yard. He saw the interactions and developments occurring in Australian boys, and sought to formulate some 'why' to the 'who, what, when, and where' he observed. Connell first made an impact on academic publishing with 1971's *The Child's Construction of Politics*. In 1977, he published *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture: Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life*, and followed in 1980 with *Class Structure in Australian History*. This thread culminated in *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (1982), a comparative study of upper- and lower-class experience, and the relationship between domestic environment and academic success. Given the era in which he started work, it is no surprise that Connell's eventual framework would draw strength and inspiration from Marxist and feminist analyses, the strong currents in academic thought at the time (and still so today). These became his lenses, his biases as a researcher, as he then moved into sociological examinations of Australian men, which emerged in 1985 in an article co-written with Tim Carrigan and John Lee entitled 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity'. In 1987, Connell published *Gender and Power: Society, Person and the Sexual Politics*, and the concept of hegemonic masculinities came into full bloom.

Connell's definition of 'hegemonic masculinities' is that they are 'configurations of practice structured by gender relations' that are 'inherently historical', and that their 'making and re-making is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change'.²⁰² This means that we are defined by ourselves and our times, but in unique and ever-changing ways. Being social creatures means that we are political creatures, which also means that we are contextual, not outside of nature or the world, but subjectively embedded within it. This exegesis takes the concept of hegemonic masculinities, and examines the creation of the characters of Brett, Lawrie, Lise and the Sarge in relation to this theory. Each of these characters reveals different aspects of the theory, such as military, subordinate, and complicit masculinities, and resistance to the notion.

²⁰² Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 44.

Being embedded, we define ourselves (and are thus defined by the contextual) for and against normative forces. This means that a masculine ideal is always ‘culturally exalted’:²⁰³

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. This is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters. Individual holders of institutional power or great wealth may be far from the hegemonic pattern in their personal lives²⁰⁴

Hegemony flourishes with the linkage between the cultural ideal of the powerful and the institutional arrangements of power.²⁰⁵ Therefore, ‘the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing *corporate* display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men. It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony’.²⁰⁶ Influencing (if not domineering) power is the everyday way of the masculine hegemon, to be strived for and negotiated against when we fail to achieve the ideal *embedded in and as* cultural norms.²⁰⁷ For *My Brother’s War*, hegemony is the way Brett is acculturated into the Army’s values. I also used the idea of hegemony to frame the ideological struggle of the Sons of the Sunburnt Country against the government of the day. The Sons appropriate the words of Dorothea Mackellar, from her poem ‘My Country’, and use them to fan the flames of dissatisfaction with the way (my imagined) Australia is heading. The Sons employ the emotional pull of the words to attract followers and spread their message of resistance. They appropriate the ‘true Australian’ character that the poem evokes. More explicitly, I represent the Sons and the Australian Federal Police as the ‘coercive’ and ‘dictatorship’ elements of Gramscian hegemony, the iron fist inside the velvet glove. The Sons coerce Brett into doing their bidding, and Agent Daniels coerces Brett’s acquiescence to help him expose the leaders of the insurgency. These are symbolic of the ways that men agree to commit acts that their higher natures find distasteful. Indeed,

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ See Mike Donaldson, ‘What is Hegemonic Masculinity?’, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities, October 1993, pp. 643-657; and Cliff Cheng, ‘Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction’, *Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring 1999, pp. 295-315.

²⁰⁶ See Donaldson, ‘What is Hegemonic Masculinity?’, p. 644.

²⁰⁷ Cheng, ‘Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction’, pp. 295-315.

the symbolism relates to how men's power interacts, both consensually and coercively, inside the masculine social world and to the worlds outside the men's realm.

Moreover, there is no single paragon of the hegemon, merely a unique set of practices that men enact in social contexts. Each person enacts their personal paragon, to greater or lesser extents. Hegemonic masculinities are a system of performance, rather than an essentialist continuity, and my definition of and desire for the performance changes according to my ages and stages of life, whether I'm at home, at work (or on the battlefield), or in the bar with friends, or even being a loving father or competitively chasing a football on a field. I am a different man, and differently masculine, in different contexts. That is why the conception relies on the multiplicity (masculinities), rather than the singular. If I enact a weaker version of the hegemonic ideal, then I'm concurrently a complicit masculinity and a subordinate masculinity.²⁰⁸ And it is this slippage and multiplicity which is both the concept's greatest utility and site for greatest contestation. I exploit this slippage in my writing practice in several ways. For my conceptions of 'writerly' behaviour, I recall a mentor, Sean Williams, who advocates the writing of 1500 words per day, in two chunks. I work toward that sort of output, and fall short, making him a hegemonic ideal and me complicit (by aspiring to that amount) and subordinate (by falling short).

I also deploy the hegemonic masculine ideal in the novel in the female form of the Sarge; she's respected by her male peers, and obeyed without question by her subordinates, and I strive to have the unusual fact of a female Special Forces soldier appear normative. Part of my future-gazing recognises the demographic imperative of female SAS operators; indeed, the Gillard Government opened previously proscribed musters to women in mid-2011.²⁰⁹ The Sarge's position within the group, her authority, goes unnoticed and uncommented; the narrative purpose is to 'show' the evolution of basic gender relations in Australia's future, a process begun (but not finished). She's a masculine actor: not because of 'butch' connotations, but because she's enacting herself with the social structure of the military. But the epithets between Phelan, and even Brett's negative self-talk, reflect the underlying patriarchy: men are put down by according them feminine traits.

²⁰⁸ See R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6, December 2005, p. 832; and Cheng, 'Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction', pp. 296-297.

²⁰⁹ Mark Dodd, 'Combat Roles Offered to Women', *The Australian*, 12 April 2011, accessed on 13 August 2011 from <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/combat-roles-offered-to-women/story-fn59niix-1226037485919>>.

Several arguments challenge some of the concept's assumptions and conclusions. The most penetrating was Demetrakis Demetrio, who published 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique' in the June 2001 edition of *Theory and Society*. Jeff Hearn, in 2004, published 'From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men', and the November 2007 edition of the *Journal of Gender Studies* carried an article by Michael Moller called 'Exploiting Patterns: A Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity'. Most importantly, Demetrio notes a silence in the concept, which he calls external and internal hegemonic masculinity. The external is the domination of women, and the internal is the hegemony over men: and the function of the internal is to buttress the efforts at external hegemony, to legitimate—and even valourise—it.²¹⁰ The example he gives relates to gay men: 'The subordination of gay masculinities is therefore a part of the strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy through the institution of heterosexuality'.²¹¹ And here lies a significant criticism, one which Demetrio terms a *dualism*: Connell overlooks the hegemon's internal 'negotiation, appropriation, and translation'²¹² from subordinate or marginalised masculinities to support itself, as well as the influence of similar groups in maintaining the external hegemony (over women):

the configuration of practice that guarantees the reproduction of patriarchy need not necessarily be the one traditionally associated with white or heterosexual masculinities. It is in fact a hybrid masculine *bloc* that is made up of both straight and gay, both black and white elements and practices. Masculine bloc, unlike hegemonic masculinity, implies a non-reified and non-dualistic understanding of masculine power and practice.²¹³

This hybridization, the diversity of appropriation, is what makes hegemonic masculinity a living, adaptive set of social forces. It is exactly the engine of social change that Connell hoped for, although, one that, at first glance, allows for the perpetuation of the patriarchal order. However, because of my detour into queer theory, this is a criticism for which I am prepared. As previously discussed, the importance of queer theory to my practice is that it enabled me to reject, with Demetrio, the false binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, in the same that Jagose rejects the false binary of man/woman and the implicit heteronormativity.

²¹⁰ Demetrio, 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity', pp. 342-344.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 349.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 348, emphasis in original.

Demetrio provides a case study to reinforce his point; the incorporation of elements of gay masculinities into the patriarchal order at a time of ‘crisis of legitimacy’. The term ‘crisis of legitimacy’ is most associated with Jürgen Habermas, a political philosopher of the Frankfurt School, who wrote:

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.²¹⁴

While focusing on the Marxist conception of ‘the means of production’, and thus relating first and foremost to the economic sphere, I’ve already demonstrated that Marxist analyses of social structures (as the basis of ‘hegemony’) contains powerful, relevant, and useful tools of enquiry for this exegesis. More directly to our project here, Habermas goes on to declare that ‘in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy.’²¹⁵ The legitimisation of the hegemonic ideal is part of the means of production. Thus, our cultural ideals are shaped by and transmitted through our social interactions, both reflecting and creating social norms.

For Demetrio, this means that hegemonic masculinity adapted its means of legitimation in response to the challenge to the order of things posed by the women’s movement of the 1970s: ‘Domestic violence, denial of women’s sexuality, and male aggression were no longer left unchallenged by many women in the West’.²¹⁶ Concurrently, subordinate or marginalized masculinities underwent their own consciousness-raising: the black power and gay liberation movements.²¹⁷ Demetrio traces the changing fashions, and media representation of men’s fashions, and links it to

²¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press, Boston, 1975, p. xix.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²¹⁶ Demetrio, p. 349.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* See, for example, Mary Bucholtz, ‘You Da Man” Narrating the Racial Other in the Production of White Masculinity’, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1999, pp. 443-460; Frank Rudy Cooper, ‘Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy’, *University of California (Davis) Law Review*, Vol. 39, 2005; Scott Saul, ‘On the Lower Frequencies: Rethinking the Black Power Movement’, *Harpers*, December 2006, pp. 92-98; David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, Macmillan, 2005; and Christopher J. Hamilton and James R. Mahalik, ‘Minority Stress, Masculinity, and Social Norms Predicting Gay Men’s Health Risk Behaviors’, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2009, pp. 132-141.

capitalism's drive for increasing markets and growth opportunities, hence the importance of capitalistic means of production. He notices that men's clothing, and the associated window-dressed mannequins and magazine ads and images, changed from sending 'sexless' and detached messages, to move toward the inclusion and normalization of more sexualized and eroticized representations. Models in photo ads expose more flesh, wear tighter or more suggestive apparel, and 'have less to do with machismo, strength, and virility than with the fracturing and eroticization of the male body'.²¹⁸ The hybridization of the masculine ideal creates a plurality, which can co-opt a previously marginalized masculinity, and recruit it into the external hegemony. Thus, in noting this process, Demetrio highlights the uses to which Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinities may be put. In my writing practice, this understanding helps inform the domination that the sexual image has over Lawrie's imagination. He is dominated by media images of teenage girls, the fodder of today's advertising industry; on the one hand, the means of production valorises this as the ideal sexual object, and yet social norms publically prohibit men from enacting this sexual desire. The tension of Lawrie's interest in Jeena should make the reader of the artefact uncomfortable, especially as the first encounter in the narrative is Lawrie spying on the girl in the spa and masturbating. This casts into relief the reader's expectations as well as the characterisation of a man who, despite being in his early 30s, is yet to explore his own manhood.

Another common criticism of 'hegemonic masculinity' relates to the plasticity of the term.²¹⁹ For example, which masculinity is hegemonic? Whose? How is it conferred and enforced? When does it transform and co-opt? For example, Stephen Whitehead writes:

the concept of hegemonic masculinity goes little way towards revealing the complex patterns of inculcation and resistance which constitute everyday social interaction ... it is unable to explain the variant meanings attached to the concept of masculinity at this particular moment in the social history of Euro/American/Australasian countries'²²⁰

Similarly, Jeff Hearn declares decries the too-limited employment of the concept and that the singular focus is too narrow. He seeks a re-definition of terms from '*masculinity* to *men*, to examine the hegemony of men and about men. The hegemony of men seeks

²¹⁸ Demetrio, p. 353.

²¹⁹ Jeff Hearn, 'From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004, pp. 49-72.

²²⁰ Stephen Whitehead, 'Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited', *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1999, p. 58.

to address the double complexity that men are both a *social category formed by the gender system* and *dominant collective and individual agents of social practices*.²²¹ Interestingly, both these criticisms use the singular form: ‘masculinity’. While that is often the short-hand version of naming the concept, the full term is a plural: masculinities. Immediately, both these criticisms lose momentum and validity due to their mis-reading of the term and its (multitudinous) implications. Hearn, in particular, falls into an essentialist trap by excluding women. One need not have male sexual organs to embody masculinities, or benefit from or suffer under the hegemonic masculinist order. This is exactly why I created the character of the Sarge, to have a woman at the center of the masculine world of the Australian special forces. I understand the importance of the plurality, and write it into the artefact as both main characters live different manhoods throughout the book. As to the narrowness of the employment of the concept, it is worth detouring into the literature to discover in what ways it has been used.

The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinities’ has been employed to study many academic and applied research disciplines. Most importantly, the field of gender studies uses the term to explore many different aspects of the field.²²² Sharon Bird delves into ‘homosociality’, the ways and means of men’s interactions and how the social dynamic is performed and how it reinforces the hegemonic structure.²²³ Of great importance for my artefact was Lori Campbell and Michael Carroll’s article that explored the social implications of men who care for parents and their and society’s assumptions about their masculinity.²²⁴ For me, this article shaped my understanding of Lawrie, who becomes a *de facto* husband to his mother from the age of thirteen. This domestic and social dynamic profoundly influences Lawrie, and further demonstrates the importance of research to creating fiction.

Another example of the role of scholarship as a vital component to creative practice lies in the masculinities literature dealing with war and military affairs.²²⁵ This

²²¹ Hearn, ‘From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men’, p. 59; emphasis in original.

²²² For general examinations, see: Mike Donaldson, ‘What is Hegemonic Masculinity?’, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities, October 1993, pp. 643-657; Michael Messner, ‘“Changing Men” and Feminist Politics in the United States’, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities, October 1993, pp. 723-737; Katherine Johnson, ‘Changing Sex, Changing Self: Theorizing Transitions in Embodied Subjectivity’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 1, July 2007, pp. 54-70.

²²³ Sharon R. Bird, ‘Welcome to the Men’s Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity’, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 120-132.

²²⁴ Lori D. Campbell, Michael P. Carroll, ‘The Incomplete Revolution: Theorizing Gender When Studying Men Who Provide Care to Aging Parents’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 9, No. 4, April 2007, pp. 491-508.

²²⁵ Stephen Garton, ‘War and Masculinity in Twentieth Century Australia’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 86-95; Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Making Sense of Masculinity and War’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10,

topic, for obvious reasons, was instrumentally important to both my genesis and subsequent development of my thesis. Writing as I was, from within the embrace of the Australian Army, the thesis became a way for me to understand my employment context as well as a way to better understand the ostensible main character, Brett. I explore Brett's sexuality in action, his performativity, by showing him beating a Timorese prostitute and then feeling the shame of his subsequent erection, as well the other special forces troops out celebrating an operation, chasing Papua New Guinean 'curly girlie action'.²²⁶ Stephen Garton's insights into the keystone position that war holds in the Australian imagination reinforces my observation of the hypermasculinity at play in the Australian Army specifically and Australian society more generally. I reflect this hypermasculinity in constructing Brett and his peers; their war stories and homosocial bonding, including the sexist put-downs and embedded misogyny of language.

Academics in the realms of politics and international relations have deployed the concept of masculinities.²²⁷ International relations especially finds great utility in the idea, particularly the way it highlights the gendered nature of discourse between countries, even close allies.²²⁸ This discipline, of course, sits close to the heart of Gramsci's initial conception of 'hegemony' and to the wider Marxist tradition upon which the notion is based.²²⁹ Even US foreign policy theorists, such as Joseph Nye, have recognised the importance of influence over force, of suggestion and attraction over giving orders and expecting obedience, as can be seen in his theoretical move toward 'soft power'.²³⁰ Ideas incorporating 'soft power', or an influencing hegemony, now lie at the heart of contemporary counterinsurgency and warfighting methods, where the once-discredited 'winning the hearts and minds' concept is now firmly embedded in the training and doctrine of Western armies.²³¹ Strategic studies, peace studies, war

No. 4, June 2008, pp. 389-404; Eva Karpinski, 'En-Trenched Manhood: War and Constructions of Masculinity in George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 5, August 2008, pp. 523-537.

²²⁶ Paul Higate, 'Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 1, July 2007, pp. 99-119; Orma Sasson-Levy, 'Individual Bodies, Collective State Interests: The Case of Israeli Combat Soldiers', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 3, April 2008, pp. 296-321; Rebecca A. Adelman, 'Sold(i)erring Masculinity: Photography the Coalition's Soldiers', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 11, No. 3, April 2009, pp. 259-285.

²²⁷ R.W. Connell, 'The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities, October 1993, pp. 597-623; Juanita Elias, 'Introduction: Hegemonic Masculinities in International Politics', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 4, June 2008, pp. 383-388.

²²⁸ Christine Beasley, 'Rethinking Hegemonic Masculinity in a Globalizing World', *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 11, No. 1, October 2008, pp. 86-103; Terrell Carver, "'Public Man" and the Critique of Masculinities', *Political Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 4, November 1996, pp. 673-686.

²²⁹ Richard Johnson, 'Post Hegemony? I Don't Think So', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007, pp. 95-110.

²³⁰ Coined by Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990); he further develops the idea in his 2004 work, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Nye chaired the National Intelligence Council during the Clinton Administration, and is one of the most influential foreign-policy theorists in the United States.

²³¹ See <<http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>>. As Lead Writer and

studies, and security studies, all cognates or sub-disciplines of international relations, often valorise rational decision-making and instrumental approaches to problem-solving, which are hallmarks of the ‘detached and rational man’, themselves hegemonic ideals.²³² Connell’s theoretical frame, thus, is highly applicable for understanding how these realms operate.

Other disciplines that use the concept of hegemonic masculinities include criminology,²³³ cultural studies,²³⁴ professional and amateur sports,²³⁵ education studies,²³⁶ media representations,²³⁷ and men’s health and risk-taking.²³⁸ Each field finds strengths and weaknesses in the concept. In fact, most scholars in these disciplines appropriate the term and then re-define it various ways to suit the purposes of their analysis. Therefore, given the wide application of the concept, Hearn’s argument on ‘narrowness’ is misdirected. I have employed the concept in my artefact to develop

Editor of the Australian Army’s completely revamped counter-insurgency doctrine in 2008, I was intimately involved in seeding and nurturing the ideas of soft power and cultural sensitivity into the thinking and writing of (the highly receptive) Australian Defence Force establishment.

- ²³² Anne Ross-Smith and Martin Kornberger, ‘Gendered Rationality? A Genealogical Exploration of the Philosophical and Sociological Conceptions of Rationality, Masculinity, and Organization’, *Gender, Work, and Organization*, Vol. 11, No. 3, May 2004.
- ²³³ Rachel O’Byrne, Susan Hansen, Mark Rapley, “‘If a Girl Doesn’t Say ‘No’’: Young Men, Rape, and Claims of ‘Insufficient Knowledge’”, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, May/June 2008, pp. 168-193; Tony Evans and Patti Wallace, ‘A Prison Within a Prison?: The Masculinity Narratives of Male Prisoners’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 4, June 2008, pp. 383-388; Raymond Evans and Bill Thorpe, ‘Commanding Men: Masculinities and the Convict System’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 17-34; Ken Polk, ‘Masculine Scenarios of Violence: The Case of Homicide’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 19, Issue 43, 1995, pp. 144-153.
- ²³⁴ Clive Moore, ‘Guest Editorial: Australian Masculinities’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 1-16; Linzi Murrie, ‘Changing Masculinities: Disruption and Anxiety in Contemporary Australian Writing’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 169-179; Linzi Murrie, ‘The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/Writing “Australian” Masculine’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 68-77; Tony Coles, ‘Negotiating the Field of Masculinity: The Production and Reproduction of Multiple Dominant Masculinities’, *Men and Masculinities*, October 2009, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 30-44; John Rickard, ‘Lovable Larrikins and Awful Ockers’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 78-85.
- ²³⁵ Richard Light, David Kirk, ‘High-school Rugby, the Body, and the Reproduction of Hegemonic Masculinity’, *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2000, pp. 163-176; Daryl Adair, John Nauright, Murray Phillips, ‘Playing Fields through to Battle Fields: The Development of Australian Sporting Manhood in Its Imperial Context, c. 1850-1918’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 51-67; Ed Jaggard, ‘Chameleons in the Surf’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 21, Issue 53, 1997, pp. 183-191.
- ²³⁶ Wayne Martino and Michael Kehler, ‘Male Teachers and the “Boy Problem”: An Issue of Recuperative Masculinity Politics’, *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. 41, No. 2, Spring 2006, pp. 113-132; Eric Anderson, ‘Inclusive Masculinity in a Fraternal Setting’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 5, August 2008, pp. 604-620; Kathleen Engebretson, ‘Identity, Masculinity and Spirituality: A Study of Australian Teenage Boys’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, February 2006, pp. 91-110; Raymond Evans, “‘So Tough?’ Masculinity and Rock’n’Roll Culture in Post-war Australia’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 22, Issue 56, 1998, pp. 125-137.
- ²³⁷ Rose Lucas, ‘Dragging it Out: Tales of Masculinity in Australian Cinema, from *Crocodile Dundee* to *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 56, 1998, pp. 138-146; Greg Young, “‘So Slide Over Here’”: the Aesthetics of Masculinity in Late Twentieth-Century Australian Pop Music’, *Popular Music*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2004, pp. 173-193.
- ²³⁸ Will H. Courtenay, ‘Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men’s Well-Being: a Theory of Gender and Health’, *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 50, Issue 10, May 2000, pp. 1385-1401; Michael Flood, ‘Men, Sex, and Homosociality: How Bonds Between Men Shape their Sexual Relations with Women’, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 10, No. 3, April 2008, pp. 339-359; David Wall and Linda Kristjanson, ‘Men, Culture, and Hegemonic Masculinity: Understanding the Experience of Prostate Cancer’, *Nursing Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2005, pp. 87-97.

characterisations, to represent my interpretation—and thus critique—of Australian politics,²³⁹ sport,²⁴⁰ and culture.²⁴¹ The concept has wide utility for the creative researcher.

Examining hegemonic masculinities through the lens of these two most cited critics, Hearn and Demetrio, we can see that the core text of the proposition remains extant. Demetrio certainly raises valid points, and Connell and Messerschmidt integrate the most useful of these into a refinement of the concept. They re-visited the idea, critiquing its usefulness in light of scholarly developments.²⁴² They address the critics and the critiques, and concede some points and defend others. Overall, the authors argue for a refinement of the concept to improve in four areas. Firstly, they seek greater emphasis on the complexity of the gender dynamic, both as a hierarchy and including women. Secondly, the contextual factors of geography need more study, such as the feedback, interference and influence of the local, regional and international realms, which recognises the differences of masculinities according to *place*. Thirdly, the authors call for detailed analysis of the lived experience of privilege, to understand better for whom the hegemonic ideal works at the reified layers of social status, wealth, and power. Lastly, they seek further understanding of the internal contradictions and potentials within hegemonic forms of masculinities. Connell and Messerschmidt note the continuing utility of the concept, and highlight the diversity of uses to which the concept has been put. Indeed, the December 2010 edition of *Men and Masculinities* contains five substantive articles, two of which deploy Connell's hegemonic masculinities as the keystone concept. Another article references Connell several times, and the other two list Connell's *Masculinities* in their bibliography. Clearly, this is a seminal text for the study of gender and masculinities. Most recent literature employs the concept of hegemonic masculinities substantially unchanged from its original formulation, thus demonstrating its ongoing relevance and utility.

It is worth examining fictional works to test the utility of the hegemonic masculinities concept. I will restrict this search to Australian works important to this

²³⁹ Bart Cammaerts, 'Jamming the Political: Beyond Counter-hegemonic Practices', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 71-90; Peter Jackson, 'The Cultural Politics of Masculinity: Towards a Social Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1991, pp. 199-213.

²⁴⁰ Ian Burgess, Allan Edwards, and James Skinner, 'Football Culture in an Australian School Setting: The Construction of Masculine Identity', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2003, pp. 199-212; Kay Saunders, "'Specimens of Superb Manhood': The Lifesaver as National Icon", *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 96-105.

²⁴¹ Anthony McMahon, 'Blokus Domesticus: the Sensitive New Age Guy in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 56, 1998, pp. 147-157; Scott Lash, 'Power After Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mutation?', *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007, pp. 55-78.

²⁴² R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6, December 2005, pp. 833-834.

project, some of which are considered ‘literature’ and others that are not. Firmly in the former camp is Patrick White’s *The Tywborn Affair*,²⁴³ which ‘links the process of fiction writing and reading with sexuality and the construction of gender’ and ‘questions the relationship of fiction to reality, in particular ... the sexual imagination to the physical, sexed body’.²⁴⁴ *The Tywborn Affair* is White’s exploration on the self-construction of identity, and the negotiation of the self with the social:

the Imaginary Order does not appear to be feminine in binary opposition to the masculine Symbolic Order—as it is in the theories of Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous—but ungendered (as in the theories of Julie Kristiva). The longing of E.—and other characters such as Don Prowse and Joanie Golson—seems to be for a freedom from gender, a recognition of an order outside “the human hierarchy of men and women” (p. 426), as Rod Gravenor puts it in his final letter to Eadith ... Once again White associates the dichotomies of gender with the constrictions of words.²⁴⁵

There is the ‘internal hegemony’ of Eddie’s time working as a jackaroo, and the ‘external hegemony’ of Eudoxia and Eadith, and while the two female ‘personas’ bookend Eddie living his sexed body, White denies the simple binary by portraying the way all three characters, who are all the same person, each wear masks and appear as shifting multiplicities.²⁴⁶ White treats us to a journey through gender relations, and the various ways of masculinity, and the importance of femininities in contrast to and composition of those self-same masculinities.

The next fictional work of interest to both the exegesis and the thesis artefact is Malcolm Knox’s *A Private Man*, which uses a suburban family to critique both Australian sport and Australian masculinities. The vehicle for Knox’s enquiry is the Brand family, and it involves both sport and pornography. The theme reflects the Gabriel García Márquez’s summation that ‘everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life and a secret life’.²⁴⁷ Access to the secret life, ‘If it was anywhere’ for Márquez, ‘... it was in his books’.²⁴⁸ Likewise, the Brands have their own secret lives: the father and one son explore theirs through pornography, another finds his in the

²⁴³ Patrick White, *The Tywborn Affair*, Penguin Australia, Ringwood, VIC, 1981.

²⁴⁴ Susan Lever, *Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of Form in Australian Fiction*, Rushcutters Bay, NSW, 2000, p. 98.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴⁶ Damien Barlow and Leigh Dale, ‘Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing’, in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer (eds), *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*, Camden House, Rochester, NY, 2007, p. 446.

²⁴⁷ Gerald Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2008, p. 198.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

(twisted) kinship of the Australian cricket team, and the third son spends the book discovering his own by discovering those of his family. Doctor John Brand loves his books, with pictures of naked girls doing sexual things, but he desperately hides his addiction to porn from his wife and his children, until he dies of a heart condition and leaves a shattered clan to explore and reveal themselves to each other, something previously prohibited by social convention and the relations of power that make family life so dynamic. This complex and subtle work shows us how contemporary Australian masculinity defines itself, in the public spaces we inhabit, as well as our own, often richer, secret lives.

Conclusion

This section examined how the theory influenced me as the scriptor, and how I contested and consented to the ideas therein. The importance of my evolving understanding of the seminal theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinities needed exploration and detail. Its lineage (and intellectual debt) to feminist and then gender studies is expressed in the discussions of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Annamarie Jagose, and thence unto R.W. Connell. From the ‘othering’ that early feminist scholarship challenged, to the normative power of dominant discourses that privilege the heterosexual binary, we explored the importance that social forces play in creating the individual. Further depth was added to this understanding by detailing the role of hegemony, in both its coercive and co-optive powers. Lastly, our examination swung around to encompass the ways and means of male power. We looked at how men negotiate their own agency within the gender and power frameworks that limit and empower individual agency, and critiqued hegemonic masculinities and reconnoitred the ways in which the term is deployed across a wide variety of academic fields, which clearly demonstrates its acceptance and utility.

Each segment of this voyage detailed how I employed theory in constructing both the artefact and the exegesis. For example, queer theory informs the characterisations of both major and minor characters (and their place in the imagined social world of *My Brother's War*), and the core concept of hegemonic masculinities is both a foundation for me-the-writer of the exegesis as well as (principally) Brett-the-character. This section explored the interactions between the created and the creator by analyzing their interactions across this literature review. Now, our *récit* has mapped the

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highlights of the journey; we traversed terrain both familiar and frightening, and our ultimate destination comes into view.

CONCLUSION:

Ways Forward

[P]rovided you kept one foot planted on probability, you might lie as hard as you liked: indeed, the more vigorously you lied, the louder would be your listeners' applause.

—Henry Handel Richardson²⁴⁹

The task of this *récit* was to demonstrate a significant contribution to knowledge, to position myself and my work (both thesis and exegesis) in relation to critical and cultural theories. However, not every one of these positions made the final cuts into the exegesis. Outside this exegesis, as part of the larger research effort to understand and frame my examination, I explored cultural studies with an original view of explicating my personal and performative (expressed in the artefact) understanding of 'the Australian'. Further, a view of narrative theory ('writing Australian manhood') and genre studies ('writing Australian manhood in contemporary Australian speculative fiction') also fell along the journey through 'the desert of the real'.²⁵⁰

Baudrillard's formulation contrasts the hopeful nature of the nineteenth century, the peak of empires, with the awful reality that unfolded across the twentieth century, expressed as the 'hyperreal', where the 'territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it'. His point, that modernity has changed the relationship between the actuality and the prepared simulation of the actuality, means that simulations usurp reality. Thus, my planned journey, when setting about the exegesis, was to cover these many and varied waypoints, to fully explore what it meant to be a writer of Australian manhood through the frame of Australian speculative fiction. What became apparent, and relatively late in the exegetic process, was that journey was too big. I had planned too much, had wanted to cover too much terrain, and that I didn't have the word space in the exegesis to treat each aspect with its proper regard. So how do I represent these positions, here, in the exegesis, when I've not conducted that exploration in these pages? Do they exist, in Baudrillardian terms, ex-ante? The iterative nature of research writing focussed on the core of my *problematique*, a stance on hegemonic masculinities ('Australian manhood'). So let's hitch our packs, re-fold the map, take our compasses firmly in hand, and press forward one last time through the undiscovered country to explicate some conclusions.

²⁴⁹ Henry Handel Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, QLD, 2001, p. 189.

²⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', Sheila Faria Glaser (trans.), in *Simulacra and Simulation*, The European Graduate School, accessed on 6 April 2011 from < <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/simulacra-and-simulations-i-the-precession-of-simulacra/#>>.

A solid *problematique* leaves questions and spaces for further exploration. So these areas of excluded research and writing died not in vain; I have excellent ideas and resources for future research work, and in areas cognate to my work herein. As a proficient researcher, I must create new opportunities for research as part of my significant contribution to knowledge. That is what the excision of these topics from these pages means: I have identified fruitful avenues to delve into, for myself as well as other researchers. Nodding as we pass on the dusty Outback track, another weary traveller may follow those other paths, and in the future I may double back and map what I walked past on the outward journey. But not today; the passage of time and terrain has worn my boots and depleted my rations. I face the end of this expedition with glad expectation of rest and recuperation, and the vague itching of future ventures back into these realms barely registers. But like the end of any journey, a tale needs to be told, a recounting of interesting sights and adventures on the road.

Our travels began with an exploration of the means of the journey, a detailing of the anxiety that accompanied my nascent understanding of the exegesis and its methodology. Despite having read the many and varied accounts of other explorers through these lands, as detailed in Section One, I needed to see the lie of the land for myself to comprehend the process itself. Only by doing the research and writing up the results could I finally understand the dry, clinical description of the thesis/exegesis model provided by Swinburne University's Research Office: 'The exegesis is a written document of between 20 000 to 30 000 words, which documents the provenance (history and context) of the work, and the praxis (theory and process) which provides insights into the work which a reading or viewing of the work cannot provide'.²⁵¹ The awesome intricacies and challenges of such an undertaking were not immediately obvious to me as I set out; an over-confident *braggadocio* quickly evaporated as the hot sun and wavering horizon shimmered in the distance.

What I discovered as I researched the exegesis (because the thetic process seemed both comfortable and easy) was that my understanding of the task emerged as I wrote the task into being. I *became* as the exegesis *became*; the act of research writing, which I've come to realise is an iterative feedback of reading, questioning, and writing, creates the researcher as well as the researched, simultaneously. In some ways, I defined the journey step by thirsty step. This is Baudrillard's insight into the creative process;

²⁵¹ Swinburne University of Technology, *Guidelines for Examination of a PhD*, p. 1, accessed on 08 August 2010, from <http://www.research.swinburne.edu.au/higher-degrees/documents/guidelines_for_phd_examination.pdf>.

the terrain does not precede, it is created as the terrain is mapped. My journey and the lands I visited came into being as I explored, and were not objective ‘things’ outside myself, waiting to be discovered. This is the harsh realisation of creating new knowledge: original creative research does not exist before the research question is posed and answered. Searching for the answers is sensitively dependent upon the questions asked. My chosen tools for the exegesis became, as a product of preliminary research, the *récit* and the *problématique*. These subjective positions allowed me to take the stance of examining myself as I wrote both the exegesis and the creative artefact, which is the exploration of provenance and praxis demanded by the University’s criteria.

Indeed, the selection of *récit* and *problématique* required a careful critique (more than a justification) of their validity for my project. Traditional conceptions of ‘research’, based in the sciences and founded on ideals of replicability and objectivity, could not produce the self-reflexive understanding needed to treat myself and my creations as the objects of research. There was never any hope of external objectivity—my theoretical position explicitly recognised my embeddedness. I have biases and limitations as a writer and as a researcher, and the quest for perfect objectivity would be pointless, so embracing this subjectivity acknowledged—and thus disempowered—these weaknesses. In the end, it is my personal interactions between creativity and scholarship that the exegesis tests and validates.

Creative writing as academic research is a relatively new realm, although it is founded on a solid base of ‘practice-led research’, and this is the basis of Section Two. Here, the researcher uses creative expression to practice their chosen craft, and notes the processes and habits that inform and propel what they create. Their practice is performative; they constitute significant research contributions by exploring means of expression outside the ‘traditional’, narrow confines of the traditional conceptions of science and knowledge. The demands of a wider discourse of knowledge, derived from the critiques of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, locates truth value and validity in the forms of creative expression, be they novels, poems, plays, paintings, or film. The medium of expression is less important than the underlying consideration and crafting of the investigation into humans and the world.

For this project, I focused on autoethnography, which puts the self-reflection of the scriptor at the centre of the research output. The point of autoethnography is the consideration of the processes and meanings of research, both as a method and an outcome, so that the contexts and relations of research products are situated within their

generative framework. This move to the subjective dispels the artificial paragon of objectivity, recognizing that bias and situatedness are the core experiences of the researcher. Further, autoethnography seeks to learn from the research process, improving it for subsequent iterations. The power of autoethnography lies in the ways in which it allowed me to reflect upon the narrative choices I made, such as characterisation and thematic structures. The researcherly self recognises its own intertextuality, how it brings the same text into different being with each encounter. As a research writer, I developed a methodology for the exegesis based on the methods employed to construct the world of my thesis, and the synergy between them reveals the utility of this approach.

To see these connections, I kept and then mined a writing journal. In both hard- and soft-copy, I recorded observations, musings, character sketches, plot points, and a series of questions that guided and shaped choices for both aspects of this PhD journey. Indeed, it the asking of questions that most informed my choices, and it was the questions in my writing journal that revealed both the strengths of the artefact and the ways forward for the exegesis. The questions, and subsequent musing to answer those questions, formed the dataset upon which this exegesis is based; this is Section Three. As I revisited the writing journals, be they in a leather-bound journal or in a Word document on my laptop, I discovered evidence of a three-stage writing process: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing.

Having practiced pre-writing as the launch-point for academic essays, it should not be surprising that similar evidence could be found for my approach to writing fiction. And yet I (the exegetical self) was surprised. At some point, probably in my undergraduate writing classes, I had taken on board the idea of a series of preparatory steps for writing in the fictive mode. Taking notes about my writing processes, using the autoethnographic approach, established the importance of such pre-writing activities as character sketches, outlining, and brainstorming. Only by keeping a self-reflective writing journal did such activities achieve liminality. Having had this awareness emerge, I can see its impact and importance, whereas previously its import had remained hidden.

Similarly, discovering my writing habits and processes indicated the impact of my theoretical explorations into realms such as hegemonic masculinities. Understanding this theory of social practice, at once both performative and contextual, shaped the way I created characters and experienced their lives. I saw these people as real, making their

own choices stemming from their own psychological background enacted in unique and ‘alive’ social frameworks. Brett Bliss was a real man, with awards for bravery and exceptional military duty. But he was also weakened by his service, and thus discarded in a very real way, in the way that today’s Defence Department casts aside soldiers in his position. Their culture, focused on ideals of masculine power, brooks little divergence from the norm, and actively punishes deviation. Along the same lines, Lawrie Bliss’s character arc reflects my own journey into manhood, deriving verisimilitude from my experiences and reflecting the reality of today’s Australian man. We are a questing, unfulfilled caste, a group at once alienated by the perfect idols of media representation and threatened by the rising power of feminine voices in a once-strictly patriarchal social order. We were raised to idolise women, but also punished for objectifying them. Such women were our school teachers and caregivers, encouraging us to feel and emote, things anathema to more traditional conceptions of Australian manhood. Thus, Lawrie is deeply conflicted; only personal tragedy loosens his psychological bonds long enough for him to mature, and the story ends with him at the beginning of becoming the new Australian everyman, fighting to forge an identity suitable for his changing world.

Having completed drafts of the artefact and the exegesis, the process of re-writing reached its highest gear. I had re-written throughout, while pre-writing and writing, in the previous writing or research session. But I also stopped fiddling with these texts and put them aside, allowing the impressions and misconceptions to settle. This ‘cold eye’ enabled the editorial self to come to the fore. This persona, much more the critic than the inventor or scriptor of earlier phases, took serious issue with the macro- and micro-structures of my written products. His job, soberly and patiently, was to ensure cohesion, sense, logic, and flow. He was in charge of grammar, spelling, and fact checking. His was the cool voice against which the treasured turn-of-phrase would beg for life, and his dispassionate judgement was the main arbiter. His criterion, first and foremost, was the Model Reader. Mr. Editor needed to consider audience, not writer, and chose what continued in the text and what faced deletion. Only through considering audience with such prominence could I meet my initial PhD goals: to be both literary and popular. My work needed to exceed academic standards, but also should appeal to a mass-market audience. The imperative of the Academy remains unchallenged, but the secondary goal is also worthy in the attempt. Only by considered and patient re-writing could I hope to achieve both.

So what are the academic imperatives? Engagement with theory, and an exploration the impact of that researchly engagement, were required, and this formed the core of Section Four. We first detailed the role of theory in creative writing, and moved swiftly to the first major theoretical arena in which *My Brother's War* played: gender. Long-standing traditions about differences between men and women, and thus the social roles attributed to chromosomal sex, led to the questioning of patriarchy. Masculine power made itself invisible by posting the feminine as 'the Other'. Across the twentieth century, critiques of this Othering gained volume and intensity as feminism rose to question this subjugation. Then queer theory challenged the binary assumptions so often played out in first- and second-wave feminism. The queer perspective offered a multiplicity of perspectives beyond 'heteronormativity', the false binary of female/male gender identity and sexual desire. The focus moved to the importance of subjective identity, and queer embraced sexuality and gender identity in the plural greater than two. Thus, the female and the homosexual, long the greatest categories of put-down in 'man speak', came to be examined, which cast a reflection of examination onto 'the male'. After exposing the important role of power in the concept of 'hegemony', I then introduced the core text of this exegesis, Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities*, which developed the idea of hegemonic masculinities. Here is the concept that informs my characterisations in my artefact: how a social dynamic, enacted at the individual level, valourises certain traits (logic, physical strength, emotional detachment, and self-sufficiency) and represses those not conforming to the ideal (emotion, empathy, and interdependence). Hegemonic masculinities are configurations of practice, performative and contextual ways of being, that rely on coercive (that is, implied) power to compare agency to an abstract ideal.

The challenge for this exegesis has been to explore how this conception could inform and motivate the creative writing process. Hegemonic masculinities undergirds the major characters in *My Brother's War*, both male and female, and forms the social background and texture against which these characters perform. Some, like Agent Daniels, strive for the ideal, whereas Brett, after his breakdown, confronts the loss of power and status. His once valourised position becomes beyond his reach, and his sense of self is stripped of identifiers. For Lawrie, his character arc reflects a parallel-but-opposite journey into self-discovery and self-acceptance. Both brothers find themselves questioning their places and identities as men and people in tomorrow's Australia.

Like many writers, I used my personal life, experience, and insights to create this world and its inhabitants. I buttressed those fictions with well-researched facts and academic insights, which has the effect of improving the fictive product by adding verisimilitude, a key ingredient in realist fiction. Further, this research and writing journey has changed me by making explicit those forces to which I respond. I test the truth-value and utility of hegemonic masculinities by applying to myself; the results are the lively characters and thematic material present in both the artefact and this exegesis. The journey to self-knowledge has been long and meandering, to be sure, but the sometimes lack of a clearly identifiable destination made me focus on the journey instead. Surely this is the point of education, especially the research inquiry of the higher-education degree. In my case, the two questions are simple: Who am I now? Where do I go from here? Better still, the same two questions apply to the reader.

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