

Legacies

**A novel written by
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Chapter One

A FAN DANGLED from the twelve-foot high ornate ceiling, rotated lazily, cut feebly through the sharp summer heat. It was the last week of January 2001 and it was damned hot – and on this afternoon, in a house without the luxury of ducted air-conditioning, the only solution during the heat of the day was to stir the air and sweat it out.

Errol Freeman slouched in an old tattered club lounge chair, silhouetted against the sumptuous flood of summer light that coerced its way through a large walk-through sash window. Beyond the window was an unkempt garden of mainly native flora camouflaging a non-too-stable corrugated iron fence. It was a good thing his neighbour didn't care too much. The two men had agreed that one day they'd get around to fixing it up. A bit like going to the doctor.

His well-worn board shorts, once starkly red, were faded to a non-descript pastel mauve, his T-shirt stretched oversize by years of wear and decorated with a myriad paint deposits, his thongs worn paper thin. His thick, recently cropped tussled hair glistened as the light filtered through the droplets of perspiration that nestled on his scalp and forehead. Alongside the chair, on the paint splattered, scuffed up floorboards, stood an old ramshackle what-not that nursed a whiskey glass with about a finger of spirit. Neat, straight. A leather pouch and a small smoking pipe with an alabaster stem kept it company. On the floor, an array of paint tubes and a motley coloured plastic paint palette void of any fresh paint.

He fondled an unused artist's brush. He focussed on something.

In the middle of the room stood a canvas on an easel. A predominance of greens and smoky yellow, something resembling a forest or jungle, the makings of an emotionally inspired painting waiting for that elusive bolt of creative lightning.

He dabbed away a drop of perspiration from his eyebrow with the brush, then downed the remains of the whiskey, stood, moved toward

the easel and hovered over the painting. At fifty-two years of age he was a tall man and although the effects of gravity had fashioned a bulge or two here and there, he was far from overweight. His ruggedly handsome face belied his age. It bore remnants of a skin problem of sorts that perhaps suggested a youth misspent in the sun or other hazardous elements. The collection of incomplete paintings of various dimensions strewn around the rather messy room seemed to hold little importance for him. Indeed many seemed conveniently placed simply to hide the network of cracks in the walls that had appeared yet again, as they had in previous summers. Such was the Bay of Biscay soil on which the bluestone house had been built some ninety years earlier. Every summer it dried and shrank causing the stone slab footings to subside and manifest the stresses through the walls.

Errol stared at the work in progress on the easel a moment before muttering, “Fuck it!” as if inconvenienced by the whole arrangement. He ambled back toward the window and pulled the heavy drapes across, dimming the room.

Leaving his accoutrements to stand sentinel over the works in progress, and with the rhythmic drone of the fan lingering on, he vacated his studio, pulling the door shut behind him. The bolt of creative lightning, it seemed, would remain elusive for some time to come.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Wednesday 24th of January 2001, Errol Freeman drove his 1980 vintage Renault into an open air parking lot and the vehicle found its way into a particular space as it had done habitually so many times over the past eight years. The surrounding stately river red gums afforded much needed shade and relief from the vicious sun that was part and parcel of an Adelaide summer. Other cars drifted into the car park in dribs and drabs – a motley collection of late model, upmarket vehicles, others of various vintage and states of repair

and about to knock on the door of the auto wreckers. But Errol was oblivious to them as he sat inside the car, taking stock of things in the relative cool of the morning. He was in a mind to restart his car and head off out of the park. Simple questions raced through his mind; *questions of doubt*. It was more than simply familiarity breeding contempt; yet Errol was not familiar with anything else at this stage in his life and he was stuck with it, like it or lump it - the latter option, as it happened, occurring to him more and more frequently as the years rolled by. He realised that he was starting to run the tips of his fingers vigorously over his cheeks. He felt them become inflamed. It was a tendency he had whenever he became agitated. He ceased before he succumbed to the urge to actually scratch his skin. He cursed the circumstances of his younger years that brought about this condition.

The occupants of the various other vehicles made cheerful salutations to one another, and indeed to Errol, as they casually made their way in a common direction past a substantial three by one and a half metre billboard. It read simply '*White Forest Secondary College*', above which was the school's logo and, below, the logo of the state education department; it had no superfluous embellishments, no ill-conceived school motto, nor false promises of future success. It didn't need it, for success here was simply presumed. They headed toward a single storey, red brick building – the administration building, erected in the early nineteen-eighties to cater for the expanding school population when it changed from an all-boy school to a co-ed comprehensive institution. Located about thirty metres away was another, older three story building, an exercise in bureaucratic symmetry of the 1950's, consisting of a central section with an extended wing of rooms on either side. This was the hub of what had become regarded as the 'privileged' school. Set in abundant established grounds in what could best be described as an upper middle class suburb, adjacent 'wealthville', it catered for the children of lower end

professionals, many of whom would have their children attend private colleges... but for their extensive mortgages.

Errol finally put an end to his musings, allowed his flushed cheeks to settle then alighted from his car and sauntered off to join the others. His battered leather satchel, slung by its strap over his shoulder, moulded into his body and became part of him, assuming a natural synergy. Like its owner, it had more than its fair share of stories to tell. His thick tussled greying hair sparkled in the morning sunlight. His overlong shorts, loose shirt and masseuse slip-on scuffs, seemed more apt for a beer garden than a place of learning. But the place would be void of students for the next four days, so what the heck.

He entered the staff room at White Forest to be greeted by a cacophony of teachers, various ages, races and creeds, on first day back from summer holidays. They seemed to have settled into almost pre-ordained groups. It was a large staff and as is typical of those overpopulated campuses it was easy to maintain a degree of anonymity should one wish to. Errol favoured that status to a point. Two more years and his tenure at this school would expire and he would be required to transfer. That meant establishing new relationships, both professional and social and he knew from experience that the lower the profile the fewer the disappointments and conflicts. Still, over the last eight years he had established his coterie of colleagues at White Forest and he went, quite cheerfully enough, to a table adjacent to an eight-ball table in the corner diagonally opposite the kitchenette. He made himself comfortable along with the English Coordinator and Legal Studies teacher Peter Millwall and Phys Ed teacher Jeff Roberts who, over the past few years convinced himself that he had more in common with this group rather than with the other Phys Ed teachers. No-one seemed to object. Millwall was a principled man who had that air of sophistication that comes from having studied the classics at university. He wore tailored lightweight slacks, tasteful polo shirt and conservative sandals.

Students or no students he kept up the standards unconsciously expected by the populace at large. Roberts did not fit this category, not by a long shot. He was beyond casual but, again, no-one seemed to object.

Errol surveyed the room, out of sheer curiosity rather than concern or commitment. A group of newcomers to the school, some young and fresh out of tertiary training and obviously feeling a little wary, were assembled at another table. Around the eight-ball table lolled a number of mainly male teachers observing the last shot of a game... as the white ball went in off the black there were raucous ad lib comments alluding to the player having 'more arse than an elephant's undies'. Errol sighed heavily, and accepted that for the time being at least, this was his lot.

His moment of introspection, however, was soon curtailed when she entered through a set of double doors leading from a corridor into the staff room. Without raising her voice she called assertively for order:

“Welcome back everyone... everyone please... okay let's get a start.”

And eventually those assembled came to order with little fuss or ado; even those die-hards engrossed in their game of eight-ball. Lyn Gianno carried herself with grace and purpose as if in command of the catwalks of Milan. Born in the north eastern suburbs to market gardener parents, she retained her maiden name after marriage purely for professional purposes. Everything she did had a professional purpose. She saw no merit in doing it otherwise.

“Good to see so many happy faces,” she greeted with more than a hint of cynicism, amid jeers and other salutations from some of the older hands. Then down to the serious matters for which she, as Principal, was not only universally well-known but also unanimously

revered. “Welcome to a new year...a special new year...a new era so to speak - who knows what the millennium will bring?”

A late-comer, Céline Molanda, entered surreptitiously from outside through a doorway to the right of the corridor doors. She drifted in behind a small group gathered in the kitchenette in the corner of the staff room. She felt a little uneasy being late on the first day back but, given her circumstances, she'd manage to melt in without attracting any undue attention. Not so the other unhurried late-comers who drifted in after her through other doors. They simply offered their unspoken salutations to those around them and settled in to Lyn's address. They were comfortable with Lyn whom they knew would accommodate their minor tardiness, for they knew that she knew that it probably wouldn't happen again. Minor tardiness in the classroom, however, was another matter!

“Anyway, I guess I'll get proceedings under way by introducing our new members of staff,” Lyn continued, looking around the room, accommodating the latecomers.

THE SCHOOL REGIMEN was not confined to the staff room. The switch had been thrown and the machinery, in sleep mode for the past five weeks, was slowly warming up. Cells of activity manifested themselves throughout the campus. The coalface workers in the staff room were just one –

the grounds curator was tending his domain, in sympathy with the weather, yet in accordance with regulations from other government departments regarding water restrictions – he had his task ahead of him for this was shaping to be a bloody hot summer, the harbinger of an extended period of drought perhaps. The campus had at least the advantage of location, nestled as it was at the base of the foothills which afforded the benefit of whatever sparse precipitation their might be at this time of the year. With sensible management the

grounds would soon be returned to the splendid state expected by the various stakeholders;

the manager of the school canteen took a final drag of her cigarette at the rear of the separate, purpose-built building and discreetly stamped the butt on the ground. She swept away the tell-tale ash with the sole of her casual trainers, finished her cup of coffee then went to deposit the butt in one of the nearby rubbish bins. However, the actual internal receptacle had yet to be replaced by the maintenance staff and so she deftly slipped the butt into her cigarette packet and returned inside. She washed her hands in the wash-basin in the administration area - no health hazards in her domain; then she proceeded to prepare orders from suppliers to feed the teenager hordes due the beginning of the following week, teenagers hungry for calories – and possibly sex – if not for knowledge;

in the Front Office, Joan Hallwood, the mainstay of this vessel – ably assisted by a number of other Student Service Officers such as Rose Fullbright, of similar age to Joan but who preferred to attend to her duties without rocking any boats – was already attending to a parent enquiry about a late enrolment of her daughter into Year Nine, in which year level the school had already topped its limit. But there was always room for one extra it would seem, given that the residential status requirements were met. Long-term rentals in this zone were at a premium and for most aspirant parents from ‘the outside’, the only long term option was to mortgage their lives away for what hopefully would deliver a quality education for their young ones;

and there was Louise Howes in the book room. A physically fit woman in her late thirties, Louise was attractive if not beautiful – butch in a non-lesbian way. She never stood still for a moment; always something to be done. It was an attribute that often unnerved those in her midst for she would appear from nowhere, often interrupting the

legitimate business of her colleagues but never-the-less always herself on legitimate business.

She had little difficulty stacking a collection of cardboard cartons, packed with textbooks, from the floor to the counter in her book room. She cared little for imposed occupational health, safety and welfare regulations, none of which would dictate to her how she should or should not lift cartons. The room was quite spacious, consisting of two sections separated by the serving counter. On one side there was a compact student waiting area with an external door through which students could enter from the grounds outside. A road bicycle rested against the end wall, a fancy helmet (Name?) draped over its handlebars. Behind the counter stood an extensive mechanised compactus, its shelves containing every conceivable educational resource and stationery consumable. And Louise would of course ensure that, as the year ensued, such merchandise would end up in the possession of its rightful and intended recipient. Every item accounted for. And Lyn Gianni was comforted by this efficiency.

SURVEYING the staff room Lyn continued addressing her newly assembled staff:

“And we also have a very special guest this year. As many of you would know, Amy Bottroff has headed off to the UK on exchange and we are privileged to have in her place, in exchange, Céline Molanda, taking over in Drama and a bit of English.”

She finally located Céline standing behind those assembled in the kitchenette area. “Welcome Céline,” she said, having taken due care to ensure correct pronunciation of the newcomer’s given name.

All eyes followed the Principal’s gaze and everyone was awe-struck when they settled upon this dark skinned beauty! Standing 170 centimetres, her svelte chocolate skin flawless, her features sharp rather than the familiar broad, her hair cropped short and surprisingly straight,

she stepped forward briefly yet confidently, fully aware of the attention she was now receiving. Yet she did not gloat in the limelight. She was a professional and she was unashamed to be subordinate to her principal. She melded back into the group.

LOUISE, task completed, headed briskly and purposefully out through a door near the far end of the compactus in her bookroom. It led into a corridor which in turn led past the Principal's Office on her left and an interview room on her right, past the Front Office area and on towards the staff room - a 16 pound bowling ball asserting its way toward the pins.

THE FORMALITY of the introductions over, Lyn moved on to the next item on her agenda:

“Now, we'll need to get your teaching programmes into your faculty coordinators for approval by the middle of next week, if you don't mind. We want to have the kids into serious work as soon as possible. Personally I think it's the best thing after such a long break. They might moan and groan about it but seriously, I think they appreciate it if we lay it on thick right from the word go. Reduce the transition period so to speak.”

She paused briefly, but there were no challenges from her charges.

“Okay then, are there any other urgent matters while we're all here?”

But again there were no responses.

“Fair enough then. Today's agenda is on the whitboard. We'll break into our various faculty groups. Most of you know where to go. The map and room numbers are up there but if our newcomers would like to bring their induction folders and come with me, we'll go on a little tour, so to speak.” Then an afterthought, “Oh, and as is customary,

we'll adjourn to the Rising Sun for lunch at around 12.30-ish, okay...unless of course you've brought your lunch in which case shove it in the fridge for tomorrow." And another afterthought, "Oh, and make sure you consult your pigeon holes regularly. There's bound to be a number of up-dates as the day progresses. They say we'll be moving to a paper-less school eventually but we all know how long 'eventually' is, don't we?"

The various staff shuffled to and fro, completing their reunions before heading off, some casually approached the main exit door near the kitchenette, about to leave, others recklessly rolled the odd remaining ball into a pocket on the pool table.

"Hang on a mo'!" Louise abruptly called them to attention as she entered through the double doors from the corridor. "Before you go, just a word about stationery this year. Everybody knows yous mob got a good deal after yous went on strike last year."

There was light-hearted abuse from the staff in general. They all knew she was serious in her views but they all took her with a pinch of salt.

"Anyways", she continued, "part of the deal is that the budget for stationery has been cut."

More mumbled complaints.

"It's 'user pays' from now on, so when you've used up your allocation ya gotta provide for yourselves. Okay?"

The protests from the staff were merely water off a duck's back and Louise, unfazed, brusquely turned her back on them and proceeded immediately to the double doors that led back into the corridor to the Front Office area; but not before chancing the briefest of glances back in the direction of Céline as she went. It was a look more disdainful than inquisitive. But she had more pressing business and like a passing whirlwind exited the room not caring if the dust settled after her.

Strike!

Still protesting, the staff drifted off to prepare for the year ahead, likewise chancing a glance at Céline as they departed. Errol was no exception. As the object of his regard wandered over to join the other newcomers in Lyn's entourage, he turned to Peter Millwall:

"Could be an interesting year," he prophesied.

"Could be," his colleague concurred.

He was not aware that Céline was still in earshot and she turned her head briefly to acknowledge Errol's comment with a wry smile. "*Could be,*" she, too, concurred, *sotto voce*.

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THE WHIRLWIND swept effortlessly along the nondescript corridor, on the left wall of which hung a number of substantial works of art that spruced up the bare red bricks and the dank grey linoleum floor tiles that were the fashion of the 1980s. Few on the staff knew of the origins of these works. Only members of the Trust set up by one of the school's early benefactors knew their creators and their worth. But everybody knew they had worth. It was what tended to make this school a little different from the average public school. They were works that the Education Department could not get their grubby hands on - that much everybody knew also. Passing on the right wall awith its mounted block of pigeonholes crafted from Australian Oak, Louise came to a doorway on her right leading into the Front Office to find Joan and Rose inserting documentation into manilla folders.

"So who's the new tinted woman back there?" enquired Louise.

Joan, who had elegantly drifted into a delightful middle age, rolled her eyes at the comment but she was not distracted from her task. Having been around the place for many years, she was hardly the politically correct animal herself but she knew the value of tact and sensitivity.

"What, the 'English' woman?" she volunteered in a tone meant to chastise.

“Not one of our tribes then, eh?”

“If you put it that way, no,” replied Joan who turned her back on the interloper who now looked for some response from the frumpy Rose – but there was none forthcoming. Oblivious to the cold shoulder, she turned back into the corridor just as Lyn and her entourage passed by on their tour of the administration building. She checked herself, avoiding a collision. She assayed the newcomers: the mature ones who had been lucky enough to get a transfer from a less desirable campus had that inner glow, the tell-tale eyes that signified that at last they had ‘made it to teacher heaven’; the novices whose innocence was self-evident, their tell-tale eyes scanning anything and everything, accommodating every skerrick of information for instant retrieval for possible instant survival. Louise chuckled sarcastically. Most assumed it was a welcoming gesture but remained focussed on Lyn’s delivery. Bringing up the rear, Céline smiled most ebulliently at Louise who for the first time in many a year was at a loss as to how to respond. She slunk back into the office on the pretence that she had forgotten something.

COMMONLY REFERRED to as a “demac”, the building was a product of economic expediency - two essentially prefabricated multi-functional classrooms connected by a common set of storerooms and office space. They were self-contained with own plumbing, power and air-conditioning, with the whole supported upon concrete piles ready for disassembly and transportation to another site if and when the Department deemed it desirable and expedient for satisfying the bottom line. The site was earmarked for redevelopment anyway – a grand plan for a genuine centre for the visual arts to complement the recently commissioned performing arts centre. But for the time being...

Errol fumbled with a set of keys and finally selecting the correct one entered via a small entrance vestibule on one side of which was a series of racks designed for the stowing of students’ bags.

The room was naturally light and airy. And naturally hot, even though it was only mid-morning and even with the slatted awnings over the north facing windows that kept out the harshest rays of the sun. The furniture was still neatly packed to one side of the room. Apart from a few art posters adorning the walls, the room had the appearance of having undergone a thorough clean out. Errol liked his fresh air. But not in this environment. He went straight to the reverse cycle air conditioning unit. It was an efficient unit. He fumbled again with his keys and, finding the appropriate one, opened the door to the small storeroom. Flicking the switch, he waited a moment until a pair of fluorescent lights flickered, then lit up the windowless room. He undertook a brief reconnaissance of the place. No change in five weeks; the bookshelf with a few folders, periodicals and magazines, filing cabinets, shelves with art supplies etc. Satisfied that he was in familiar territory, he returned to the classroom proper. He felt the cooler air now circulating. (At least the public works got something right, thought Errol.)

He dragged the teacher's desk from the side of the room into its appropriate position, dropped his satchel on top, wheeled the teacher's chair over, the five coasters issuing a dampened whine as they rolled across the polished linoleum. Flopping into the chair, he looked around and tried to establish some degree of empathy with the room, as if within that space there resided a spirit he might connect with. One thing was certain; it didn't get any easier as the years went by. And this year was no exception; the spirit remained elusive.

He stood up, rummaged in his satchel and removed a small leather pouch, went from window to window and briefly looked out in the various directions. No-one was around, not surprisingly as the demac was at the far reaches of the campus in 'world's end' aka 'Siberia' and the other faculty members, all established teachers at White Forest, had gone their own separate ways to their own

classrooms. He wandered to the rear of the room, switched on an extractor fan over a 'Hazardous Materials' bench, took out his small pipe from the leather pouch, half stoked the cone, lighted up, savoured the drag, looked about the room again, shaking his head resignedly.

CÉLINE STOOD patiently in the student waiting area of the Book Room with Peter Millwall, ready to receive their allocation of stationery from Louise. The teacher before them gathered up a carton from the counter and went to the exit just as Elisabeth Jansen entered. She was young and pretty in the mould of a Bronte heroine. From appearances she was often mistakenly regarded as freshman fodder; but there was resilience at her core that spelled not only survival but control as well. Not only that, she politely stepped aside to allow the encumbered teacher pass first. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Next," called Louise and Millwall stepped forward. "Name?" she asked clinically.

"Millwall, Peter," He replied, clinically, as he stepped up to the counter and stood as if at attention on parade, awaiting inspection.

Elisabeth caught the eye of Céline who smiled disbelievingly at the tone of proceedings as Louise went about her business in journeyman fashion gathering materials for her current punter.

"Your first school?" Céline asked the young Elisabeth as a few other teachers drifted in.

"Yeah," replied the novice assuredly, "although I did my placement here last year."

"And the verdict?"

"Well, I survived," Elisabeth chuckled in a confident tone. "But we'll see I suppose. And yourself?"

"Just had eight years in North London."

The younger woman screwed up her face at the thought of it.

“Not that bad. Just made sure I made it as interesting as possible. And where possible, relevant!”

“Funny, your accent doesn’t sound very English,” observed Elisabeth.

“It’s not,” she replied.

Millwall registered Céline’s revelation as Louise pushed the carton of resources across the counter to him.

“And that’s your lot. Don’t let the kids get their grubby mitts on it.”

“Jawohl!” he responded, clicking his heels together as he effortlessly gathered up the hefty carton and eased his way through those waiting. He was a big man but always very gentle, always with memories of his own youth in the back of his mind whenever he was confronted with student behaviour management issues.

Louise then made eye contact with Elisabeth and again asked clinically:

“Name?”

But Céline stepped forward to the counter. Elisabeth, realising her predicament, stepped back and waited for the floor-show as Céline smiled assertively at Louise.

“Molanda, Céline,” she said, apeing Millwall’s earlier regimented response.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there.”

“A common problem for some,” Céline countered in a mockingly understanding tone.

Louise simply scowled then turned her back and systematically went about gathering the materials.

Céline turned to Elisabeth and smiled reassuringly, saying:

“It’s Zimbabwean.”

The novice was impressed – as were others.

EIGHT O'CLOCK that evening, a feeble gully breeze sauntered through the daylight saving summer dusk and was welcomed into the back extension of Errol's house via the open rear café doors. Above an old cane chaise lounge in the living area of this extension, an ancient wall-mounted reverse cycle air-conditioner struggled and strained to complement the evening breeze. The house extension represented one of many stages in what was a major project begun with good intentions years before- yet still incomplete. What was in vogue in the nineteen eighties was now, in this first year of the new millennium, out of favour. Yes, the hallway of the villa was tastefully restored to its former glory, albeit in more palatable hues, giving a haughty lightness to the basically useless ten metre long vestibule. But the additions and alterations to other parts of the structure, in which recycled baltic pine featured prominently, simply did not gel with the ethos of the original design. Even the combustion heater looked out of character stuck in a far off corner from where in winter it had minimal effect.

Errol wiped down the dusty remains of freshly ground coffee beans from the kitchen bench. He wiped out the grinder with a fresh sheet of paper towel and packed it away in one of the cupboards overhead. He then took two sealed jars, one of beans, the other of a few days supply of grinds, to the cool of a lower cupboard. He was meticulous when it came to brewing his coffee. Indeed, he was meticulous with many of what could be regarded as the finer things in life; not so much epicurean as sagacious. It was a craftsman's approach quite disparate with his bent in his studio. But that, after all, was art –

He took the small cafetière to a large timber table in the middle of the room fashioned from recycled floor-boards, stained to match the elaborately turned colonial legs of an unknown timber salvaged from the shed of a country homestead. He and Fran had gone to great lengths and travelled long distances in their quest to create their authentic extension. In fact it was no more than a potpourri of styles and trends

that fell short of a genuine identity – it was no more than the result of misguided enthusiasm. And even that was relatively short-lived.

Standing by the table as his coffee brewed, he opened up his leather shoulder satchel and took out some of its contents. There was no real pleasure in this operation – no more than a chore. He opened a particular book, a new edition of a Teacher’s Year Planner, and flipped through some of the pages. He retrieved a similar but well-worn volume from the satchel and flipped through some of its pages: teaching programmes from the previous years, yet to be deposited in that ubiquitous digital world of the school’s internal network. It was not an act of rebellion: indeed, he cherished his burgeoning experience with the emerging design applications on offer but he saw no point in spending time at a keyboard doing what his fingers already did so well on paper. He made a very cursory examination of some of the entries. He was mandated, nay, obligated, to deliver a course that satisfied certain curriculum and assessment criteria. Motivation to do so was another matter. It was a matter of fitting his ideas of what was valuable into some kind of paradigm laid down by some kind of committee. It was a committee sanctioned by the government, by a government, the political persuasion of which was irrelevant. But it was a committee nevertheless. Everyone in the industry knew it would be reviewed in due course by another committee sanctioned by another government, political persuasion again irrelevant, in their effort to appear progressive and responsible. But Errol, like most members of the profession, taught what they considered relevant for society and made the token effort to couch their teaching programmes in the vernacular of the paradigm. But making the token effort was still an effort.

The squoosh of the plunger as it was slowly depressed masked the sound of the heavy flyscreen door opening at the front entrance. But then the plodding thud of footsteps down the carpet runner signalled Fran’s arrival home. She entered the back room carrying a leather

shoulder satchel similar to Errol's and savoured the pleasant aroma that permeated the space. But caffeine was not her drug of choice. Without any affectionate acknowledgement she went immediately to the ageing refrigerator and poured a glass of white wine from an already opened bottle and stood in front of the wall mounted air-conditioner. Everything seemed to be 'ageing' in the household. It was not as though modern con whitegoods were not affordable. And it was not as if the occupants were couched in any sort of apathy – it was basically because neither had a strong desire to succumb to consumerism, to replace reasonably efficient equipment that still worked. And the fact was that they were not big on entertaining...didn't really need superfluous objects.

"Dinner's in the oven," Errol mumbled – even in the height of summer he maintained a rich culinary regime that this night consisted of a home-made meatloaf which could be consumed as a cold salad at a later date. **Can this be shown?**

He returned to his chore and guided by that ubiquitous master called accountability, began copying the contents of the old volume to the new. The truth of the matter was that he had on his mind a more pertinent vocation that had been interrupted by the day's proceedings.

Chapter Two

ON THE SATURDAY following the national holiday commemorating the British colonisation of the east coast of Australia, Errol tried unsuccessfully to put in a few hours in his studio. The flesh was willing but the spirit weak: his whole being had been depressed by a completely new mindset imposed upon him by 'others'. In all his adult years Errol had never been able to reconcile his real dream with that very Australian notion of security. For generations, Australian males had held that the dream of owning one's own home was part of the national psyche. It was, after all, why generations before had gone to

war. King and Country may have roused the populace to take up arms against other imperialist foes but fulfilling the Australian Dream was the ultimate mission, regardless of how long the battle lasted.

Still, with home ownership came certain privileges and the right, indeed an almost larrikin duty, to lounge around and do what is lovingly known in the vernacular as ‘bugger all’, especially on public holidays.

And Errol, on this Saturday following Australia Day was no exception. He had his little bit of security – obtained at the expense of his real love which he knew offered no security, at least not in the financial sense. And so his work in progress in his studio remained just that for the time being. ‘Tis a pity he never managed to read Thoreau’s *Walden*.

He closed up his studio and walked languidly down the hallway to the renovated kitchen. Even the international cricket being played that weekend held no attraction for him.

Passing through the kitchen, Errol proceeded past Fran, reclined, nay sprawled, on the old and frail cane chaise lounge making the most of the relief from the reverse cycle air conditioner just above her.

“Fill this for me while you’re up, could you?” his wife of twenty-five years requested. With nary a word, Errol deviated, took an empty wine glass from the slate tiled floor at her side over to the bench beside the refrigerator. He removed a two litre cask and poured some white wine; but he deliberately refrained from actually filling the glass. He handed the half-filled glass to his wife. He turned from her and headed out through the café doors to the vine-covered patio, oblivious to the disdainful look she gave him on seeing the sparsity of its contents. Affronted, she rose from the chaise lounge, went to the refrigerator and filled her glass completely and skolloed it. She laid back down, place an arm over her eyes and shut out the world.

Outside, Errol approached a dilapidated hammock strung on a powder coated metal frame that showed telltale signs of rust where it

rested on the brick pavers –recycled red clinker bricks, laboriously cleaned of their mortar and laid by him and Fran in their enthusiastic years. A similarly paved path led through an expanse of unkempt lawn-come-ground cover that somehow survived beneath the myriad eucalypts and acacias dotted haphazardly about the quarter acre. Here and there were oddments, embellishments such as a concrete pedestal bird bath, dangling terra cotta mobiles and bamboo wind chimes.

He eased himself on to the edge of the hammock and looked about at the unkempt state of the yard. By the boundary fence, nestled beneath a copse of palms of various shapes and sizes, was a dilapidated pond that once housed a turtle, a goldfish or two and a wayward frog. Now it was nothing more than the refuge of mosquitoes, millipedes and earwigs. He would get around to restoring it to its former glory – one day. Not today.

On a small bench beside him was an unglazed clay ashtray, a box of matches, his leather pouch and his pipe. He stoked the brass cone, lit and inhaled. He laid back on the hammock, a somewhat mechanical operation, a natural routine in his life. He gazed at the ornamental vine overhead. The zephyr wafted through the rich green leaves, the variable light creating images that danced and flittered. Slowly he immersed himself in their choreography. For a moment.

“We’ll have to leave in a couple of hours don’t forget,” interrupted Fran, poking her head out through the café doors.

He roused himself, sighed inwardly, simply nodded his head and muttered:

“Uh-huh.”

She closed the door behind her leaving him to live his own life as he would: as he had done for the past seven years in fact, during which period Errol had wandered high and low through the ever undulating pastures of the mind. He sought not solace, not escape, nor retribution but mere consideration. From whom, however, he could not determine.

He was not convinced there was an answer. There was no doer of wrong against him as such, no dictate from above that he dared not obey, no comforting angel that offered false comfort, nor unfettered morality that fashions the conscience. Yet he knew that one day he would come face to face with his spirit in whatever form it might choose at the time. But now was not the time. Beneath the shade of the vine the heat of the late afternoon seemed to subsume him and he soon divorced himself from the conscious world.

ANOTHER bluestone villa and the summer heat had mellowed slightly as the day dissolved into night. It made for a congenial corroboree as various groups of people lingered and chatted beneath the shade sails of an architecturally designed entertainment area.

The sandstone paved area, gracefully illuminated by low voltage garden lights strategically placed within the manicured shrubs around its border, merged with an ample spread of lawn on which a few children played innocently beneath southern skies.

Errol, now suitably groomed and attired for the occasion in cream linen slacks, plaited huarcachi sandals and black designer T-shirt, occupied himself with an attractive woman, Sheree, a few years his junior. Her mass of auburn hair, pulled back on her forehead by a delicate silk bandanna, draped to the back of her shoulders so that the pale, freckled skin of her neck could take advantage of any cooling breeze. Her minimal make-up, her subtle coral earrings, cool green dress that was indeed little more than an underslip, her single strap low heeled open shoes and the hint of van Cleef & Arpel's eau de parfum gave her an air of a sophisticated hippie daughter of the intelligentsia. There was no doubting that Errol was smitten by her.

But something else in that magical moment seemed to compete for Errol's attention. He breathed the mid-summer night's air with due approbation as a joint was passed to Sheree from another small group

occupying the patio. With nary a nod of acknowledgement she took the reefer and partook before passing it to Errol. He was more sociable and with a smile and a nod indicated his approval to the other group as he took a more than generous toke. As he and Sheree exhaled simultaneously with a sensuous gleam in their eyes, another male, Gareth, arrived with a fresh glass of wine for Sheree. Errol acknowledged Gareth more as an annoying intrusion than as a friend, especially when he put his arm around Sheree. He noticed that there was total indifference in this manoeuvre; she certainly showed no sign of personal comfort or otherwise – it seemed to be an act simply for the social occasion.

Not wishing to become too socially involved, and knowing that this intruder did not indulge in marijuana, Errol moved across to return the reefer to the other group.

“So,” Gareth challenged Errol in a voice loud enough to retain the attention of the neighbouring party-goers. “Another year coming up, eh? You’d just about be ready for retirement by now, eh?” Gareth’s lack of tact and lack of finesse was a sore point for Errol. But he was able to disguise his annoyance well enough.

“We’ll see, Gareth. You know me. Always on the lookout for talent...to nurture,” returned Errol, looking carnally at Sheree. Had Gareth not been present she might well have responded for she had, over the past few years, been to a few gatherings at which Errol had been present and she had regarded him as a possible relief from her boorish husband, even if she valued Fran’s friendship most highly.

“So, you heard about the two old dears talking over the fence,” Gareth continued, oblivious to his wife’s flirtation, “and one of them says to the other how she had a hell of a time getting her son out of bed, wouldn’t get dressed, wouldn’t have breakfast, forgot his lunch... just did not want to go back to school. *Oh really?* says the other old dear and then the first old dear says, *Yeah, don’t know why –*”

“– *he ever became a teacher!!* Yeah yeah,” interrupted Errol. How many times, he thought to himself, had he heard this? And each time it was from an equally boorish dolt like Gareth!

There were polite, accommodating chuckles all round as Sheree smiled insincerely at her husband. But it was patently obvious to all but Gareth that Errol's smile was feigned.

This was not really the sort of social intercourse that appealed to Errol. He held his palms up in mock surrender. “I’d better check on that lovely wife of mine,” he excused himself and darting a lascivious wink to Sheree, he moved away from the group and headed through the café doors into the kitchen of the well-appointed house.

Here a mass of party-goers vied for attention as they debated among themselves the pros and cons of universities marketing themselves to foreign, fee-paying students. It was a topic about which Errol was passionate. But these people were all total strangers to him and he was inclined to maintain that status quo. He smiled apologetically and quite sincerely to individuals as he wended his way through them, stopping briefly at the stainless steel island work-bench in the midst of the miscellany to savour some hors d’œuvre set there.

In the few minutes since his session with Sheree he had now become aware of the aesthetic as well as the gastronomic appeal of the selection of food before him and he indulged himself accordingly. As he nibbled he felt his body start to subtly move in sympathy with the music he could detect coming from within an adjacent lounge room – the gentle pulse of the academic, pleasing fusion jazz, not too upbeat, simple keyboard, alto sax, drums. Then quite whimsically, with his appetite magically sated, he drifted from the current debate to the source of the music.

The kitchen led into a casual dining recess and going through this, Errol entered the formal lounge that doubled as a gallery of original Australian artists. On the wall opposite one in particular sang to him –

or did he taste it? In the style of Jeffrey Smart, a streetscape depicted a row of shops in a Vietnamese populated suburb in Australia. Something about the Vietnamese. He viewed it a moment from his station but he found he could not approach it further. Whether it was due to an inner reluctance or the fact that in this room were as many people as in the kitchen, making it difficult to move, was irrelevant to Errol. It was all part of his drifting.

He drifted past Fran in a serious discussion with a group of academic-types. Their eyes met briefly and she appraised him a moment. It was not her drug of choice. He showed no inclination to join her in her socialising.

The fact of the matter was that he was attending this function purely out of a sense of politeness. He was oblivious to the identity of the host even though most of those assembled with Fran knew of Errol. But that suited him. It was a warm night, he was feeling comfortable and slightly euphoric and he had no complaints. He was content to let the magic carpet take him through the night.

It took him into a smaller informal family room a teenage girl with a mobile phone to her ear accompanied a slightly younger lad watching television. Errol flopped himself into a vacant lounge chair without acknowledging them. It was most comfortable, a Khai Liew design. He stared at the television with glazed eyes... occupying a vacant lot waiting for the appropriate development. And the girl and the boy took it all in their stride, he not blinking an eyelid from the television while she continued with her conversation on her phone.

AND SO the night wore on. Conversations were indulged in, polite debates resolved very little, and self-ordained epicureans analysed the subtleties of each morsel consumed and mouthful of wine quaffed. The music changed at the whim of whoever was closest to the sound system. Academia had its share of rebels. For a while rhythmic seventies

classics generated a party atmosphere that enticed young and old alike to depart from their intellectual preoccupations. But by midnight this had subsided into more mellow background jazz. It seemed to be a natural progression in symphony with the body clocks of those politely regarded as middle-age. Guests periodically consulted their watches: perhaps some had other more pressing engagements awaiting; perhaps some were cerebrally exhausted; perhaps some, who had families later in life, had contracts to fulfil with babysitters; or perhaps some were simply bored witless. Regardless, in dribs and drabs, guests offered their congratulations, apologies and even contact details to their hosts and sundry associates and faded from the scene.

Fran looked at her new compact Nokia mobile, checked for any messages and reassured herself of the lateness of the evening. She too approached her hosts, thanked them for a wonderful evening and went in search of her husband. She stood in the doorway from the lounge to the family room. The young lad had not moved from his position in front of the television, which now blurted out adult only music video clips. On the floor in front of him was a selection of snack wrappers and soft drink cans. The teenage girl was now cuddled into a scruffy looking youth on the sofa.

And Errol was just stirring from his slumbers.

“I’m driving am I?” came the rhetorical question Fran had muttered on numerous occasions in the last seven years.

He gathered his wits and languidly eased himself from his cosy chair without comment and followed her out of the house, offering to his hosts a courteous nod of appreciation for the evening.

The drive home was uneventful. Errol was fully appreciative of Fran’s competence as a driver, be it her car or his. He had insisted on driving to the party in his Renault rather than in her less ancient BMW which he regarded as too much of a status symbol. She should have known of his motivation. She knew how he regarded status cars like

hers. It was a subtle way in which he could rebel against the general coterie of guests at the party, most of whom he regarded, without blatantly declaring as such, as the parvenu.

As she drove in silence, he drifted into various degrees of somnolence, occasionally opening his window to breathe in the comforting air that was delicately infused with the lemony perfume of eucalypts that grew in the area. He knew he would soon be home and he was grateful for the feeling of *sine-curâ* with which he was endued.

ERROL FLICKED on the light to his studio. He leaned wearily against the paint splotted door jamb with little concern for his cream linen slacks. He stared at the incomplete canvas on the easel. The cannabis had virtually run its course and had arrived at the doldrums of the mind. It was after midnight but he was not yet ready for bed. Void of emotion, he went about packing away his equipment. In the corner behind the door was an old metal storage cabinet in which he virtually shoved the various tubes of paint and other paraphernalia. Alongside this was a small laundry wash-basin that had been crudely installed. But at least it was legal, with its s-bend connected to a pvc pipe leading along the wall to the external wall and to the outside waste system. In the basin were a few old brushes that had been crudely cleaned and left to dry. He chose those that were usable and stowed them in the cabinet, the others he dumped in a plastic garbage bin alongside. From the bottom of the cabinet he retrieved a couple of bed-sheets and placed one over the work in progress and another over a couple of other frames on the floor leaning against the wall. He closed the cabinet doors, dusted his hands, sighed resignedly, flicked off the light and pulled the door firmly shut.

He ambled along the hallway to a door slightly ajar, his sandalled footsteps softened by the carpet runner. Residual light from the hallway softly illuminated Fran already asleep in bed in the darkened room. Errol regarded her a moment, in the manner of a little boy pondering,

unsure of the **destiny (?)** of a final present lying beneath the tree at Christmas time. No certitude was forthcoming and he continued along the hallway toward the front of the house, to the doorway into another room.

He switched off the hallway light and entered his bedroom. He turned on the room's light and turned the dimmer down. He undressed and judiciously stored his clothes in the antique oak wardrobe and slipped his sandals under the double-size brass and iron bed. He turned off the light, slipped into bed and masturbated himself to sleep as he had done on countless nights before.

Chapter Three

AND SO IT WAS that Errol arose alone again on the following Monday morning and prepared himself for the day ahead. His preparation was void of any commitment or enthusiasm; indeed it was routine and mechanical. He knew that there were those, somewhere in the world, who no doubt greeted such an occasion with gusto, with an inordinate enthusiasm and eagerness for what might unfold; those who were determined to make a difference, who embraced an opportunity to take responsibility. Unlike those who were simply charged with such responsibility. He did not despise the former, simply could not identify with them any more. And that seemed to be the gist of the matter – on this morning he could not identify with anything or anyone.

He attended to his ablutions just like any other morning. He was regular. Ever since his mid twenties, he had tempered his consumption, and constitution, with regard to the Buddhist ideal of moderation. He was not a Buddhist, yet his years in their midst had taught him to question the circumstances of his upbringing. What he could not accomplish however was a severance from the carnal aspirations of his upbringing. As he showered in the household's second bathroom, he thought about a possible dalliance with Sheree; but it was a fleeting

fantasy for although it pleased him to know that he was an entity worthy of consideration by a woman who savoured the sensual elements of life, he was pragmatic enough to know that Saturday night flirtations rarely made it past Sunday morning.

His ablutions complete, he sauntered naked along the hallway to his bedroom, his towel draped over his shoulder. He set the towel out over the foot of the bed. Then from a valet chair near the window he selected and donned a pair of knee length Bermuda shorts and a loose fitting floral shirt that had been set out the night before. He slipped on a pair of sturdy sandals reminiscent of southern Californian huarachis from the surfing days of the nineteen sixties and was basically ready to face the day.

He made his way to the kitchen, firstly to the freezer section of the refrigerator from where he took out a doughnut wrapped in clingwrap, and a few slices of frozen wholemeal bread and proceeded to prepare himself a sandwich - his favourite for a warm day - vegemite, cheese and lettuce. He wrapped this in greaseproof paper and placed this with the doughnut inside a plastic bag taken from a cloth swag hanging inside the pantry door. It was the same type of plastic bag that the sliced bread came in. Both he and Fran considered that if food had to come in a plastic bag then the least they could do was to make most use of them. He threw in an apple and a sort of muesli bar. That done he prepared himself some breakfast - a cup of green tea and a bowl of cereal; Weetbix softened with boiling water, a spoonful of sugar and fresh cold milk, a legacy of his childhood. As he sat at the table, Fran, in flimsy cotton happy jacket, entered through the café doors with the morning newspaper still in its protective plastic film wrapping. She made an unconvincing attempt to remove the wrapping.

“D’you want to read this?” she mumbled in a raspy, unexercised voice.

“A quick look if you don’t mind.” She willingly handed it to him and he laboured to find the ending of the protective wrapping; but this morning, as on most other mornings, to no avail and so he resorted to the cruder brute method of rip and see, eventually liberating the paper.

“Just leave it on the table when you’re finished,” Fran said, “I’m going for a shower. What time are you going?”

Errol looked at the wall clock; it was 7:46am.

“Couple of minutes.”

“Leave the door open will you? Let some air in before it gets too hot.”

A maximum temperature in the mid thirties had been forecast and already the brilliant azure sky of early morning was beginning to take on the hoary haze of another scorcher. The classic bluestone villa, with its solid foot and a half thick masonry walls, was considered ideal for Adelaide’s so-called mediterranean climate. But when first built, no-one took account of the extremes of climate in this ostensibly desert environment. When the walls cooled in winter the house took on the chill of the mediæval monastery; and when they baked in the summer sun it became nothing short of a sweltering torture hut in a Japanese POW camp. The cooling gully breezes that were drawn down from the not too distant foothills sometimes brought a modicum of respite in the evenings... and, if you were lucky, in the early morning.

He nodded in the affirmative as she sauntered off to her bedroom and the en suite. He turned his attention to the newspaper and, referring to the publisher of the newspaper, muttered sotto voce:

“What does the bastard want me to believe today!” There were only two things he could believe when it came to the tabloids: the name of the publication and the date. He ignored the headlines. He wondered if the day would ever come when a news event would occur which could not be distorted on the front page. He flipped quickly through the pages until he came to the editorial section and read the letters to the

editor while he consumed his breakfast in solitude. This was his moment of solace when he connected with the world while divorced from it.

AS ERROL DROVE once again into the main gates of White Forest Secondary he nearly collided with a group of students in summer uniform loitering with some older miscreant teenagers, former students who had yet to come to grips with the real world. The umbilical cord had not yet been completely severed and the old alma mater still held an appeal, if not security. Errol gave them a disapproving look as they said their farewells, and extinguished the odd cigarette on the footpath before entering the school grounds.

He pulled into his regular parking space as other students, some talking on their mobiles, wandered through oblivious to anything beyond their immediate cocoons. The novelty of the technology was beginning to shackle them and they submitted unconsciously to the new emerging regime – it was no longer the exclusive province of the upwardly mobile junior executive class. Unlike his arrival a few days earlier Errol found himself in different circumstances, circumstances that precluded introspection. Things were happening around him; a process had commenced and he was part of it, voluntarily or otherwise. It was as if he were overcome by some other drug, some soma that pervaded the morning air. There seemed to be a new set of parameters that determined not only his actions but also his attitude. He assumed a new persona. Or rather, another persona that had long inhabited him seemed to exert its presence. He grabbed his satchel and exited his car and looked up to see various other teachers arriving. He caught a glimpse of Céline stepping out of a vehicle and regarded her a moment as an artist might view a possible subject for study. His moment of solace was interrupted by a directive called by a less than authoritative voice.

“You students use the paths. You’re not to shortcut through the car park – especially you senior students. You should know better!”

Some of the students complied but most didn’t give a damn as they issued various abusive mumblings and simply continued on their merry way.

Errol shook his head sympathetically at Graham Hadlin, the Deputy Principal, and his vain attempt to regulate the movement of the students. Aged sixty, here was a teacher who for many years had been regarded as a professional in the truest sense of the term, whose workday over the years had typically begun at seven in the morning and not finished until ten o’clock that night. He had always been ready to lend a sympathetic ear to the students and their problems which, just as often as not, were personal rather than, in the strictest sense, professional. But over the years those who knew him well considered that he had lost his touch. They put it down to a natural degeneration of the fundamental esse of the professional teacher. There was nothing wrong with that; not an issue. And although he maintained a semblance of enthusiasm and commitment, his outward personality belied the fact that he was a prime candidate for a breakdown, possible stress leave and probable early retirement.

Errol was not so forgiving with the insubordinate students.

“You heard!” he blasted them. “Let’s not make life miserable on our first day, eh fellas.”

It was not so much a threat as a declaration of common sense which the students were mature enough to understand. Although not happy, they complied and made their way out of the car park to the designated walkways.

Céline was duly impressed with the proceedings but said nothing as she made her way toward the administration building.

Hadlin added his coda to Errol's comments:

“And make your way to the gym when the siren sounds, okay?”

