

About the Author

Dave Thompson is a part-time author and full-time company director. Together with his wife Nina, he runs a computer service company in their hometown of Christchurch, New Zealand.

He is the author of the book, Computer Kung-Fu for Beginners.

How Far is Home

By Dave Thompson

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction, and, as such, any similarity to any event or events, or person, living or dead, unless specifically mentioned and therefore intended, is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgments

This book comes from the kernel of a story I carried around in my head for over twenty years. I finally sat down and put pen to paper (figuratively; the book was written on my trusty laptop) in August 2005. I finally finished it in August 2007. I must therefore thank my wife Nina for her support during this period and apologise for the frequent, vacant stares and long nights ignoring her while I sat in the other room, hammering away on my keyboard.

I would also like to thank Anton Jenner, for objectively casting his educated eye over the manuscript; I know it took way too much time from your already insane schedule.

Thanks to Jim Wilson for providing endless inspiration with all things military (and other things as well; you know what they are).

Dave Thompson
Trogir, Croatia.
August, 2007

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all of the millions of heroes who ever fought for peace, no matter which side they were on.

Part One

Recently Over Auckland

Baker silently cursed, checked his watch and logged the call in at 4.12 a.m. He was dog-tired, and so were the crew; they had already been airborne for hours assisting on a S & R over the Tasman and were running low on fuel. He sighed and turned and looked over at Coop, the flight's navigator, and in the pale green glow of the avionics saw he felt the same. Twisting in his seat, he checked with Hogan, the observer. Hogan raised his eyebrows and shrugged; work was work.

Baker pushed the intercom button on his stick.

'OK,' his voice sounded thin and full of static in their headsets, 'let's do this and go home, eh?'

Two clicks from each of the crew acknowledged his transmission and Baker pushed gently on the cyclic, the chopper banking as it changed course onto a new heading toward South Auckland.

As they started their descent to a more suitable altitude for vehicle pursuit Cooper leaned forward in his straps and ran his fingers over various switches and knobs on the console, carrying out flight checks on the FLIR; they were probably going to need it. The offender was most likely a car thief who would pull over and leg it when he either ran out of road or lost control of the vehicle. He could run all he wanted but he couldn't hide from their infra-red sensors. In the cabin behind Baker and Cooper, Hogan did the same and readied the side-mounted NightSun spotlight. That done, he settled back and closed his eyes, enjoying the sensations of the natural rhythm and subtle attitude changes of the aircraft, allowing his tired mind to rest. After a few minutes, a burst of static brought him back to the job at hand and he checked his harness before leaning far out of the open door, the slipstream tearing at his

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flight suit and helmet as he peered into the nightscape below. He was soon rewarded.

'I got him!' Hogan called over the intercom. 'Two o'clock and moving fast west on Neillson'.

'Roger that.' Baker responded and pushed forward and right on the stick, sending the bird into a shallow dive in the direction Hogan indicated. 'Yep, there he is. Jesus, he must be doing at least one-sixty, huh?'

'Yeah, he's going for it.' Coop this time. 'No need for the FLIR at this stage, Sarge.'

'Roger Coop,' Baker answered. 'Ian, you ready to get a lock?'

'No worries Sarge,' Hogan replied through the static, 'just put me on top and I'll do the rest.'

Below and ahead they could make out the darkened car racing through the empty streets, a police cruiser with all lights blazing trying to stay with it. They could also see several other police vehicles, their blue flashing lights visible for kilometres, heading in from different directions across the dense cityscape to support the pursuit. The chopper crew monitored ground communications and through the chatter they could hear the adrenaline-charged excitement in the chase-car driver's voice, all eyes watching as the police vehicle careered precariously through the tight suburban streets.

Coop shook his head: 'That's Maynard driving. He aint gonna make it.'

'Twenty bucks?' Hogan questioned.

'Sucker's bet.' Baker cut in, 'I'll take your money.'

They flew at a distance and watched. As if on cue, the cruiser failed to take a bend and ploughed through a fence into in a yard, wheels churning earth and lawn before finally regaining the road and continuing the chase, now far behind its quarry.

'How much is that you owe me now?' Baker asked as he twisted open the throttle and pushed forward on the cyclic, the AeroSpatiale Twinstar diving into position and easily

matching the car's speed.

The question went unanswered as the NightSun suddenly illuminated the scene below. At the centre of the 30 million candle-power circle of light the dark car raced through the night. Suddenly, it disappeared forward out of the beam.

'Shit, what the hell happened there?' Baker asked. 'Wait, there he is,' he answered his own question as he pulled more pitch and accelerated harder. 'The crazy bugger must be doing over two-hundred now. This could all go tits-up in a hurry.'

'Get me back on top Sarge,' Hogan complained through the headphones, 'I can't get a lock from this angle'.

'He's using nitrous I reckon,' Coop chimed in, 'see the flame out the exhaust? Don't worry, he won't be able to keep that pace up for long, the engine'll blow to bits.'

'He's close to home then,' Baker replied, putting them back over the car, 'and I reckon I know where he's going.'

The car hurtled on through the now light-washed streets with the chopper flying directly overhead before abruptly braking and turning hard into a cul-de-sac.

'Yep, that's a mistake. We got him,' Coop exclaimed, reaching for the FLIR controls.

'No need, Coop,' Baker interrupted, watching as the car roared onto a property at the end and disappeared from view under what looked like a large car port.

Baker silently congratulated himself; he'd been right. He fiddled with a couple of knobs to change radio frequencies.

'Central, this is Skyhawk One. We have a location on that offender for you,' he called in as he hovered sideways, circling the garage, trying to find a position that allowed the NightSun to penetrate the darkness beneath, the chopper's rotor wash stirring thick grey swirls of hot tyre and engine smoke up into the frigid early morning air.

Greece, 1941

It had been raining for three weeks solid. Not just rained; poured, as if all the water in the world was being dumped onto this single place on earth, twenty-four hours a day. The ground had long ago turned to mud; not the shallow annoying-in-the-way-it-got-on-your-pants-and-shoes mud but the deep, stinking, black and thick kind that tried to suck the boots off your feet and your soul from your body. The quagmire made any kind of travel all but impossible; horses broke legs in it, carriage and caisson sank hopelessly and irretrievably to the axles in it and even men could barely traverse it. Thousands of infantry soldiers hunkered down and made their home in it as best they could as the great allied war machine ground to a halt around them. The fetid muck got into their hair, their food, their teeth, their backsides and their very hearts; there was no way to escape it. Many ruefully recalled the hot, dry heat of the training camps in Egypt and how they had cursed the sand, the wind and God and the army for sending them there; now they would trade places in a second. Everything was out of whack; more men were being sent to the rear with trench foot than injuries received in combat. It was impossible to keep any part of their bodies dry. Any little sore or blister soon became a putrid and infected mess requiring immediate medical attention. Less obvious, but just as debilitating, was the constant noise of the rain, an incessant white-noise dissonance that effectively masked the sound of everything from the distant guns to an enemy advance. A whole battalion could approach their position blowing trumpets and not be heard. There could be no normal conversation, only yelled exchanges when absolutely necessary, the men's voices barely cutting through the din. The relentless hiss made life in the trenches that much more

intolerable. Those familiar with such things said the constant artillery fire was doing something to the clouds, creating the rain.

Dobby shifted his 6-foot frame from one uncomfortable posture to another, his sopping-wet clothes suddenly cold again against his skin, causing him to shiver. He pulled his helmet lower and his thoughts turned again to the rain; as much as he tried to think about something else, it always came back to this. It certainly didn't feel like the rain back home; this lot felt heavy and dirty as if it consisted of more than just water and gravity. Perhaps it also harboured the misery and despondency they all felt, hidden there somewhere between the fat, grimy droplets. Some of the men complained out loud, mostly the newer blokes who had just shipped in. To Dobby the rain seemed the perfect excuse to allow a man keep his opinions to himself. Peering through the grey deluge, he was surprised how something as simple as rain could break a man's spirit; after all, he had been soaked to the skin enough times in his line of work. Once he got that wet, more water didn't really matter a damn. This had to be more than that, it had to go deeper.

Fighting a war in these conditions was not only folly and unworkable, it merely added another burden onto men who already had more than enough to deal with. Dobby and the other old salts just got on with it, knowing that there lay a lot more ahead to bully about than mud and rain. After all, it wouldn't rain forever. Some day all-too-soon the sun would break through the clouds, which would lift the men's spirits but also signal a resumption of the madness. Dobby didn't want to think about that either.

In some bizarre way he had gotten used to it. Maybe it was just part of his brain not registering the fact that he was constantly soaked through, cold and filthy; some kind of built-in protection mechanism, the same way you don't hear a

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ticking clock after a while. He had lived in this hole in the ground for two months, some godforsaken place dug into the side of a mountain somewhere in Greece. It was a life lived constantly bent over; you couldn't stand for fear of a sniper's round. Now even moving along the trench-line was such an effort that most just stayed where they were, lying down to sleep on a muddy, rain-soaked poncho mattress and sitting up again when they woke, struggling along the line to the few 'official' latrines if they could. Most of the blokes didn't bother, pissing in their helmets and throwing the contents over the lip of the trench. At least they were chucking something at the Germans. Any other business was done into a newly dug hole in the mud while the rest of the lads looked away. Once covered it was life as normal. It beat getting your head blown off. Toilet paper was more valuable than gold here, and the men went to enormous lengths to keep it safe and dry. Dobby had heard stories of men being seriously injured while trying to 'borrow' someone else's stash but he hadn't seen anyone desperate enough around here... yet. He was sure the top brass kept their heads dry, wherever the hell they were sitting this weather out, and he wagered they also had a pot to piss in, so to speak.

Over the years he had heard bits and pieces about Greece and the exotic Greek Islands; he had seen photographs in magazines; beautiful bleached stone houses bunched together, separated only by quaint cobbled streets. The villages in the photographs were always bathed in never-ending sunshine, the sparkling clear blue waters of the Mediterranean providing a sensuous backdrop. Looking around here, he barely believed those places were part of the same country. No point in getting too excited about it; word had it that the Germans were massing for an assault so the allied forces would be moving out soon anyway, probably off to some other wet and filthy hole in the ground. Quietly, Dobby hoped that was the case, at

least they might see some action; even with the probability of getting killed it was better than more of this interminable bloody waiting.

Hurry up and wait -- the catch call of the soldier, he mused as he stared out through the rain, that's what war is these days. All they did was wait; for the enemy, for action, for death, for redemption; anything at all to break the brain-buggering monotony of doing nothing. Some men went mad, not only because of their fear, but because of the endless periods of doing nothing. It gave them too much time to think, and some men didn't want to think any more. It tore them apart, that and the lack of control over their own fate. Most who succumbed to trench madness and shell shock would have been fine if only they could have chosen when to fight and when to wait. Not knowing what was going on literally killed some of them; more than a few had eaten their rifle barrels after their dark thoughts finally succeeded in eroding what little remained of their courage. Those that didn't take matters into their own hands were carried away; some screaming, some gibbering and some horribly silent and staring, taken where their terrible cries in the night couldn't be heard; somewhere their fears were someone else's responsibility. He had only seen a few of those blokes return to the lines, most shadows of their former selves and, in his opinion, still not ready for a return to duty; he assumed the rest were shipped home to suffer their fates and their demons alone, most likely for the rest of their lives.

Faces drifted past Dobby's eyes as he sat puffing on a damp cigarette, doing his best to keep the coarse tobacco alight and away from the downpour. Men moving up and down the line, going somewhere, going nowhere. Empty faces; half hidden under steel helmets, surreal, floating on air, already memories. Closing his eyes he could see them now, names etched in stone on small-town memorials all over the world, known only to

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those who watched them march off to war all those days, months and years ago. Forgotten men, brothers, fathers and sons, now only alive in sepia photographs and the in hearts of those who lost them; casualties of war. How often had he seen the lists of names on memorials to the Great War in his travels around Southland? Seeing these men now and reconciling them with names on some future memorial put him in an even darker mood. Would his name be there one day? Would some other young man gaze upon an inscription in marble and wonder who this fellow was, what he was like? Dobby lit another cigarette and tried not to dwell on it. He half-considered having another go at shaving; the lieutenant had warned the men they would be on a charge if he came by again and found any of them unshaven.

'Fat bloody chance' the men had griped, 'we won't see that jumped up little prick around here again until the rain stops; he might get his bloody boots dirty.' It seemed ridiculous that the men were filthy, hungry and soaked through, yet somewhere in the rear, in the warm and dry surroundings of a commandeered country estate, some General or other had issued orders to have the men be clean shaven and presentable at all times. What good would that do? Make them better looking corpses? Bloody hell! Still, Dobby had other, deeper reasons for the apparent disobedience of a direct order. The last time he shaved, or tried to, he had literally dropped the razor in shock, barely recognising the old man staring out at him from the bully-tin mirror. With trembling hands, he recovered his razor from the mud and stole another look. The pale blue eyes were the same but there was a darkness behind them now. His suntanned skin was now pasty white and he noticed deep lines and bags around his eyes he knew weren't there the last time he looked. His dark-brown hair was already turning grey at the temples and his mouth was now turned down at the corners, where before he had always worn a half-

grin that gave him the appearance of being happy and contented. The face he saw now looked angry, sad and lost. How was it possible that he had changed so much in so little time? It wasn't that long ago that he was a young, strong and virile shepherd, fresh from the antipodes; now he was an old man, a shadow of his former self.

He again set about having a shave, something that was once a routine chore, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to drag the blade across his face. His brain was sending the orders, but his hands weren't receiving them. The more he tried, the more his fear was that if he started, he wouldn't be able to stop; he would keep scraping the blade over and over, harder and harder, trying to erase that old man's stare, the stench of death from his skin and the horrors of what he had seen. He feared that he would never feel clean again, he would never be free from those terrible things and no amount of grooming or scrubbing would remove them. He had put his kit back where he found it and with shaking hands held a match to a cigarette, dragging long and hard on the smoke. Calming. Shaving could wait. Bugger the lieutenant, what was he going to do? Make him stand in the rain longer than he has already? Have him shot? At least that would be bloody interesting. Dobby smoked and peered through the torrent at the darkening sky and let his mind wander.

He is a long way from the golden fields of Otago, where it seems a lifetime ago he was droving sheep on horseback through the back country stations. There it often went months without a spot of rain. His only real worry back then was whether Sharon Harper would choose him, or Jock Moffett. Sharon would be the ideal farmer's wife; wide open smile, child-bearing hips and a bosom to match. She could work all day in the fields grubbing tussock and slinging stock over fences with the best of the men and still come home and throw together a delicious roast for the lads. Sure, Jock was taller and

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better looking in a rugged kind of way, he had a motorcar and was due to inherit a huge block of land somewhere up Kurow way but he pulled some stunt to avoid coming over here and Dobby hoped that Sharon would him for what he was; a bloody coward. Dobby and ten of his mates had all joined the line that September day at the recruiting station, which in this case was a table set up at Blake's Pub in Naseby. The army blokes behind the desk asked them a few questions, wrote things down and gave them some papers to fill out. Two of those gathered were rejected for being only fourteen years old, boys really, in men's skins. One other was turned down because he was fifty one; he had served with distinction in The Great War and although he protested bitterly, pointing out that the army needed experienced men, he was bluntly informed that the local volunteer force would be grateful to accept a man of such calibre.

Dobby was eighteen, but looked older because of his years of hard work on the stations; he listed his age as twenty one, the minimum age for volunteers, and though the man at first looked sceptical, he was not questioned further. Still, there was no doubt in his mind of not going; his dad had soldiered in The Great War and his Grandfather had fought in the Boer War so it seemed the natural thing for Dobby to do. When the call came for able bodied men, people from all over the country answered. Some enlisted because they wanted adventure, a way out of the boredom and solitude of farming life. Some wanted an excuse to start a new life somewhere else, to leave behind a nagging spouse, a criminal past or inconvenient 'social' situation with one of the young lasses in the district. Some, like Dobby, followed the news reports and knew there was a job to be done and simply wanted to go and help do it. He believed a dark cloud was indeed building over Europe and he wanted to do what he could, what he felt he was expected to do. He later heard someone claim that by the

end of the day nearly five and a half thousand men from all over the country signed up to do their duty. Looking back, he wished the man behind the desk had been able to show him what was really waiting here for him, but now he realised that unless a bloke lives and breathes it, the idea of war and its hidden horrors cannot be adequately explained to someone who hasn't. Tell a man that there will be killing and horror beyond imagination and nine times out of ten he still wants to go anyway. Morbid fascination? The irresistible temptations of sterile boyhood adventure fantasies? The ever-present thought that "it won't happen to me?" Or perhaps the need to prove to himself that he is a man and not just a wet-behind-the-ears colonial boy. Dobby had seen his fair share of blood and guts around the farm. He had cut sheep's throats, shot rabbits, wallabies and deer, skinned and gutted them, up to his elbows in gore. He'd reasoned how much different it could be. Dobby had since discovered it was very different; very different indeed.

He had shipped out with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary force a few months later, bound for the Middle East of all places. It had all seemed like a big party, the farewells at the wharf, the months on the boat, the daily drills they practised and the games and camaraderie they shared on the journey. The war was all so far away, and they were told it might even be all over before they got there. Now he had seen things he had never dreamed of, or had nightmares of. From the endless sand dunes and pyramids in the Valley of the Kings, and the seedy bars with their cheap, chubby and toothless whores in the back streets of Cairo to the corpses of men and beast shattered, rent and mutilated in every conceivable way on the battlefield, his life opened up in many ways. He didn't know now whether he would still come to war if he knew the true colour of what lay ahead, and he didn't waste much time thinking about it anymore. He was

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here now, and the job to do was even more important than it was back then, so he consciously made the decision to knuckle down and do it. It seemed such a long time ago when he and the others laughed a little too loudly and looked at each other nervously over a congratulatory jug or two at Blake's, he now realised it was a lifetime ago.

Dobby lit another cigarette and watched the rain. The world in front of his eyes was devoid of colour; black and white, like the cine news reels he used to watch when he went to the flicks in town with Sharon. Heavily sanitised for the masses, images from the front lines showed smiling soldiers drinking mugs of tea, thumbs up to the camera while the announcer told the audience it would be over by Christmas; that our boys had Jerry on the run and had given him a jolly good thumping and a black eye to boot. How many months ago was that? He couldn't remember; he'd lost track of time. He flicked his cigarette butt into the black water at his feet where it disappeared with a faint hiss. A shiver went down his spine and he instinctively pulled his soaking poncho tighter. His thoughts turned to his survival, which he now considered to be a spurious mix of fortitude, superstition and pure dumb luck. The bravest of men were cut down by a piece of metal no bigger than a fingernail; the luckiest remained standing untouched through the fiercest blizzards of steel and lead. Who can tell when the very spot they occupy on earth at any given moment won't be intersected by a shell, bullet or any of the thousand other harbingers of death on a battlefield? In this respect it would seem luck (or fate, as Dobby was beginning to believe) played a large part in one's survival. But that in itself is a conundrum. What a person does in action can affect his immediate future. Who's to say that taking that step to the left or clinging to the ground like it was your mother's breast will put you into, or out of, harm's way? That step could take you to a buried mine or put you in the unforgiving path of a high

velocity round, or under the lethal umbrella of an air-bursting mortar shell. Staying put might do the same. What about running like a lunatic, zigzagging over the battlefield? They say moving targets are harder to hit, but what if he ran into danger instead of out of it? Dodging raindrops. Dodging death. Getting wet. Getting dead. Getting horribly and grotesquely and disgustingly dead. That's what really did his head in. Dobby stretched out his aching legs and took a swig of water, almost spitting it out. He couldn't decide what was worse; the metallic taste from the canteen or the chemicals they put in the water to purify it. At least it helped clear some of the darkness from his mind.

Luck or fate? The eternal question. He knew a few of the lads relied on a charm of some kind, maybe a lucky button, four-leaf clover or rabbit's foot. Some wore garments, like a scarf or, in one case he heard of, the same underpants for months; believing it made them lucky - or at least more lucky than not. Others just 'knew' they weren't going to cop one. Every squad has one of these blokes and sometimes other men unconsciously stay close to them, hoping some of that invulnerability rubs off on them. Dobby recalled ruefully that many of those 'lucky' lads ended up just as bloody dead anyway, along with their retinue. There was so much death that to escape it would be a miracle; to escape the war unscathed was looking impossible. He had heard the other blokes claiming you don't hear the bullet that gets you, but who really knows? The dead aren't telling. Most of the lads who had been around a while, Dobby included, just got up and went, crouching and running to minimise the chances of getting hit. He would never forget the bullying voice of RSM Sandy Taylor screaming advice to them during basic training in the desert:

"All right you pack of useless bastards! Listen hard and remember what I'm telling you! Move quickly, stay low and

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take full advantage of any available cover, or every one of you fucking ladies will be dead before you take one fucking step!" Dobby had listened; and learnt. He recalled the boys' comics he used to read as a child and their popular images of a soldier, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, square jaw firmly clenched on a cigar, firing his gun while standing in full view of the charging enemy. After seeing action he reckoned someone would have to be either bloody desperate or a complete fool to break cover like that during a battle; they would be literally cut to pieces in seconds.

Bloody propaganda. Dobby wondered why anyone in their right mind would want to glorify this complete and utter stupidity in the first place. The more he thought about it the more he knew why; if mothers knew what it was really like, they would never allow their sons go to war. The hardest of generals can deal with men but Dobby wagered none would want to take on a million irate mothers.

'Bloody mongrels,' he grumbled out loud as he lit another cigarette and stared up through the rain to the darkening sky.

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The sound of the gravel crunching under his rubber-soled boots seemed louder than it actually was; the stillness of the night and his proximity to an iron fence had the effect of amplifying any sound he made. It was cold but at least it wasn't raining. While it makes for good cover, Nudge disliked getting wet. As he made his way he looked up at the stars and briefly wondered, as he often did, what really was out there. Other life forms? How far did it go? Putting the thoughts out of his mind, he shivered, zipped up his jacket to the top and pressed on into the shadows. The noise didn't worry him unduly because this path led through a cemetery and there was no-one to hear it except the dead. Still, he tried to walk as quietly as possible, no point in being sloppy and needlessly attracting attention to himself. In the weak light he could make out some of the inscriptions on headstones nearest the path. Most were faded by time and weather into illegibility. He could tell some were soldier's graves from World War Two by the rows of simple but elegant grave markers; others were just your run-of-the-mill garish and ostentatious monuments. One small stone in particular stood out, bathed in the soft moonlight and seemingly meant for him to notice. It read:

*Remember me as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, so you shall be
So be prepared to follow me.*

Nudge paused, struck by the simplicity and inevitability of the epitaph. It gave him cause to think. Compared to the other members of his 'family' he was well read. He was no bush philosopher but he enjoyed books and regretted the fact that

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he didn't get much time these days to catch up on his reading. A lifetime ago, in those idle times at school, he had gone to the library and read as many books as he could, captivated by the words and their power. It amazed him how a few simple lines of script could spark his imagination into creating the most vivid worlds in his mind. His father, however, regarded Nudge's interest in books as pansy bullshit, not a fitting pastime for a man, and on many an occasion when worse for drink had made his feelings known with his fists or anything else close to hand. Nudge shook his head as if to physically remove the memory from his brain. In his present life it didn't do well to have the others know about this side of him. He drew a deep breath, the cold air clearing his mind, and concentrated on the task at hand.

Houses bordered the cemetery on each side, and ahead was a school, and it was from that point on he had to be careful. All it would take is some fruit-loop walking their dog at 3.45 a.m. to spoil his night. Or maybe one of those community patrols that are so in vogue now, a couple of elderly 'concerned citizens' cruising the neighbourhood in a car sponsored by some local-boy-made-good car dealer, more for marketing than civic duty, busting teens for just hanging out, furtively smoking their first cigarettes or clumsily fumbling with each other's buttons behind the bike sheds.

'Chumps,' he muttered contemptuously under his breath. Stepping off the path onto the widening grass verge beside the fence, he welcomed the lighter tread of the damp turf. He came to a point where the iron fence met one that separated the school grounds from the cemetery and silently vaulted it in an easy, practised move. Dropping to a crouch on the other side, he scanned the area in front of him. His target for tonight lay to the right, out of view beyond the school buildings and across the road. To the left, a children's play area in the school grounds, near the beginning of the street. Swings and rocking

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horse were now dew coated cold metal, grey and silent in the frigid air, as unfriendly as prison bars when seen without their brightly coloured paint and decorations. Straight ahead, the road stretched from the left end of the grounds to the buildings on the right. Houses, dark and brooding, occupied the far side of the street. Staying in the shadows, Nudge moved carefully to his right along the fence line until he came to the courts. There was no cover here at all and he would be visible to anyone on the street or in the houses. He waited, his breathing slow; the small wafts of steam catching the moonlight in the darkness before dissolving into the air. Keeping low, he half ran across the concrete, staying quiet. What a strangely funny site he would have made should he have been observed, a hard man like him tip-toeing across the pavement. He made it to the corner of the school gym. Plenty of cover from here among the various buildings. Sticking to the path, he worked his way through the school until at last he reached the edge of the school property. Across the road and down to his right lay his target, a local chemist shop, the middle store in a block so typical of the suburbs. Glancing left and right from the cover of the building, he checked the way was clear and furtively crossed the road.

As he made his way, his thoughts turned to why he was here tonight. In the old days, the gangs relied on selling heroin, dope, stolen property and breaking down the odd car into saleable parts to survive. Plus, there were lucrative labouring contracts to be had if you knew the right people. The council would hire gangs to build fences, or clear land, and would pay them way more than a 'legit' contractor would get for doing the same work. Nudge had often wondered how that worked and one day he overheard the elders talking about it. The government made a lot of funding available for Maori social and employment development programmes, and with extended family members working within the administration

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it wasn't difficult to apply for, and be granted, large sums of money for these reasons. All the dough went straight into the gang coffers. As long as the fence was built or the land cleared, nobody asked any questions. Until recently, when some upstart politician from up north started digging into the schemes and finding things he shouldn't. No amount of pressure from internal or 'external' lobby groups could stop his crusade. Now it was a lot harder. The money was still there but to get it you had to be a lot sharper, have good legal backing and someone untouchable on the inside. The latter was a lot harder these days; many departments were purged of people with the slimmest of connections to the gangs. The odd person still got caught out, but they were stupid; too obvious; busted after being seen driving brand new cars, having expensive cosmetic surgery on the taxpayer or taking around-the-world trips on some ridiculous premise. Not that these people were thrown in jail or had to pay any money back. They may have had to endure the uncomfortable glare of the media spotlight for a few months but episodes like these were soon forgotten; spin doctors saw to that. Even on those rare occasions the affair went all the way to court in most cases legal aid would be granted; the taxpayer again footing the bill. It reminded Nudge of a saying he had heard once;

"An illegal act is only illegal if you are caught doing it."

He smiled at the logic of it and wondered why it was always the same with certain people; as soon as they had money they spent it; booze, cigarettes, the track, cars, bling and other material shit. They could win a million bucks in the lottery tomorrow and be broke in six months.

'Chumps.' he muttered again.

Loss of income from government sources wasn't all the gangs had to deal with. Now Joe Public could buy dope anywhere,

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from schoolyard dealers to the hundreds of growers around the country. And these days the cops were climbing right into organised stolen car and property rings and dishing out relatively heavy penalties. Besides, the margins are nowhere near enough to make them profitable enterprises in this day and age. The big money was in the heroin business, but since the boom days of the seventies and eighties the heroin coming in from every corner of Asia had long since dried up, thanks to global efforts to prevent poppies being grown and aggressive border patrols to stem the flow of raw opium to heroin processing laboratories in Europe. The whole thing became far too hot to handle, with extremely harsh penalties, including death sentences Asian countries were no longer afraid of handing down to white foreigners, and the cops infiltrating every aspect of the gang's business with effective undercover operatives. With stakes that high, it was easier to drop it altogether and diversify into something a little safer. Then along came P, the 'new' heroin. Highly addictive and with a buzz that lasts a very short time, it is the ideal product. Hard core users would get so fucked up on the stuff they would steal, cheat or, in an increasing number of cases, kill to obtain it. Shit like that sells itself. It was also a godsend to organised crime syndicates which were looking for a replacement product and who already had distribution channels in place left over from the heroin days. The drug could be produced easily, by those who know how, in mobile labs small enough to be concealed in the boot of a car. This made it much harder to bust the cooks and easier to move large quantities to the end users. If a lab got busted, another popped up in its place. No more headaches with importation of the stuff either, it was all "home-made". The only downside is that to make it they needed the raw materials, and that's where Nudge came in. In the early days supply of the ingredients was down to 'mules' going around the local pharmacies and buying up off-the-shelf

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cold and flu medicines which were then easily broken down into their base chemicals. It wasn't long before the authorities wised up to this game; as they had done twenty years before when "homebake" heroin made from common painkillers was the scourge of the streets. Skilled at all types of house and shop-breaking, gangster's talents were now in huge demand. They supplied the chemicals, the cooks produced the drug and the gangs took a large percentage of the final product as their 'commission'. The profit margin was over five-thousand percent, making it a lucrative and ever-expanding market, ideal for a gang run operation.

Crossing the road, Nudge slipped into the shadow of a row of shrubs next to the footpath. The chemist shop was less than one-hundred metres away. The night was still and he would have to be careful now as there was no ambient noise to use as cover. He would be going for the back door. He knew there was an alarm, but he was ready for that and the outer door lock is of a type that is easy to defeat, if you know what you are doing. Since the seventies, when increasing drug abuse became a social and economic problem, chemists have been built like Fort Knox and most do not carry any kind of narcotic or sought-after street drug in stock, preferring instead to order it in if a customer presents a prescription. Nudge had inside knowledge that this chemist had today taken delivery of an order of Pseudoephedrine, one of the chemicals used in the making of P. He didn't know why they had it here, and he didn't care; all he knew is that it would be sitting inside there now. The cooks could turn that into one hundred grand's worth of P in a few hours. Well worth the effort, and the risk. Using a small lane which allowed vehicle access to the rear of the buildings, he approached his target. He stepped up to the back door, recessed from the wall in a kind of alcove, just shielded enough from the view around the back of the block of shops. He used a thin, highly flexible aluminium jimmy to

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manipulate and trip the lock. It took less than five seconds from arriving outside the door before he was standing in the back room of the shop, closing and locking the door silently behind him; a loud beeping starting immediately he entered the room. The alarm would go off in fifteen seconds. He didn't hurry, but calmly walked over to the keypad and entered four digits. With a soft double beep, the alarm was disarmed.

Nudge smiled. It's amazing what a grand can buy these days, he mused, glancing quickly outside through the barred window beside the door. Nothing stirred. The safe could be a slightly harder proposition. His source couldn't provide the type or the model so he was going in blind. But now he had to work quickly. That alarm would no doubt be monitored and the security service would have logged the entry into the premises. Not many pharmacists come in to work at 3.50 a.m. and they would probably call to request a security code. The problem being that the phone was in the next room, along with the safe, and there was another locked door between him and that room. Looking up, he saw the transom above the door contained a window with five louvers, the kind that uses a small lever on the side to rotate the panes open and closed. He turned around and found a plastic twenty litre bucket beside the back door with a few mops standing in it. He removed the mops and set the bucket upside down in front of the door. Standing on it, he gently removed the louvers from their frames one by one, gloved fingers leaving no prints as he stacked the glass panes against the wall at the foot of the door. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he sensed a movement outside.

'Fuck!' he hissed under his breath as he leapt to the floor, staying low. Rising enough to peer through the window, he could see the nose of a police cruiser sitting at the curb. A spotlight was playing over the window and the outside of the door, evident by the light showing through the cracks under

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and around the edge. Nudge held his breath and pressed himself into the shadows. The car lingered, and Nudge could now hear the radio squawking inside the car.

'Come on, come on,' he whispered to himself, 'get the fuck out of here.' From the other room, he heard a phone start to ring. 'Fuck fuck fuck fuck!' he silently cursed. He heard the car door open, and a moving form broke the beams of light shining on the other side of the door. Nudge remained pressed into the wall, holding his breath, the muted sound of the phone ringing breaking the stillness. Suddenly, the door rattled as the form on the other side grabbed the handle and gave it a good shake. A beam from a hand-held torch cut through the darkness as it was shone through the window and played back and forth around the interior. Nudge slid further down the wall to a crouching position, deep into the corner of the room. He inwardly cursed and hoped the figure outside would not see the bucket and the louvers stacked beside it. If he did, the night was about to get very fucking interesting. The light flashed a few more times over the back room and disappeared. The phone continued ringing, insistent and unforgiving. Apparently satisfied, the cop returned to his vehicle, said something Nudge couldn't hear to his partner and closed the door. The car moved forward slowly, the spotlight playing over the outside of the building. Eventually, it accelerated away, leaving only silence and the sound of Nudge's heart pounding in his ears.

'Jesus!' Nudge heaved a sigh of relief. After quickly risking another look outside through the window to ease his rising paranoia, he ran and launched off the bucket, easily manoeuvring himself through the space left by the louvers. Dropping to the other side he hit the ground running and snatched the phone from its cradle. 'Good morning, Dowling's Pharmacy, how can I help?' he spoke in his best formal accent, trying to keep the panic from his voice and nervous tension

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from betraying him. He had always been good at voices, often cracking up the boys with his impressions of politicians and movie stars. He put that talent to the test tonight. 'Your five digit security code please, Sir,' demanded the humourless voice at the other end.

'Two, Seven, Three, Three, Nine,' Nudge recited the code given to him by the insider from memory.

'Is everything all right there, Sir?' the voice asked, the question designed to allow someone under duress to release information unknown to an assailant.

'Yes. Everything is fine. I've just come in to work to fill an emergency prescription for one of my customers. I shall be leaving again shortly.' Nudge responded, his voice steady, belying his intense nerves.

'Is there anything else I can help you with?' asked the voice, a faint trace of suspicion.

'No thank you,' Nudge replied, 'it is nice to know there is someone at the other end of the phone in times of need though,' his soft, grateful tone winning over the voice.

'Alright then, Sir,' the voice now satisfied, 'I'll leave you to your work. Have a nice day.' With that, the line went dead.

Momentarily exhausted, Nudge sat on the edge of the desk. He took a minute to calm himself down before getting back to the job at hand. Spotting the safe, he moved over to it and only at this point did he use his micro maglite. The small aluminium torch used a Light Emitting Diode which emitted a soft blue light, which was nowhere near as harsh as "normal" krypton bulbs. He flashed it on for a few seconds to familiarise himself with the make and model of the safe. The light revealed what he thought would be the case, a standard Chubb Drug Safe. He also ran his gloved finger around the entire back edge of the safe, where it met the wall, checking for additional alarm cabling. None. Piece of cake, he thought, switching the light off and slipping it back into his pocket,

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only one six barrel lock. Fortunately there was just enough natural light to enable Nudge to complete his task without the need for another light source. He peeled off his dark jacket, set it to one side and took some items out of the small black canvas bag he always carried with him on such jobs. One of the tools looked like a gun, but with a weird looking device where the barrel would be. He laid it to one side and picked up a small aerosol can of liquid nitrogen, the kind technicians use to troubleshoot electronic equipment. He directed the thin flexible nozzle into the keyhole and squeezed the top of the can. With a faint hissing sound and a small amount of frosty vapour rising, he emptied the entire contents of the can into the lock. Placing the empty can back into his bag, he removed another identical can; that too was emptied into the lock, more clouds of steam rising as the components inside the lock froze to over a hundred degrees below zero. The spent can was also replaced into the bag. Working quickly -- the lock would not stay frozen for long -- he picked up the gun device and inserted the weird-shaped tool into the keyhole, working it in with gentle pressure and small rotating movements. Once firmly seated, he held the tool in place with one hand while turning a knurled steel thumbwheel around the barrel of the device with the other. Inside, the piece now positioned where the key would normally fit was expanding, filling every available space inside the tumblers with small hardened steel pins, the principle similar to those toys you can buy made up from thousands of little pins all bunched together in a sandwich; pressing a hand or object into one side produced a cool looking 3-D form on the opposite side. He grunted slightly as he made the final turn on the thumbwheel. By now the inside of the lock was completely tamped with hardened steel. That done, he picked up his jacket and wrapped it around his hand and the protruding 'gun' with it, stuffing the fabric hard into any gap he found. Once satisfied it was

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completely encased, he pushed as hard as he could and pulled the trigger. A muffled “POP!” broke the silence. It was no louder than the sound of a cork leaving a wine bottle in the next room. He waited, straining for any sound; nothing stirred. He undid the thumbwheel, and with a gentle sideways rocking motion withdrew the device and put it back in the bag. A faint smell of burnt gunpowder wafted past.

God he loved that smell. He closed his eyes and clearly remembered his uncle teaching him to shoot a rifle all those years ago. This was the same smell, the scent of the smokeless black powder used in the hunting ammunition his uncle loaded himself with a special bullet press out in the back shed. Under his uncle’s watchful eye he had enjoyed hitting the tiny detonator caps with a hammer; they always produced a safe yet satisfactorily loud *bang!* He smiled at the recollection. It was not surprising this smelled similar because the lock-breaking tool utilised a blank .22 calibre cartridge as a firing device. The tool was designed by the military for breaking bad-arse locks, and Nudge acquired it through a “friend of a friend of a friend” who was a supply sergeant in the army. It worked by literally demolishing the inside of the lock with the channelled explosive power of the blank round. Once done, all that was needed was to remove the broken pieces of tumbler and barrel, give the rest a bit of a tweak and hopefully the lock would open. Nudge had the vaguest feeling of regret at damaging the lock, though it soon passed; he knew the pharmacist could have it replaced under insurance. Nudge used his next tools, a selection of thin magnetised and non-magnetised rods and tweezers to poke and pry around in the barrel of the lock. He extracted any bits he could find that would adhere to the rods. A few quick sharp taps with a small jeweller’s hammer onto the still frosted barrel dislodged any reluctant remnants still inside. Again using the rods and tweezers he withdrew the last of the broken pieces. His final tool was a standard set of

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locksmith's picks. Looking like Allen wrenches, or bent hairclips, given time a skilled lock man could open any lock that uses a key with these tools. Time was always the problem in work like this, which is why Nudge preferred the gun; it had probably saved him at least thirty minutes. The less time spent inside the better. He expertly fished around inside the broken lock, rotating, pulling and prodding until he heard the soft 'clunk' of the bolts withdrawing. Holding his breath - he loved this part - he pulled the handle on the safe and the door opened smoothly and silently on its hinges to reveal what he knew he would find.

The container of Pseudoephidrine sat inside the safe. Nudge quickly stuffed it into his bag, along with a few other red and white boxes of Morphine Sulphate ampoules that were also in the safe. Sitting on a shelf beside the boxes was a sum of money, which he left behind. He never stole money. The dope could be replaced; the pharmacist would have to stand the loss of the money himself. Nudge was a thief, and a good one, but he wasn't a complete cunt. He packed the remaining tools, stood back and surveyed the scene. Good, nothing left but an open safe. He had taken all the rubbish with him, leaving nothing for the detectives to find. He left the room the way he had come, and replaced the louvers and bucket as he had found them. After re-setting the alarm, he checked the coast was clear and slipped quietly out the back door, locking it behind him and retraced his steps to the school.

His heart beating faster, the rush of the job, he made his way across the school grounds toward the cemetery and his waiting car. He had parked it under an overhanging oak tree at the top end of the graveyard, making it all but invisible to the casual observer. Even a pedestrian walking along the cemetery path would not see it unless they were looking for it. He stopped after taking the fence to the cemetery, crouching in the darkness. Nothing. Not a sound. Fucking lucky tonight, he

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considered. It could have turned out very differently. Still, even with the interruptions he had been in and out in just over fifteen minutes. Sweet as. The way it should be.

Traffic was light. A few shift workers on their way home from work, or perhaps on their way to work.

Fuck that, he thought, the same thing, day after day. People trading their lives for a handful of money. To his mind they were like hamsters on a wheel, blinded to what was really going on. He thought of that scene in that movie, Matrix, where all the people are living in pods, plugged in to a grid while the machine feeds them their reality and feeds on them in return. He shook his head slowly.

'No fucking way is that for me,' he said aloud, as if to convince himself that he had made the right choice. Again he found himself wondering if he was missing something; what couldn't he see that everyone else could. There must be something -- why else would people fucking do it? He had never held a job like that. Well, that wasn't strictly true; once he worked after school at a food processing plant doing menial shit like moving boxes from one place to another. All the guys that worked there had their own thing going, like the forklift driver would 'accidentally' drive into a pallet loaded with various foods. Damaged, they were no good to the company so the workers would get to take it home. The higher the position, the more you got. He had quit after a few months, not because he didn't enjoy the work or the small pay packet each week, but because of the factory floor mentality of the people. No loyalty, no honour among any of them. All of them were too fucking quick to climb over someone else in order to rise up the ladder. Nudge didn't fit in and they didn't like him because of it, so he left. Not long after that he had found a friend in a new guy who had recently moved to the neighbourhood. That friend introduced him to the gang way of life and it had seemed to be everything Nudge was looking for. A sense of family, honour

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and loyalty, the things he most respected were all there waiting for him.

The only thing about travelling at this time of the night (or morning) is that there fewer people on the roads, making what traffic is on the roads more obvious. Nudge found this out the hard way when he ran a red light; there had been nothing else anywhere to be seen on the road so he took the risk. It was a mistake. A police cruiser appeared out of a side street and pulled in behind him; the flashing lights and blip on the siren confirming that they wanted him to pull over.

'Fuck it! he swore out loud, as his heart began pounding in his chest; there was no way he could talk his way out of this one, not with the way he was dressed and the shit he was carrying in the car. Possession of the tools was bad enough, but he would go down for a long time if caught with the crank, even with his clean record.

Cursing himself for being so stupid, he weighed up the odds. The car was a typical gang vehicle; it looked like a complete shitter and because it was made from parts from a dozen other stolen cars it had no papers and a fake registration. However, under the rough exterior was a well maintained and very powerful street racer. Nudge took the only option he thought he had and, after killing his lights, floored the accelerator. The power from the big block V8 threw him back into his seat and the car leapt forward. The police car immediately fired his siren and gave chase. Nudge could imagine the police comm channels were already buzzing with descriptions and locations. He looked around as he drove, ramming the car through the gears and taking bends at speed, assessing the situation. It would take time for the roving patrol cars to get to this part of town, he was only five kilometres from base and the roads were relatively clear. Accelerating hard, engine roaring and tyres protesting, he set a course for home. He could make it.

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The shell impacted and exploded less than twenty yards away, blowing a huge cloud of earth and debris in all directions. Dobby had heard it coming in and instinctively hit the ground and pressed himself in as low as he could, becoming one with the earth. He could tell by the note of the shell how far away it would hit and from experience he knew this would be close, very close. As long as he stayed low he should be safe from the deadly halo of fleshettes and shrapnel. The force of the blast sucked the air out of his lungs and caused an instant high-pitched ringing in his ears, momentarily disorienting him. His world slowed down, silent and surreal; movement leaving streaks across his vision; sounds dull echoes beneath the tinnitus. He lay there for a few seconds, not knowing if he was injured or not as debris rained down on him. All he could think of was breathing and after what seemed like an age he managed to draw a few jagged breaths. The shells were "walking" away from him now, down the line, safely out of range. He felt all over his body, quickly moving his hands to all the important places; everything seemed to be where it should be.

'Jesus Christ!' he gasped. 'That was too bloody close!' Peeking over the rim of the shallow trench he had sought shelter in he could see where the shell had hit. Where a moment ago there had been five men taking cover in an adjacent crater, now there was only a smoking heap of upturned earth. The men had simply vanished. He had seen people blown to pieces before but it still shocked him how little there was left. There was of course something, but the remains were so many, so small and so widespread that they could never be reconciled with the living, breathing bodies they had been only seconds before. How the service accounted for all these casualties

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Dobby didn't know. It was a giant bloody mess that no-one would ever be able to clean up, a ghastly ledger that could never be reconciled. He presumed their names would join the other thousands listed as "missing in action - presumed dead", but how could they ever be totally sure. Sometimes men wanted to disappear. Maybe they had simply had enough and took the golden opportunity to desert. More than a few times he had seen men reappear who had been on that list, presumed killed. By some twist of fate they had gone to the latrine a few seconds before the shell fell, or miraculously survived the explosion only to wander the lines, confused and disoriented before someone cottoned on to who they were and the fact they were still alive.

Dobby shook his head, trying to clear the lingering after-effects of the blast. There was one good thing, he reflected - and only those immune to war and its horrors could see this as a good thing - at least the men left alive by this particular barrage didn't have to deal with the bodies. Often, they were so pinned down by the enemy snipers and guns that they had to leave the dead where they fell, and sometimes they even stacked the bodies like sandbags at the edge of the trench and used them as cover. That really messed with the men's morale. Most were good Christian boys and to not have a decent burial or be treated with respect if they were killed really upset some of them. Well, the rest of them couldn't do anything about it. That's what war is; that's what war does to people. Dobby gave a quick thanks; at least these poor bastards died quick and clean, consigned to the ether and out of reach of any other possible indecency their fellow man could impose on them.

That's when heard it. Cocking his head to one side, the ringing in his ears still muting sounds, he could faintly make out the sound of engines, men yelling and whistles blowing. Spinning around and looking toward the enemy lines he could see the whole front was alive with movement, less than a few

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hundred yards away; soldiers and machines advancing steadily toward him. Since the rains stopped a week previously they had been expecting an attack, but so soon? They barely had the chance to dry out and get their lines back in order. At the front of the column, troops with flame-throwers swept the ground before them, those most evil of weapons emitting a terrible screeching sound as the tongues of liquid fire adhered to and incinerated everything in their path. Beside them, tanks traversed the mutilated landscape as best they could, rocking from side to side, pitching forward and back as they fell into holes and powered out again, black smoke billowing from their exhausts. Behind them came thousands of infantry soldiers, firing and advancing in the tank's wake. The allies had earlier fought and won precious victories over the occupying Italians and had even driven them back as far as Albania, but these troops were battle-hardened Germans, sent in by Hitler to prop up what he considered to be a weak and ineffectual Italian army. They wanted Greece at any cost, and had the will and the means to take it. Dobby had seen action, but he hadn't seen anything like this.

Soon they were only a hundred yards away at most, too bloody close. Confusion reigned along the allied lines; no-one seemed to know what to do; no orders were forthcoming. The only thing to do in lieu of orders was fire at the enemy and try to repel their advance. Dobby picked targets through the smoke and haze and fired for effect, trying to take out the flame-throwers and as many of the following infantry as he could. The allied forward lines put up withering sustained fire, but it proved mostly ineffective against the advancing legions; the enemy war machine kept rolling forward, crushing the allies in their trenches.

'Christ!' Dobby shouted, a hint of panic in his voice. Before he could do or say anything more, rag-tag lines of men retreating

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from the front started streaming back through the trenches. 'There's no bloody way of stopping that,' one of the men shouted, tilting his head toward the enemy.

'Retreat and regroup!' yelled a captain somewhere, the order relayed up and down the line. Dobby, along with those who were able, grabbed whatever kit they could carry, slung the wounded onto stretchers or dragged them to their feet, and the whole line started moving back as quickly as they could through the maze of trenches, away from the advancing grey hordes.

Once the trench system ran out, the troops continued their retreat across open fields, withstanding constant sniper and harassment fire, then through dense woodlands, pressing rearwards. Small squads stayed behind to delay the enemy, and their tragically heroic, doomed, last-ditch stands could be heard being played out in the near distance. With the enemy advance momentarily stalled, Dobby regrouped with the remaining men in his platoon and took a quick inventory of their stores. Other platoons did the same and while all squad leaders met for a briefing from the field commanders. Dobby's squad leader, Fred "Taffy" Tulley, returned after five minutes, informing them that the situation looked bad. Dobby listened grimly as Tulley explained how the Germans had invaded Yugoslavia and Greece simultaneously with a vast amount of troops, tanks and aircraft. This was the "Blitzkrieg" style of warfare they had all heard about. They were in grave danger of being out-flanked to the west, where large gaps in their defences were being exploited by the Germans. They had been ordered to take their only viable option; conducting a fighting retreat down the coast toward Athens, some five hundred miles away. The men looked at each other in silence, realising the huge task that lay ahead. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was all they had. Gathering his kit, plus all the extra weight he could carry, Dobby turned and joined the lines of men as they

began their march to Athens.

As they trudged into the darkening night, the sights and sounds of war surrounded them. Distant artillery fire created flashes of light like lightning on the horizon, shadows of men and machine in between playing on the clouds like giant shadow puppets in some grotesque theatre. The sound arrived later, a deep rolling thunder, though without the natural random discordance. This thunder sounded man-made; somehow orderly. Dobby could pick out a distinct rhythm every now and then among the clamour and he could imagine the gun crews, miles away, loading and reloading like clockwork, one man throwing ejected smoking shell casings onto huge piles beside the guns while another rams a new shell into the breach and yet another pulls the lanyard that fires the gun, the caisson bouncing in recoil as the round is hurled skyward. In the distance tracer and ack-ack fire streaked through the night sky, blasting among the clouds creating beautiful latticed patterns, poisoned needles and threads of light seeking targets to touch high above the earth. The paradoxes of war were not lost on Dobby; how it could be as beautiful and alluring as it is ugly and repulsive. The engineering, the weapons and machinery; all works of art in their own right and the very pinnacle of the age's technology and development; the cutting edge of design and manufacture. That they were created with the single purpose to inflict death and destruction was a mere triviality, an afterthought barely considered by their admirers. After all, much of modern science and technology, from engineering methods to medical procedures, was developed during wartime. How far in arrears would humanity be if conflict hadn't demanded that advances be made?

Even the soldiers themselves evoke conflicted emotions. What woman's heart doesn't flutter at the sight of a man in uniform? Yet this same soldier kills and maims men, women

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and children alike in the course of his duty; his occupation demands he be cruel and heartless and brutal. Who could possibly love such a creature? And who among men, Dobby included, could deny the wonder and awe with which they viewed the huge explosions, the big guns, the inspiring power and the thrilling sights and sounds of a thousand well equipped men, aircraft, tanks or ships setting off to war? Dobby knew those on the receiving end had a somewhat different perception. To him, a Spitfire represented the very peak of superior aeronautical design and the triumph of modern technology, but he guessed that to those under its guns, it is the embodiment of evil. War is a beautiful mistress with a coal-black heart; men loved her, but she had always forsaken them. She has nothing to offer but death and destruction for those who care to court her, captured by her beauty, seduced by her excesses.

At the particular moment, it barely mattered to Dobby. He had most often thought about it on those long, seemingly endless nights of guard duty, but now he was tired; exhausted by lack of sleep, shock and from feeling too much too often. He knew many of the men around him felt the same as they slogged through the darkened fields, but they wouldn't show it. It wasn't so much the marching in full kit that tired him, he could do that easily, it was the mental strain; the ever-present underlying fear; the constant state of alertness; the sometimes overwhelming sorrow of losing good men to senseless ends. He recalled how only days before one of the blokes, coming back from guard duty, had slipped on the slatted wooden duckboard they used to line the bottom of the trench. As he fell, his helmet strap caught on one of the makeshift trench periscopes, snapping his neck. Gone, just like that. One second he is full of life, laughing and joking; the next he is just another corpse being carried down the line. It all made no bloody sense. Dobby didn't let his emotions show either, of course.

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The men relied on each other to hold one another up. If one man broke down, it was all the others could do not to chuck in their hand with him. Better to tough it out and keep those feelings to yourself. The others appreciate it. After a while it became easier to do, the most humane reaction to an inhumane experience.

Dobby picked his way carefully through a small thicket. He didn't blame the new blokes for thinking they were an unfeeling pack of bastards, he knew the truth was just the opposite, the new men just didn't understand yet and there was no explaining it. They would eventually find out for themselves, if they lived that long. He did what he had to do to make it through, and if that made him look like a bastard, well so be it. If they still didn't understand, then bugger them.

Silently, Tulley loomed up out of the darkness. Dobby started and raised his rifle.

'Easy on lads, it's only me,' he half-whispered as he neared the men, 'only a few more miles until we get to a main road. If we're lucky from there on we have transport, so keep it up and yell if you see anything. See you at the road.' With that, he was gone.

Peering ahead into the blackness, he marched with renewed energy. A few more miles. No worries, he could make it.

Run Like Hell

The tail end of the car let go as Nudge took a tight curve at breakneck speed. Double-clutching into third and burying the throttle he controlled the skid perfectly, over-steering out of the bend as the rear tyres smoked and screamed in protest. The driver following didn't fare as well, even though the police cruiser had been modified for performance and handling, sliding off the road through a small picket fence and into a garden, giving the occupants of the house an unwelcome early-morning wakeup call. It was soon roaring back over the curb onto the road, fish-tailing as it clawed for traction, perennials and clods of earth flying in its wake as the wheels spun in the soft ground. Nudge had gained valuable time. He fumbled in his bag, steering and changing gears with one hand until he found his cell phone. Hitting the call button, the phone came to life and dialled. 'It's me bro!' he yelled when it was answered, 'I'm coming in hot! Get the gates ready. I'm trying to shake them but it'll be fucking close!' With that, he dropped the phone onto the passenger's seat. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead despite the cold night air rushing through the half-open driver's window. Pumped with adrenaline, he vented his aggression on the car, throwing it into the narrow side streets, losing nothing on the corners and hitting the mid hundreds on the straights. His focus was getting as far ahead of the pursuing vehicles as possible. He hoped they hadn't second guessed where he was going, which is why he was taking side streets instead of the obvious route back to base; the last thing he needed was spikes right outside the gates.

Now the lights in his mirrors and the sound of the siren had receded, he breathed out heavily in relief. Had he lost them? He could only guess. There had been a shit-load of bad press

lately over some high-profile fuck-ups during police pursuits and no-one seemed to know what the current procedure was. Maybe they'd abandoned the chase due to some new regulation, or it could be up to the cop behind the wheel whether he flagged it or took it on himself to challenge 'the offender' to a little game of catch-me-if-you-can. Nudge smiled to himself; he had won this round, and he allowed himself to relax a little. Suddenly, the car was bathed in a blinding white light.

'Fuck it!' Nudge cursed under his breath as he tried in vain to shield his eyes from the blinding light, his night vision instantly destroyed. Momentarily stunned, his other hand wrestled with the steering wheel as the car careered almost out-of-control along the road. He could hear it now over the roar of his engine; the Skyhawk police helicopter, flying directly overhead and easily matching his car's speed, beaming its NightSun spotlight down on him as he raced through the streets.

'What the fuck is he doing out at this time of night?' he swore as he regained total control of the car, his eyes now growing used to the change in light. He understood now why they gave up the chase and dropped his hand to a switch hidden under the dash, flicking off the safety catch with his thumb; they knew he couldn't outrun the chopper. The cars would still be coming, just not right up his arse. Desperation set in; he had to get back to base or he was fucked. He was close too; only minutes away. It made no difference if they were watching his every move; once back there he would be safe. As he toggled the switch a red warning light flashed brightly on the dashboard. Ignoring it, he buried the accelerator and was instantly pinned to the back of his seat as pure nitrous oxide was pumped directly into the supercharged V8's injectors. The effect was like a hit of P, immediate and intoxicating; tyres howled in protest, the supercharger whined and the big-bore

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exhaust belched raw blue flame as the combusting mixture of oxygen, petrol and NOS poured 800 horsepower to the car's rear wheels, hurling it forward like a missile. Nudge's world slowed down to a silent and insanely surreal speed-induced tunnel-vision blur. The circle of light briefly fell away behind him, struggling to find him as the car streaked away into the night. Nudge felt his heart beating, now slow and controlled, ignoring the adrenaline pouring through his veins; this was familiar ground. He became one with the car, sensing the rhythm of the road through his body as he became an extension of the speeding steel cocoon. In his peripheral vision parked cars and lamp posts raced by as if the rest of the world was in hyper rewind. His only thought was getting home.

After what seemed like an age he was there, and as he gunned toward the end of the cul-de-sac he was grateful to see the reinforced steel gates usually barring the driveway to headquarters sliding open. As he roared through, they closed behind him. Braking hard, he handbrake-turned the car into a large open-sided car port, hiding it from the prying eyes in the sky above. He leapt from the car and swung his bag to a waiting man. Smoke and steam poured from under the bonnet of the car and from the wheels; the smell of overheated brakes mixing with the choking odour of burnt oil and grease; the vented disks glowing a dull red behind the rims. The helicopter circled above, trying unsuccessfully to angle the light under the structure in an attempt to see what was going on. The bright light created deep shadows, and this effectively prevented those watching from observing the activity beneath the car port. The smoke from the overheated car was churned through the air by the wash of the rotor blades, making visibility even harder. The man who caught the kit bag slung it over his shoulder, climbed onto a Harley and fired the single crank V-twin engine into life, along with a dozen other bikers assembled under the canopy. The noise was deafening and

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Nudge couldn't help but grin, almost overwhelmed by the sound. It was exhilarating, the noise resounding deep in his chest, the light and the smoke causing the darkness to come alive.

'Like a fucking war zone,' he hollered and whooped as he looked skyward, spinning to take in the view. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face if he had to.

A smaller security gate in the rear of the property was opened and the bikes filed through it one by one, then down a short lane to the road beyond. They split up as each rider sped off in a different direction at speed, lights extinguished and engines thundering.

'Chase that you fuckers!' Nudge yelled to the hovering helicopter, his voice barely audible through the cacophony, as the sound of the bike engines quickly faded under the steady thumping of the blades. Still under cover, he triumphantly entered the main part of the house, greeted by high-fives and slaps on the back.

'Fuckin' A, bro!' one of the men shouted.

'You fuckin' showed 'em Nudge!' yelled another. One of the elder members pushed his way roughly through the group. 'Enough!' he snarled, his face flushed with anger. 'Cut the bullshit!' He gestured wildly, 'help the others get this fucking place cleaned up; they'll be knocking our fucking door down soon enough.' Turning to Nudge his face darkened even more, 'and I'll be fucking talking to you later, bro,' he growled, poking Nudge hard in the shoulder. Nudge was taken aback, the smile on his face fading.

At that moment, one of the prospects ran in.

'The fucking pigs are outside, carloads of them!'

Turning from Nudge the elder yelled to the prospect. 'No shit, Sherlock! Instead of running around like a dumb cunt go and help clean up! You'll be fucking going down too if they find anything.'

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He turned once more and leered at Nudge, shaking his head as he walked away, weighing up his options. The house defences would buy them time; the cops wouldn't come in until the gates were opened and the guard dogs controlled. Forcing the gates would take a bulldozer, and they wouldn't get one till morning. They would open them when they were good and ready. He saw to it that the shit on the floor was quickly swept into the hangi pit, the embers flaring as the debris ignited. The rest of the crew gathered up weapons, pipes, drugs and other assorted paraphernalia and either threw it into the pit, or skilfully concealed it in specially made caches in the floor and remaining walls where it would remain undetected unless the cops were really looking, which most of the time they weren't. This kind of shit happened every now and then; an occupational hazard. The police were usually too wary to enter gang properties and even then they only did so in force, the raids becoming more a media event than anything else, TV crews tagging along to show how the police were cracking down on gangs. Tonight Nudge had dropped them right in the shit, and now they wanted him. He figured the best thing to do was to give him up, though he was going to make the cops work hard for the privilege.

On the Run

The village was dark and quiet, appearing almost deserted to the casual observer in the soft glow of the moon, a stark contrast to the scenes witnessed over the preceding days. After their long march, Dobby and his company finally reached the road where they, along with what was left of the battalion, hitched a much-welcome lift south toward Athens on some heavy transporters. Where the roads ran out or were too damaged to traverse, the men disembarked and, with great effort, manhandled the vehicles over or around the obstacle. Where even that was not possible, they resorted to marching. As they retreated down the coast they encountered constant enemy patrols and sometimes had to fight their way through, suffering inevitable but relatively light casualties. Overall it was a text-book fighting withdrawal, designed to impede and delay the advancing Germans, which it did considerably. After days of fighting, interspersed with bone-shaking transporter rides and hard foot-slogging, Dobby and his comrades reached their designated evacuation stations south of Athens. As soon as they arrived, they were picked up by the British Navy and taken to the island of Crete, 100 miles offshore in the Mediterranean. There, along with tens of thousands of British and Australian troops, they now occupied positions all across the island. It stood to reason that the enemy would want Crete as it was a vital staging point for both supplies and raids into the occupied mainland. Rumours did the rounds reporting that Hitler wanted the island as badly as Churchill wanted to keep hold of it. If the scrap on the mainland was anything to go by, Dobby and his mates were going to have a bloody tough job ahead of them.

The locals had received the retreating soldiers well, giving them hot tea, bread and cheese and dry quarters; they didn't

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seem overly pleased at the prospect of a German occupation either. The village had bustled with activity as places were found for men and equipment. Squad leaders had disappeared to hurried briefings, so the men in Dobby's squad sat and smoked or slept in the darkness of their billets. Not much was said; all were too shattered to speak, instead inwardly focusing on the task that lay ahead. A huge enemy force was somewhere out there beyond the darkness, and they would meet them soon enough. Dobby marvelled at those men sleeping around him. He envied them the ability to just sit and fall asleep wherever they were, no matter what was going on. He wasn't one of them. His mind raced all the time these days, and every little sound jolted him awake, alert and aware. Sleep only came to him when his body demanded it; even then it was a shallow, fitful slumber full of terrible images. His thoughts wandered as he drew hard on his cigarette, the coarse smoke burning his throat. The Nazis had to be stopped somehow, and like all bullies they only understood one thing, superior firepower. Over the last few days he had been hearing disturbing rumours of forced evacuations of entire cities in occupied Europe, the occupants herded aboard trains like animals and taken to labour camps to be pressed into work for the Reich. It was said that the Nazis confiscated these people's money and lands and that the old and infirm, or those too weak to work, were executed by the thousands and the bodies bulldozed into mass graves like human deadwood. He'd assumed it was probably just their propaganda machine working overtime; nobody could get away with anything like that, even in wartime. Dobby had grown used to the powers-that-be portraying the Germans as leering, evil-eyed fiends who ate babies and bayoneted old women, but killing civilians like that was surely beyond even the Nazis. The rumours could be rooted in some truth, but like the old parlour game of "Chinese Whispers", the stories were bound to be blown out of

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all proportion by the time he got to hear them. Dobby crushed the butt of his cigarette on the sole of his boot, watching the dying tobacco ashes fall to the floor of the barn. Still, he considered, if the rumours were even partially true then somebody had to do something about it.

He lit another cigarette and drew the thick smoke down, the glowing embers searing orange flares into his eyes in the darkness, his mind wandering to thoughts of home and Sharon. He wondered how much had changed in the time he had been away. Something that really bothered lately was that he was having trouble remembering what it had looked like back there; what it smelled like in the summer. His memories of home were being erased and replaced by much darker and more sinister content. He also kept having the same recurring thought; as far as he could see there were no winners in wars, only losers; it was just the degree of loss that differed. And if men make war and war makes men, how would it ever bloody well end?

Dobby's thoughts were interrupted as the door creaked open and Taffy called softly for his squad. The men stumbled awake and rose to their feet, converging on one corner of the room. Someone produced an electric lamp, providing enough light for the huddled men to see. Taffy pulled a military map from a cargo pocket in his blouse, unfolded it and spread it out on the dirt floor.

'The top brass have intercepted Jerry communications and reckon they will attack here,' he whispered, stabbing his finger into the paper at a spot on the north-west of the island, 'and will likely try to take the airfields here as well,' indicating the location on the map. At this stage we don't know when, but almost certainly within the next few weeks, which means we have to be ready for them. I'm told there are over thirty thousand of us on the island, but we are going to be facing battle-hardened troops, and lots of them. They will probably

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hit us with aircraft from their forward bases in Greece so we'll have to dig in well and hold our positions for as long as we can. Our battalion has been chosen to cover this area,' he pointed to the map, 'and the Poms and the Aussies are setting up flanking positions either side of us, here, and here, so make sure you don't start shooting at them or they'll most likely get bloody annoyed and start shooting back. As soon as we see the Germans coming we are to engage at will. We stay engaged until they kill us or are about to over-run us, at which point we are to conduct a fighting withdrawal back as far and as best we can. The only problem is that there is this bloody big mountain in the way,' he circled it on the map, 'so it could be tough going. If they drive us far enough back there is a chance that we can be evacuated from Sfaika,' his grubby finger pointed to a dot on the south coast, many miles away from their battlefield, 'but don't count on it. We are to maintain light and noise discipline until such time as we want to advertise our presence. Anyone have any questions?'

'How many of them do you reckon?' one of the men asked.
'By all accounts we'll outnumber them,' answered Taffy, 'but, we have bugger all heavy artillery, no decent field guns, no air support and barely enough transport to keep the lines resupplied.' The men looked at each other in the glow of the lamp, their faces grim, each already knowing the logical outcome. No-one else said a word so Taffy refolded the map as best he could and put it back into his pocket.

'We assemble by the clock-tower at the north end of the village at dawn,' he checked his watch, 'which is in 5 hours. Make sure you're ready.' Dobby and the others quietly began preparing their kit, checking their weapons and filling ammo pouches; it was going to be a long night.

The next day, the battalion set off for their assigned positions, firstly by truck and then on foot when the narrow island roads petered out. As night descended, those who were

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able finally had the chance to get some much needed rest. The darkness came very quickly in the hills; there was almost no dusk. Settling down into a natural hollow in a field, Dobby scanned the area to his left and right. They had been warned that the Germans might already have surveillance patrols on the island and he fancied he could make out faint shapes moving on the hillsides, watching them as they set up their positions. Dobby shrugged off the feeling; it was probably just his mind playing tricks on him. He recalled the things he used to think he saw on long dark nights of guard duty. Whether the enemy were up there or not, he didn't feel good knowing they might already be under surveillance.

No-one spoke and there was no noise to be heard except the odd cricket and the gentle song of a soft breeze. And there they waited, peering into the gloom, alert for anything out of the ordinary. Gradually, the night sky lightened, and the squad sank lower into their cover. Nothing stirred on the mountain, and it stayed that way for the next three weeks. After digging foxholes and fire platforms into the rocks as best they could, Dobby and his mates found their days once again became a dull routine; staying as low and inconspicuous as possible during the day and keeping a sharp watch at night; back to the waiting of war. Some of the blokes reckoned a night attack was unlikely but there was still the possibility of enemy probes along the lines after dark, testing both their defences and their nerves. After a few nights Dobby reckoned their positions were already well-known to the German field and air commanders. He also knew the coming battle was going to end up in one hell of a bloody mess.

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The air in the room was so heavy that it was impossible to see the far side wall; an acrid, choking blend of alcohol, sweat, P, dope and cigarettes. Add to that the aromatic cooking smoke from the stove and the hangi in the corner of the room and it was a wonder there was enough oxygen left in the air for anyone to breathe. The noise from the gathered crowd was deafening, almost drowning out the bass-heavy ragga beats pounding from two oversized stereo speakers hanging from exposed beams in the roof. Extension cords and other cables drooped snake-like through the open walls casting looping shadows through the skeleton-like structure. Bare bulbs strung throughout the interior cast wan globes of yellow light which almost failed to penetrate the murky haze. The house was like many on this street; built by a state eager to be seen to be doing something for low income families and instead rented by the gangs and their associates for a song at below-market rates. The inside of the house was virtually gutted; most of the interior walls had been long ago been knocked down or chain sawed out leaving only the odd partial wall and floor-to-ceiling beam standing to support the weight of the roof. The interior was devoid of fittings and furniture except for a few sagging couches, usually occupied by those too wasted to stand, nodding their heads to the music and looking like comically fearsome bobble-head dolls. Here and there the odd leaner “borrowed” from one of the many hotels in the district propped up those who preferred to drink from bottles while standing and shooting the shit with their mates. Many houses like this one in the district were now “owned” the mob; who was ever going to kick them out? And who could live in the place even if the current tenants vacated it? Those people naive or desperate enough to move in close by were soon seeking

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housing elsewhere after a visit by a few of the gang prospects; teenage males not yet "patched" and with cause to prove themselves to the elder members. They went anywhere they wanted in the 'hood with immunity and almost always returned with a TV or stereo; the previous owners soon on the phone to the police and then to the local welfare department. Those neighbours who chose to remain had either formed an uneasy alliance with the gang in return for protection -- only the most desperate thief would consider hitting any of the houses in the street -- or remained steadfast in their homes, something the gangs strangely respected. To be fair, they pretty much minded their own business, and as long as everybody else did the same a semblance of balance was maintained. It went without saying that if someone called noise control over a loud party, or complained to the council about the wrecked cars blocking the footpath; they would soon learn that such actions were not welcome in this neighbourhood.

The kitchen of the house, such as it was, consisted of a large stove, two overworked fridges full of nothing but bottles of beer and a bench with a sink along one wall. Sweating, smiling, hard-faced women smoked and busied themselves fetching drinks and cooking endless pots of steaming meat and vegetables for their men. The floor was bare wood -- the carpet long ago ripped up and thrown out -- was awash in spilt beer, cigarette butts, roaches, scraps of food and other trash, all ground into a slippery thick black paste by a hundred boot soles. The hangi pit was near the kitchen and was simply a hole dug into the ground underneath one cut through the floorboards, roughly lined with scraps of old roofing iron, the top of each piece hammered flat to create a kind of rim around the edge. Hot embers glowed in the darkness beneath and the smoke added its own unique fragrance to the atmosphere. Half-naked kids ran wildly about among the mess playing

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their own games; giggling, screaming and crying; none of the adults gave them a second glance and couldn't hear them over the din anyway.

Tacked onto the back of the house was a kind of lean-to, crudely constructed of recycled wooden beams and corrugated iron. A roughly-cut hole in the rear wall of the house provided sole access to the structure. Dug into the floor was a shallow arena about half a metre deep and five metres in diameter. Lighting was provided by a mechanic's inspection light; the power cable strung over nails in the beams and the wire framed bulb dangling low over the centre of the pit. The majority of the noise in the house came from here. The light's glare illuminated dozens of faces around the edge of the arena. Shouting faces, glazed red eyes filled with drugs, booze, excitement and lust. Discernable amidst the yelling and cheering was the primitive and guttural sound of animals in combat. In this case, an American pit bull terrier and a Staffordshire bull terrier were attacking each other, spurred on by primal instinct, the tone and volume of the noise around them and the smell of the blood-soaked earthen floor of the pit. These dogs were highly prized by the gangs; powerful, aggressive and extremely ferocious; their locking jaws and brute strength allowing them to inflict terrible injuries and keep fighting until they were dead or too badly injured to continue. They were stolen from breeders or "legitimate" owners as pups and trained with boots, fists and starvation to make them hungry and mean. The dogs were not pets and never could be, not after the way they had been treated. Even if the S.P.C.A. "saved" them they would most likely have to be destroyed as they could never be trusted around humans.

Around the arena money was constantly changing hands amidst the din. It wasn't unheard of to win five grand on a single fight, though tonight's pot wouldn't be that rich; no out-of-towners. Still, the winner could easily walk away with a

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grand and even more importantly, bragging rights and 'street cred'. A good fighting dog these days sells for thousands of dollars, that is, if the owner wanted to sell it; by keeping it he could easily pull in a hundred grand in winnings.

Fifty or so men stood gazing intently through the haze into the pit, each one wearing a variation of the unofficial uniform of the gang; black leather pants or jeans so old they were rags barely holding together, black t-shirts, jerseys, leather jackets and vests, wrap-around sunglasses, hobnail boots and of course the large coloured patches on their backs. Most sported either dreadlocked hair or shaved heads, and while some men's faces were clean shaven others grew pointed goatee style beards. Almost all were heavily tattooed over most of their bodies, some with full-face Moko, though none among them had earned the right to wear such a tattoo. In traditional Maori society, the Moko is a sign of experience, wisdom, ancestral knowledge and deep spirituality. Because of this, it is usually only worn by elders or other respected members of the tribe who have proven themselves worthy, attaining high status within the tribal system. Moko were usually started on young men and added to over many years, until the face was completely covered. The design related the personal history of the wearer and as such each one is unique. These concepts were beyond the grasp of most of these men. Their tattoos were merely brands, worn as a badge of toughness and to openly exhibit their anti-social status. More than a few of them were bad cunts to the core, psychopaths who looked for any excuse for violence and nutted off at the slightest provocation. It was virtually impossible to keep them under control, so it was probably a blessing they were so blasted all the time on drugs and booze that they could barely function.

The men jostled each other for the best positions around the ring, seeming not to mind being splashed with the flying blood and saliva. They pressed in even closer as they sensed the end

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drawing near, tightening the circle as if they couldn't get close enough to the action. Caught up in the hysteria of the moment they waved and yelled and urged their favourite on, the cacophony rising to a fever pitch. After what seemed like an eternity one of the dogs finally lay on the floor of the pit, too stricken to continue. The other animal was half-standing to one side, also injured and panting hard, drool mixed with blood pouring off its tongue and soaking into the earth under its bloodied paws. The voices subsided and the dogs' owners dropped heavily into the pit. The owner of the winning dog bent down and grabbed it by its studded collar, hoisting it victoriously high and out of the ring, his mates laughing and slapping him on the back in congratulation. The owner of the losing dog walked over to it, gazed down and spat at it, his contempt for the animal obvious. The dog lay still and rolled its eyes in fear, sensing the man's hatred, unable to move, and the man raised his foot and brought his boot heel crashing down on the dog's head, crushing its skull and killing it instantly. He turned and climbed out of the ring, yelling angrily for another beer.

'No-good fucking cunt of a dog,' he swore to no-one in particular.

The others swapped wads of cash among themselves, the losers grumbling and the winners gloating. A few of the prospects cleaned up the mess in the ring and two more dog owners readied their charges for the next contest. At that moment, barely discernable in the throng, a cell phone rang. One of the men broke away from the group, pulling the phone from his leather vest pocket. He flipped it open and answered it, walking away from the noise with a finger in one ear and the earpiece pressed to the other in order to hear above the racket. He listened, clapped the phone closed and, standing a little taller, looked around the room. Spotting his mark on the other side of the crowd, he elbowed his way through and

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tapped one of the men on the shoulder. When the elder turned around, he lowered his ear to the other man, who cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled: 'We have a problem!'

The Balloon Goes Up

Early one morning the routine on the island was broken. Dobby woke to the sound enemy aircraft flying overhead and from his position he could only watch helplessly as thousands of enemy paratroopers dropped into strategic locations behind their lines. A few of the men took pot-shots at the nearest descending paratroopers until orders came down the line to cease and desist, to save their ammunition; the enemy were miles out of range. Tense moments followed where nothing happened; a few shouts, a few shots. Then the order came; shoot anything that moved; anyone with a clear target, fire at will. Two man mortar teams, set behind the rest of the squad, waited for specific fire orders. Once again it was dead quiet, as it always was just before a battle. The silence seemed to pervade every man's thoughts. Eyes peeled, they stared out into the scrub. Was that movement? There! No, nothing. Dobby could almost taste the tension in the air. They began to hear sporadic gunfire in the distance; the Aussies and Poms were being engaged. The fire from their flanks intensified; there was a hell of a scrap going on over there.

Wouldn't be long now, Dobby guessed, straining and searching to see or hear or feel the enemy. Close by a shot rang out, then two, and then a whole volley as movement was spotted. As soon as the first enemy incoming round was heard falling, the mortar teams received co-ordinates by radio and sent a barrage right back out into suspected enemy gun emplacements. Soon they all heard it over the din; the sound of major movement to the front. Using trench periscopes it was quickly confirmed, the enemy was mounting a massive assault. By now the men in Dobby's squad had started firing at opportune targets, round after round tearing into the enemy lines. Still they advanced. The Germans were taking some

The Balloon Goes Up

terrible losses. Dobby could see right away that this was going to be hell. The allies didn't have nearly enough heavy weapons, but they had orders to hold as long as possible and that's what they were going to do. Their machine gun and mortar crews were now pouring fire into the advancing enemy, tracer rounds ricochetting crazily off men and rock and machine, but nothing they threw at the Germans seemed to make any difference. As one man fell another stepped on or over him and continued the advance. Now gliders full of German soldiers could be seen landing in the near distance, the allied mortar teams receiving orders to hit them as soon as they were on or near the ground. It was bedlam; total confusion. Dobby had seen some bad shit but he hadn't seen anything like this before; as long as he fired outward he was hitting the enemy.

From where the flanking troops had been positioned, even heavier firing could be heard. The men looked at each other with the same thought on their minds; they were going to be trapped if their flanks were breached. At the same instant, the sound of incoming enemy mortars and artillery rounds filled the air and the men hit the dirt as one. The rounds fell with startling accuracy, decimating the battalion. Dobby knew there were spotters up on the mountain somewhere, and peering in their direction he could see the odd flash as the early morning sun reflected off their binocular lenses. There was bugger all he could do about it; even on a perfect day he couldn't make a shot like that from this distance. It seemed to Dobby the enemy had outsmarted and outflanked them, catching the allies in a classic hammerhead. They were royally buggered, or at the very least soon would be.

The German artillery had found range and was now raining fire around their positions at will, blowing the hell out of their defences and effectively cutting off any escape to the rear. Great plumes and mushrooming clouds of earth, whizzing

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shrapnel and unthinkable pieces of man and machine flew around the battlefield. Then enemy dive-bombers appeared overhead, their bombs primed and ready. Dobby groaned, recognising the evil shape of the Stuka. Many here remembered Dunkirk and knew the damage these devils could do. The men were sitting ducks out there; nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The aircraft initially just circled high overhead, holding off their attacks. Dobby guessed why; artillery fire and low-flying aircraft don't mix. They didn't stay out of the scrap for long though, the pilots consoling themselves with strafing and softening up more obvious targets on the outskirts of the advance, out of reach of the artillery. On the ground, things were getting out of hand very quickly. As the intensity of the mortar and artillery fire waned, enemy troops began their push toward them from all directions. One enemy soldier ran past Dobby's cover, gun blazing, bullets chewing into the allied line. Dobby instinctively raised his rifle and fired, a lucky shot hitting the man and he dropped, dead, limbs flailing like a rag doll. Raising himself slightly and quickly scanning the area Dobby could see that they were almost surrounded; the man he had just killed was probably just as confused about where he was supposed to be as Dobby was.

'Poor bastard,' he thought grimly, glancing at the form lying beside him, the corpse adopting that broken awkwardness that only the dead can assume, Dobby called to the remaining men around him; they quickly emerged from their cover and huddled together to figure out what the hell they were going to do. It soon became apparent the only thing they could do was fix bayonets and fight their way out doing as much damage on the way as they could. One of the men signalled and they all looked to where he was pointing, more of their own troops moving in from behind them, retreating from their own front and crowding out onto the battlefield. Dobby

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assumed they were now effectively cut off. A classic hammer and anvil move; it wouldn't be long before the enemy were sitting in his lap. As the men from the rear swelled their ranks Dobby felt a little better, safety in numbers and all that, but even so, he realised this was probably it.

He had often thought of this moment; where would it be, how he would go; quick and clean or slow and dirty. Would he have time to pray? Did he believe in God anyway? Would any God allow this? There was that old saying about there being no atheists in foxholes and Dobby was inclined to agree. More than once he had made a deal with God that if He got him out of this jam he promised to be a better person, go to church or some other resolution as long as he was still alive. He had survived until this point, so maybe those impromptu battlefield pleas to the Lord had worked after all. With an increasing feeling of dread he realised he had defaulted on all his promises. He hadn't been to a service for years; he still thought carnal thoughts, swore like the soldier he was and still killed the enemy. Maybe this was his time to pay the ferryman; a final terrible penance for not keeping his end of the deal.

His thoughts were grim. If he was going to die, then he was taking as many of these bastards with him as he could. Glancing around, he could tell by the expressions on the other men's faces that they had made the same decision. Not a word was said. Each man checked his weapon and did whatever it was that he had to do. Most dropped their packs and unnecessary kit, retaining only ammunition and other essentials, lightening their load for the combat to come. Looking at these men, who were really all just boys; not one in ten being over twenty five years of age, Dobby shook his head at the waste of it all. As he contemplated what lay just ahead, he was once again reminded of something he had read a long time ago. He had grown up on adventure novels bought for him by his mother, the local school teacher, and one of his

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favourites was 'King Solomon's Mines'. It related the exotic tale of Allan Quartermain, an adventurer who went looking for a lost brother and a mythical treasure through deepest, darkest Africa. Dobby would sneak a candle into his room and read the story in the flickering light until the candle burned out, his imagination carrying him along with the others on that incredible journey. One phrase from the book had always stuck with him, and it seemed horribly appropriate now. It was something Sir Henry Curtis said to Quartermain before one of battle scenes, when they were faced with insurmountable odds and everything seemed utterly hopeless. In part it read:

"fortune favours the brave..."

Dobby hoped to God it was true; it would take every ounce of bravery and good fortune to come out of this smelling of roses.

The men hunkered down into whatever cover they could find, waiting for the inevitable moment the enemy would arrive; each man resigning himself to the hand fate was about to deal him, primed for action, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Dobby's entire world had contracted to whatever happened immediately around him. In this heightened state, nothing would stop him until he is incapacitated or dead; he is a human animal running on instincts developed over, and in most people suppressed for, millions of years. He knows nothing else because nothing else matters. His senses are as acute as they possibly can be; he can see further, hear more keenly and react faster. Any thought outside what he must do has been relegated to some other part of his brain. He is as ready for what lay ahead as he will ever be.

'Fix Bayonets!' The command that struck fear into even the hardest of soldiers' hearts was passed down the column. Metallic clicks were heard up and down the line as each man

The Balloon Goes Up

quickly attached his 16 inch, hardened steel bayonet to the end of his rifle. Again they waited. The tension was almost unbearable and each man swallowed hard as the taste of adrenaline hit the back of his throat. Ranking officers roamed the defences urging the men to "wait for it you bastards; wait until you see the whites of their eyes!" Finally, on an unseen signal, whistles blew and the defenders rose with a mighty roar as one. Surrounded on all sides, it was simply a matter of pointing and firing to engage the enemy. The fighting was too close for air or mortar support and it was down to primitive, savage, hand-to-hand combat. Wave after wave of Germans swamped the defender's positions, only to be repelled by bullet and bayonet. Clip after clip was exhausted as Dobby fired round after round into the enemy, and for the briefest moment a picture flashed into his mind of that square-jawed soldier in the boys' magazines. When his ammunition ran out he used the weapon as a club, savagely swinging, thrashing and bayoneting anyone who came within arm's length. There were men everywhere, and in the smoke and confusion of battle it was getting to be impossible for Dobby to tell friend from foe. His eyes burned from the cordite that hung in the air and his ears rang with the din. He knew it was a hopeless situation and the fear and anger and inevitability erupted from deep within as he roared and screamed in his last stand of defiance, certain the end would come soon. From the corner of his eye he saw the distinctive shape of several potato-masher grenades arcing through the air toward him.

By grenade. In the split second before they exploded he knew now this was they was he was going to go. They burst just yards away, the blast hurling him through the air.

Nudge Takes a Hit

An hour later found the gates open and the chopper long gone; the scene still somewhat surreal with flashing red and blue lights and an eerie silence punctuated only by the squawk of the police radios. The detective walked through the front door, almost gagging on the thick air. He wasn't a tall man but he carried himself well. He stood for a moment, letting his vision adjust to the dim light. He was in good shape for a man of his age, though his close cropped hair was now more salt-and-pepper than the black it used to be. His choice of t-shirt and 501's accentuated his youthful appearance, making him seem younger than he actually was. His manner and number two haircut implied military; in another life had been an MP in the Army for more than twenty years until leaving in the late eighties to join the civilian police force, looking for something a little more challenging than pulling drunken soldiers off whores and out of third-world shitholes every other night.

Looking around the room, his dark, piercing eyes took in every detail.

'Christ,' he muttered to himself, 'how the hell do people live in here.' He picked his way cautiously through the house, his shoes sticking to the filthy floor, conscious of the hard stares from equally hard men following his every move. He wasn't intimidated by them. The men he previously policed would wipe the floor with these goons. In his experience gangsters thought themselves hard bastards but in reality most were just angry, ill-disciplined and disillusioned sociopaths who found strength in groups, demanding respect through fear rather than earning it the hard way. Soldiers, on the other hand, were hard men, toughened by discipline and training, by the things they saw and by the things they had to do. Admittedly some were also disillusioned sociopaths but at least they had

Nudge Takes a Hit

direction, purpose and perhaps most important, accountability. And the training was good for them, kept them in line. Some had joined the armed forces in the same state as the men standing around this room, except now they served someone other than themselves and were far better men for it. It is true that the discipline and hard work of the services make men out of boys. Not many ex-professional soldiers end up on the wrong side of the game.

Seeking out one face among the crowd he approached the elder that had reamed out Nudge earlier, standing tall, arms folded, staring and trying to look mean.

'You're in charge?' It was more a statement than a question; the detective had done his homework.

'Sure boss,' the man replied. 'What can we do you for?' He smirked and looked side to side defiantly at the other men. A smattering of nervous laughter sounded around the room.

'Your name please, Sir?' enquired the detective, staring the man down.

'Fuck you, copper.' replied the man, a grin crossing his tattooed face. Some of the other men openly laughed.

The detective scanned the room and the faces around him. He sighed and looked to the ground and then suddenly back to the man.

'Your name!' he demanded.

'Don't remember, Boss.' the elder replied defiantly.

The detective suddenly raised his hand, extended his index finger and drove it hard into the other man's sternum, driving him backward and causing him to visibly wince at the intense discomfort. He took a step closer until he was chest to chest with the man, his hands now on his hips. Although the other man was taller, an observer would have sworn the cop was the taller of the two. The elder instinctively leaned a back a little.

'Enough fucking around!' the detective almost shouted to the man's face. He addressed the elder in a quieter, yet more

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disconcerting voice. 'If you want me to make you look like a dickhead in front of these people,' he paused and looked around for emphasis, 'by all means carry on playing this stupid fucking game, however I advise you to cooperate or I might be inclined to climb into your little operation here.' He gestured around the room. It was no hollow threat; he could make their lives very uncomfortable.

The elder thought quickly; he hadn't seen this guy around before. He wondered what had happened to Chisholm, the last DI. He guessed he had perfed out with a huge pension and was now doing "consultation" work for the government making even bigger money.

And they call us the fucking thieves, he thought grimly as he stared mutely down at Henderson.

'Have it your way,' the detective said as he walked back to the centre of the room and took a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. He held it up in one hand and turned from left to right, addressing the gathering.

'My name is Detective Inspector Don Henderson. This warrant allows me to search this premises for a car and the driver of that car. The car was followed here tonight by the police helicopter; I imagine some of you Einsteins noticed it flying about earlier. If that man steps forward and comes with me now we will go and leave you in peace.' Nudge shifted uncomfortably but remained silent.

The elder glared hard at the detective along with every other set of eyes in the room but stood firm, though Henderson had perceived a fleeting doubt in the man's eyes and seized the advantage.

'Outside! All of you!' the inspector spoke sharply, never breaking eye contact with the man, 'now! Except you,' he said quietly, placing his finger on the elder's chest as he began to move toward the door. 'You and I can stay and have a little chat.'

Nudge Takes a Hit

As uniformed officers began herding the protesting men out into the yard, Henderson steered the man to the other side of the room.

'Harold Alan Gay.' Henderson spoke the name and smiled inwardly to himself. 'How many of these guys know your real name?'

The elder glowered. 'Not many,' he growled, 'and if they said anything they would to fucking answer to me.'

'Fair enough,' replied Henderson calmly, 'let's get down to business.'

'They call me Toa,' the man crossed his tattooed arms, trying to make himself look bigger.

'They can call you whatever they want, Harold, but your parents gave you a name and to be honest I think it suits you better,' Henderson replied with a smirk. 'Toa means warrior, doesn't it? Bit of a reach, isn't it Harold? Doesn't look to me like you live by a warrior's creed.' Toa scowled at the insult. 'Anyway, let me make this as easy as I can. I'm the new boy around here and I have a few simple rules that, if followed, will mean that we'll get along just fine. I will respect you and your way of life until you do something that warrants withdrawal of that respect. The first rule is this; I will not take any shit from you or any of your associates. None. This is not negotiable. The second is that if you fuck with me in any way, I will fuck with you right back,' he leaned forward and whispered, his tone hard, 'and rest assured Harold that I can play very, very hard.' He stepped back and smiled. 'That's it.' He paused for effect. 'So, here's what you can do for me. I want the car and I want the man who drove the car. I want him standing at the front gate in exactly five minutes. If he is not there by that time, I will consider it a show of disrespect and I will tear this shit-hole apart piece by piece and personally charge you with possession of everything illegal I find in it,' he looked around the room, 'and I'm thinking that

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I'll find plenty. Do we understand each other?"

He saw by the elder's body language that his words had the desired impact.

'Sure Boss,' Toa replied, 'let me get this sorted, OK?' He was relieved to be given the very option he was thinking about earlier.

'OK, Harold, but leave the prison slang for impressing the ladies. My name is Don, or Henderson. You can use either.' He changed his tone.

'Look, Harold, you live your way, I live mine. I'm not here to pass judgement. The government pays me to do a job and you understand I have to be seen to be doing it. All I want are the car and driver then you and your associates can get back to doing whatever it was you were doing.'

'OK Boss, er, Henderson,' stammered Toa, 'leave it to me.' He stood taller again. He wasn't prepared for the way Henderson had treated him; a disarming mix of vinegar and honey, though he could clearly see he was not a man to get on the wrong side of.

'Harold, it's been a pleasure. Let's do it again soon, eh?' Henderson turned and crossed the room to the open doorway, grateful to have some clean air to breathe. Turning back he addressed the elder one last time.

'Five minutes, Harold?' He raised his eyebrows. Toa nodded and headed out the back to find Nudge.

Henderson called one of the junior detectives over and told him to pull the uniforms back beyond the front gate and wait there. Puzzled, the detective was about to say something when Henderson held up his hand and sighed,

'just do it Morrison, please.' The man turned and set off without a word.

Meanwhile Toa made his way out the back to where Nudge was standing, jiving with some of the other men, still regaling them with the story of his near capture.

Nudge Takes a Hit

'Nudge, you stupid cunt' he called, 'get the fuck over here!' Nudge stopped in mid sentence and broke away from the group, crossing the yard.

'What's up bro?' he asked hopefully, 'you get the cops sorted?' 'No, it's not fucking sorted!' Toa replied angrily. 'What the fuck were you thinking, bringing the heat down like this? This is not a fucking game!' Lowering his voice he asked, 'You got rid of the shit didn't you?'

'Yeah, it's long gone. Fuck man, chill out.' Nudge replied reassuringly.

'Don't fucking tell me to chill out; your shit has hit my fan. Grab your gear and go to the front gate. Find Henderson, you're going with him. Someone has to take the fucking fall for this and you're it.' He turned to walk away. Nudge's mood darkened.

'Now just a fucking minute...' he began. Toa cut him off, turning back quickly, staring him down, nose to nose.

'You fucking listen to me you little cunt! You fucked up. You have to take this one. It's a bullshit charge and you know it. What are they going to do? Slap you on the fucking wrist and send you on your way. I'm not about to fuck up our whole operation because of your stupid fucking mistake. Now get the fuck out to the gate or I'll fucking drag you there myself!'

Nudge understood the logic but he was angry and confused. He had made it this far, all these years, avoiding the consequences; a charmed life. Tonight his luck had run out. The very people he trusted with his life were willingly giving him up; his friends, his family. He also didn't much like the thought of being locked up. His mind in a spin, he returned to the house, gathered a few of his things and grudgingly made his way over to the front gate. The cop he had seen inside stepped forward.

'I'm the one.' Nudge confessed.

Dobby Takes a Hit

Dobby must have passed out; as he came to he realised he was lying in a crater, the mutilated body of a man lying on top of him. As he moved he felt a searing pain in his side and let out an involuntary cry of pain. He struggled as best he could to move the dead weight of the body, rolling what was left of it sideways and off. Raising himself slightly he realised there were two men in the hollow with him. All around him he could hear the sounds of battle; men shouting and screaming, rounds crackling through the air and grenades exploding. Feeling along his side his hand came away slick and red with blood. His breathing was laboured and he guessed he had copped one in the ribs or lungs; something felt strangely out of place down there and he was in a lot of pain every time he moved. He glanced at the grey uniform of the man lying immediately to his left; German. His head was a mess and he appeared to be dead. The other man was groaning. Looking over, Dobby could see he was one of theirs, a big Maori bloke, and his leg was in a bad way; blown off above the knee. The man was in terrible pain and deathly pale, struggling to get up.

'Stay down mate!' he shouted to the man. 'Wait there.' Dobby edged himself slowly over to the man, who wasn't far from where he lay but it seemed like a mile, every movement causing intense pain in his side. When he reached the man he rummaged in his kit and used one of his battle dressings to apply a rudimentary tourniquet to the stump to stop it bleeding.

'Hang in there mate, it's not too bad; just a scratch' he lied, 'you'll be fine.' He rolled over, grimacing, and pulled his canteen from his belt. He unscrewed the cap and held it to the man's lips.

Dobby Takes a Hit

'Hold this cob,' he urged, picking up the man's huge hands and wrapping them around the canteen, 'and get it all down, I'll try to find a corpsman.' How he was going to do that he wasn't sure, sticking his head up would be suicide, but he had to do something to help this man or he would soon die. He adjusted the man's helmet to give him the best protection and prepared to move. At that moment, the body in grey beside him stirred.

'Bitte bitte!' the man cried weakly, blood bubbling from his lips. Dobby edged painfully over to him and with a gentleness that surprised him put his rucksack under the man's head. By the looks of it he had taken some shrapnel to the chest and was bleeding profusely from head wounds. Dobby didn't think about what he was doing; he instinctively searched through the German's bags until he found his first-aid kit. He tore open several field dressings and began wrapping the man's wounds as best he could. As he worked, Dobby looked into the soldier's face. He recognised the same gaunt, haunted look that he saw when he looked in the mirror. This man was about his age, same physical size and certainly didn't look like the baby-eating, sausage-guzzling barbarian devils the propaganda posters made them out to be. He was just a man trying to do the best he could in the most trying of circumstances and had probably seen and done the same things that Dobby had seen and done in his own soldiering career. But he was still the enemy, and with that thought Dobby pulled the dressing tighter than perhaps he should have. The soldier cried out in pain and Dobby felt fleeting remorse. Groping around under the man, he found his canteen and told him the same thing as he had told the Maori. He knew the German probably didn't understand what he was saying but that didn't matter - he would know what Dobby meant. As he finished securing his rudimentary bandages the man reached out and feebly grabbed his arm. Suddenly

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disgusted at the realisation he had just helped a man who had earlier been trying to kill him; Dobby removed the man's hand from his arm and turned away to deny him his gratitude. He crawled back the short distance to the other soldier and could see his condition was stable but still grave.

'What's your name cob?' Dobby asked, calling over the noise of the battle.

'Joe. Joe Ngarimu,' the big man gasped as he answered, lifting his head and weakly holding out his hand.

'Mine's Dobby. Nice to meet you Joe. What's your favourite song?' he asked as he gripped the huge hand in his own.

A puzzled look crossed Joe's face as he replied weakly,

'What's that mate?'

'Your favourite song Joe, what is it?' Dobby yelled again as he went back to checking Joe's leg.

'Song? Oh, um, Pokarekare Ana', Joe replied.

'Good song,' shouted Dobby as he checked the tourniquet, 'can you sing it for me?'

Confused, Joe nonetheless began softly singing the haunting Maori folk song between gasping breaths, barely audible beneath the sounds of battle.

'Right,' Dobby interrupted, 'when you get to the end, start again and at the same time check this bandage. Don't take it off, just check it. If you start bleeding, tighten it with this; he had put the handle of his entrenching tool through the bandages so it could be turned like a key. Here's another dressing to use if this one falls apart. OK?' Dobby placed a spare dressing he had borrowed from the German's kit on the ground next to him.

'Sure, Dobby, I'll try.' Joe stammered through the pain. 'It bloody hurts though.'

'I know mate, but you can't let it bleed. Bugger the pain, you have to keep that thing tight or you'll bleed to death before I get back and I don't want that on my conscience.' He did a

Dobby Takes a Hit

final once-over to make sure everything was right.

'One other thing' he began as he was about to get up. Reaching over, he picked up a weapon, placing it in Joe's hands. 'Here's your rifle. I think it still works. That Jerry over there is still alive; if he tries anything, blow his bloody head off.'

'Dobby,' Joe struggled to raise his head so he could see him.

Dobby placed his hand on the man's shoulders, gently pushing him back out of harm's way.

'Steady on mate, you have to stay down, what is it?'

'How far is home from here?'

'Too bloody far to matter to us now, cob,' he sighed. 'Way too bloody far.'

With that Dobby prepared to move out. As he gathered what was left of his kit, he tried to formulate a plan. He had no idea where to find anyone, let alone a corpsman; they could all be dead as far as he knew. He was in a lot of pain and didn't know how far he was going to be able to get anyway. As he turned to say a final goodbye to Joe, German soldiers suddenly emerged through the haze, standing right at the edge of the crater. One of the soldiers spotted him and fired before Dobby even had a chance to react, the force of the round knocking him flat. The last thing he saw as his world faded to black was Joe fumbling with his rifle, trying to aim and fire at the enemy as they swarmed over their position.

Part Two

Welcome to Woodvale

It was a typically humid October day in Auckland as Nudge walked down Kingston Road looking for number 30. He was sweating in his black leathers; not a good choice, he ruefully reflected. He had taken the bus, swallowing his considerable pride to do so, and had ended up walking the last kilometre or so as he had been unsure of his stop. He'd considered asking one of the others to give him a lift but that idea seemed more distasteful than catching a bus. He didn't like asking any of them for help; favours always meant owing something in return. Besides, there were worse things than riding the buses.

He hadn't travelled in one for a long time and was surprised at the general condition of the vehicle; this one was old and mechanically run down with tattered seats and graffiti covering almost every surface. He also seemed to remember the buses running more frequently when he was a kid than they did now. Back then, along with his brothers, sister and mother he would only have to wait a few minutes at the stop before one happened along to take them into town. Maybe his mum just knew the time the bus would be there. In his memories the bus was bigger and cleaner and didn't bear any of the torn fabric and marker-pen scribbling of the one he rode this morning. When he was a kid, the driver, always ready with a friendly grin and who seemed to know everyone by name, would welcome them aboard, leaping out of his seat to help his mum with the numerous bags she always carried and deftly slinging the pram on the hooks at the front of the bus. In those days it was always a fun day out for Nudge; getting on the bus usually meant going somewhere and doing something out of the ordinary, like a trip to the dentist, going to the pool

for a swim or, much more rarely, to see a film in town. He loved sitting so high up that he could see over peoples' fences and into their yards as the bus drove by; it felt kind of naughty yet was harmless fun at the same time. He also enjoyed watching the people, looking at their faces and wondering what their stories were; where they were going, what they were doing. Out of nowhere a memory rushed into his mind of one particular man whose face and hands had been badly burned; he was often on the bus at the same time. Back then Nudge couldn't help but stare at the man even though his mother, if she caught him looking, would shake him hard by the shoulder, scolding him loudly enough for the man to hear, forcing Nudge to look away, his face burning with embarrassment. When he stared though it wasn't to look at the burns; he had seen them often enough; he stared in wonder of what it must be like for the man; what had happened to make this once ordinary man so different. He was dying to ask the question but knew he never could. He had stared because of the man's eyes, clear and blue beneath the mask, friendly yet full of tragedy. He desperately wanted to know what lay behind those eyes; the experiences and the trauma. He could only begin to imagine the horrors of it and some days he could physically feel the anguish he saw in those eyes. He sometimes had the innocent urge, as only children seem to have, to run up and cuddle the man. That's why he stared; maybe that's why everybody stared. Nudge shrugged off the memory and looked out the window at people's yards, still feeling a little shame even now and awkward at the long-forgotten tenderness of his memories. Someone at the time said they thought the man might have been a fighter pilot during the war, but no-one really knew him that well. Nudge never did find out what happened to the man; one day he just wasn't there anymore. Maybe he moved away or maybe he died; somehow it suddenly felt important for Nudge to know. He

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pushed the feeling away and promised himself that one day he would ask around and see if he could find what happened to him.

This morning, as he sat on that torn bench seat beside an old woman with an older wicker basket full of shopping he realised that he still took some pleasure from the experience. He relaxed into the seat and enjoyed the rest of the journey, reflecting that a couple of dollars spent on a bus ticket had bought him some brief respite on an otherwise stressful day. Perhaps things weren't going to be so bad after all. More often than not, his thoughts were much darker. He had disliked his home life as a child and actively avoided thinking about it. When he thought of his mum and the love she had shown all of them, it was fine, but his father was a different story; he was a real cunt. Nudge couldn't think of one time his father had shown anything but contempt for him. He assumed he was typical of many men of the time; mostly under-educated urbanised Maori, they partied hard and worked hard in mostly low paying, shitty fucking jobs. When they got home all they wanted was a smoke, a cold Lion Brown and their dinner on the table; what they didn't want was to hear about anyone else's problems. He had four kids and a wife to take care of and probably had no fucking idea how to do it. There weren't as many agencies and groups around that people could turn to for help in those days and even if there were Nudge couldn't see his old man asking; that would be weak. In the end the old boy had reacted to the situation the only way he thought he could, by drinking too much, which obviously made things worse for all of them; the problems were still there when the hangover wore off. Still, no matter how Nudge looked at it there was no fucking excuse for beating the shit out of him, his mum and his brothers. When the poor stupid pissed fuck had been hit by a car and killed while staggering home from the pub one night down the

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middle of the road it was as if a weight had been lifted off all their shoulders. His mum had cried; she was the type of wife who loved her man no matter what he did but all Nudge felt was guilty, selfish relief; he was far better off without having that shit to deal with all the time.

Between those drunken thrashings there was only a sparse state-house yard in which to seek solitude and, when the mood was right, to play. He bored easily; toys like other kids had were just a dream to him. Instead he made do using small off-cuts of wood scrounged from building sites around the neighbourhood, the rough-sawn blocks becoming trucks, tractors, tanks and aeroplanes. Being the youngest he was targeted by his brothers, often bearing the brunt (and bruises) of their fun. His face flushed as he remembered the fun his older sister had with him, dressing and making him up for her and her doll's 'tea parties'. God forbid anyone got wind of that today. He remembered his clothes were never new, instead coming by way of his brothers, often third hand. He didn't own a new pair of shoes until he was well into his teens, and then only because he saved up and bought them himself. Because of all this he didn't think about his childhood often, but when he did, it left him in a funk which sometimes took days to wear off. If he had been a drinking and drugging man he saw how those vices could become a real problem. In some ways it gave him an insight into the junkies he sometimes came across in his travels but beneath the shallow acquaintance he thought them weak and pathetic; if he could say no then so could they. He couldn't help but liken them to his father, hooked on booze, in the end getting what he deserved. Maybe he was too harsh, judging others against his own shortcomings. Whatever, he didn't want to have anything to do with people like that.

Nudge stopped for a moment and took off his jacket, slinging it over one shoulder, allowing his thoughts and

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memories to fade away. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and continued on, thankful of the slight breeze that had picked up, easing the oppressive humidity. As he walked he searched for the numbers on the letterboxes; 16, 18, 20. He was getting closer. He noted a bus stop just ahead; that's where he'd get off next time. Beside the path was a freshly painted fence. Nothing unusual in that but what struck Nudge about it was that in his part of town this fence would be covered in graffiti and so would the bus stop; anything defaceable or breakable was long ago defaced or broken. He had only noticed graffiti by the lack of it in this neighbourhood; when he was driving he didn't see it but while riding the bus he saw it everywhere, covering fences, telephone poles and accessible walls of most buildings. The further he got out here in North Auckland the less conspicuous it became, though he still spotted the odd tag here and there. Like many big-city dwellers he subconsciously didn't see the ugly side of the inner city anymore; it was just part of the scenery. He had done his fair share of bombing back in the day but it was only kid's stuff, furtively spray-painting a stylised initial on a lamp post, traffic-light box or the odd road sign if he felt especially daring. He had inwardly balked at the shit some of the others did; brand new buildings or freshly painted fences; he was reluctant to bomb anything that wasn't done already. He also thought it pretty short sighted to fuck off the neighbours and draw even more anger toward the gang from the local community who barely tolerated their presence in the first place. He figured the less attention they drew to themselves the better but it seemed the voice of reason was not one that the gangs spoke with or listened to much. Another thing he had noticed on the bus windows and in shop windows as he passed was that scratching the shit out of glass seemed to be the latest craze. He shook his head. You can always repaint a fence but to ruin

thousands of dollars worth of shop window was something else. He couldn't see any fucking art to it, no significance like there was with bombing; it was more like mindless vandalism. He doubted it was even gang related. Most likely it was done by bored little cunts hell bent on causing damage, fucking up things just for the sake of it or to be seen as 'cool' by their equally retarded friends. To Nudge that was just fucking nasty. Maybe he was just getting older in his ways but he didn't think he would have done it back in the day. Granted, spray-painting shit must have pissed people off but carving something up for the hell of it didn't seem fair. Lately he had seen graffiti being one of the big issues; a bandwagon for every local politician running for office; candidates mouthing off about how they would deal with the graffiti 'epidemic'. They didn't understand that no amount of painting over it would ever stop it; tagging is all about breaking the law, civil disobedience. The city could build all the walls in the world for the local kids to tag and they would simply ignore them and tag the fence next to it. It's about the rush of doing something illegal and getting away with it.

24. 26. 28. Nudge reached down and switched off his mp3 player. Pink Floyd's 'The Wall'. He pulled the oversized DJ headphones he wore down and back until they sat, slung around the base of his neck. The album was Nudge's all-time favourite, probably because it was the first one he had really sat down and listened to, analysing it and dissecting it song by song at a time during those golden teenage years when he was becoming more aware of who he was and where he might fit in to the great scheme of things. The way the album, unlike the majority of others at the time, was created as an entire interconnected concept appealed to his intelligence. Critics called the music irrelevant, paranoid and self-indulgent; too obscure and too influenced by the drugs the band was so obviously taking. Nudge thought it was brilliant. Like most

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people, he enjoyed a broad range of music; he didn't automatically like a song solely because it was by an artist he liked. He was the first to admit that some of Floyd's early work was pretty stink -- after all, twenty minute instrumentals are not for everybody -- but to him this album was perfect, from the obviously 'hidden' message at the beginning to the rest of the message 'hidden' at the end. That in itself was clever, and a figurative middle-finger to all the self-righteous, hand-wringing social police of the era hell-bent on "discovering" secret satanic messages in rock music. There wasn't one track in which Nudge didn't find something meaningful for himself, hidden or not. Like all great song-writing, it could be interpreted and reinterpreted depending on one's mood and perception at the time of listening, and he heard something different every time. To Nudge the music provided answers to some of the questions he had wanted to ask at the time, yet no-one he knew could answer. More importantly, it provided yet more fodder for his active imagination. He didn't need drugs to access the music; they would probably have closed his mind off to it. He would lie back and lose himself in the soaring guitars and lush keys, the steady, slow drumming fitting just perfectly into the vast sonic landscape. It was that elusive blend of music and verse, greater than the sum of its parts that made this album special, and listening to it always calmed him down and gave him time to reflect on what was happening.

He had listened to it a lot in the days following his bust. He still burned with anger at the way the boys had given him up like that; that was some pretty fucked up shit. It was also the first time the law had really caught up with him and he found it a sobering experience. He'd had dealings with them before, but not like this; he had never been booked and charged with anything. This time he went through the whole humiliating procedure of being carted off in the squad car, squeezed in

between two burly coppers, feeling like a little kid; a small crowd of neighbours standing in their dressing gowns, pointing, watching the whole thing. That cop Henderson was pretty cool about the whole thing though; he was surprisingly friendly, chatting away during the trip to the station.

It was when they turned up at the Watchtower that things got worse; locked in the cells with all those other fucking losers, some puking all over the place and carrying on and generally making life even more unpleasant. Nudge found a spot in the corner of the holding cell and sat there taking in his surroundings. It was a cold and austere place, bare concrete walls, tiled floor and a solid metal door. A concrete bench for sitting or crashing on circled the room, the only gap being for the door and a small toilet area at the other end. No-one wanted to sit next to that stinking thing, always blocked because some shit-head or other had stuffed something down it. Fucking idiots; shitting in their own nest. Nudge was glad he had parked himself away from the others; they didn't want to mess with him any more than he wanted them to. He began to feel claustrophobic being locked up and he vowed then and there he wouldn't allow himself to be put in this situation again.

As the small morning hours dragged on, the cell filled up with more of the night's casualties, the monotony broken by one almost comical moment. One strung-out looking white dude, who had obviously smoked too much P at some point during the night, suddenly stood up and came over all aggressive. He began working his way around the cell, bad-mouthing and lashing out at the other dozen or so occupants, trying to get some kind of rise out of them. The inmates tried to ignore him as best they could or meekly took the odd flailing hit from him, trying not to antagonise him further. The closer he got to Nudge, the more nuts he became, wild-eyed and shouting all kinds of crazy shit. Nudge was aware of the

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coppers watching through the peephole in the door of the cell. The man kept coming. When he got to within arm's reach, Nudge had suddenly stood, puffing up and drawing himself up to his full height, intent on defending himself if that's what it came to. Now directly in front of him, the man's eyes slowly focused on Nudge, looking him up and down, taking him in. As he noted Nudge's short black hair, tattoos from his neck to his wrists and muscular arms almost bursting from the black t-shirt he was wearing, the crazy motherfucker almost wet himself with fear and couldn't back off fast enough. In his haste he tripped over his own feet and fell heavily backward, his head smacking onto the cell floor. Everyone else in the cell conscious enough to know what was happening winced at the same time, glancing quickly sideways at each other in the awkward silence with the same thought running through their minds; that had to fucking hurt. The guy lay there dazed; at least the crazy fucker was quiet now and Nudge sensed the immediate relief and unspoken thanks in the nervous glances his way from the others in the tank. At that point the watching policeman opened the door and dragged the P freak by his collar to one corner of the cell, propping him up in a sitting position and checking him over briefly for any serious injury. Finding none, he turned and, smiling faintly, ushered Nudge out for fingerprinting, photographing and all the other drama that goes with being booked. They also did a routine breath test but it was apparent that Nudge wasn't drunk or under the influence of drugs.

He was surprised at the atmosphere down there once he was out of the cells; the cops all struck him as being pretty laid back dudes. He saw in that short time another side of the thin blue line; people making the best of a difficult situation and doing their job as best they could. He had no doubt there were some cunts in the force but that night no-one took advantage and tried to fuck him up. No verbal abuse or beatings with a

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rubber hose or a wet telephone book; all that urban legend shit. He fancied that if he had been violent things might have been different but to him tonight they were nothing but polite and professional. He was out in five hours; most of that time he was sitting in an interview room, shooting the shit with Henderson. Nothing much was said about the bust, just a few questions about the chase and filling out paperwork. He bullshitted his way through the tricky questions, playing the dumb card. He told Henderson he had run a light by mistake and decided to do a runner when challenged, just being a boy racer; trying it on, testing the car and his driving. Henderson had nodded and written it all down. It was all pretty standard. Henderson asked Nudge about his home life, about his brothers and sisters, the gang and his thoughts about his future; he guessed it was just routine questioning. He found he couldn't help liking the man, even though he was 'the enemy'. He looked like a hard cunt and Nudge guessed he had seen some shit in his time but he also seemed pretty real and genuinely interested in what Nudge had to say. Though different and less traumatic than what he had expected, the experience was an unsettling one none the less. They way he had been given up and the end of his "lucky" streak combined to make him ponder some serious questions. Most of the gang saw being busted and doing jail time as a badge of courage; a bleeding. The worse the crime and the more lag you did, the badder motherfucker you were. Nudge didn't see it like that; the less time he spent at the mercy of the penal system the better it suited him. Something had changed that night; some switch inside him had clicked from one pole to another and he knew it could never be changed back. Perhaps Henderson sensed it too, because he has said a curious thing as Nudge was led past on his way out the door.

'One piece of advice,' he had said, looking him straight in the eye, 'and you can take this any way you want. In my

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experience if you swim with sharks, you'll eventually get eaten.' At the time Nudge dismissed him out of bravado but after mulling it over for the last few months he started to believe it was probably true. He shook off the thought; today wasn't the day to be dealing with shit like that.

Finally he reached number 30. The sign above the gate read "Woodvale Veterans Home". This must be it. He took a deep breath and walked up the long winding driveway, gardens and trees bordering the tarmac. Not used to feeling intimidated in social situations, at that moment he was more than a little uncomfortable; this was way out of his zone. Apparently this was some kind of private hospital; the people at the courts couldn't tell him any more about it. They did tell him that he would usually be sent to work in a soup kitchen or, ironically, cleaning graffiti off fences somewhere, and he probably would have preferred something like that; mindless work and easy to handle. At least with doing shit like that no-one fucked with you and all you had to do was your five hours of peeling potatoes or scrubbing paint and home you went. Instead the powers-that-be arranged for him to serve his community service here, every Saturday morning for the next three months. A few of the boys had told him to forget about it; do nothing; don't turn up. Tell them to go fuck themselves. To be honest he had considered that option for a minute or two but in the end thought it easier to just go and do the time; why make things harder. They would catch up with him eventually and throw him in fucking jail anyway. As it was, he was thanking fuck they hadn't put two and two together and linked him with that crank heist. Perhaps they had made the connection but didn't have any solid evidence that would stand up in court. Who knew? What he did know was that for weeks after that night in the cells, every time his phone rang or a police car went past, his heart started beating a little harder and his hands got a little sweaty. He half-expected them to

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turn up and drag his arse off to jail at any time. Now those feelings had mostly subsided but he still thanked his lucky stars that he only had to go to some hospital and clean floors or some shit instead of spending a couple of years in the joint. Doing time might be cool for those other fucking heads but for him it was something he desperately wanted to avoid, which is why he didn't really mind going and doing his community service; it might actually be interesting.

Nudge took a breath, pulled the door open and entered the foyer of the building, pushing his wrap-around sunglasses high up on his forehead. An involuntary shiver run down his back as the sweat on his body met with the air-conditioned atmosphere. Nudge looked around and quickly took in the layout of the hospital. To his left an officious looking woman sitting at a reception desk looked up as he entered. To his right was what appeared to be a large, open common room, or maybe it was a dining room; already there were people milling about there; families visiting patients, he guessed. Straight ahead, through some large aluminium and glass double doors was a wide corridor; Nudge assumed that was the way to the private rooms.

'James Kingi?' asked the woman at the desk, her tone acidic.

'Yeah.' Nudge replied, turning back to her.

'We have been expecting you,' she said abruptly, rising to her feet. 'This way please,' she indicated with her clipboard as she bustled out from behind the counter.

She was a large woman in that matronly kind of way; all hips and bust, perfectly presented in a crisply starched white uniform and nurse's cap.

'I'm, er, sorry I'm late, Miss-, Mrs-, Ms-?' he started, his voice betraying his nervousness.

'You can call me Sister Parker,' the woman replied, a hint of a prim English accent coming through; her biting tone indicating she was neither impressed nor intimidated by the sight of this

leather clad, tattooed Maori.

'I'm sorry I'm late, Sister Parker,' Nudge corrected, 'I had to take the bus and I didn't know which stop to get off at.'

'That is not my problem, Mr Kingi,' she said curtly. 'If you arrive late again I shall report the matter to the proper authorities.'

'I won't be late again Sister,' promised Nudge meekly.

'Good. Come this way.' She led him through the large double doors and entered the first room on the left.

'This is the staff room Mr. Kingi, and for now this locker is yours,' she said, pointing to a metal locker with his name written on a piece of tape stuck to the door. 'There is no lock because we are all honest people here and you won't need one.' She made a point of looking him directly in the eye as she spoke to him. 'You are free to use it or not during your time here with us. Rest assured nothing you store in it will be touched by me or anybody else. Now, take these and study them.' She handed him a small booklet and a couple of pieces of paper laminated in plastic. She indicated one of the forms in front of him. 'You cannot carry any of these items with you on the ward,' she said, pointing out a bulleted list with her pen. 'That includes these,' she said, holding out her hand for his sunglasses and headphones. Nudge felt like a schoolboy at the principal's office, emptying his pockets. He removed them and handed them to her. She opened his locker door and took a small square plastic box from the top shelf, placing the items into it.

'Please remove anything else you may have that is on the list. It is for your safety and the safety of our guests. The booklet details our house rules. You will study it and abide by the rules at all times. Any breaking of the rules will result in me contacting the department immediately, and the consequences will be yours to bear. Our job here is to make our guests' stay as comfortable as possible, and the rules are there for a reason.'

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She looked at him, searching for some form of understanding. Nudge nodded quickly and she continued. 'The last form I have given you is a list of your duties here. You are to carry them out without question, exactly as they have been written. I will inspect your work after every session and if it is not done to my satisfaction you will do it again, in your own time, until I am satisfied. When your tenure here is over you will hand these items back in, so please do not damage or lose them.' She smiled darkly. 'Am I understood Mr. Kingi?' The look she gave Nudge could wither flowers and he thought it wise to accept her conditions without question. He hadn't been spoken to like this for a long time and he found himself very embarrassed to be treated this way. Turning to the locker, Parker reached in and took a white plastic overall from a hanger, similar to ones Nudge had seen the cops using at crime scenes.

'You will wear these at all times on the ward,' she said, presenting him with the suit. 'And this as well,' she added, pulling out a light plastic cap that to Nudge looked suspiciously like a shower cap. Noting his obvious expression of disdain, she informed him that they were the same caps and gowns that surgeons use to keep dirt out of their patients and to protect their own clothes. Nudge felt a little better, but not much. If anyone he knew was to see him in this getup...

'I will be back in ten minutes and I expect you to be waiting for me outside this door.' She turned to leave. When she got to the door, Parker turned back. 'One other word of caution Mr. Kingi,' she said, 'I advise you against talking to or otherwise interacting with any of the guests. You will no doubt notice that it isn't against the rules but it is not wise to have too much contact with them.' With that, she turned away and was gone. 'Jesus!' Nudge exclaimed under his breath. He could barely believe what just happened; steamrollered by a woman! He had taken a lot less shit than that from people before using his

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fists and he wasn't prepared for the onslaught he just experienced. Still shaking his head in disbelief, he stripped off his clothes down to his underwear and t-shirt, donned the overalls and pulled the hat over his close-cropped hair. He couldn't bear to look in the mirror, but he did anyway. What a sight! He almost laughed out loud. He looked ridiculous, though come to think of it he did fill the suit out pretty well; he half turned left and right, pumping his biceps and checking the results in the mirror. All that work in the gang's gym had done him some good. The thing that looked most out of place was his black, chisel-toed Windsor Smith boots. Decorated with metal rings and leather straps they went pretty well with torn jeans or leather pants, but worn with this white plastic boiler suit they just looked stupid. Hearing the outer doors opening, he opened the staff room door and went outside to meet Parker.

'Mr. Kingi, you have read the rules?' she enquired pointedly.
'Um, yes Sister,' he lied.

'Well why then are you still wearing these?' She retorted, directing his attention to his rings and wristwatch.

Knowing he was caught in the lie, Nudge mumbled an apology while removing the jewellery, popping back into the room to place it in his locker.

'Not a very good start, is it Mr. Kingi? I must say I am not very impressed. I don't know who you know in the department to have been sent here but I assure you that this will be no free ride. If you thought it would be otherwise you are very much mistaken.'

Fucking hell, he thought, does this woman ever let up?

Parker gave him the once over, looking him up and down, eyes sharp as an eagles looking for any further infraction of the rules.

'You'll do. Follow me.' With that, she turned on her heel and strode quickly down the hallway, the soles of her sensible

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white shoes squeaking slightly on the highly polished linoleum.

Parker gave Nudge a brief tour of the facility, showing him the main areas of interest to him and warning him of the places that were off-limits.

'We have fourteen rooms here, Mr. Kingi, and at the moment we have fourteen guests. We are partially funded by the government but most of our funding comes from private benefactors. Our guests stay here for varying times and their medical conditions are no concern of yours. If they wish to convey that to you then that is their business. Your duties, as I am sure you have studied,' she paused and gave him that look again, 'are to carry out the listed tasks and to assist the nursing, gardening and kitchen staff in any way you can. I will introduce you to your supervisor, Nurse Mills, presently. You will answer to him and do whatever he asks of you. If he should come to me regarding your behaviour then I think you know what will happen?' She raised her immaculately plucked eyebrows.

Nudge nodded, quietly fuming and wondering how much more of this uptight bitch he could manage. As they walked along the corridor Nudge could see people in the rooms -- at least, the rooms with their doors open. Some of the men lay in bed, others, dressed in robes and slippers, sat in chairs or at desks. From what he could see the rooms were pretty nice, large and well appointed with TV's, small fridges and plenty of furniture; more like a small apartment. Many had photographs hanging on the walls and sitting on the dresser tops; a home away from home. At the end of the corridor Parker opened another set of double doors and they both entered the spacious kitchen. A large woman wearing a chef's uniform looked up as they entered and walked over, wiping her hands on a cloth.

Parker made the introductions, and Nudge shook hands with

the chef, Glenys Hughs.

'Nice to meet you Mr. Kingi,' she beamed, her smile lighting up the room, 'I think we are going to get on just fine.' Nudge caught her firing a look at Sister Parker and saw that Parker was not impressed.

'I'm sure we will Mrs. Hughs,' he replied.

'Oh, call me Chef,' she grinned, 'everyone else does.'

'OK. Chef, I look forward to working with you. You can call me Nudge.' He smiled back. This woman was like a breath of fresh air compared to Parker. He was suddenly conscious of how he looked and was unsure how to act. He had always relied on his dress to advertise who he was and what he was about. Without his patch and uniform he felt naked and vulnerable; the boiler suit covered more than just his tattoos, it masked his very identity. He wondered how much they all knew about him. Being a small place, news probably spread quickly. If Chef thought he was some bad-arse gang banger, she didn't let on. Parker obviously knew, and she was pissing on her lamp post right off the bat. It was fair enough, Nudge conceded; after all, she was the boss and she ran the place her way. Besides, he was no stranger to being subordinate when the situation required it. What surprised him was the punch she packed. Chef obviously didn't buy into it though; he would have a talk to her after a while and get the lie of the land. Parker started toward another door at the rear of the kitchen.

'Mr. Kingi, if you please, we haven't got all day,' she said icily, as if reading his mind. She led him through the door and showed him a back room where the buckets, mops and other cleaning gear were kept. This room also had an exit to the rear of the property; the door had an old-style reinforced glass panel, the type that looked as if it has a wire net embedded in the glass, and Nudge could vaguely see beyond what looked like a good sized garden out the back.

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'You'll need these for your work here,' Parker interrupted his thoughts, 'and when you arrive please use this entrance. You can come through the rear gate off Priory Lane. Once you have changed into your working clothes you can then report to me at reception. Oh, and one more thing, Mr Kingi. Please wear something a little more appropriate next time; this isn't one of your tawdry gang parties.'

Nudge felt himself flush at the dressing down. Not only that, he had to use the fucking back door; the tradesman's entrance. He wasn't used to being insulted this way and his first instinct was to bash the fucking crap out of Parker. He felt impotent and emasculated by her. Fucking cow, holding all the cards and lauding it over him; he literally had to bite his tongue to stop himself giving her a piece of his mind. Fuming, he simply glared at her. Noting his disposition she was obviously well pleased with herself and returned his look with one of haughty superiority. Just then, a man entered from the garden, breaking the tension.

'Ah, Nurse Mills,' Parker turned and addressed the man, 'this is our new temporary staff member,' indicating Nudge with barely hidden contempt. 'James Kingi, Brandon Mills, head nurse here at Woodvale.' Nudge moved forward and shook the man's hand firmly, looking straight into his eyes. If Nudge's old man had taught him anything, it was how to shake hands like he meant it. Nudge clearly recalled how his father would grip his hand until it hurt.

'Remember this, you little pussy,' he had said, 'only bloody girls shake with limp hands. You need to squeeze firmly, but not too hard, and look the other person straight in the eye. Anything else and he will lose all respect for you.' His old man had been proven right over the years. If there was one thing Nudge disliked, it was a man who shook hands with a weak grip or, even worse, clammy hands. Nudge called it a 'dead fish' grip because that was what it felt like.

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'James will be helping out on Saturday mornings for a while,' Parker continued. Mills returned the firm handshake and nodded a polite welcome.

'Pleased to meet you, James,' he smiled. 'If you come along with me I'll show you where to get started.' Nudge turned and watched as Parker left, all squeaking shoes and bustling arse. He'd fucking show her.

That first Saturday was more for familiarisation with the place than anything else, although Nudge's first assigned task had been to clean the benches and up-stands in the cooking area. He did a thorough job, making sure he got right into the nooks and crannies all kitchens seem to possess. He then polished the stainless steel surfaces with some kind of scouring paste until they were so much like a mirror you almost couldn't tell where the wall started and the bench finished. That took a good few hours, and even in the climate controlled environment he was sweating heavily under the plastic overalls. He had never minded nor shied away from hard work; he often found it was while doing some physical task that his mind was at its most creative. His motivation was a little more obvious than that however, he was also making damn sure that Parker would have no fault to find in his work. At the stroke of one o'clock, as he was finishing buffing the counter tops, Parker materialised beside him as if by magic. Nudge jumped a little, unaware of how long she had been there while he worked.

'Mr. Kingi,' she spoke with some admiration, running her perfectly manicured fingertip lightly over the polished surface, 'you have done an excellent job. I cannot remember a time when these benches were this clean.' It was her turn to fire a look at Chef, working across the other side of the kitchen at the sinks. Nudge noticed her stop working for a brief second before starting again, no doubt resisting some kind of retort. 'I trust that all your work here will be to the same high

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standard.' Nudge fancied her face almost broke into a semblance of a smile; perhaps she wasn't all piss and vinegar after all.

'Yes, Sister, it will be,' he assured her. 'Is there anything else?' he asked.

'That will be all for today, Mr. Kingi,' she replied. 'There is a shower in the staff room. You may use it and get changed. You can put your overalls and cap in the bin by the door. Please see me at the front desk before you leave, I need you to sign out.'

Nodding his agreement, Nudge returned to the staff room and after a quick shower, changed into his clothes. They felt heavy and damp; he didn't fancy the prospect of riding back home in the humidity. He made his way to the front desk and signed the sheet Parker presented him with. It was basically saying that he was there on time and did his work as required blah, blah, legalese blah.

'That's all then?' Nudge enquired.

'Yes, that's all.'

'Next week then, eh, Sister,' he turned to leave.

'Mr. Kingi!' Parker called after him.

Nudge stopped and turned back. 'Yes Sister?'

'The back door if you wouldn't mind, Mr Kingi', she replied, pointing toward the back with her pen.

Fuming, Nudge turned and trudged through the double doors toward the rear of the building.

Another Break Out

The heavy night mist muted, but didn't completely suppress, the flash of bright light and the horribly familiar crackling sound of high-voltage electrical arcing coming from the opposite side of the compound; it meant Smitty had done his part of the job. The thick night air was instantly alive with the sound of whistles, sirens, barking dogs and cries of "Alarm!" Searchlights from each of the now barely-visible corner guard towers swung toward where the commotion came from, not very successfully trying to pierce the dank gloom. Five hundred yards away, on the other side of the camp, shrouded in the mist, five men huddled beside the inner fence.

'Here goes then lads,' Dobby whispered, holding his breath and wincing slightly as he quickly touched the bare wire with a piece of grass. Nothing. Good, the first part of the plan had worked. If the fence was still live the current would have knocked him flat, even through such a poor conductor as the blade of grass, and that would have been the end of the attempt. They all got stuck in and hacked feverishly at the first line of barbed wire with rudimentary home-made knives. At first it looked as though it was going to be an impossible task to sever the carbon steel links but with the strength that comes from adrenaline and desperation they used their tools to bend the wire back and forward around a sharp edge, work-hardening the metal until it became so brittle it broke. Working as quietly as he could, one of the men pulled the razor-sharp strands back in a loop, old cloth rags protecting his hands from the rusty barbs, allowing the others to pass through the gap. The men ran, hunched over, to the second fence line four yards away and began working on as the wire-man carefully let the strands snap back into place where he tied them together as best he could with short lengths of boot

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lace. The break in the line would be hard to detect on a night like this; the rough repair would hopefully pass muster enough to delay the guards in finding exactly where they made their escape. Overall, three razor-wire fences separated them from the relative freedom of the Belgian countryside. Hopefully all the guards and dog-handlers that usually patrolled the area between the fence-lines would be now heading for the "breach" over behind the hospital wing. If even one of them smelt a rat and cottoned on to a diversion then they were buggered. So far the plan was working, but it was early days yet - .

Luckily for Dobby and his companions only the inner fence was electrified. Smitty had taken care of that problem.

The poor bastard, Dobby thought as he strained to bend the heavy wire.

'Come on lads,' he whispered harshly to the others, 'get in amongst it, we owe it to Smitty.' Using the same frenetic technique they were soon through the second barrier. Peering into the murky darkness behind them they could just make out the faint, monochrome scene of soldiers with torches moving among the orderly lines of barrack rooms, yelling and banging on doors and shutters. They were rousing and assembling the prisoners; it wouldn't take them long to figure out five were missing. Wiping sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his heavy overcoat, Dobby's thoughts drifted back to Smitty. Lieutenant Robert 'Bob' Smith was a pilot in the little-known Special Operations Section of the RAF. His Lysander STOL aircraft had been shot down about six months previously while on a mission to drop an agent known as The White Fox into occupied Belgium. Stunts like that were always dangerous; the Lysander is a very slow and lightly armed aircraft and flying low to avoid detection often put it in harm's way. The pilots on these missions had only a twenty percent chance of survival which meant that they had to either be very

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brave or very stupid to take on the job. Many were ex Battle of Britain fighter boys, transferred out of the fighter squadrons after hundreds, if not thousands of soul-destroying sorties; other pilots were men whose temperament just suited the job. On still nights you could hear a Lysander engine from miles away and that night misfortune took Smitty directly over a roaming Jerry patrol. The Germans opened fire on them as they flew overhead, raking the plane from spinner to tail-wheel with machine-gun fire from only a few yards below. It was one of those "wrong-place-wrong-time" cock-ups that often happen in wartime, a minute or a mile's difference either way and they would probably have completed their mission without incident. Miraculously, the occupants escaped injury from the hail of bullets but the shooting mortally damaged the aircraft. Smitty had tried to gain height -- the pilot's best friend -- and kept the Lysander flying for as long as he could, but the engine had been hit and fuel and coolant were leaking everywhere. He had anxiously searched for a suitable field to put down; with oil pressure dropping like an anvil he knew he only had seconds before the engine seized; at that point they were going down regardless. He had cursed his luck, knowing his war was probably over. His prime directive now was to keep his passenger out of enemy hands; God knows what those Gestapo bastards would do to her if they caught her. It was imperative he make as much distance as he could from the patrol. He had spotted a likely-looking field away over to his left and gently coaxed the Lysander toward it, willing himself and his charge on. Inevitably the leaking fluids reached the exhausts and instantly ignited causing an intense contained explosion under the engine cowling. With nowhere else to go, the resulting fireball raced rearward into the cockpit, fed by the slipstream, igniting anything combustible in its path. Instinctively, Smitty reached forward and flicked the extinguisher switch, causing high pressure carbon-dioxide gas

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from two small tanks to flood into the engine compartment in an effort to starve the fire of oxygen. In this case, however, no amount of the gas was going to quell the now raging fire. With toxic smoke and flames filling the cabin, Smitty had pushed open the top half of the horizontally-split side window and leant out as far as he could in order to see where he was going; the last thing he wanted to do at this point was to fly into a tree. The resulting draft fuelled the fire even more and with increased ferocity it licked higher around him as he struggled with the controls. The propeller finally stopped dead as pistons, heated to almost melting due to the friction from lack of lubrication, expanded and locked solid in their cylinders. The only thing keeping the aircraft aloft now was the speed gained by the shallow dive Smitty maintained as he steered the stricken craft toward his goal. Now dead-stick, he was out of options. He had managed to reach the field but the lack of forward speed finally caused the wings to dump lift, flipping the plane over in a stall. The controls were now useless in Smitty's hands so all he could do was brace himself against the fuselage for the impact. The plane had gone in from fifty feet, falling nose first into the earth, the entire forward section of the cabin by that time well alight. Trapped in the crumpled cockpit, Smitty was severely burned. He was lucky -- or unlucky, Dobby reckoned grimly -- to have still been alive when some local Partisans, who happened to be covertly meeting in the area, rushed to the scene following the sound of the crash and had beaten back the flames, pulling him from the wreckage. On seeing the state of him they had decided to leave him for the Jerry patrols they knew would be on their way. The Partisans had spirited The White Fox away; her luck had held where Smitty's had failed as she had been thrown clear in the crash, dazed and bruised but otherwise unhurt. At the time the Partisans had no idea who she was, but rear-seat passengers on these flights were not the sort of people to let

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fall into enemy hands. It must have been a tough decision for the resistance men and Dobby couldn't blame them; he knew they wouldn't have the resources to look after anyone with such grave injuries. They gambled on the hope he would stand a better chance with the Germans; at the very least they would put him in a prison hospital, which is where he did end up, in the bed next to Dobby's. Dobby had often looked over at the tragic figure swathed in bandages and thought that if he'd found Smitty he probably would have snapped his neck or put a bullet in his head. The poor bugger wouldn't have much of a life after this anyway, with his face and hands gone and terrible burns over most of his upper body. Night after night Dobby had lain there listening to Smitty's laboured breathing; lungs scarred beyond repair; it must have been agonising for the poor devil. Dobby had argued many times with the nurses and doctors, trying on Smitty's behalf to get better treatment for him, but there were never enough drugs to go around. What few pain pills Dobby did get he sneaked over to Smitty and he grubbed whatever he could from some of the other lads on the ward. Most were more than happy to give them up, though Dobby did have to persuade the odd selfish bastard with some strong words or the threat of a clip round the ear. He wasn't there to win friends but some jokers could be downright bloody selfish. How Smitty had endured that ward Dobby would never know. How many times he'd considered putting a pillow over that bandaged face. He shook his head at the thought; anything would be better than the hell he must have been going through. It was bad enough being able-bodied and having to deal with the muck that was dished out in the camps. Mercifully, the fact Smitty was so badly injured meant that the Jerrys had taken some pity on him and had at least spared him the treatment some of the others had to endure. Perhaps they had the same thoughts as everyone else: "There but for the grace of God go I".

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There! They had finally broken through the last line of wire and once through they all helped the wire-man tie up the loose ends. With the briefest of glances behind them, they ran out into the murky night. Searchlights and torches wouldn't do the guards much good but the dogs would soon be out and that spurred the men on. They had all seen what those dogs could do to people and a little mist wouldn't stop the animals tracking them. All of them were weakened from beatings, overwork and lack of nourishment, and Dobby thought it would be a bloody miracle if any of them made it. He had heard that only one in every hundred who attempted escape succeeded; the rest being killed or recaptured. Still, he had to try; it was his duty. Where the others split up into pairs, Dobby cut out alone -- as was his way -- and they all headed off in different directions. Dobby ran as fast as his legs and the terrain would let him. He had gained some of his physical fitness from the month or so lying in that hospital bed. Marginally better food than the rest of the POW's and a good rest was all he needed to prepare himself for this attempt. He would cut out for the coast; at his reckoning about eighty miles away as the crow flies. In every other direction was occupied land, part of the reason that men like him were sent to this particular camp. From the coast he would try to "borrow" a boat and with a lot of luck and a similar amount of nerve he could make it to England. The other men had set out for a known safe house; there was an "underground railroad" operating in the area that repatriated downed allied airmen and the odd escaped prisoner. Dobby had heard that one before and didn't trust anyone, which is why he went alone. He knew the Jerrys would assume all the men would head for the coast but he was going to take the long way around. He would survive by eating grass and licking moisture off rocks if he had to; his theory of lying low during the day and making good ground by night was going to get him home.

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As he ran, his mind wandered. He had escaped before, twice, and he suspected the Germans were getting to the end of their patience with him. After his capture on Crete, Dobby had been shipped, along with thousands of other Greece and Crete Campaign POWs, to Stalag XVIA in Austria. He spent his first months there recuperating in the hospital wing. Dobby had been well pleased to find Joe Ngarimu alive and well there and Joe had filled him in on events after they had been captured. The Stalag was a kind of clearing camp. Prisoners would arrive by rail, fifty men to a wagon, where they would be assessed by the camp doctors and assigned to a work party. Attached to the camp was a small hospital ward where some of the wounded would be treated until they were fit enough to work. Those prisoners who were too badly injured for the hospital to cope with were loaded in boxcars and sent somewhere down the line - no-one knew exactly where - but the word going round was that those poor buggers were shipped to camps back in Germany and used for medical experiments. Dobby put it down to propaganda - not even the Nazis could be that inhuman. As he had recovered, his only thoughts were escape. By befriending the nurses and orderlies, he soon gathered enough information to be able to formulate a plan. Security in the camp was often lax to the point of farce; prisoners were sometimes allowed walk outside the wire if they promised to return before the nightly roll call; their captors initially adopting the 'olde-world' chivalry of previous Wars. Of course, one night Dobby didn't return from one of his trips outside the wire. Even though he had at least eight hours head start and made good progress he was caught a few towns over trying to borrow a car by the civilian owner, a Great War veteran holding what looked like an antique blunderbuss - Dobby didn't want to be anywhere near that thing if it went off - and the old Prussian marched him at gunpoint the entire ten miles back to camp. If nothing else it

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broke the boredom of waiting for Red Cross packages from home. For that little stunt he earned himself a one month stay in the cooler, (which he didn't really mind) and after that a posting to one of the iron mines in the area (which he did). It was hard, dangerous and dirty work saved for those who fell foul of the powers-that-be. In hindsight, the Stalag wasn't so bad; certainly nothing like some of the places he had seen in the meantime. Six months after that he had been moved to another camp, always looking for an opportunity to escape. It appeared that the authorities didn't know what to do with him; the various camp Commandants finding it easier to send him down the line and let someone else take care of the problem. He had ended up in the sprawling Neuengamme camp near Hamburg, which was actually a group of high-security camps for political prisoners, Jews and other "undesirables" of the Reich. His stint in the hospital wing there was the direct result of his most recent escape attempt - and subsequent capture.

He and two others had managed to take advantage of some shoddy security and break out of the main compound, making their way through the complex to a poorly guarded section of the outer perimeter fence. It was easy enough to throw one of their thin straw mattresses over the rolled razor wire at the top, help each other over and disappear into the night. Dobby, against his better judgement, had stuck with the others because one of them claimed to have a contact in the town, some pre-war yacht-racing cobber or some-such, sympathetic to the allied cause. They made it as far as the outskirts of the town before turning a corner in the darkness and stumbling right into a dozen or so armed and drunken SS men out for a night on the town. It was one of those comic/tragic situations where everyone freezes for a moment, not really believing what they're seeing, until someone breaks the spell by moving and then everyone is galvanised into action. One of the men,

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“Ocker” Barnes, an Australian gunner, had turned and bolted back away from the group and Dobby wasn’t far behind him. Teddy Hetherington, the other man, simply put his hands in the air and surrendered. As Dobby ran, he heard Teddy pleading for his life before a gunshot silenced his voice. Cursing, Ocker and Dobby weaved and crouched as they fled. Dobby felt a round rip past his head before he even heard the shot and Ocker pitched forward onto the road in front of him. Dobby tangled his legs in the falling body and half-stumbling and hopping managed to free himself before keeping on running. Shots and shouts rang out behind him and he heard bullets splatting into the road, ricochetting off nearby walls and whistling past his ears. Back then he was in far worse shape than he was in now and he soon tired. He had managed to gain some distance from the soldiers but knew he would never outrun them. Looking around, he spotted the beginning of a row of old stone two-storey houses a few yards away. Reaching them, he desperately tried a few doors and, finding one that opened, quietly slipped through and latched it behind him, turning the old key in the lock. In the faint light he saw some steps to his right and crept down them into a cellar, hiding behind some wine barrels he found there. His heart pounded in his ears and his lungs heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Barely minutes passed before he heard the soldiers above knocking on doors and raising the tenants. Those that didn’t answer the summons quickly enough had their doors kicked in as the SS men searched, knowing their quarry couldn’t have gone far. Predictably, they had found him cowering there in the cellar and with spittle-laden screamed threats proceeded to beat the living hell out of him with fists, hobnail boots and rifle butts. He tried his best to protect himself but the thugs were enjoying themselves on their night off and ended up giving him a hell of a pasting. They had really done a job on him, aggravating his old injuries. Why

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they hadn't just killed him he didn't know - maybe they were having too much fun. He had passed out and woke some time later to find himself soaked in blood and bouncing around on the floor of a transport truck on the way back to the camp, sandwiched between the bodies of Ocker Barnes and Teddy Hetherington. One memory stuck in his mind from that night; seeing he was conscious, one of the SS men had pulled out his Luger pistol, cocked it and pointed it at Dobby. He then leaned closer and with booze breath and broken English told him he must be one lucky Englander, as the shot he had killed Ocker with had been aimed at him.

'Next time, huh Englander,' the man had said, sighting along the pistol at Dobby's head and mouthing a 'boom' sound as he jerked the gun up into the air as if in recoil.

The Commandant at Neuengamme must have had enough of him because he had him immediately transferred to his current home, Krakenau. He had spent the next month recovering from that beating in the hospital wing and that was where he had become acquainted with Bob Smith. Smitty was a little better by then, able to talk, his voice husky but weak. The two men kept each other company through those long days of convalescing with their stories and escapades. The head doctor, the only human being in the whole bloody country, Dobby reckoned, had constantly stonewalled his new Commandant's efforts to have Dobby reassigned back to work details, telling him that he was not yet healed and any work would surely kill him. That the Commandant could not care less about one more dead prisoner was evident, yet the doctor stood his ground. Maybe the two of them had something else going on, some other history between them. Dobby never knew what motivated that doctor, Eidelmann was his name, but he almost certainly saved Dobby's life. If Dobby was caught again though, he knew he would not be so lucky. Krakenau was specially designed to hold problem prisoners.

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He was told that if he attempted escape again, and was caught, he would be summarily executed in front of the men as an example, or possibly worse, deported to one of the camps in Germany. Dobby had no doubts about the threats. The Commandant could have been a poster boy for the SS. He was a real Aryan-looking prick named Engel, who would, at his whim, kill prisoners at random, just to keep the rest of them on their toes. He delighted in killing, and did so sadistically, often laughing as he murdered women, children, old men; it didn't matter to him. No-one had ever escaped alive from his camp and he was determined no-one was ever going to; not on his watch. Dobby had seen the men who had made the failed attempt; left hanging where they were cooked alive on the wire or caught and staked to the ground in front of the paraded prisoners while Engel pulverised their feet - and their heads if the fancy took him - with a tank-track hammer. Sometimes for a variation he would sever the tendons in the backs of their knees or ankles with a straight razor, crippling them for life, obviously relishing the screams of agony. Engel was a real bastard, and Dobby swore to himself that one day he would be made to pay. The prisoners were forced to witness this gruesome theatre; those who tried to look away, unable to bear the cruelty of it, were beaten into watching. Dobby had grimly looked on and plotted revenge - he had to stay alive and make sure Engel got what was coming to him.

Those dark thoughts spurred Dobby on as he navigated the fields and sparse woodlands with the practised ease that comes from years of running up and down mountainsides after wayward sheep. He ignored the brackens and thorns which tore at his legs and clothes as he made his way well off the beaten track, going where they wouldn't think a man would travel, keeping to the steep stock trails, dense tree lines and streams when he could. After half an hour of continuous running, he stopped and listened; all he could hear were the

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usual nocturnal sounds of the forest and his own ragged breathing. Satisfied, he turned and pressed on into the misty darkness.

The Outside World

Nudge thought the second Saturday had gone pretty well; he was five minutes early for a start and that put him in Parker's good books. He had dressed accordingly so he wouldn't suffer from the heat on the ride in or during his work. He managed to have a quick chat with Chef, as he mopped the kitchen floors, who told him that although Parker was a bit on the severe side she was a highly regarded and professional nursing sister. Chef and the Sister didn't always see eye to eye, but that was to be expected with two capable women working in close proximity to each other. Chef ran her kitchen like Parker ran the hospital and sometimes that caused a little friction. Overall, everyone got along very nicely, like a family. Nudge liked Chef. She was open and friendly; she reminded him a little of his mother. Not only that; she was a bloody good cook, and Nudge loved good food, not that he'd had the opportunity to eat much of it in his time.

As he wandered about that morning in the course of his work he crossed paths with some of the guests. He would nod a polite hello to the men as he met them; most seemed pretty friendly and when it felt right he introduced himself with a friendly grin and a handshake. He found the odd one was a bit grumpy; those patients he left to themselves; he assumed they weren't feeling well and didn't want to be bothered. They all ranged in age; a few Nudge guessed to be as young as fifty while others were much older. He felt a poignant sorrow for these men; they were once young and vital yet now their bodies (and some their minds) were failing with the relentless march of time. It forced him to wonder about his own mortality; he had never imagined himself getting old or even being old. He always fancied he'd go out somehow in a blaze of glory way before that. Seeing these old men deeply affected

him and bought him down to earth.

He completed the rest of his tasks quietly pondering his own future. If he was destined to be old, what would he do? What was there out in the world for him? He didn't see himself staying with the gang forever and now that he thought about it, there weren't many older members around. He paused for a moment, leaning on his broom and looking into space. Where did they go? What did they do after they left the gang? He figured some would have died, more than a few were in jail and some probably moved on to settle down and lead quieter lives with wives and kids; new responsibilities taking priority over old. He carried on sweeping. There was something else. Mills was a straight arrow; pleasant enough, and helpful, but there was something unsettling about him. Sure, he was a stickler for the rules, but that wasn't it. Out there, in the world, Nudge wouldn't have given him the time of day, putting him down as just another square Pakeha, but in here it was different. He found himself wanting Mills to like him, to approve of his work. Then it dawned on him; the people around here didn't automatically respect him. In Woodvale he was nobody; just another man doing a job, and a brown man doing a menial job at that. He was lower in status than anyone here; the bottom of the heap. They couldn't see a patch or his tatts and so didn't react like those who did and made snap judgements. In here he would have to earn their respect and for a moment he was afraid he might not be able to do that.

After he mopped the floors he began running the polishing machine back and forth over the linoleum, buffing it until it shone; his mind wandering off to simpler times as he remembered the polished wooden floors of his parent's house. While a must-have yuppie accessory these days, the house Nudge grew up in had plain wooden floors by necessity; there was no money for carpets. Wearing only socks, he and his

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siblings would run up the hall and slide the rest of the way on their stocking feet, all the way into the kitchen where they would tumble in a tangle of arms and legs, only to get up and do it over and over again. It was amazing how far he could slide on the smooth, Rimu planks and he loved the sensation of almost-weightless movement and speed. Their mother would mildly scold them, probably thankful they were out of her hair for a while, and as long as they kept their shrieks of laughter to a reasonable level she would carry on reading her magazines and drinking her cups of coffee while sitting in a haze of cigarette smoke at the Formica and chrome dinner table. He smiled sadly at the memory and for the briefest of moments was sorely tempted to take off his black Addidas runners and give it a go. He doubted Parker would see the fun side of it, so he didn't, but he schemed that maybe near the end of his time here he might just have to try it out. He finished up as usual, signing out after showering and changing, Parker casting a critical but approving eye over his work. As he made his way out through the kitchen Chef called him over and handed him a plastic container containing some left-over savouries and a sweet pastry. He thanked her with a wide smile as he headed out the back door.

The next bus was going to be a while so Nudge decided to walk part of the way back and enjoy the afternoon sun. On the spur of the moment, he did something he had never done before; he stopped at a café and ordered one of the coffees with a fancy name. He then sat there in the shade of a large umbrella and ate his pastries and sipped at his coffee -- which was delicious -- watching traffic and people as they carried out their Saturday afternoon rituals. Because he wore simple blue jeans and a t-shirt, he aroused none of the acrimony or suspicious and derogatory glances he was used to getting from the other patrons. His arms were heavily tattooed, but then again many people wore them like this now. Once the domain

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of sailors and the under-classes, tattooing took on a whole new meaning back in the nineties with bands like the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Jane's Addiction and countless heavy metal outfits sporting modern, tasteful and intricate designs. Now it seemed every suburban shopping centre has a tattoo/body piercing parlour and every fourteen year old girl has either an ankle band, an arm band or some winged-butterfly design on the small of her back to keep hidden from her parents for as long as possible. It was now almost too socially acceptable to have a tattoo and many tattooed people inwardly bemoaned the fact that they weren't members of an exclusive 'club' any more. Many tattooed people got their tatts back in the day when it was kind of dangerous and anti-social; now all they had was faded ink that looked dated and clumsy compared to contemporary work and while some kept getting more done to maintain their image, others gave up as age and conservatism caught up with them and had them removed or kept them covered, relics of a bygone chapter in their lives. Nudge didn't mind his being on display; there were no obviously offensive symbols or images like some of the boys had. His thoughts wandered to other forms of body decoration. He didn't much go for the whole body piercing thing. He had a couple of earrings but drew the line there. Pierced noses, belly buttons and less obvious places were not for him. He remembered back in the day when a man having his ear pierced was a sure sign of being a criminal, homosexual or child molester -- either that or a musician -- but many a mother's heart broke the day her son arrived home with a fresh gold ear stud. Nowadays that sort of reaction is almost laughable; mothers are probably glad it is just an earlobe and not something more radical. Watching some of the young people walking past on this sunny afternoon with spikes sticking out of their foreheads and chins or holes the size of fifty-cent pieces in their earlobes brought a wry smile to his face.

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I must be getting old, he thought as he sipped his coffee.

Enjoying this simple experience, alone, out in this strangely alien world, he began to wonder what other of life's simple pleasures he had missed out on by choosing the path he did. At the time he was convinced the way he chose to live his life was the right one. It felt right, and the lifestyle fulfilled a need within him. How could it be wrong if it felt right? Would making changes now be a mistake? Or was his original choice the mistake? Maybe he needed to live those years the way he did to evolve into the person he is becoming. The words Henderson said that night at the station kept coming back to him. Nudge shifted in his seat and stared out over the tables and chairs, swirling the last of his coffee around the bottom of his cup. These were questions that didn't have any immediate answers. He had already gone over this stuff years ago, not knowing then either. Maybe now it was different; he had a few years of perspective and experience behind him. The questions whirled around his head. How much choice did he have over the type of person he was? How much is genetic and how much is programming by parents and society? Nature or nurture? The whole thing was coming back to haunt him again. He had been down this road before and so far it hadn't led him to a good place. He drained his macchiato and stood up, flipped some coins on the table, put on his headphones and sunglasses, hit 'play' and headed off home with Floyd's "Hey You" soaring in his ears and freeing his mind.

The Taste of Freedom

As each day passed without his being discovered, Dobby allowed himself to relax a little and he soon settled into a routine of laying low during the day and making as much distance as he could by night. By avoiding the obvious routes and taking the long way around, travelling under the cover of darkness through thick bush and crossing terrain that pursuers would not imagine him taking he had successfully evaded all of the patrols that were out looking for him. They were looking in the wrong places; areas where they assumed inexperienced, confused and desperate men would choose to travel. He had to force himself to stay put during daylight hours, resisting the ever-present temptation to get up and go, no matter how safe it felt, to get as far away as he could as fast as possible. He knew Jerry would be thinking he would make a beeline for the nearest safe haven; most escapees did, it was human nature. Dobby's theory was that the safest place for him to be is exactly where they didn't think he would be, and the strategy had worked pretty well so far. He had spotted the odd group of soldiers marching on foot or speeding past in the back of trucks but he wasn't sure whether they were actively looking for him or not; one expected to see lots of soldiers in occupied territory anyway. Now, after days on the run, Dobby was feeling good. He was more relaxed and in control than he had been on his previous escapades. He was somewhat fitter, better mentally prepared and had a reasonable idea of where he was and thus where he needed to go. It was just a matter of time; a small, personal war of attrition between him and his captors. Eventually they would give up, thinking he was either dead or had succeeded in making it out of the area and he could potter along in his own time and get to his destination relatively unmolested. All he had to do was stay calm, keep

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out of sight and he would make it. Sometimes his thoughts turned to how the others had fared, but he didn't dwell on it for long; out here it was every man for himself. Deep down he hoped they had been clumsy, inept, leaving a trail that would be easy to follow; that way their group would become the focus of any search. Not a nice thing to think, but anything that kept the Germans away from his position the better.

He had to stay alive; it was more important now than at any time before. It wasn't solely for his own sake; it was for the men he had seen murdered in the camps. The guards and the bastards running the places were thugs and cowards and they had to be brought to account for their deeds. Succeeding in his escape was the way he was going to see it done. He was also grimly aware of what would befall him if he was caught and that butcher Engel got hold of him; it was those thoughts that drove him on and made him even more determined during the long, stagnant days and bitterly cold nights. He survived by carefully digging up roots and vegetables from farmer's fields and drinking from the many streams in the area. On one occasion he sneaked into a barn, foraging for whatever he could find and had discovered an old horse blanket, the smell of which transported him back to the golden fields of home and he was grateful for the warmth and comfort it provided. He was using all the cunning and wits he possessed, covering his tracks and being wary of taking too much from any one place; the last thing he needed was for someone to notice an intruder and call in the Gendarmes. Discipline would see him through; discipline and a healthy dollop of luck, and he had to rein himself in more than once. It simply wasn't worth the risk to move during the day, though staying put had its own downside; he often had to remain silent and completely motionless for hours on end in order to avoid detection. There were times he had holed up in what he thought was a nice safe spot only to find by daybreak that a farmer would arrive to

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work in the fields close by, meaning he couldn't move at all without the risk of being seen. There was a possibility that the farmer was anti-German, or perhaps a member of the local resistance, but Dobby couldn't take the chance. Sometimes it meant pissing his pants, or fighting the urge to sneeze, or biting his lip until it bled so he wouldn't cry out with the pain of a cramp; what seemed like innocent everyday acts to anyone in peace time could be the difference between life and death here. Every night as darkness fell he would gingerly and gratefully emerge from his hiding place and stretch painfully, working and kneading his stiff muscles in preparation for the night's work ahead. It was tough going, especially for a man in his reduced condition, but he was free, and there were far worse things than damp pants or a few sore muscles waiting for him back at the camp if he was captured.

He was fortunate in that the countryside was mostly forested hills and he made good use of the cover the trees and bracken provided. He instinctively waded through rivers and streams where he could, if for nothing else to throw any tracker dogs that might be following off his scent. Occasionally he would have to cross open fields, and on clear nights even the pale blue moonlight lit up the landscape enough to make him stick out like a sore thumb. He used his combat sense in such cases, keeping low, moving quietly and sticking as close as he could to the hedge-rows and low stone fences that separated the fields for cover. It was a testament to his ability and discipline that in the time it took him to reach the coast he had only one mildly close call. After a hard night's travel he had holed up in a run down and apparently disused barn, which seemed a safe bet as it was out in the middle of nowhere and completely run down, the nearest dwelling being miles away. He reached the place just after dawn and had gratefully bedded down in some of the old, dry straw in a corner of the creaky loft. He was jolted awake shortly after by the sound of

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the barn door banging shut and of giggling and laughing. A young couple had chosen the barn for an assignation and they too climbed to the loft Dobby had chosen to hide in. As Dobby was mostly hidden from view by straw - and the couple had other things on their minds - he remained undetected while the lovers did what lovers do for the rest of the morning. It was a bizarre and very tense interlude; while the couple were young and naive, they still presented a huge danger to Dobby and he was more than prepared to do whatever it took to remain safe. As he lay there quietly, every sense on full alert, his thoughts drifted back to home and to Sharon and the times they had spent alone just like this couple. How dangerous it had seemed then and how ridiculously innocent it all seemed to him today. He lamented how far away he was from it now, literally and figuratively, and he knew at that point nothing would ever be the same and under the sound of the youngster's laughter and rapture, it was all he could do to not break down and cry.

From where he was Dobby couldn't see the couple directly, but he could see the rest of the barn, and nature created a beautiful moment too; sunlight streamed through the small broken window and the cracks and holes in the roof creating beams of light through the shadows. The lover's movement stirred up dust and straw particles which accentuated the rays and for a few moments there was no war, no sadness. Dobby watched the scene from his cover, a fleeting moment of splendour in an otherwise insane and brutal reality.

That reality once again intruded as Dobby heard the couple preparing to leave. After listening to them for hours, not understanding a word of their language but knowing exactly what they were saying, he felt like he knew them and he was quietly glad for all their sakes they didn't discover him; it would have been one more horror on his conscience. Eventually they made their departure and after a few minutes

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Dobby breathed a sigh of relief, releasing the tension he had been holding for the last few hours. He inched toward the window and watched as they ran and skipped across the fields, unaware of how close they had come to having a very different day. After a precautionary hour's watching and listening, straining to detect any further disturbance which would indicate he had been spotted, he had finally slept, exhausted from both the previous night's efforts and the morning's events.

Fate Steps In

The third Saturday dawned grey and raining, though the weather belied what the day held for Nudge. When he arrived at Woodvale, he was a little depressed. Mills popped in and saw him as he began to take off his jacket.

'You can leave that on if you like James, you don't have to change into your favourite suit,' a smile crossing his face. 'I have another job for you. This isn't part of your normal duties so you can say no if you want to.'

'What is it?' Nudge asked.

'One of the specialists in the city who offers his services at no charge to the hospital whenever he is available has had an appointment cancelled this morning, which means he is free to see one of our patients, as long as someone can go there with him. I'm tied up here with another patient and so I can't do it. Would you like to go?'

'Yeah, of course,' replied Nudge, brightening. 'I can't drive though, well, not at the moment anyway.'

Noting his disappointment, Mills grinned. 'No problem James, you would be going by wheelchair taxi anyway. So, you're up for it?'

'You bet.' Nudge felt better already.

'Excellent. I'll meet you outside room four in five minutes; I just have to grab some paperwork for you to take with you.'

Nudge felt a little excited, not because he was going to town instead of mopping floors but because they actually trusted him with the task. Sure, Mills was in a bind and couldn't go, but the fact they saw him as an option made him feel good. He found it pleasantly satisfying. Now all he had to do was hold up his end of the deal and he was determined not to let them down.

He made his way down the corridor, the odd guest milling

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about greeting him with an increasingly familiar smile or nod. Mills was already waiting for him when he arrived outside room four. Though the door was closed, Mills spoke in low tones.

'OK James, here's the paperwork. You need Parker to sign you both out here and do the same with the people at the other end when you leave. That's all! Enjoy the trip! Oh, one more thing. You'll find this one's a bit of a handful, but he's OK, really. Just don't give him any cigarettes or booze, no matter how much he hassles you.'

Mills knocked, waited a moment, then opened the door to the room. They both entered.

'Bill, how are we this morning?' Mills asked breezily, 'Are we ready to go and see Dr Walker?'

'We?' the old man sitting on the bed griped, 'I don't see you bloody well going anywhere in the rain.'

Mills smiled and ignored the remark. 'Bill, this is James. James, Bill.'

James extended his hand toward Bill, who shook it, his grip like a vice. They made eye contact and something happened. Nudge saw something behind those clear blue eyes, and he was sure that the other man felt the same. Nudge was drawn in; the old man's eyes were piercing and bright, yet had a darkness about them, full of life yet tired and hiding a weariness Nudge had not seen before. After what seemed like an age, the old man spoke.

'At last!' he exclaimed with a wide grin, 'someone who knows how to shake hands like a man around here. Not like these other ruddy milk-sops,' he fired a derogatory glance in Mills' direction. 'I like you already James!'

Turning to Mills his mood changed and he spoke sharply. 'You know it's no bloody good me going to see this joker, why go through the whole ruddy rigmarole again?'

'Come on now, Bill,' Mills placated him in that professional

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tone all nurses had, 'you know it's for your own good.'

'Don't talk to me like I'm a bloody idiot, Mills, I may be old but I'm not bloody stupid. All that poking and prodding, for what? Bloody doctors and their bloody mumbo jumbo,' the old man grumbled. Turning to Nudge, he brightened. 'So you're coming with me eh? What say we ditch this bloody awful place and head off to the pub for a beer and a fag? Whaddya reckon?'

Nudge hesitated, not knowing what to say; Mills stepping in and saving him.

'Bill, you know you're not allowed to drink or smoke, the doctor said so. And try not to corrupt poor James here, Sister Parker wouldn't be amused if we sent him back with any bad habits now would she?'

'Bugger Sister Parker, uptight bloody woman. She could use a jolly good shag I reckon.' Bill winked at Nudge, 'and you look as though you're corrupted enough already, eh James?' he joked. They all laughed, the tension in the room easing a little. Nudge took an immediately liking to Bill. It wasn't often he met older people that he could relate to and he could see this morning was going to be fun.

Mills bought a wheelchair over and sat it next to Bill. As Bill went to get into it, Mills took him by the arm to help him. Angrily shrugging Mill's arm loose, Bill informed him in no uncertain terms that he could manage by himself, thank you very much and that he wasn't a bloody invalid. Nudge turned away and grinned to himself; he was definitely starting to like the old man.

Once they had installed themselves into the rear compartment of the taxi, Nudge and Bill settled for the thirty minute ride across town.

'Got any durries?' Bill asked. Seeing Nudge's confusion at the term he added, 'smokes, fags, coffin nails, cancer sticks?' Understanding, Nudge shook his head.

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'Sorry bro, don't smoke, never have. Don't like the taste.'

Bill nodded. 'Good for you James, filthy bloody habit anyway. Wish I had never started. Ah well, too late to whinge about it now.'

'You can call me Nudge, if you like, Bill.' Nudge offered.

'Nudge, that's an odd nickname for a bloke like you James. How'd you come by that one?'

'You really want to know?' Nudge asked.

'Sure. That kind of thing is interesting to an old man. Christ, everything's interesting to an old man.' He grinned.

'Well, it was at school. I was the class clown, used to do impressions, you know, put on voices and stuff like that. One of my favourites was from a Monty Python skit; one of their catch phrases was "nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more!"' Everyone was saying it there for a while.' Nudge put on the voice, mimicking the English accent perfectly and exaggerating the word "more" in that classic Pythonesque way to sound like "mowah". 'I guess I used it once too often'.

'Heh heh,' chortled Bill, 'I remember it. You do it very well. Mind you, I could take or leave Monty Python, though one of my good mates loves them. I found some of it good and yet other stuff went right over me. That fish dance, that's bloody funny.' They both laughed at the thought.

Bill continued. 'I was never much good at voices and things, I had different talents.' He winked knowingly. 'Oh, and you can call me Dobby.'

'Dobby. How did you get yours then?' Nudge asked.

'Oh, nothing as fancy as your story. My second name is Dobson, and where I come from the blokes weren't that high powered in the old creativity department -- if you know what I mean -- so they just shortened names and added something like an 'O' or a 'Y' on the end. Tom became Tommo, Deans became Deansy; you get the idea.'

'It really is nice to meet you Dobby,' Nudge shook his hand

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again. 'So, how long have you been at the hospital?' he asked. 'Aw, about 3 months now,' replied Dobby, a hint of resignation in his voice.

'Oh. Shit, sorry bro, I hope you don't mind me asking,' said Nudge, suddenly aware that the question was quite personal. 'Not at all Nudge. It's nice to have someone half-way bloody decent to talk to. They must all go to some bloody school to learn to talk the way they do. So bloody condescending, they talk to us as if we're retarded bloody children.'

They sat in silence for a minute, Nudge studying his charge. Judging by Dobby's white hair and leathery skin Nudge guessed he must have led an outdoors life and be about 75 years old. He was also quite tall man; he would have cut quite a figure in his younger days. Nudge peeled off his jacket, feeling the heat in the back of the van.

Dobby looked up and down his arms. 'Bloody hell Nudge, that's some serious tattooing you have there.'

Flushing slightly with embarrassment, Nudge subconsciously wrapped his arms around the back of the car seat.

'Sorry mate, I didn't mean to stare,' Dobby apologised.

'Nah, it's cool Dobby, I'm used to people staring, I'm just not used to caring about it,' Nudge reassured him.

'I'll show you mine then,' he said and rolled his sleeve up, exposing his forearm. Nudge leaned closer to look. Dobby pointed to a tiny green mark, which to Nudge looked more like a freckle.

'There ya go Nudge. The bloke started the machine, touched it on my arm and I yelled for him to stop. That was enough for me!' He grinned, and Nudge grinned back.

'Yeah, I guess they aren't for everyone, bro.'

'Well, I often thought about getting a proper one but, well, you know, I just never got around to it, what with one thing or another.'

'Fair enough, bro. Never too late though.'

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Dobby laughed, noticing a vaguely familiar emblem in one of the designs on Nudge's arm.

His smile faded. 'Jesus, Nudge. You're not in one of those bloody gangs, are you?' Dobby asked. 'I mean, you don't seem the type. Bloody mongrels those people if you ask me. None of that carry-on in my day; for one, the lads would have had them well sorted out, and for the other the local Maori wouldn't have stood for it either. Does them more bloody harm than good. These days they let them get away with anything. Bloody rapists and robbers, the lot of them,' he broke off into a coughing fit, his body convulsing with the spasms. Nudge leant forward. 'You OK there Dobby? Anything I can get you?' he asked, his concern rising.

Dobby held out his hand, signalling that it was alright. After a minute the coughing subsided. Dobby looked suddenly tired. 'Sorry about that Nudge,' he gasped, his breathing heavy, 'I get a bit carried away at times, always have done.'

'Shit bro, don't worry about me. Anything I can do?'

'There's some bottled water in my bag here, can you get it out for me?'

'No worries, bro.' Nudge opened the bag and found the water, tearing off the seal and offering it to Dobby. The old man drank thankfully.

'Ah, that's better,' he sighed, sitting back in the chair.

'Bloody hell Dobby, you scared the shit out of me,' Nudge leaned forward, looking intently at Dobby, 'you sure you're OK?'

'I'll be fine Nudge, no worries,' replied Dobby, 'just a bit of a cough; I've had it in some form or other all my life, that is, after the war.'

'Second world war?' enquired Nudge.

'That's right, Nudge. You know something about it? Not many do these days.' Dobby reflected, 'Young people today don't give a damn about what happened one year ago let alone

sixty.'

'I've done some reading, and one of my uncles went and served somewhere in the pacific, but he doesn't talk about it at all, at least, not to me. I don't really know shit about it, bro.'

'Well, one day I'll tell you a bit if you are interested. I've not got anyone interesting to talk to and you seem like a nice enough bloke.' He lowered his voice and asked, 'you're not in one of those gangs are you Nudge?'

Nudge looked at the floor.

'Sorry to disappoint you, Dobby.' The surprising thing was that he really felt sorry.

'Oh, I'm not disappointed, Nudge,' Dobby said brightly, 'I just didn't pick you for one of those types. Maybe I've misjudged them all along. You're the first bloke I've met who is in a gang.'

'No, I think you've got them pegged pretty well,' replied Nudge. 'I've been thinking of making some changes lately anyway; I don't think it's for me anymore.'

'Changes eh? That's always tough. I'm sorry if I offended you Nudge, I didn't mean to.' Dobby suddenly clicked and smiled. 'So that's why you've been around the hospital recently, you've been a bit of a ratbag and now you have to do some type of service. Am I right?' His blue eyes sparkled.

'On the button Dobby, but don't take me the wrong way, I am actually finding it good for me. Hey, maybe the justice system works after all!'

'I wouldn't bloody bet on it Nudge,' Dobby laughed.

Nudge laughed along with him and it felt good to talk about it with someone.

The van slowed to a stop.

'Here we are gentlemen,' the driver said as he opened the back door and lowered the lift, wheeling the chair onto the pavement. 'At least the rain has stopped for us. See you back here in an hour, or perhaps two?'

'Make it two eh mate. Whaddya reckon Nudge?' Nudge nodded and smiled to himself as he pushed Dobby up the path to the hospital.

The appointment took around thirty minutes, Nudge passing the time reading the latest motoring magazine in the waiting room. He thought it ironic that the only people who could afford the types of cars featured in these magazines were the people that had these magazines in their waiting rooms; the patients were probably spending a good percentage of their expendable income on the specialist's fees and not on brand new cars. He wondered if things were different if he would have gone into medicine. He didn't have to think about it long; he didn't fancy the idea of constantly being around sick people. Not only that, people never went to the doctor to say hello and thank them, they went to bitch and moan. Half of them probably didn't have anything wrong anyway, just wanting some attention. He thought some aspects of medicine would be fascinating, and he didn't begrudge the doctors their training and undoubted skill; he just couldn't see himself doing it. As a kid, he had wanted to be a soldier, a fireman, or a policeman; something glamorous. He didn't know where those aspirations went, or when he stopped believing those things were possible. It was probably a combination of his father beating it out of him and his mother telling him that Maori boys would never amount to anything, the Pakeha would see to that. As it turned out, she was mostly right, although he had doubts as to whether the Pakeha had that much to do with it. All his brothers had done jail time; he had barely avoided it as well. Now the only work any of them could get was in road gangs or as builders' labourers. No wonder gang life was so attractive. Rightly or wrongly, at least there they could find some acceptance in a culture that didn't judge them, at least not the way the rest of society judged them. While there was no doubt that racism was alive and well

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in New Zealand, Nudge had lately found himself believing that a man created his own destiny with drive and determination and a little divine help from whatever was out there. It reminded him of a poster, he couldn't remember where he saw it, probably some lame social services office somewhere, and the slogan on it stuck in his mind. It read:

"Together with God you can move mountains, but you had better bring a shovel."

To him it meant he had to work for what he wanted and he liked the sentiment, except for the God bit. He had often wondered about God; Maori legend is full of Gods and spirits and things and he heard enough about them from uncles and grandparents when he was younger but as he got older most of it fell by the wayside. It didn't seem to be helping any of them much, no matter how much they prayed or respected the Gods. He had tried reading the Christian bible once and, like many others, gave up after the first few chapters. He found that you really had to be in the right frame of mind to read it. It also helped if you were a theological scholar, or at least had the mind of one, so you could decipher the true meaning of the text. It was a little like Shakespeare (which he also tried to read, and gave up on), unless you actually studied it, you often didn't "get" it. You couldn't just pick it up and say, "Oh yeah, Othello did this or Jesus meant that". You had to translate the thing and work out the context and only then could you decide whether it was a great yarn or not. Nudge had waded through both as a kind of personal challenge, but he got too lost in it and wasn't about to ask anyone for help.

God as an entity just didn't sit with him. He certainly couldn't get the concept of people bowing and carrying on to some "thing" that only existed because someone else said it did. He could understand his people worshipping the sun or

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the trees or the mountains; they are tangible things that you could see and feel. Worshipping a belief, and a belief created by someone else at that, just didn't make much sense to him. After studying history, albeit not at university but in his own bedroom with books from the library, his own theories about organised religion and the considerable role they played in both the creation and destruction of societies seemed to be reinforced. To his thinking, the church had been created, or, if not created, at least had been employed by the ruling classes of the day to keep the majority of the population in a perpetual state of guilt and fear, subjugated and controlled. Many a war over the centuries has been fought because of religious intolerance and persecution. Would the kind and benevolent God at the centre of every one of the world's religions let the atrocities Nudge regularly saw on the news take place? Is it really God's will that man eradicates himself and every other living thing on the planet? Or is that just part of the big picture as well, part of the prophecy where only the faithful will survive the Armageddon to live again in a pure and just after-world? He had to admit that to have that kind of faith was something to be admired, but at the same time he couldn't imagine having to rely on it to get him through the day. People who did seemed no different to him than the drunk or the addict, unable to function without an external crutch. He'd come across many people who practised spiritual principles who were not, and didn't consider themselves, religious. They were just good people.

Nudge viewed organised religion as a dangerous and subversive movement and his views could be somewhat supported by looking at the current trend of modern organised religion. He had seen the rise in recent years of "new" evangelism. Though Evangelistic preachers had been around for years, especially in the southern states of America, they were often viewed by the mainstream religions, and most

people, as crackpots and hustlers, playing on the guilt and misplaced faith of their “flock” to fleece them of millions of dollars, often from people that could ill afford such pledges. Now, new “churches”, loosely based around more orthodox institutions have appeared, their doctrines more extreme and more radical than those practised in established churches, and parishioners from the latter are flocking to the former, dissatisfied with the political correctness and open-mindedness of current preaching. Evangelistic churches preach extremes; their “bishops” and “priests” often former criminals now espousing the “good word”; no gays, no women priests, killers are executed, children are flogged, zero tolerance. To Nudge it seemed a dangerous development and more and more people were buying into it, literally. He wondered if it was because modern society has grown immune to the violence and the crime they see on their televisions every night, or was it because, just like an addict, people need stronger and stronger doses of whatever it is that gets them through the day to survive?

Nudge had let the magazine fall into his lap as his mind wandered. As he closed it and placed it back alongside last month’s Readers Digest and Woman’s Day, the door opened and the doctor wheeled Dobby out into the waiting room.

‘All done?’ Nudge rose from the chair.

‘Yes, all finished,’ the doctor replied. ‘I’ll send the results on to Woodvale in the next few days.’ He smiled. Nudge could sense the man judging him as he stood there. The doctor broke the silence.

‘You have some forms to be signed?’ he held out his hand.

‘Oh. Yeah, sorry Doc,’ Nudge passed him the folder.

‘No secretary today so I can do this for you.’ He scribbled a few notes and signed the bottom. ‘All yours. See you again,’ he smiled as he passed them back.

‘Thanks doc,’ Nudge smiled, realising that maybe the man

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hadn't been judging him after all. How often had he misinterpreted other people's reactions?

The question bugged him as he manoeuvred the wheelchair out of the building.

'What's up cob?' Dobby had twisted himself around in the chair to look at Nudge. 'You look like you are trying to choose whether to kill your dog or your mother.'

Nudge smiled a little.

'Nah bro, just thinking. By the way,' he said, changing the subject, 'how'd it go back there.'

'Same old story Nudge. It's all tied up with what happened in the war. Nasty business, but not a lot they can do about it.' He sat up straighter. 'Just have to live with it.'

'I'm sure you've got a few good years yet, eh Dobby,' Nudge said as he pushed the chair along.

'Bloody oath Nudge, don't count me out yet. Say, how long have we got?'

Nudge checked his watch, 'just over an hour before we meet the taxi.'

Dobby turned, 'There's a pub down the road, how about we go for a jug, my treat.'

'Can't do it Dobby, Parker would have my balls on toast,' Nudge replied, both men involuntarily shuddering at the image before putting it out of their minds. 'But I'll tell you what we can do.' He spun the chair around, looked both ways before crossing the road and headed back the way they had come.

Down by the Sea

Dobby finally stood, after many long weeks of difficult and painstaking progress, and stared mutely out over the choppy sea as it washed against the pebble beach on Belgian coast. It was an emotional moment and he could hardly believe he had made it this far. He was thin and exhausted, but he had done it. What he faced next was the final and most treacherous part of his plan. If he pulled it off, he would be home free. He made his way carefully down to the water's edge and rested there on the beach, the weak winter sun barely defeating the cold sea breeze as he shivered underneath his now ragged clothes. The smell of the sea and the call of the gulls were comfortably familiar as his mind drifted back, remembering the long and lazy summer holidays he spent as a child at his uncle's bach near Boulder Bay. Dobby allowed himself a few moments, soaking up what little sunlight there was, recharging his spirits. Opening his eyes, he took stock of his situation. He had made it this far by avoiding everyone on his journey, military and civilian alike, not trusting anyone, no matter how tempting it had been. After the first few weeks he had begun feeling more secure, and that was a dangerous emotion out there in the wops. He had kept reminding himself that feeling too cocky leads to mistakes, and he couldn't afford to make any mistakes this time out -- the threat of what would happen to him if he was captured was ever-present, hiding beneath the paper-thin illusion of safety. He had to make it for Smitty and the rest of the lads; one win and it would all be worth it.

Over the previous weeks he had deliberately strayed close to the western border with France; far enough away to avoid the inevitable border patrols yet close enough to shorten the coming sea voyage to England. During his time in the hospital he'd had ample opportunity to study and memorise a map

that one of the men had smuggled onto the ward. Day after day he had mentally traced his route as far as the coast, not really knowing what he would encounter on the way, but at least he had a general idea of where to go and how to get there. After savouring the view a moment longer he stood and carefully began making his way along the beach, negotiating the tidal pools and odd rocky outcrop, heading for the now visible outskirts of the port town of Nieuwpoort. As he got closer, he knew had to be careful. He expected the town to be heavily guarded, and he knew he would have little chance to get a boat from there; even if he did he could never pilot one out to sea unnoticed through the port's defensive blockade. He would look for a boat elsewhere, but first, he needed supplies, and a big town was where he could find them.

He soon spotted what he was looking for; an unattended washing line. He took what was probably his biggest risk so far, grabbing some clothes from the line, running down a back alley and furtively changing into them, dumping the rags he was wearing under some bushes. He still looked exactly like what he was, but he stood out a little less than the rest of the locals now he sported a decent shirt and pants. He was forced to move by day now, and he found it the most nerve-wracking part of the escape. He was also literally starving, and it was going to be tougher finding food. He joined others scavenging the city's rubbish bins to find something to eat. As he foraged, he was constantly reminded of being in a country at war. Patrols, soldiers and military hardware were everywhere, the threat and presence of the Third Reich around every corner. He spotted the Star of David adorning walls of many buildings and saw people in the streets wearing the yellow emblem on their lapels. Those who wore the star would glance at him briefly and then turn away, their eyes full of fear. He struggled against his instincts and kept his cool as he brazenly walked down the almost-deserted streets, hoping his bluff of hiding in

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plain site would pay off. It did, most soldiers barely gave him a second look as he passed; he was just another filthy, starving civilian. The fear in his gut almost made him physically sick, but he drove himself on, determined to succeed.

Within a few hours he had gathered enough food, having in some cases to wrestle other men for it. He had a stroke of luck when he found a bin behind a bakery that contained old crusts of bread and even some pastries, stale they might have been but to Dobby they were more precious than gold. He sat on the pier, ate and plotted, staring out into the North Sea. England was just over there, out of sight, but tantalizingly close. The weather was fair; it was cold but not stormy. With luck, and depending on the boat he used, his trip across the channel would take about fourteen hours, which meant he could almost do the whole thing under the cover of darkness. He would travel without lights but he would have to be on the lookout; any boat he was planning on taking from here wouldn't be capable of outrunning even the oldest and slowest German naval vessels. If the voyage took longer, at least he would be close to the English coast by then and have less chance of being intercepted and more chance of being picked up by a British ship. With the plan settled in his mind, he dropped to the ground, and with his belly full and his spirits high, he made his way through the town and headed west along the coast, picking his way, and he wouldn't stop until he found what he was looking for.

As he made his way he discovered several isolated boat-houses, all of which were locked and only one of which actually contained a boat, which, Dobby could make out through the salt encrusted windows, was more like a dinghy; he could use it in a pinch but he was hoping for something a little more substantial; drowning didn't fit in with his escape plans. A few miles down the coast he stumbled across one of the many fishing villages that dotted the coastline and found

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what he thought would be the perfect vessel. It was a 30-foot fishing boat, moored at a modest jetty. Various other smaller craft bobbed at their moorings nearby in a small marina, backups aplenty should this one not work out. As Dobby watched, one crewman walked to and fro, carrying the catch of the day while another checked and repaired nets on the wharf. Dobby holed up in an abandoned boat-house nearby and bided his time, waiting for his opportunity. Darkness fell quickly and at last the men headed for home, or perhaps to the local tavern, their daily chores done. Dobby sat back and waited, it would be another hour before he would leave his cover and begin the final chapter of his plan, the sea journey home.

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'What the bloody hell is this?' Dobby demanded as he stared down at the tiny cup in front of him.

'It's a mocha macchiato,' Nudge grinned. 'Try it.'

Dobby picked up the cup between his knotted fingers and took a tentative sip. He smacked his lips a few times and grinned back. 'Bloody hell, that's delicious! What did you call it? Mocker whatto?'

'Mocha macchiato. It's Italian; chocolate coffee or something. I had my first one just the other day as well. To think all this time all I had to do was go to a café and I could have something like this,' Nudge sipped from his cup, the froth sticking to his top lip.

'You've got a Milo moustache there cob,' Dobby pointed out and they both laughed as Nudge sheepishly wiped it away with his thumb.

'Reminds me a bit of France, this place.' Dobby spoke as he looked around, his voice distant.

'What's that bro?' Nudge enquired.

'This place, the café; the red and white chequered tablecloths; the grey buildings.'

'You were in France, Dobby?' Nudge asked, leaning forward, his interest piqued.

'It was a long time ago Nudge, a lifetime. Just after the war.' He leant forward as well and dropped his voice. 'Have you ever been in prison Nudge?'

Surprised by the question, Nudge had to think for a second or two.

'Er, no bro. Came close there a few months back. I know enough people who've been inside to have some idea. Not for me I think, bud.'

'Uh huh,' Dobby grunted and sat back in his seat. 'Prisons are

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country clubs now anyway. They even have TV and bloody phones! People have no idea...' his voice trailed off as he looked off into space.

Nudge waited and watched as Dobby continued staring into the middle distance.

After a few moments he prompted gently, 'Dobby? You OK, bro?'

Dobby suddenly looked over.

'Oh, sorry cob, I was just thinking about something. Yes. It was 1941. You wouldn't believe it by looking at me, most young people can't, but I was a strong young man then, in my prime, fit from years of working the land down south.' Dobby paused, looking over. 'I hope you don't mind me asking; how old are you, Nudge?'

'Thirty seven this year, Dobby, though sometimes I feel older.' he answered with a grin.

'Thirty seven eh?' Dobby looked surprised. 'You look a lot younger than that Nudge; must be all that clean living,' he winked and smiled broadly. 'Hmm, that makes you born in 1970?'

Nudge nodded, taking a sip of his coffee.

'Interesting,' Dobby mumbled to himself, a sad look momentarily crossing his face.

'I was nineteen years old in 1941, Nudge, barely out of short pants. Can you remember what you were doing at nineteen?'

Nudge shook his head.

'Not much Dobby, at least nothing worth remembering; probably just hanging with my mates.'

Dobby nodded.

'I know exactly where I was at nineteen; living in a hole in the ground. I was dug in up there in Crete with thirty thousand other blokes from all over the Empire. Some were green, straight from basic training in Egypt. I pitied those boys; they had no bloody idea what was waiting for them.' He shook his

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head sadly at the memory. 'Others,' he continued, 'like me, had already seen our fair share of fighting. There were Poms and Aussies, a few Canadians and stragglers from various other battalions who had been evacuated there as we all pulled back ahead of the Jerry blitzkrieg in Greece. We were being hammered pretty badly at that stage. Freyburg, the kiwi general who was given command of the whole shebang, was pretty cocksure that we could hold the island but I had my doubts. If anyone had thought to ask any one of us lowly infantry soldiers, we could have told them there was no way we could hold the place with the men and equipment we had. I had experienced Jerry first hand and Nudge, I have to say, they were bloody good at this war business. Mind you, they'd had a lot of bloody practise too!' Dobby coughed and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, taking a sip of water from his bottle. Nudge leant forward, concerned.

'You right there bro? Anything I can do?'

'Nah old cob, I'll be right in a jiffy.' He took another long drink of water and settled into his chair. Nudge relaxed in his chair, ready to hear more.

'We waited there on that rocky bloody hillside for three weeks, expecting an attack any day. Eventually they did, of course, and overall we actually beat them back for a bit. Although our lads put up a brave show, we made some mistakes and didn't win it. It was my bum luck to be wounded on the first day and taken prisoner. I learned afterwards some of the lads managed to fight a withdrawal over the mountains to the south coast and were evacuated by the Pommy navy back to the Middle East.' Dobby paused again and sipped his coffee. He shook his head sadly.

'We lost nearly one thousand good kiwi blokes in just those first few days. But the Germans suffered far worse. Some reckon they lost as many as twenty thousand, and for what? A pile of bloody rubble. It was the first time in the history of

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warfare that an airborne assault of that size was attempted, so a lot of bad calls were made by both sides. Can you imagine that Nudge? Thousands of men gone, lives snuffed out just like that.' He clicked his fingers. 'You know, the day I signed up, ten of my mates went along with me. Of those ten blokes, seven were accepted, and of those seven, I was the only one to make it home, and then only bloody just. The rest are buried in war cemeteries all over in Europe. In a community the size of the one I lived in those numbers hit hard.' He paused, thinking about those old mates, still seeing them as if it was yesterday, downing their beers at Blake's tavern, in his memory forever young. He cleared his throat and continued.

'Many more thousands of us were captured; the brass pulled the plug on the whole thing when they realised Crete was lost, which is one blessing, I suppose. A few hundred blokes escaped the Germans and spent years hiding in the hills, protected by the local partisans until they either escaped by boat to the mainland, were discovered and shot or were liberated at the end of the war.' He paused, taking a drink of water. 'You know the people there still hold festivals in our honour every year. I've been to a few and to this day they are still deeply grateful for our efforts. Most people around here couldn't care bloody less. Ah well, nothing much I can do about it now.'

Nudge shrugged his shoulders, not knowing what to say about that.

'Another coffee, bro?' he asked. Dobby nodded and Nudge called the waiter over and placed the order.

After the pause, Dobby carried on the story.

'It was a bloody mess, Nudge. Many of those taken prisoner later died in the camps of injuries, disease and abuse. I spent years in one God-forsaken camp or another, terrible places they were, run by murderers, sadists and bullies. We lived like bloody animals, eating rats, cockroaches and anything else we

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could get our hands on. I was beaten many times, mostly at the whim of some arsehole guard or other.' He leaned back in his chair, breathing hard; Nudge could see the affect it was having on him.

'Dobby, you don't have to --' he began.

'No, Nudge, I do,' Dobby interrupted, holding up his hand. 'I haven't talked about this for a long time, and I feel like I can talk to you.'

Nudge was humbled; no-one had confided in him anything as deeply personal as this before. He could see this was something Dobby wanted to do, so he sat, sipped his coffee, and listened.

'I was wounded, you remember, in the assault on the island. Christ Nudge, I thought that was it for me. I was prepared for it, or as prepared as I could have been. In my career as a soldier I saw things that defied description. I often saw myself as one of the dead; torn apart, mangled beyond recognition, and it scared me Nudge, I don't mind admitting it. I was terrified of ending up like that. At the time death was so random, so indiscriminate and so common, but I never got used to it. Oh, I could deny it, and for a long time I did, I had to, but eventually a man has to think about death; it's a natural part of life after all.' Dobby drained his cup and put it back on the saucer before looking off into the middle distance. 'I once saw a bloke die after being hit by one of our own mortars. The tube fell over as the loader dropped a round into it and it fired the shell down our own trench-line. The man's name was Vincent --, Vincent something or other, from the Waikato,' he paused. 'Jesus Nudge, I can't remember his name.' Dobby's eyes began to water. 'Vincent. I'm sure it was Vince -- bloody hell!' He banged the table a little too hard with his fist in frustration, their cups jumping a centimetre into the air before rattling down onto their saucers. A few curious diners looked their way briefly before carrying on whatever it was they were

doing.

'Hey bro, it's OK,' Nudge said, doing his best to sound soothing as he repositioned their cups. 'You'll probably remember it at two o'clock in the morning, that's when I seem to remember stuff like that,' he half joked.

'You're right Nudge, but I have just done that man a great disservice. I once made a promise to myself that I would never forget...' Dobby wiped at the corners of his eyes with a gnarled knuckle. Nudge took the opportunity to order another blend of coffee each; when it arrived Dobby took a gulp and gave Nudge a thumbs-up. What a sight they must have made; Nudge with his wrap-around shades and tattoos and white-haired old Dobby, sitting in his wheelchair, chatting like life-long friends.

'You were saying?' Nudge gently prompted.

'Yes, yes, the mortar. The shell tore through him and ended up buried in the trench wall. It hadn't travelled far enough to arm itself so it didn't explode, but it was already going hard enough to do the damage. The bloke, I'm sure his name was Vincent something-or-other, sat and looked at his legs lying on the other side of the trench in disbelief, pleading with us to not let him die; though it was obvious to everyone there, himself included, that he wasn't going to live. It was all I could do not to put a bullet in his head, and I'm sure most of the other blokes felt the same way. He lived for what seemed like ages, the poor bugger. We couldn't do anything for him. One bloke held his hand, and I'm not ashamed to say it was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen anyone do. Even now the thought of it still moves me deeply.' Dobby stopped and wiped away another tear as it ran down his wrinkled cheek before carrying on his story. 'He just sat there asking for his mother and his girlfriend as his life slipped away. You know, Nudge, I haven't thought about that moment until now. That was sixty odd years ago. Sixty years! Where has it all gone...'

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his voice trailed off. Dobby hung his head, lightly thumping the arm of his chair with his hand. 'Bloody hell, I'm sure it was Vincent something...' He looked up, his blue eyes searching the skies for the answer.

Nudge sat there, not knowing what to do or what to say. He took a chance.

'You were going to tell me about France, the cafés,' he said brightly, trying to sound positive, but not overly succeeding.

'The cafés?' Dobby questioned. 'Oh yes, that's how we got onto all this wasn't it? France was much later than what I was just talking about, you understand.' He seemed to cheer up a bit. Nudge glanced at his watch.

'Shit!' he exclaimed. 'Drink up Dobby. We're due back for the taxi in ten minutes.'

'Oh! Yes, Bugger, I lost track of the time.'

The old man ran his spoon around the inside of the cup, scooping the remains of the foam, and with a trembling hand raised it to his mouth and noisily sucked the spoon dry.

'Delicious! What was this one called again?'

Nudge laughed, 'Cappuccino bro, and I can arrange for Chef to make them for you if you like.'

'She can make these at the hospital?' Dobby sounded incredulous.

'They have a special machine,' Nudge informed him, 'you can have them night and day if you like mate.'

'Bloody hell cob, I'm up all night pissing like an Auckland Cup winner as it is. I might have to limit them to, say, ten a day,' the sparkle had returned to his eye.

'Come on bro, let's get to that taxi.' Nudge walked along quickly, pushing the wheelchair ahead, a new-found friendship forming in his heart.

They made the trip back in silence, each man deep in his own thoughts, digesting the morning's events. Arriving back at the hospital, Mills met them at the front door.

Dobby Shares

'Where did you two get to?' he asked pointedly, 'the appointment was at nine, and now it's after eleven-thirty. Sister Parker has been asking questions.'

Nudge wasn't about to lie to Mills, so he opened his mouth to tell the truth when Dobby cut him off.

'You know how these bloody doctors are, Mills. We ended up waiting bloody ages to see him and then he buggerised around doing this and that, poking and prodding. God knows what these mongrels learn at medical school. All they do is poke and prod! Poor old James here read every bloody magazine in the place, even the girly ones with Lady Di on the cover. Now stop mucking him around and help me into the toilet, I'm busting to go.' He winked at Nudge as Mills moved to the back of the wheelchair, and as he turned it around, Dobby reached out and put his hand lightly on Nudge's arm.

'Thanks cob,' he said quietly, 'I really appreciate it.'

Mills looked on with a questioning expression.

'No worries bro, catch up with you next time, eh?'

'Come on, Mills' Dobby complained, 'what are you waiting for? Don't stand about, I haven't got all bloody day!' Mills sighed and pushed the chair down the hallway and Nudge could hear Dobby railing Mills as they went. He grinned; he liked Dobby, he liked him a lot.

Nudge finished the rest of his duties on automatic pilot. He couldn't help thinking about Dobby the young man, fresh from the farm, dealing with situations that no-one, no matter how old they are, could possibly be prepared to deal with. What must it have been like? How the fuck did those boys cope with it? Nudge couldn't imagine it. He actually couldn't even begin to imagine it. His mind reeled at the heaviness of it. Thank fuck I didn't have to go through something like that, he thought as he put away his sponges and mops.

After showered and changed, Parker signed him out as usual, apparently happy with his day's work. As he walked toward

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the kitchen, Parker suddenly called after him.

'Excuse me Mr. Kingi, can you wait a moment please.' She bustled up to him. 'I'm sorry, I should have given you this before, but it slipped my mind. I'm sure I don't know why, but Mr. Dobson in room four wants me to pass on a message to you. He said to tell you, oh, wait, I want to get this right,' she paused and took a slip of paper out of her uniform pocket, unfolded it and, after studying it for a moment, continued. 'He said to tell you that 'the man's name was Corporal David Vincent, Davo, from the Waikato', and that you would know what he meant.'

'Thanks Sister; thanks very much,' Nudge nodded and smiled, noting her puzzled look.

'Remember, Mr. Kingi, that I warned you about getting involved with the guests,' she said in her stern, matronly way. 'Yes Sister, you did. You most certainly did.' Nudge turned and walked away, adjusting his headphones as he left through the back door.

Exit, Stage Left

Nudge shifted his weight nervously as he stood, betraying his rising apprehension.

'You fucking want to what!?' Toa almost shouted. The others looked on in patent disgust.

'You heard me,' Nudge said loudly, standing his ground. 'I'm gone. I want out.'

'I always took you for a fucking pussy Nudge. A little trouble with the law and you fucking run for cover.' The others laughed derisively.

'Yeah, you fucking chicken shit,' called one.

'Call yourself a fucking man,' said another, spitting on the floor in Nudge's direction.

A little name calling didn't bother Nudge; he could see there was no reasoning with any of them. He thought Toa might have empathised with him, but his attempts to have this talk with him alone proved futile. His only option was to address the whole group; an informal council, though to call them a council would be implying they had intelligence to go along with it. The problem Nudge faced was that these men weren't capable of understanding why he wanted out; they knew no other way, or they chose to not know any other way. To their thinking he was insulting them by leaving, rejecting their comradeship and loyalty. For Nudge, it was simply time to move on; he had outgrown what they had to offer, and he still smarted over the way they had coughed him up to the cops; that hurt him more than he initially realised.

He had long ago discovered that the gang viewed the world in black and white; now their reasoning is that he was either with them or against them. At the time it suited Nudge to think like that as well; membership of a gang virtually demanded such a view. The issue now was that Nudge had discovered a middle

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ground; a third option. So here he was, standing before a council of gang elders, in their eyes rejecting their way of life and everything they stood for.

One of the men moved away from the group, pulling a knife from his leather pants, the blade opening with a metallic click. 'What if we don't fucking let you leave?' the man demanded menacingly, toying with the knife, the other men instinctively positioning themselves behind him.

'Then I'll fight my way out, starting with you, you fucking cunt,' Nudge threatened angrily as he bristled and took a step toward the man, staring him down, 'so put that fucking shiv away unless you want it stuck in your fucking neck.'

As Nudge had hoped, the man backed down; he had seen Nudge fight before and didn't fancy getting half killed.

'Alright you fucking idiots, give it a rest!' Toa shouted, breaking the tension a little.

Turning to Nudge, he spoke:

'Twenty-five grand.'

'What?' Nudge responded.

'You heard me,' Toa replied, a sinister edge to his voice. 'I figure with rent, food and expenses, you owe us twenty-five thousand. Come up with the cash and you can leave. If you don't, well, let's just say I would hate to see anything to happen to you.'

Nudge stared at them in disbelief.

'Let me get this straight. You want me to pay you twenty-five grand or you'll fucking kill me? Where the fuck do you think this is, New York? Who's going to do it, you?' Nudge stared at the others in turn, 'you? You? Jesus fucking Christ, you're fucking insane if you think you can get away with that shit.'

Toa stood and drew himself to full height. 'Listen to me you cunt, you want out you pay us twenty-five grand. The only other option is you stay and we forget this shit ever took place. You've got one week to think it over, but you're not fucking

staying here in the meantime. Now get your shit and get the fuck out.'

Nudge could feel the intensity of the collective disgust directed at him from the men standing opposite. He stared them down, unflinching, but he knew he couldn't win; any way he looked at it he was in trouble. Even if he had the money and paid up he doubted he would ever be free of them; they would be back for more. He couldn't stay either, no matter what Toa said; they wouldn't forget this; couldn't forget it. He knew he couldn't run. One, he wasn't about to run away from these fuckers and two, even if he did, they had chapters all over the country and affiliates in Australia; he would have to run a long way away to escape their reach. He could also think of worse things than being dead; he had seen men brain damaged beyond repair by a baseball bat to the head, wearing diapers and drooling into their baby food. Fuck that. He feared it might turn out like this, but twenty-five thousand, where was he going to get that kind of bread?

Under watchful eyes, Nudge packed what little possessions he had at the house and left. He didn't look back; he felt no need. As he walked away he contemplated the small box of items he was carrying.

'Not much to show for almost twenty years work,' he reflected. Though convinced he had made the right choice, he still regretted losing some of the culture he had found among the gang. He would miss the loyalty, comradeship and the sense of belonging, but that was now gone; water under the burning bridge. He quietly hoped it was possible to find these traits in the outside world.

Right now though, he had more pressing problems, like where to stay. He had no other friends outside the gang and his brothers were spread all over the country; they wouldn't exactly welcome a non-paying guest anyway. He thought briefly about his mother's place but equally as quickly

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dismissed that option. He could probably crash at a shelter for a few nights but beyond that he would have to figure something out. He had a little money put away - he had been saving whatever he could since he began thinking about leaving - but it wouldn't last long. He had also decided to make a promise to himself that he would not to resort to crime to survive. He had drawn a line in the sand; made his choice. That way of life was blind him now and was no longer an option.

But first things first. Stopping at a café and putting his box of meagre possessions on the chair beside him, Nudge ordered a double mocha cappuccino, a Danish pastry and sat back to enjoy them, allowing the sun to warm his face for what felt like the first time in his life.

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Nudge arrived at the hospital thirty minutes early that Saturday. The reasons were twofold; the first being that he had to be out of the hostel by 7.00 a.m. and the second because he wanted to see how Dobby was doing before getting started on his duties. He walked through the building toward the front desk, noting Dobby's door was closed.

He hoped he wasn't too early, not sure what time the residents usually rose. He considered popping in, but thought better of it. He would ask first.

Sister Parker was at the desk as usual.

'Good morning, Mr. Kingi,' she called, her voice a little brighter than usual. 'You're early this morning?'

'Morning Sister Parker,' Nudge smiled. 'I wanted to pop in and see Mr. Dobson before work, is that OK?'

'I'm not sure, I think he has someone with him,' she said, looking toward to ward. 'Shall I check for you?'

'Yes please Sister, I would appreciate it.' Nudge said gratefully, 'and Sister, do you think you can call me James, or even better, Nudge? Mr. Kingi was my father, and I have been here a while now.'

'I'll think about it, Mr. Kingi,' she replied showing a glimmer of a smile. 'Wait here please?'

Nudge watched as she disappeared through the double doors, knocked on the door of room four and put her head in briefly. A moment later she closed the door and came back.

'He will be free in a few minutes, you can sit and wait there if you like,' she pointed to a large couch by the door.

He sat and looked around. He wondered what it would cost to run a place like this. There were only a handful of staff, but the upkeep of the building would be horrendous. He had been surprised to learn from Mills that the government only gave a

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few thousand dollars a year to hospitals like this one - and there were many of them dotted around the country. Somehow they fell through the cracks in the system. Nudge thought it quite unfair that other people had free health care laid on by the state, including tourists coming here to have babies (or so he had read in the paper), while guys like Dobby, who had suffered horribly in the service of their country ended up having to pay their own way or rely on some benevolent businessman to take pity on them and cover their costs. He shook his head sadly at the thought. He was beginning to wonder, as did so many others, what the bloody hell the world was coming to.

Hearing the ward doors opening, Nudge looked up in time to see a greying, middle aged woman walking briskly toward the front door, sobbing quietly and dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief as she hurried out. She seemed pretty upset. He looked over at Sister Parker. She returned his gaze and tilted her head toward the ward.

'Mr. Dobson will be free now, Mr. Kingi,' she said knowingly, and then went back to her work.

'Thanks Sister.' Nudge climbed out of the sofa and made his way to room four.

'Nudge!' Dobby practically yelled as he came in. 'It's bloody good to see you cob. Come in, have a seat, take a load off.'

'How are you today bro? Nudge asked.

'Same as always Nudge, getting by. You have to seize the day you know.'

'So I believe Dobby. I saw a woman?'

'Ah, you saw her.' Dobby seemed nervous and shifted position. 'Crying was she?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Hmm, I thought she might be. She wouldn't be here, not in front of me. That was my daughter, Elaine. It's a pity you missed her Nudge, I think you'd probably get on.'

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'Daughter? I didn't know you had any kids bro, mind you, I never asked, did I?'

'Aw, no worries cob. I had two children, a long time ago now. Remember that day I was going to tell you about France? It's all tied up with that. Ooh, that reminds me. Will you have time when you've finished today? I'd like you to meet someone.' He was like an excited child, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

'I think I can arrange that Dobby, mind you, I'll have to ask Sister Parker.'

'Leave her to me Nudge; I'll sort it all out. You just come back at one. By the way, thanks for having Chef make me those mashowhatto things,' he leant forward and lowered his voice to a whisper, 'though she doesn't make them as nice as that place up the road!'

'Don't sweat it bro, there's an art to it. She'll get better, just tell her what you want; more froth, less froth, more coffee, less coffee. Help her out.'

'Thanks cob, will do. See you at One then.'

Nudge cleaned the floors and benches as usual. As he worked, he wondered who he was going to meet and felt quite excited at the prospect. It didn't take long though for his other problem to push itself into his consciousness - whenever he thought about it he had that awful sensation in his stomach that often comes with bad situations; a sinking, fluttering nauseous feeling full of impending doom. He would find a way; he was determined not to be beaten. Something would come along at the right time, it always did. As he pushed his mop he recalled a line from a movie he had seen once; as was so often the way, the movie was stink but there was the odd good bit of dialogue. It was:

"Chance favours the prepared mind"

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He supposed the guy who wrote the movie heard it from somewhere else too, maybe it was from Kafka or Jung or some other philosophical genius. Wherever it came from, it worked for him. When he was ready to accept something, it would inevitably come his way. Was that chance. Or fate? He'd have to think about that one some more, but not right now

He finished the rest of his work and cleaned up. When he went to sign out, he sensed Parker looking at him a little differently than usual.

'I see you are getting on very well with Mr Dobson. I think it is good that he has someone he can talk to, though I have to admit I am at a loss to explain what you two might have in common.' She looked intently at him, and put her hand on his arm; her voice suddenly softer and more comforting.

'Tread very carefully James, these people are fragile. Do you understand?'

'Yes Sister, I think so. I'll wear kid gloves.'

'Very good. And well done on the ward today. We all appreciate your help.'

Nudge was pleasantly taken aback. Parker was acting like a human being for a change, and he had to admit he liked the feeling of being appreciated.

'Sister, if I could ask -,' he began.

'You may visit with Mr Dobson now James, it has all been arranged.'

'Thanks Sister, you're a gem.' Nudge smiled.

As he walked toward the ward he could have sworn he had seen the faintest hint of a blush in her cheeks.

The door to room four was open, so Nudge just knocked on the jamb as he walked in, calling a hello as he went. He was surprised to find Dobby's bed empty. For a second he didn't even realise there was another person in the room, and jumped with a start as that person spoke.

'You must be James, or can I call you Nudge?' The voice was

old, yet still deep and strong.

Nudge wheeled around to see who had spoken to him. There, sitting in the chair, was one of the biggest men he had ever seen. He was like a giant, even in his advanced years.

'Er, hello,' said Nudge nervously, 'sorry, I was looking for Dobby.'

'He'll be along shortly,' the man replied, 'he's off giving Nurse Mills a bit of a rark up.' He laughed, deep and loud.

'I know what you mean, he can sure wind Mills' clock,' Nudge replied. 'I guess you're the person he wanted me to meet this afternoon?'

The man struggled to his feet, leaning on his carved wooden cane for support. Nudge had noticed the cane; he had seen his uncle using one similar. It was called a *tokotoko* and this was a particularly beautiful example. Only highly respected elders usually possessed such a cane. As the man rose, he held out a huge hand.

'Joe Ngarimu, James, and I'm very pleased to meet you. Dobby speaks very highly of you, you know?'

Nudge blushed slightly at the compliment.

'James Kingi, or Nudge to my friends, Joe,' he took the hand in his, barely able to get his fingers around it.

'Ah, there's that handshake that impressed Dobby. It is good. My grandfather taught me to shake hands, a very wise man. He lived to be one hundred and ten years old.'

'My father showed me,' Nudge replied, 'about the only good thing he ever did for me.'

Joe tut-tutted.

'I'm sure he did his best Nudge, we all did. Some of our people had a tough time of it.'

'If you consider getting pissed all the time and thrashing all of us half to death on a daily basis his best, then he did that alright,' Nudge said with more than a little bitterness in his voice.

Joe laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Just remember Nudge, your father was a farmer without a field to till; a warrior without a war to fight; a fisherman without a sea to fish in. He was trapped between cultures he didn't understand and he didn't know how to act or what to do. You can't blame him for not coping. Don't get me wrong, Nudge, there is no excuse for hitting you or anyone, but underneath it all he was just a man like you and me; he was adrift, afraid and not in control of his own destiny.'

Nudge shrugged it off, but Joe said made some sense.

'I suppose you're right, I never got a chance to really know him. I guess he must have had his good points or my mother wouldn't have married him. She's a good woman.'

'How is she now?' Joe enquired.

'I'm not sure, to be honest,' Nudge replied sheepishly, 'I haven't seen her for a few years. She didn't approve of my, um, choice of lifestyle.'

'Shall we sit?' asked Joe, 'I get a little tired standing these days.'

'Shit, sorry Joe, I'm too busy thinking of myself.'

He pulled up the second chair and sank into it as Joe took his seat.

'You are in a gang?' Joe came straight to the point.

'Was,' replied Nudge. 'I quit last week.'

'Quit eh? Just like that. They let you go that easily?'

'Not exactly.'

'Hmm, I guessed that might be the case. How much do they want?'

Nudge looked surprised.

'How come you know so much about this?'

Joe leaned forward.

'Look at me, Nudge. I am eighty five years old. I have lived in this town all my life, except for the time I was away in the war. I'm Maori, and proud of it. There isn't much in this world I

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haven't done or things I haven't seen, the best and the worst of it. I know what goes on out there and I know how to deal with it. How much?

'Twenty-five thousand dollars.'

Joe didn't bat an eyelid.

'Hmm, it's gone up a bit. What do you plan on doing?'

'To be honest, I have no idea. I don't have that kind of money; even if I did I would be loathe to pay those bastards anyway.'

'Not long ago, "those bastards" were your friends and colleagues, Nudge. You can think they are misguided and they have chosen a different way than you but they are still men underneath all the bravado. Let's show them a little respect, eh?'

'Sorry bro. I don't know what the hell I'm doing any more, but I'm trying my best.'

'That's all we can expect from ourselves.' Joe replied. 'Do you speak Maori?' he asked.

'No I don't,' Nudge replied, feeling a flush of shame in his face.

'Nudge, I'm not judging you, so you have no need to feel ashamed,' Joe replied in a fatherly voice. 'You are young, you have plenty of time.' He continued. 'Our people have a saying:

"He manga wai koia kia kore e whitikia"

Or, in English:

"It is a big river indeed that cannot be crossed."

It means nothing is impossible if we put our mind to it. Take Dobby for instance. He doesn't look like it now, but back in his day,' he sat back, 'whew! he was some wild horse. He told you the story about him being captured? Well, he probably left a few details out. The man was unstoppable; he wouldn't back

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down from anything. The guards gave him some wicked thrashings; he could have avoided most of them by just keeping his mouth shut, but not Dobby. If he saw any injustice, like a guard beating someone, he would intervene to divert attention to himself instead of the other bloke. Of course, the guards would give him the bash, throw him in the cooler or refuse him food for a week, that kind of thing, but Dobby wouldn't let them break him. He escaped so many times he ended up in one of those places for "problem" prisoners. He was very fortunate they didn't just kill him, like they did so many others.' He paused, remembering. 'The camp was supposedly escape proof, but somehow Dobby got out along with a small group. He was on the run for months, and he was the only one who made it back alive; apparently the others were captured after only a few days and the Germans executed them, hanging the bodies up in the middle of the camp as an example to the others, leaving them there until even the birds didn't want them. That hurt Dobby a lot, Nudge, that type of thing. He told me later the only thing that kept him going was to see justice served to the camp commander, a man named Engel. Dobby reckoned he was the nastiest piece of work he'd ever come across, and that's saying something! At the end of the war, Engel was on a list compiled by War Crimes investigators but he was nowhere to be found; it was said he'd slipped off to South America, which at the time was a safe haven for ex-Nazis. Dobby was beside himself when he heard that; swore on his mother's grave -- though to be honest I don't think she was dead yet -- that he would see him brought to justice one day.'

'And was he?' asked Nudge, eager to know what happened. 'Well, it seems about five years later someone found him in Bolivia, took him outside and shot him dead, one round in each knee, two in the guts and one through each of his eyes. The killer, or killers, didn't touch the wife or kids, who slept

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through the whole thing, and legend has it that whoever carried out the killing waited several minutes between the groups of shots, reading a list of charges and explaining to Engel why he was being killed. Nasty business, though all killing is nasty, no matter what the reason, but this was such an odd way of doing it; obviously revenge.' Joe's eyes sparkled mysteriously.

'Do they know who did it?'

'Well, at the time the rumours all pointed to Mossad; Israeli commando types. They were known to be carrying out operations against exiled Germans over there, so it might very well have been them, though they were usually the first ones to admit it if they did do something like that; kind of a warning to others. Who knows, eh? There were, no doubt, a few thousand men who would have gladly pulled the trigger on a man like that. I'm sure Dobby could tell you more about it if you asked him; he was keeping up with Engel's whereabouts there for a while. He could tell you a few stories as well, but he's proud Nudge, he won't tell you himself the great things he has done over the years. Maybe when we get more time I'll fill you in, eh?'

Nudge was captivated by the old man; Joe had an amazing voice was a natural storyteller.

'I'd like that very much,' he eagerly replied.

'Nudge, seriously now. What are we going to do about your little problem?' Joe looked at him sternly.

'Hell, Joe, it's my problem, I don't see why you should be involved,' Nudge protested.

'Because you are my friend, and a fellow Maori, and I am not going to see you disadvantaged by these people. Who are they anyway?'

Nudge told him.

'OK, let me think.' He sat back, both hands resting on the top of his cane, eyes closed. He stayed that way for several

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minutes. At last he leaned forward and opened his eyes.

'Give me a couple of days,' he said firmly.

'But Joe -,' Nudge began.

Joe raised his hand and stopped him.

'It is done already. You can't undo what has been already done.'

Nudge looked at the floor, guilt rising in his chest.

'Come on now Nudge, no need to feel guilty. You need to learn to trust people and be ready to accept help when it is offered. After all, chance favours the prepared mind, doesn't it?'

Nudge looked up Joe. How the hell?

Joe leaned forward, his voice serious.

'There are many things to learn in life, Nudge; you just have to be open to it. Your surname, Kingi, do you know where it is from?'

Nudge had to admit that he had no idea.

'Your ancestors were very magical people Nudge, perhaps you should start there.'

Nudge was humbled by the generosity and respect he felt from the old man; how did he deserve such things?

'Thanks, Joe. I really mean it. Thanks.' He stood and shook Joe's hand, grateful that fate had dropped this opportunity into his lap.

They both turned toward the door simultaneously as they heard Dobby's voice outside in the corridor, ragging Mills as usual. Presently they both appeared at the door.

'Alright Mills, you can bugger off now, we've finished with you,' Dobby cracked, winking at Nudge. Mills feigned a hurt look and Dobby apologised as he climbed onto the bed. 'Aw, come on Mills, you know I'm only having you on, you're the best wheelchair jockey around this place.' Mills left in an exaggerated huff with the chair.

'Too bloody serious that man, I reckon he needs a good

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shagging, loosen him up a bit. Maybe he and Parker should help each other out!'

Joe tut-tutted again disapprovingly.

'Your mouth is still getting you into trouble Dobby.'

'So you two have met?' Dobby asked, looking excitedly at them both.

'We've had a little chat, yes,' Joe replied.

'Did he show you his wooden leg, Nudge?'

Nudge shook his head, as did Joe in mock disgust.

'Er, no Dobby, he didn't.'

'Crikey, didn't he? Normally he has it off and waving around by now. He couldn't bloody wait to show it to the ladies back in the day, if you know what I mean!' That wink again.

'Come on Dobby, you know that's not true,' Joe protested, a little embarrassed. 'What's gotten into you today, you're buzzing like a bee.'

Nudge clicked. 'I think I'll have a word with Chef about changing to decaf.'

'What's that?' asked Dobby.

'Just a different type of coffee Dobby, could be better for you.'

'Long as it tastes the same,' he replied. 'Anyway, show him Joe.'

Joe took his cane and tapped it against his leg. It made a sharp *tink*. 'Not wooden these days, Nudge. Titanium. Light and strong. The grandkids love it; they show off to all their friends by knocking on it with their knuckles. Sadly, that passes for entertainment to me these days.'

He turned to Dobby.

'Did you tell him the story? About the German?'

'Nah, he doesn't want to hear about that.'

'Yes I do!' Nudge interrupted, 'what German?'

'You tell it Joe,' said Dobby. 'You always were better at telling stories.'

They all settled back comfortably, and Joe started speaking.

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'It was the day that Dobby and I met,' he began, 'Crete, May, 1941. I had been trying to get back to my battalion -- The Maori Battalion -- after a spot of leave, when the balloon went up in Greece. I ended up on Crete, thrown in with a bunch of other blokes who were also looking for their outfits. The battalion had been sent to the north-west of the island to bolster defences there and so that's where I headed. The German invasion interrupted my travel plans and I found myself hooking up with another outfit. During the attack I was trying my best to stay down, not easy for a man of my size. It was a bit unfair I reckon, I'm a bigger target than the average soldier, so I should have been paid more; at least that's what I tried telling the paymaster, but he wasn't having a bar of it.' He grinned. 'Anyway, there I was, in the thick of it when I saw a grenade flying out of nowhere. I knew then that I was in trouble; while some blokes could move very quickly, I wasn't one of them. Luckily, one of the blokes nearby got up and swung with his rifle, hitting the masher in a perfect cricket shot and it flew back over the Germans, where it exploded. We didn't have much time to admire the results; more grenades followed and I got up to run. As I did I saw this one soldier, standing up nearby, screaming and carrying on like a madman, waving his rifle around. I had to laugh. No, it's true,' he said, seeing the sudden look of disbelief on Nudge's face. 'I laughed because it was the most stupid, heroic thing I had ever seen. It was all in slow motion, and as I ran I watched this bloke for what seemed like ages, but was probably only a few seconds. Then a grenade landed in the crater I had just run into and exploded. The next thing I remember is lying there while the soldier I had seen before wrapped a bandage around my leg, asking me to sing him a song.' Joe leant forward. 'That's how I met Dobby.' He grinned and sat back, both hands resting on the ball of his cane. 'I first thought I had a bit of shrapnel stuck in my leg, you know, still burning, because

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that's what it felt like. Dobby told me it was nothing -- just a scratch were the words he used if I remember correctly -- but I know when a person is lying, especially a bad liar like him.' He grinned again, and so did Dobby. 'I was in a pretty bad way and he looked after me. But we weren't alone; there was another man in the hole with us, a German soldier. Dobby went over to help him, or kill him, I didn't know what he was up to at the time. It was only at that point I realised Dobby had been hit as well; he couldn't move very well and his uniform was soaked with blood. He bandaged up the German and when he came back he said he was going to find a corpsman. I knew then that if he went, I would never see him again, at least, not alive. I wanted to stop him from going, but I also wanted to live, and I thought he was my only chance. I still feel guilty about that today.'

Dobby shook his head. 'I keep telling you, there's no need to feel guilty. Remember, I was wounded too, and needed a corpsman as badly as you.'

'Well, what happened next made it a moot point anyway,' Joe continued the story. 'Dobby got up to leave. He'd only taken one step before some Germans over-ran our position and shot him.' Joe leant forward again and dropped his voice to a whisper. Nudge craned forward, eager to hear.

'I have seen some lucky people in my time, but this has to take the cake. The bullet went through the side of his head and out the top at such an angle that it missed all the vital bits. The doctors said that if his brain hadn't been abnormally small, it would have almost certainly killed him.' He nodded knowingly and sat back.

'That last bit isn't bloody true, you ratbag,' Dobby complained as he good naturedly back-handed Joe on the leg. They all laughed, even though it was hardly a laughing matter.

'You were bloody lucky by the sound of it though, bro,' Nudge interjected.

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'Too true, cob,' Dobby replied, 'but I would have been luckier if I hadn't been hit at all!' They all nodded in agreement.

Joe carried on. 'Actually, it did hit part of his brain but the doctors, who, incidentally, were pretty good, patched us both up and off we went to begin our careers as Prisoners of War. I have to say though, for such serious wounds, it didn't seem to slow Dobby down much. It took my leg months to heal; Dobby was up and around in a week, badgering and pestering the guards to give me and the others more medicines and such, wrapped in bandages looking to all the world like one of those Indian Sikhs.' He stopped and drank from the glass of water beside his chair, letting the story sink in.

'But what about this German you mentioned? Nudge asked impatiently.

'Oh, yes, the German. Well, turned out that if it wasn't for the fact Dobby had patched him up they would have killed us where we lay. They were about to shoot us, but the injured man managed to stop them and let them know Dobby had saved him, so instead of killing us they had us carted off to the rear for medical attention.'

Nudge let out a breath, easing the tension he felt.

'Close call, eh?'

'Just one of many. War is like that. Catch a break and then lose one in the blink of an eye.'

'But there's more,' Joe continued. 'After the war, the German tracked Dobby down and wrote him a letter, thanking him for saving his life and proposing they get together one day, you know, bury the hatchet and talk about old times.' He looked over at Dobby. 'Perhaps you should tell this part, eh?'

Dobby nodded, saying nothing for a minute, the others patiently waiting in silence.

'His name was Dieter Länge, from a town called Nieder-Kinzig. He was a farmer, just like me, except he was drafted into the war, whereas I volunteered. He must have found my

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details from somewhere because a few years after the war, in fact it was the second Christmas, I received a card and a letter from him. I was surprised at how good his English was, and I fancy he understood everything I'd said to him that day as I patched him up. Lucky I didn't call him all sorts of names or perhaps he wouldn't have been so kind to us!' Dobby paused, gathering his memories.

'He was civil enough I suppose, enquiring after how I was doing and telling me how he had been invalidated out and spent the rest of the war behind a desk. He thanked me for saving his life that day, but I didn't, really. At the time I saw a man in trouble and I helped him as best I could. Besides, he saved ours too, remember? I think if he'd had to wait much longer in that hole he would have died of shock and blood loss anyway, so it was his lucky day they found us so soon.'

'And my lucky day too, remember that,' Joe interjected.

'I don't think you'll ever let me forget it,' ribbed Dobby, a faint smile on his face.

Nudge broke the awkward silence.

'So what happened, did you write back?'

'It was a difficult time for everybody Nudge,' Dobby shifted position as he struggled to explain himself. 'I was a bit of a mess myself; a bloody great chip on my shoulder. Dieter wanted me to write back so that we could arrange a meeting. He felt it was somehow necessary to come and thank me in person. He wrote that he understood if I didn't want to; I imagine he knew very well what war could do to a man. Well, I wasn't ready for that sort of carry on, not yet. To be honest, at the time if I had come across a German in the street I probably would have killed him. I didn't answer the letter. So that was that!' He looked done.

'Tell him the rest,' Joe prompted, in the same tone he would as if he was forcing a boy to admit he stole an apple from the neighbour's tree.

Dobby looked mildly annoyed.

'Alright, alright. I don't feel that good about it now, Nudge. Dieter sent me a Christmas card every year, and every year he asked how I was, how my family was doing and had I thought about a meeting. He always said he understood if I didn't. He was never pushy, always polite and friendly. He told me how he and his wife had bought a small farm and raised some stock and had a couple of children, the normal things men do. He always made a point of thanking me and said that he owed it all to me because I helped him that day. Well, this went on for over twenty years; always a card, and a letter, sometimes a photo, thanking me and telling me little bits about his life. But I was stubborn Nudge. Even when I thought I should write back I was embarrassed to concede to him after all this time; what would he think of me then? Eventually this big lug sitting here,' he indicated Joe, who smiled softly, 'convinced me to do it. I thought I had worked out some of my anger by then, so one year -- it was 1969 from memory -- I bit the bullet and sent him a card back. I wasn't committing myself to a meeting quite yet, but I thanked him for the cards and letters he'd sent and told him a bit about myself and what I was up to.

A few months after that, April I think, I received a small package in the mail from Germany. I opened the package and it contained a letter and a German Iron Cross medal. The letter was from Dieter's wife, Gilda, and in it she told me that Dieter had died in his sleep a few weeks before my card had arrived. She said he would have been-' Dobby paused for a moment, turning aside and blinking away a tear. He took a breath, composed himself and then continued, his voice cracking. 'She said he would have been delighted to finally hear from me; that he had always considered me a friend, never an enemy. He had spoken of me often to his family and friends, and always said a toast to me at Christmas. He had even named his

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son Wilhelm after me. She sent the medal because Dieter had always wanted me to have it, saying that I deserved it more than he did. If we had ever met, he would have presented it to me in person, and it was his wish that if he died before that happened, it would be arranged that I should have it.' He broke off, sobbing, unable to continue, his chest heaving with emotion.

Joe leant over and put a huge arm around Dobby's shoulders, comforting him.

'It's OK mate. Let it all out.'

'Jesus,' Dobby choked through the tears, wiping his face with the back of his hands. 'Look at me, crying like a bloody baby.'

Nudge, looked quickly around the room, fighting back tears himself.

Joe addressed Nudge, his deep voice reassuring and fatherly: 'Nudge, if you feel like crying, cry. I did at the time as well. We're all friends here; there is no shame in it. It takes a bigger man to cry in front of his mates, remember that.'

The tension in the room was almost unbearable; he had never been in such an emotional situation before.

'Don't worry about it Nudge,' Joe could see how he was struggling with it, 'we've had much longer than you to sort it out for ourselves. Give yourself some time.'

'Jesus. I don't know how you guys did it. I mean, I've been in some shit but I'm not sure I could handle something like that.'

'Oh, you'd be surprised what you can do when push comes to shove, Nudge.' Joe turned to Dobby.

'Ok mate?'

Dobby looked shattered.

'Yeah cob, I'll live,' he grinned weakly. 'Can't keep me down for long.'

'Still, I think we should call it a day,' Joe looked at his watch.

'I've got some things to do.' He turned to Nudge.

'Where are you staying at the moment?'

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'I'm crashing at a hostel across town,' he replied, 'it's OK, a few bucks a night and a café right around the corner for breakfast.'

Dobby looked surprised.

'What? Why is that, Nudge?'

Before Nudge could answer, Joe interrupted.

'Nudge has made some changes. He moved out from where he was living and is looking for a place. I have somewhere he can stay for a while.'

Turning to Nudge he started to speak, but it was Dobby's turn to interrupt.

'You can stay at my place,' he offered. 'It's sitting there empty while I'm in here and it looks like I might be here for a wee while yet. How'd you like to look after it for me?'

'Sure, well, yeah, if you think that would be alright,' Nudge stammered.

'Yeah, no worries, cob. I'll rest here easier knowing someone's looking after the place anyway.'

'Well, yes, that'd be great. Sweet, Dobby, thanks a lot.' Nudge replied, feeling considerable relief at not having to spend another night on a lumpy bed at the hostel.

'It's settled then. Joe has the keys and he can show you about, if that's OK with you Joe?'

'No worries there mate, I'm sure Nudge will take good care of the place.' He smiled at Nudge.

'See how it all works out when your mind is in the right place, eh?'

Nudge was blown away. It was all so foreign to him, how "real" people interacted with each other when there was no bullshit in the way. He had a lot to learn.

'Right then,' Joe started to get up. Nudge quickly stood and held out his hand to the big man.

'Here you go.'

'Thanks.' Joe took his hand and hauled himself up out of the

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chair as Nudge held tenuously to his own balance. 'See how natural it is for you to help others? Remember, one hand always washes the other.'

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Nudge looked around at the apartment in awe, thinking Dobby must have done alright for himself over the years. It was right on the waterfront; all open plan with three large bedrooms and a balcony with stunning panoramic views of the harbour. Joe had driven him over - stopping for groceries on the way - and had shown him around, turning the hot water on and generally making the place liveable again. Joe had told him not to worry about bills; that was all taken care of. All he had to do was keep the place clean and it was his for as long as Dobby was at the hospital. Nudge shook his head slowly. It really was providence, though he was having trouble believing he deserved such benevolence from people he barely knew. He had more questions but Joe had good-naturedly told him that there was plenty of time and he would be in touch in a few days when they would talk some more. After Joe had left, Nudge had spent an hour just looking at the photos on the wall. He felt like an intruder, a voyeur, going from one photo to another, fragments of Dobby's life. He figured that if Dobby didn't want these moments to be visible he wouldn't have hung them in the lounge where every visitor would undoubtedly see them. He noted the numerous black and white photos of a beautiful, long haired woman and children at play; he supposed they were Dobby's wife and kids. There were portraits of Dobby as a young man, wearing different uniforms, both alone and with groups of men. A few had the curious look of having been colourised by hand; Nudge had seen this technique before in books, it was in vogue there for while before colour photography became affordable for the everyman. Nudge recognised a much-younger Joe in a few of the snaps; it wasn't difficult to pick him out since he stood head and shoulders above everyone else in the pictures.

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Colour photos showed Dobby posing with helicopters, jet fighters and other soldiers. Nudge wasn't sure, but that looked to him like shots he had seen of Vietnam; interesting since Dobby hadn't mentioned fighting there. There was another, larger, portrait shot showing two young soldiers Nudge took particular notice of. They were grinning for the camera - one with his arm around the shoulders of the other in that pose many assume for a photograph. He wasn't sure who the men were but one was almost familiar to him; he had the feeling he had seen him somewhere else. There were various other hunter type snaps, an older Dobby and Joe posing with deer, or other animals, taken up in the mountains somewhere by the looks of them. There were even more adorning the walls of the bedrooms and study, some of them shots from more modern times. More than a few hanging in the study were deeply disturbing. Here, an Arab-looking man kneels in the mud, hands clasped together in front of him, a look of abject terror on his face, obviously pleading for his life from some bad looking men with guns; there, dead bodies lying in the street, a soldier, weapon slung over his shoulder, frozen forever in the act of kicking at one of them. Another, wild dogs tearing at human remains in what appears to be a rubbish dump. There were dozens of others like this. From the look of them they were shot all over the world; Nudge guessed Africa, Asia, the Middle East and maybe South America. He was repelled by the images and yet somehow fascinated by them; he couldn't look away. He had a similar feeling when he was a young child, watching Dr Who on his uncle's old black and white TV. He was often so afraid -- those Daleks were pretty nasty with their death rays and maniacal voices -- that he would hide behind the couch, but he still watched, glued to the events on the screen, secure in his hiding place. Now, with the same morbid curiosity, he browsed the pictures. He couldn't help but look, even though the content disturbed him greatly. He

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vaguely recalled seeing some of them before somewhere, or maybe something similar, but he couldn't be sure. One large portrait in the master bedroom showed Dobby as an older man, possibly in his fifties, Nudge guessed, wearing one of those adventure vests - the ones with more pockets than a billiard table - a couple of Nikon cameras slung around his neck. He looked like a movie star, Nudge fancied, with his dark wavy hair cut just so, Ray-Ban Clubmasters pushed high on his nose and a cigarette set at a jaunty angle in his mouth; the old boy sure had some style. Nudge wandered from room to room, fascinated by the history he was witnessing in the photographs. He got that same feeling when looking at photos of early Maori; the Marae, old warriors and others wearing those outrageous period clothes, their Moko culturally clashing with their top hats and vests. It was a life in stills.

Suddenly, he was startled by the ringing of the telephone in the other room. For the briefest of moments, he thought he had been caught doing something wrong before remembering where he was. He wondered whether he should pick it up or let it ring; it was most likely not for him.

Taking the plunge, he jogged over and picked it up.

'Dobby's place,' he answered.

'Nudge!' it was Dobby. 'How are you getting on there?'

'Dobby, I'm great thanks. How're you after this afternoon?'

'Fine, Nudge, fine. Just thought I'd call and see if you are enjoying the photos?'

'How'd you know I'd be looking?'

'Because I know you more than you think, Nudge. I think you're a lot like I was when I was younger. If I were you I'd be looking at them as well. I daresay you have lots of questions.'

'Well, yes. By the looks of it you've led an interesting life.'

'No more than most Nudge. Say, do you like sports? Footy?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Game on tomorrow arvo on Sky, Pumas versus some no-name

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team from Brazil, might be bloody awful, but might be alright. You interested?’

‘Yeah, sure. What time?’

‘Visiting hours are two till five, but I’m sure Parker will let you stay longer. By the way, in the bottom of the bedroom cupboard there’s a small wooden chest, can you bring it with you?’

‘Yeah, no worries bud. Anything else I can bring?’

‘Don’t forget the beer and cigarettes,’ Dobby cracked as he rang off.

Nudge spent the rest of the afternoon fixing something to eat, tidying up and making the place a bit more liveable. He dug out the box Dobby asked for; it felt quite heavy and as he turned it over in his hands, he wondered what was in it. It was locked, but he wouldn’t have looked anyway; this was obviously valuable to Dobby and, as he trusted Nudge enough to handle it, he wasn’t about to betray that trust. If Dobby had wanted him to see what was inside he would have told him to open it. After a light meal and a hot shower, Nudge sank gratefully into bed, drifting off to the best sleep he had in a long time, with a thousand images creeping into his dreams.

Nudge arrived at Woodvale just before two o’clock. He entered via the back door as usual and popped out to see Parker first. She wasn’t at the desk, so he pressed a button beside a small sign, which read:

“If Reception Unattended - Press for Service”

He heard a faint ‘buzz’ from somewhere in the office behind reception. The door opened and Mills came through.

‘Hi James,’ he said with a smile when he saw who it was. ‘Fancy seeing you in today. Anything I can help you with?’ He sounded genuinely pleased.

‘I’ve come to visit Mr. Dobson, he was arranging it

apparently.'

'Oh, I haven't heard anything about it,' Mills replied, leafing through the pages of a large visitor's book on the desk. 'Still, I don't see any problem; it is visiting hours after all, eh?'

'Thanks, Nurse Mills,' Nudge said as he turned to leave.

'Call me Brendan, James; I'm not really one for formalities, only when Parker is around.'

'Thanks Brendan, I will.' Nudge smiled.

He knocked and entered Dobby's room to find him glued to the TV.

'Hey bro,' he greeted him.

Dobby waved, shushing him and indicating for him to sit down.

Nudge sat down and looked at what Dobby was watching. It looked like some kind of martial-arts fight.

Dobby half turned, keeping his eye on the screen.

'Judo tournament, Osaka. Watch this guy Toronaga, with the blue Gi, he's bloody good.'

Nudge watched with mild interest. Martial arts never blew his hair back, though he respected the commitment required and the speed and dexterity of the fighters. The match was over in minutes, Toronaga trapping the other player in some kind of complicated strangle hold.

'That's the end of it; the game will be on soon. How are you old son?' he asked. 'Comfy at the house?'

'Oh yeah, look thanks bud, it's saved me a lot of grief.'

'Aw, don't mention it cob, one friend to another and all that. Hell, I'm not there so someone may as well be getting some use out of the place.' He smiled. 'You bought the box. Good. Betcha want to know what's in it, eh?'

'Well, I must admit it did cross my mind, but I figure if you want me to know you'll tell me.'

'Right you are, Nudge.' He pointed. 'Over in that top drawer there; the bunch of keys.'

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Nudge crossed the room to the desk and bought Dobby the key ring; he sorted through the bunch and, finding the one he wanted, opened the box.

'Bet a fella like you wouldn't let a tiny lock like this stop you eh?'

Heh, no, it's a matter of trust though, isn't it? Locks are just for honest thieves.'

Dobby opened the box, the lid folding neatly over the back and out of the way. Nudge tried to catch a glimpse of the contents while not letting on he was looking.

'You're a bloody wag, Nudge,' Dobby cracked. 'Pull that chair closer and have a decent look.'

Dobby pulled out a photo album while Nudge re-positioned the chair. He could see the inside of the box now and it contained what looked like more small albums, assorted newspaper clippings and other bits and bobs.

'See here Nudge, photos. I've set them out with one album each for my wife, my son and my daughter. I was a bit of a shutterbug, you see; I always carried a camera for a while there. Don't do much with it these days though, lost the urge. Have a look through this one while I tell you a story,' he passed over the first book.

Nudge opened the album and the first photo was a smaller print of the one he had seen on the wall; the one of the beautiful young woman.

'She is beautiful, isn't she?' Dobby almost whispered in reverence, tenderly touching the photo with a gnarled fingertip. 'I bet you're wondering what a woman like this was doing hanging around with an old goat like me eh?'

Nudge smiled.

'Nah, bro. Never crossed my mind.' Nudge replied, which was a bit of a white lie.

'It's OK if you were Nudge, I could barely believe it myself. I met her in France, well, Paris to be exact. It was just after the

war. The honeymoon had soon worn off and all of Europe was reeling from the consequences of the previous five years. The economy was a mess, unemployment was through the roof, crime was rampant -- especially crime involving guns -- and millions of deeply disturbed young men wandered the streets of cities and towns wondering what the hell they were going to do now. One of those men was me. I was still only in my mid-twenties remember. After the end of hostilities I was sent to England and demobbed with all the rest. I had the choice of going home or staying on; I chose to stay. As much as I loved the hills of Otago, I couldn't face going back there, at least, not right away. Maybe part of that was because I had heard from home that my girl Sharon had married this other bloke I knew, Jock Moffett; they'd even had a couple of kids by then. Looking back, it was the right thing for her to do, it would never have worked out between us. I was unsettled Nudge, in a big way. I couldn't sleep; it was too quiet, and most of the time I couldn't bear to be awake either. I did what a lot of other blokes did; I hit the bottle, and hit it hard. All I lived for was getting the next drink. It dulled the physical pain I still suffered periodically and it dulled the mental pain as well. I had my father wire me some money to live on and travelled from one place to another, wearing out my welcome as I went. More often than not of a morning I would wake up in some cell, the watchman shaking his head at seeing yet another young life going to waste.

I ended up in Paris, home to many a great drunk. I was almost broke, having pissed away all the money dad had sent over. I was sitting in a café one morning, a little like the one we were at the other day, when I saw her. She arrived with a friend and sat at a table in my line of sight. I couldn't help but stare; she was such a natural beauty. I'd love to tell you I was sitting there in my best suit of clothes, enjoying a fine breakfast of coffee, brown bread, lamb cheese and olives, after which I

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dabbed the corners of my mouth with my napkin, stood and went over, introduced myself and swept her off her feet with my suave charms and colonial graces, but that's not the way it happened. I must have looked a right toerag; unshaven, unwashed and stinking of last night's booze. I was actually getting up to go to and throw up in the pissoir across the road and I had to pass by her table to get there. As I edged past, a little unsteady due to my fragile state, my legs got all tangled in the table and chair legs and down I went, upending the lot and knocking all of us to the ground. Talk about your Mintie moment! I managed to free myself from the mess and get to my feet in time to help her up. I apologised in my best pidgin French, and she and her friend were most gracious. I offered to replace their drinks, and you know what?

Nudge looked up and shook his head before going back to flipping through the photo album as Dobby continued.

'She insisted on buying me a drink because she felt sorry for me, a foreigner all alone in the big city. Her name was Nicolette, though she called herself Nico. We hit it off right away; it was as if we'd known each other for years. After a while her friend bade us adieu -- I think she could sense she was becoming a third wheel -- and went off shopping while we sat and chatted. Nico could speak a few words of English, and we muddled through pretty well. They say only fifteen percent of human communication is verbal and I'd have to agree; there is always a way of being understood.

Dobby stopped for a breath and drank his bottled water.

'As it turns out, her story was even more awful than mine. Her father and grandfather had been executed after the war as conspirators, hung in the streets for all to see. Their story was the resistance had forced them to work for the Germans as informants, relaying back to the Partisans any useful information they could find. They had apparently carried out this dangerous task undiscovered until liberation, when they

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were both tried for collaboration in some kangaroo street court. The people they had made the original deal with had since been killed as well so there was no-one to verify their story. As a consequence the men were killed and her mother driven out of their home village, branded a whore and fallen woman. She got away lucky; they were stringing up hundreds of so-called 'traitors' a day in those turbulent times. Nico was away, staying with relatives, and heard all this second hand from a family friend. She wisely chose not to return, instead coming to the relative anonymity of Paris. Whether her father's story was true or not, I don't know, France after the war was a bad place to be if you had even so much as helped a drunk soldier cross the street.' He paused and picked through some other snapshots. Nudge listened, fascinated.

'The old saying is: "Misery loves company". Well, we were a perfect match. Although we were miserable, we were deeply in love, and you know, we did laugh a lot together and it all felt so right. In those days, with the naïveté of youth, I believed that love was all you needed; nothing else seemed quite as important.' He paused, looking wistful. 'It's true what they say, youth is wasted on the young.' He looked over at Nudge. 'Have you ever been in love, Nudge?'

Nudge shook his head.

'Nah bud. Never found the right girl.'

'You will,' Dobby assured him. 'The less you look, the more likely you are to find her. That seems to be the way it works. Anyway, I'm digressing. Where was I? Oh yes. Love. We loved each other very much and decided to get married. We married in a registrar's office somewhere -- I couldn't tell you where now if you paid me -- with some old drunk Parisian woman acting as a witness; I do remember it cost us a bottle of Absinth for her to do it. We decided to stay on in Paris. We found an apartment; a dingy run-down place it was, on the sixth floor of a war-damaged building. The landlord was a sleazy little

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bugger, filthy in that way that some Frenchmen are; the way he looked at Nico cob, it was all I could do to stop myself punching his bloody face in. We were running out of money, and I was trying to dry myself out so I went out looking for a job. It was a terrible and wonderful part of my life.' Dobby shook his head sadly at the memory.

'I found a position in a local factory, working a big lathe making brass fittings. The pay was low and the work surprisingly bloody dangerous -- they hadn't heard of safety glasses and things; men were always losing eyes and fingers to the machinery -- but it was all I could get; there were probably ten other men waiting to fill my place if I quit. I stayed away from the booze as best I could and things started to come right. I don't mind telling you it was hard going cob, we didn't have Alcoholics Anonymous or anything like that back then; I just toughed it out and hoped for the best. Nobody really understood why people hit the booze -- or the pills -- so talking to anybody about it was pointless, and nobody knew why some had problems dealing with it and not others. It was seen as a weakness, a flaw in a person's character, which tended to drive people like me further into their cups. I think they regard it nowadays as an illness, which means it can be treated with medical methods. That would have helped me I think, but there you are; you can't choose what era to be born in, eh cob?' He smiled and slowly shifted position, easing his legs the other way.' Later, when that therapy carry on was all the rage, I found out that no amount of talking about it exorcised my demons anyway, it just enables me to live with them without them overwhelming me. They're always there, just out of view, waiting to return when I'm least expecting it. Living with them is just one of life's obstacles. Some people have worse things to deal with, some better. It's a lottery, Nudge, no doubt about it.

A few months later we discovered Nico was pregnant. Well,

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by this time we could see it wasn't going to work out for us in Paris, or Europe for that matter; better to go back home and try to make a go of it there. I wired my father, begging him to send money for our tickets, telling him I was coming home as an incentive to loan it to me, and a few weeks later we set sail on a steamer for the dominion.'

Nudge noticed Dobby looking tired. 'You want a drink of something, Dobby?' he offered.

'What've you got there?'

'I've got a mineral water, a cola, or lemonade, not much of a choice I know --.'

'I'd better go for the mineral water. Been a bit hyper lately, some new pills they've got me taking. Hey, look, the game is starting. You want to watch for a while?'

Nudge was keen to hear more, but thought it was better to give Dobby a break. 'Yeah, let's do that. Pumas, eh? From Argentina, aren't they?' He passed the bottle of mineral water across.

'On the button, cob. You know, I was out there once. South America. After the war. Argentina, Bolivia. I was taking care of some business...' He looked as if he was going to say more, but instead took a swig of water and pumped up the volume on the TV.

As they watched, Nudge's mind wandered. He thought about his dad all the other people he knew addicted to booze, surprised that someone like Dobby could fall into the trap; he certainly didn't fit the stereotype. He conceded that it might not be so much a weakness, but the result of many different factors. Maybe there were some who liked a drink so much that over time they became physically addicted, just like a smoker who keeps puffing away, even though the first few makes them feel sick. Then after a while, they can't give it away because their body protests and it makes them feel bad. He supposed there were those, like Dobby, who took the stuff

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to escape from whatever demons they needed to escape from. It could be something like physical abuse, a bad marriage; the more he thought about it the more he saw there were a hundred possible reasons. That put a whole different perspective on things, and as he watched, but didn't see, the television, he saw instead the bag of chemicals he stole, and for the first time in his life felt a twinge of guilt about what he had done. Although it wasn't his responsibility that people were addicted to P, he was part of the machine that exploited and made money out of another person's frailties and misery, and right here, now, that didn't sit well on his shoulders.

He consciously banished the feeling and instead watched the TV. It wasn't a very good game, and Nudge found nothing more boring than watching a badly played match. Suddenly it dawned on him, after all this talk of war, how sport had been used as a surrogate for war throughout the ages. How had he not seen it before? It must have been the natural urge of human beings to pit themselves against one another that drives them to compete in sports. The most obvious way of doing it is on the battlefield, but the rugby field and tennis court are arenas as well. Nudge's thoughts probed deeper. If his life was under threat, or his property about to be forcibly taken, he would pick up a gun and defend what was his; he knew he would; he was certainly quick enough to with his fists. Then at its simplest, that's all war is; men like him defending what is they hold dear. It was then that Nudge came to the realisation that as long as there are men alive, war would continue to be waged. Listening to reason often isn't enough; some people only respect the report of the rifle or the stamp of the boot upon their heads. And because Nudge presumed one of the basic survival instincts every man shares is to protect that which is his and his alone, his life, they would do anything they could to guard it. If that meant committing what they once imagined were horrors beyond their abilities

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or beliefs, then so be it. It would be an extravagant soul who would sit and do nothing, sacrificing his life rather than fight his way out, yet Nudge knew history is littered with the corpses of such people; he had seen the photos; burning monks in Vietnam, human shields in Palestine. Some people applaud them and raise them to the level of saints and heroes, some spit upon their memory in disgust and yet others just don't give a shit; all reasons why the will to do battle will endure as long as two men are alive. Nudge didn't have to look into his soul very deeply; he would fight for what he believed in, and he could kill for it.

Luckily, he reasoned to himself, as he watched the game, sport is not war. But, he pondered, if sport pushes the same buttons and raises the same emotions that battle does, then the only difference is that not as many people get killed in sport. He also knew how wound up a crowd could get, recalling his rare outings to The Springs to watch the local team and how he could almost physically feel the awesome buzz of the crowd, their collective energy and enthusiasm galvanising everyone present. If a few blokes running around a field can do that to a stadium full of people, it wouldn't take much for a clever individual or government to manipulate a whole population into doing something as long as the right buttons were pushed and the people believed in it.

Nudge cracked open one of the colas and drank as he looked over at Dobby, who was engrossed in the game. He felt like talking some more, but Dobby was enjoying the game so he went back to his thoughts. Besides, they had heaps of time. The more he looked at it, the more he realised that almost all modern sport is gladiatorial; the object being to defeat opponents by strategy, strength or whatever means can be employed that stay within the rules of the game. Sport these days had also become as high-tech as war, if not more so; the stakes extremely high with millions of dollars riding on

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performance and results. Rules, once adhered to with that old fashioned ideal of “sportsmanship” by the individual, are bent to the point of requiring teams of lawyers to determine outcomes of games. It was no longer the bastion or responsibility of the sportsman to dictate his own behaviour on the field; teams now had cultures, mission statements and internal doctrines that required players to play to the limit of the rule book and sometimes beyond. Like the military, strategists analyse teams and individuals, profiling and studying to reveal possible weaknesses and strengths that could be used against opponents. In some ways, Nudge thought, modern sport was becoming more and more like ancient sport, and more like battle. Looking at it the other way, war was becoming more like sport, televised and beamed live around the world in real time; the networks keen to exploit the “bad guys versus good guys” aspect that every match must have for the people watching to more appreciate the conflict. He grimly realised human misery had become the new spectator sport and maybe it was turning full circle, where one day we will once again return to the arenas of old; the winner bearing the head of his opponent around on his sword to appease the baying crowd.

Nudge was brought out of his thoughts and back to the game by Dobby hooting and hollering, resulting in him having another coughing fit. Nudge got up and moved toward him, concerned, but Dobby held up his hand.

‘I’m fine cob. Did you see that,’ he said excitedly when he had recovered. ‘What a fantastic try. That number eight, boy he can run.’

‘Yeah bro, that was a good one. You sure you’re OK?’

‘No worries, just the cough again is all.’

‘If you’re sure?’ Nudge sat back in his seat. ‘I was just thinking about how sport has replaced war in peace time.’

‘Yep, I made the connection a while back; they even call British

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fans the Barmy Army, don't they.' Dobby replied. 'I suppose there will always be someone fired up enough at someone else to want to do beat him at something, whether it's footy or in battle. I think it's just in our nature.'

'That's what I was thinking, bro. Doesn't look good for us, does it?'

'I guess not. But its been that way all through history and we're still here, so maybe we'll be OK. Mind you, it only takes one bloody nutcase with a nuke to start the whole thing off, and from what I read in the papers there's a few of them about. It's always been a bit of a lottery, where you're born and who ends up fighting who. I hope that in your lifetime you don't end up in some strange place, shooting at people while they shoot back.'

Nudge nodded, it was a sobering thought, and one he didn't want to dwell on.

'The game isn't that good though, eh bro? This Brazilian team doesn't look like much.'

'Nah, just a show team thrown together as an excuse for a match, I think,' Dobby agreed.

'Do you feel up to talking some more?'

'Why not. Where did we get up to?'

'I think you were sailing back to Aotearoa.'

'That's right, we were. We had packed up our old kit bags -- it's an old song so ignore the pun if you haven't heard it -- and headed home. Well, home for me and a strange, strange land for Nico. The trip took about three months; we had a bit of fun, forgetting our problems for a while. We stopped at lots of ports on the way for one reason or another so we got to see a bit of the world, or at least the ports. They all started looking the same after a while; they don't tend to be the prettiest of places. We landed down in Westport and took the train south as far as we could, taking buses and hitching the rest of the way to my father's farm. It was the summer of 1947.'

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Dobby shook his head. 'New Zealand wasn't kind to us. It had always sat alright with me before, but there was something different in the air. Don't get me wrong, I love the place and always will, but it's like the love you feel when you split up with someone who did you wrong. You still feel it, but in a different way, colder and more distant. I loved being in Southland again; the hills, the plains; there is nowhere else like it in the world, not that I have seen anyway. You been there, Nudge?'

'Nah, Dobby. Never been out of the North Island.' Dobby seemed surprised.

'You should get down there cob, it's a bloody nice place to be. Well, I have to say that; it's my home, no matter where I live. When we got back though, I felt the innocence was gone, or perhaps it was just my own. I saw a side of New Zealand that I hadn't seen before, probably because I never had the need to see it. The locals didn't really take to Nico. They seemed friendly enough, but underneath it all they're a bloody racist lot. There was always that unspoken view, and sometimes spoken when one of the lads had a few too many, that I was a snob, that a kiwi girl wasn't good enough for me. More than once I defended us with my fists. Poor Nico, she had no real friends, no-one here but me, and I'm ashamed to admit that at that point I wasn't being much help, having my own problems to deal with.'

She ended up losing the baby, which came as a shock, but I don't mind telling you I was a little relieved; the state I was in, I couldn't even look after myself let alone a baby. It hit Nico harder. I think a woman in trouble often sees a baby as a way out, you know, someone else to look after and make them forget their own worries. Because she had no support; she just withdrew more into herself. Bloody hell, Nudge,' he attempted to explain, 'I tried my hardest but I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I never seemed to be able to put a foot right.'

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'I'm sure you did what you thought was right, bro.' Nudge tried to sound reassuring.

Dobby shrugged and took a drink of water, collecting his thoughts.

'About that time we had decided that maybe a hobby would help settle her down, maybe give her an interest to put her energies into. I bought her a camera, a Box Brownie, and we both started taking photographs of everything we could, though it ended up mostly me taking shots of Nico. I became fascinated at the idea of stopping time, capturing in a brief second something that would last a lifetime. She didn't really take to it; perhaps it was too technical for her. On the other hand, I really enjoyed it and started getting more seriously into it. After a while, that was all I did; spending all day taking pictures, practising my technique and trying to get that perfect shot. I ended up neglecting her even more.'

He looked at Nudge with great sorrow in his eyes. He stopped, both men watching the muted game on the TV in silence. Eventually he began speaking again.

'My old man took me aside one day and gave me a talking to. I loved my old man, and I can say that now he's dead. He was a Southern man through and through, never happier than when he was on horseback, up in the back blocks with his dogs. He didn't mince words. He told me to stop being such a selfish bastard and to get my head out of my arse. He said if I didn't shape up he would give me a kick up the backside. He had fought in the Great War, so I thought he would have understood what I was going through, but if he did it didn't affect his judgement of me. You know, I have never seen such a disappointed look on any man as I did on his face that day, and I'll never forget it. It wasn't the threat of a hiding that got me back on the road, it was that bloody look. He left me there beside the shed, embarrassed, ashamed and heartbroken that I had let him down; not to mention Nico and myself.'

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The next night at dinner, he handed me an envelope. I asked him what was in it; he told me to open it. It contained the title to Glenlea Station, a one thousand acre block of land up behind Omarama that had been in the family for years, and one thousand pounds, a huge sum in those days. He looked me in the eye and said, and this is in front of everyone mind you:

"This is all I can afford to give you Bill, if you can't make it with this, you are no son of mine and you needn't bother coming back for more."

'Well I got pretty wild, I tell you. I grabbed Nico, gathered our things and stormed out of the place right there and then; I never returned to that house, my pride wouldn't allow it. That was the last time I ever saw my father.'

Dobby took another sip of water, staring into the glass.

'Did you ever go back? Nudge asked.

'I went back there years later. It's gone now, just ruins in a paddock.'

Nudge could see Dobby's regret.

'It's hard for anyone to go back home Dobby, even if nothing bad like that ever happened. Once you leave, it is never going to be the same; it's just the way it happens. It's the same for me, bro.'

'I suppose so, but I can see now it was a big mistake to do it like that. I know dad never forgave me for acting the way I did to him and mum, and I never had the good sense to say sorry.'

Nudge nodded, not knowing what he could say.

'Of course Nico and I took the land and the money; we would have been fools not to. We built a cottage on it, bought a bit of stock and farmed it, working day and night, growing our own food, selling extra milk and wool and saving our money. I promised Nico we would make enough so we could go back to France; my love affair with Southland was beginning to cool. It was bloody hard work with no days off, no weekends. One

day ran into another and before we knew it a few years had drifted past. Inevitably, Nico fell pregnant again. This time she carried the baby to term, and our son Robert William Dobson was born on December 28, 1950.¹ He passed Nudge another photo album. Nudge flicked through it; photos of a naked toddler, a boy in a scout uniform, a young man. The usual family snaps. The final photos were of the same soldier Nudge had seen in the photo on the wall of the apartment. It was obviously Robert, but he still puzzled as to who the other man was, the one he thought he recognised. He reminded himself to ask Dobby about it later.

'Being a father changed me Nudge. It changed Nico too; she now busied herself making a household for the three of us. Motherhood suited her very well and she grew immensely as a person, coming right out of her shell. Those were good days for us, and I'll never forget them. The farm had finally started paying its own way, we had savings, money coming in and things were generally looking up. Nico wanted to have another baby, and so did I; she was soon in the family way again. This time though there were complications,' Dobby's voice faded and his face dropped. He looked as if he was about to cry.

Nudge took the lead.

'Hey, that's enough for today, eh bud? No point in pushing it.' Have another drink and we'll talk about something else.'

Dobby shook his head and looked up at Nudge, passing him the last album. It was similar to Robert's, instead showing a young girl.

'I loved Nico, more than anything. Without lifting a finger she pulled me up when I was down and gave me hope when I didn't have any. Even when I was the biggest bugger on earth she stood by me. We had our problems, but she completed me, and she kept me honest. She died shortly after giving birth to our daughter Elaine, on April 25th, 1953. ANZAC day. Ironic,

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isn't it? What hurts me, even now, is that deep down in my heart I thought it was for the best. She had never fitted in here; no matter how it looked on the surface she was always going to feel like an outsider, unwanted and unaccepted. We could have gone back to France, but she kept putting it off, finding some excuse or other. I think she felt she didn't belong back in France either, that it wouldn't be the same if she went back there. How could it be? All her close family were dead; she had no-one to go back to. She was caught somewhere in the middle, and it was no place to be for a woman like her. I buried her ashes at the foot of Dobson's Point, high up behind the cottage at Glenlea. I'm not sure if that's what she wanted but that's where she rests today.' He sat back in his chair, staring at the TV but not seeing it.

Feeling a little awkward, Nudge patted him softly on the shoulder, his sadness for Dobby weighing heavily on his heart. 'I'm really sorry bro. I'm sorry she died and I'm sorry she had to put up with the racism; you don't have to tell me how that feels.'

'Ah well, it's all such a long time ago now,' Dobby sighed, 'though sometimes I still feel it like it was yesterday. Time may heal some wounds but others stay raw forever.' He let out a slight groan as he stood up and stretched.

'Well, the games finished,' he noted, changing the subject. 'The Pumas thrashed them.'

'Yeah, I guess I had better be going and let you get some sleep, eh bud?'

'OK Nudge, though I don't get much sleep these days. It's a bloody curse on old people. Most of us have no-one to talk to and nothing much to do, locked up in our rooms and forgotten by our families. You would think that we could get some solace in sleep, but as you get older you'll discover that you need less sleep. I only sleep four hours a night nowadays. The rest of the time I have to fill with TV or memories, and I get

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pretty sick of the same rubbish on TV; you can only see those infomercial a few times before they start to get bloody annoying.'

'Oh, I see. Yeah, that would be a real bugger. I love my sleep.' Nudge thought for a minute. 'What about books? Do you like reading?'

'I used to, Nudge, but there's so much rubbish around these days. I haven't bought a book in years. Wouldn't know what to buy any more.'

'I'll bring some for you tomorrow if you like; I'll pick some good ones.'

'Done!'

'See you tomorrow then, and thanks for this afternoon.'

'Thank you for listening. Crikey, I'm busting to go; another old people's curse! I'll see you tomorrow!'

Dobby headed for the bathroom while Nudge let himself out, calling a goodbye as he went.

The following day Nudge dropped by with a selection of books for Dobby, who was busy with Mills doing something-or-other, so he left the books with Parker. He had gone to the library for the first time in over twenty years and was surprised at how easy it was to get a card; all he'd needed was identification and, after signing a form, he could borrow up to six books. He had chosen a wide range, unsure of Dobby's tastes, a mix of fiction and non-fiction. He hoped Dobby would like them, but if he didn't, well, it was just another trip to the library to exchange them. With a smiling goodbye from Parker, he left, promising with a grin to see her on Saturday morning.

An Audience is Requested

‘Toa wants to see you.’

Nudge looked up from his book to see Dink, one of the nastier members of the gang, standing tough before him. Nudge looked past him and saw a car holding more of the gang, leering at him from the open windows.

Nudge turned back to the man before him. ‘Well here I am. If he wants to see me he can fucking well come down here.’

‘He wouldn’t be seen dead in some pussy fucking milk bar,’ Dink sneered, looking around, ‘now get in the fucking car.’

‘Fuck you Dink, and fuck them,’ he nodded toward the others. ‘This isn’t The Godfather for fuck’s sake,’ he said, noting by the bewildered look he received that the reference was wasted. ‘Look shit-for-brains, I’m not going with you so you can fuck off and take those cunts with you.’ He pulled a pen and a piece of paper from his bag and, scribbling something on it, passed it over. ‘Here’s my phone number. Tell Toa to call me or leave a message like any normal fucking person.’

‘Aw come on Nudge, just get in the car,’ Dink whined, ‘Toa will fucking kill me if I don’t bring you back.’

‘I’ll be sure to send flowers. Now get the fuck out of my sight; I’m not fucking going anywhere with you.’ Nudge put down his book, his heart starting to beat faster, and began to stand, noticing from the corner of his eye as he did so the other patrons in the café distancing themselves from the developing altercation.

A brief show of fear in his eyes betrayed him and Dink, knowing it was useless to argue, backed away toward the car, threatening as he went. ‘You fucking cocksucker Nudge, Toa will fucking get you.’ The car pulled away from the curb with a screech of tyres amid obscene gestures and catcalls of ‘pussy’ and ‘fucking wanker’ from the occupants.

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Nudge watched as it sped off down the street and looked around the café. He could see the fear in people's eyes and shrugged his shoulders, nervously smiling an apology as he sat back down.

The fucking nerve! Nudge picked up his book and took a sip of his coffee. He sensed the people around him relaxing and as his heart returned to a more normal pace his thoughts turned to what had just happened.

Where do they get off? he wondered, his book momentarily forgotten. What had come first, the way gangsters behaved or the movies that portrayed them? Take The Godfather; were "Dons" really like that; all-powerful God-like figures, or was it all just Hollywood; dramatic license? And do modern-day Dons subconsciously model themselves on Brando's character? He had seen some of those American mob bosses on TV; sharp-dressed and well groomed, surrounded by "soldiers" and other made men. Nudge reckoned it was just the trappings of having money and power. But was it a case of life imitating art or the other way around? His thoughts digressed.

He had loved watching shows like Star Trek and Blake's 7 as a kid, even though when he saw them now he had to admit they looked a little lame. Still, those early episodes were all about phaser guns, communicators, laser beams and doors that opened with a 'swoosh' as the crew got near them. Today, the phasers might still be a way off but communicators, lasers and self-opening doors have been around now for decades. Did the people who conceived and designed those devices take inspiration from Sci-Fi shows or would mankind have naturally evolved, creating them anyway, even if Gene Roddenberry hadn't come up with the idea forty years ago? Space ships and space travel had been dreamt and written about more than a century ago, the stories themselves theorising many of the problems modern astronauts would eventually face; lack of air, weightlessness, re-entry into the

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atmosphere and so forth. The authors of those tales figured out ways around those issues by a mixture of imagination and science as it was understood at the time. Would modern space travel have been possible as early in our history if those stories hadn't been written? It was an interesting question to ponder and Nudge put his head back and relaxed in the sun, his book -- Keri Hume's The Bone People -- forgotten as he let his mind explore the universe.

More is revealed

Dobby didn't look very well today. Nudge had stopped in briefly before starting work.

'How are you today bud?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

'Oh, not so good today, cob, feeling a bit sick on it. How about yourself?'

'I'm fine thanks. Can I get you anything?'

'Nah, I'll be OK. Mills is coming back in a minute with some pills that he reckons will help. By the way, thanks for the books.'

'No worries, you read any of them yet?'

'Read them? I've finished them!'

'Bloody hell Dobby, all six of them?'

'Yep. That one 'Chickenhawk' was bloody good eh?'

'I reckon bro. I read it years ago. I thought you might like it because I saw that photo of you and the choppers on your lounge wall; looked like Vietnam in the background.'

'Good spotting. If you have time, come back after work I'll tell you all about it. It carries on from where we left off the other day anyway.'

'Righto bud, I'll be by about one-ish then.'

Nudge carried out his duties with his usual enthusiasm and attention to detail. He enjoyed working here, not only because of the stories Dobby regaled him with, they were a real bonus, but because it felt like he was, in some small way, giving something of himself. He had been thinking about something for a while, and when Sister Parker came to inspect his work, he asked, out of curiosity, how one would get a permanent job working in a place like this. She had been surprised, but, he reckoned, not as surprised as she would have been a few weeks earlier if he had asked the same question. She told him

that cleaners and maintenance staff didn't require any formal qualifications, although some experience would be beneficial, but staff that cared for the patients required at least a diploma in either nurse-aiding or some other type of related social work. She asked him why he was interested and he'd replied that he was just weighing up options. She smiled and offered him reading material on the subject if he wished to pursue it further, then thanked him for the usual excellent job he had done. As she had done before, Chef had made him some pastries for lunch and he took these with him to Room Four, along with a couple of her special cappuccinos.

'Vietnam was a hot and dusty place,' Dobby said through a mouthful of savoury. 'Mmm, these are good aren't they? I wonder why I'm fed crappy bloody baby food while the staff gets these. I must have a word to Parker about that.'

'I didn't realise you had fought in Vietnam.' Nudge settled into his chair, sipping his coffee.

'I didn't.'

Noting Nudge's puzzled look, he continued quickly.

'Let me explain. Vietnam was a lifetime away from just after Nico had died, so I'll start from that point, OK?'

'Sure bud, you're telling the story, so you tell it however you want. I'll enjoy it either way,' he smiled.

'Well, there I was, thirty-odd years old, with two young kids. I didn't cope very well with her death, cob. We were isolated out there, and while it was great when we were a complete family, it wasn't too good for me to be alone. I ended up chucking it in, leasing out the farm to a young couple from the city who fancied themselves farmers and packed the kids off to their grandparents while I tried to get myself together. The first thing I did was hit the bottle. After a week-long binge I had made up my mind and fell back on the only familiar thing I knew, war. At the time there were dozens of little wars going on in banana-republics and tin-pot countries around the

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world. I grabbed my cameras and spent the next ten years travelling from one hot-spot to another, photographing conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South America. Revolutions, coups, police actions and wars, I shot them all, freelancing for newspapers and magazines. When I wasn't taking photos I was drinking. I was surrounded by so much suffering and injustice that it made me forget all about home, and if I did start remembering, the drink soon put paid to that. In some ways it was a bloody good life, in others it was a dreadful existence. The money was pretty good -- for a decent shot -- and I took a lot of those. I went places the other photographers considered too dangerous, took a lot of risks. I thought I had nothing to lose. I was wrong of course; I just couldn't see it at the time. I was wounded here and there, nothing serious, but even that didn't tame my need to be in the thick of the action. It's dangerous, thinking the camera makes you bullet-proof, but that's the way I was back then. You know Nudge; it is one of the hardest things in the world to do, catalogue human misery. It is a terrible decision to make, to witness those events and not influence them, or try to stop them. It isn't that I didn't want to help those unfortunate people or prevent some of the atrocities from happening, far from it. The agony came from having to be impartial, to be the pure observer, never interfering with the events I was capturing on film. If I did, it might very well put me in danger as well. A few photographers I knew of did get involved, trying to help the victims, and were killed for their efforts. Others did intervene and save some lives but when do you know which way to go? The mongrels with the guns were mostly ignorant and savage people; they made the rules. The easiest way to play it was to be dispassionate and unswerving from the task of recording the event. Of course, the argument was that with a camera present, people reacted in ways they normally wouldn't, and that this actually encouraged a lot of

the killings we witnessed. My argument is the opposite; that with a camera around a lot of killings that might have happened never did. I think the people in my photos wanted their story told; they wanted the world to know what was happening. The ones doing the killing wanted to have their fifteen minutes, their heroic deeds recorded while the people getting killed wanted this horrible event witnessed, perhaps so for that few seconds of life they had left they could feel they weren't going to die in vain, or in the same way gave them hope that their killer may be brought to book some day. Often, they pleaded with me, wanting me to save them; that was the hardest thing Nudge, seeing the look in their eyes, hearing the fear in their voices, knowing full well I was powerless do anything.' Dobby flicked through some of the loose photographs in the box, his memory carrying him back to the moment he had taken them.

'Bloody hell, bud. That must have torn you apart. I know it would cause me some problems.'

'It took its toll on me, cob, believe me,' Dobby assured him. Nudge just shook his head.

'I saved most of the money I made,' Dobby continued, 'building up a nice little nest-egg. Eventually, it really started getting to me. I was drinking myself stupid in the evening to blot out the things I had seen during the day. I was in a bad way; I couldn't go out there anymore. Aside from the fact it was getting bloody dangerous for photographers, with more of us were getting killed every day, I just couldn't take it. I stayed in my hotel room, drinking, while the others went on working; the war raging both in and around me. Inevitably, I hit the bottom. I wanted to die, but something inside me must have wanted to live more. I finally made the call to the only person I knew I could ask for help.'

Joe flew out and literally carried me to the airport and onto the plane. We came back to Auckland, where he had a place I

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could stay and get my act together. He's a beautiful man, Nudge, and I can honestly say that without any shame. He sat with me for two weeks, taking care of me until I had passed the worst of it, then he sent me home. Not once did he judge me or question me in any way. There aren't many men left who would do that for their friends Nudge, not without wanting something back.

Of course I'd had to come home eventually, but when I did it was to a lot of grief. My dad had died while I was away. Just fell off his horse, dead. Doctors said it was a heart attack. Mum had tried to get hold of me but there was no reaching me, wherever I was. She had done her best, raising my kids and dealing with dad's death. I felt like a right bastard Nudge. It was hardest on her; she had aged from the vital middle-aged woman I remembered when I left into the bent old maid I saw standing before me there in the kitchen. The kids were barely kids any more, grown up and proving to be a real handful; teachers from school complaining about their behaviour and what not. Well, a switch clicked somewhere in me. Maybe it was just the fact that at forty, I was ready to settle down and knuckle into being a father and a man. I took the farm back over and raised the kids there, helping them off to school, loving them and supporting them as best I could, helping them with their homework and chores. They were good kids Nudge, a little wild, but they seemed to settle down a bit once they were back with me. I never hit them or shouted at them, I even surprised myself at how I could handle them. Robert was just like me, he was a stubborn bugger, wouldn't back down from anything. I suppose that's why he got into a few fights at school. He wanted to join the army as soon as he left school, and I couldn't think of one good reason why he shouldn't. He made a fine soldier, and I was very proud of him. Elaine had grown into a beautiful young woman, just like her mother. We never got on that well, maybe she missed a woman's influence

More is revealed

around the house, I don't know. I had to fight off the local boys with a stick sometimes; she would make a great catch for someone. She went off to university in Otago and we kind of lost touch over those years. It was the late sixties, and it was a time of student protests and rebellion against your parents. I'm not much of a letter writer and, well, we went our own ways. I could understand why she was angry with me, but I couldn't change the past. It also wasn't very fashionable to have been a soldier in those days; the Vietnam thing was in full swing and the country divided into two camps; you were either against the war, which meant you spit on anything military or part of "the system", or you supported it, which automatically made you part of the system. It was a turbulent time, and families were often pitted against each other; arguments raging over the evening news reports. And at the bottom of it I'd been a terrible father to her, abandoning her and her brother at a time when they needed me most. It was all I deserved. A few years later she called and told me she had married a policeman from Oamaru. As much as I missed her and, in some ways, was angry with her, I really wished only the best for her.'

'She was here the other day though, bud?' Nudge was intrigued.

Dobby picked up what Nudge was getting at.

'Yes she was. We do talk now and then. I don't think she hates me, but there has always been a distance between us that I could never bridge. She's her own woman Nudge, has her own life, out there somewhere. I'm probably just a reminder of an unhappy time for her.' He looked out the window. 'I hope you don't make the same mistakes I did Nudge. If I could do it over again differently I would, but you only get one chance.'

'I can't really agree with you there, bro. I've been given a second chance. I was going down a road that could only end in disaster; I would've ended up dead or in jail. Someone somewhere thought I could use a kick in the pants, and I got

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one. That judge could just as easily have sent me away for a stretch. I think if that had happened, I wouldn't have come out of jail with the outlook I have now. I have you and Joe to thank for that, and I'm going to take my second chance with both hands. You've shown me that there's much more to life than the nowhere shit I was doing.'

'Well, I'm happy for you Nudge. You're a nice young bloke and you deserve to get a fresh start, but the second chances I'm talking about are the ones that can't be made right. For a start, I'm too bloody old now and it really is too late to do anything. I'm talking about my relationship with my mum and dad, my wife, my kids. I can't undo that now. I've tried to patch things up with Elaine, but like I said, there is a lot of burned bridges there and they can't be crossed.'

'What about your son?'

'Yes. Robert. Well, as I said, he was a soldier, and when the balloon went up over in Vietnam, he volunteered. Just like his dad, eh? He served over there for a couple of years; he didn't have to, but he kept reapplying and stayed on. He ended up joining up with some Special Forces types who were going on operations with the Americans; kiwi soldiers were very sought after as jungle fighters -- we'd cut our teeth in the jungles of the Pacific during World War Two and in Malaya and Korea after that. Legend has it that those boys had prices on their heads, incentives for the VC to kill or capture them. As for Robby, I got the odd letter from him; he never said much; I don't think he could for security reasons, so I didn't know much about what he was doing, and I still don't.'

'You two don't keep in touch?'

'That's just it, Nudge,' Dobby replied sadly. 'He went missing in 1970; we never found him and he is now legally dead.'

'Shit Dobby, I'm sorry, I didn't realise...?' Nudge tried to back-pedal.

Dobby held up his hand. 'It's fine cob, don't worry about it.

You weren't to know and I've had a long time to get used to the fact he isn't coming home.' With some discomfort he shifted position and went on.

'I tried to get answers from the army but they either didn't know or didn't bloody care enough to climb into it. That wasn't good enough for me. I called everyone I knew, trying to find out more. A few of the photographers I had worked with were covering the war there so I did what every father in that position would have wanted to do; I got my cameras, my press pass and hitched a ride to 'Nam with the RNZAF to look for him myself.

As I said, it was a hot and dusty place. The Kiwis had a base set up at a place called Nui Dat, so I started my search there. Yes, he had been there; no not recently. Where had he gone? Nobody knew. I could see it wasn't going to be easy. I'd been told by one of his mates that he'd heard through the grapevine that Robby had actually gone missing in Laos; when I started asking questions, the Army's line was that because at that time we weren't officially "in" Laos, he couldn't possibly have gone missing there. Obviously, I wasn't going to get anywhere there. I got hold of an old photographer friend; he knew some people who might be able to help. I linked up with them at Cu Chi and they put me in touch with a guy called Tex -- who was obviously CIA from the tip of his Stetson to the toes of his cowboy boots -- and he got me on a transport into Laos. The plane landed at a dirt airstrip outside Vientiane and took off again within minutes, stopping long enough to unload a few packages and load a few on. There was no knowing when the next flight would be so I was basically stranded out there. The spooks there were a great bunch and very helpful, once they found out I wasn't just some crazy-arsed photographer -- how little they knew -- but was there looking for my son. They gave me the name of a soldier who had been part of the mission Robby disappeared on. He was up-country somewhere; I

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would most likely find him at a camp near the Plain of Jars. I scored a lift up there with a chopper crew who were part of an unofficial search and rescue mission themselves; they were grateful for every spare set of eyes they could get. We flew at treetop height all over the countryside and eventually found the downed plane they were looking for, a Forward Air Controller Cessna L-19 Bird-dog, but the pilot was dead, killed by the local insurgents by the looks of him, since people don't usually get skinned alive and end up with their private bits in their mouths in plane crashes. We zipped his body up in one of those horrible rubberised body bags they used back then and it rode with us on the floor of the chopper the rest of the way, a mute reminder to all of us that war is a crazy and dangerous game to play. The chopper dropped me off at a dusty forward fire base near Phônsavan, and it took only a few minutes to locate Wilson, the soldier I was looking for; he was in the mess tent, drinking coffee.' Dobby leaned forward and looked sternly at Nudge. 'Now I've seen some soldiers in my time Nudge, but this guy scared the hell out of me. He looked like he was only nineteen or twenty years old, and he should have been at home wondering who to take to the school dance, but this kid was a killer through and through. He stared right through me as if I wasn't there, his answers to my questions polite and in a voice so quiet and matter-of-fact that it made me shiver. At one point he tried to show me a package he kept in his fatigues pocket, but the mess sergeant interrupted us with an apology to me and told him to put it away before I got a look at it. I asked the sergeant later about it and he said that Wilson carried a bag of fingers he'd cut off enemy soldiers around in his pocket; he was so proud of his trophies that he couldn't help but show them to everyone he talked to. Anyway, Wilson told me that they had been out in Indian country when they found a man staked out on the ground, eaten alive by insects and rodents. Robby, doing the decent

thing, went to cut him free, not realising the body had been booby-trapped. The explosion injured Robby badly and he was too wounded to risk carrying him out. They built him a bivouac shelter and left him there with another soldier, the rest of the squad planning to walk out and send a chopper back to pick them up. When the chopper got there, five days later, both men were gone along with their weapons and gear. Tracks led off into the bush. The chopper had swept the area but no trace was found. An unofficial search and rescue mission turned up nothing to indicate what had happened to them and the army wasn't about to launch a full-scale mission to find soldiers who technically weren't there in the first place. I tried to get up to the scene myself, but as that area was now abandoned to the enemy it was impossible. I spent a month there at the camp, asking every new face I came across, both soldiers and locals, if they had any word on Robby, or perhaps had heard a rumour of two white prisoners. One villager swore he had seen two prisoners under guard being moved across a bridge by bandits up north, one walking and one being carried, but the spooks told me that he was a local nutcase and his information should be treated with the utmost suspicion. Since there was no corroborating evidence, I had to let that lead go. I saw Wilson from time to time there and he would enquire politely, in that voice of his, how was I getting on, did I find Robert and would I like to look at something? I would hate to think of him walking around the States after the war, I mean, what the hell would he do, sell used cars? I would tell him I was fine, I hadn't heard any news and respectfully decline to see his "collection". I found out later from some blokes in the rear that these soldiers lived right on the edge; they lived for months on end in the bush, trapping and eating local game raw because fires would attract attention. They didn't wash or shave lest the smell of the soap on their skin would give them away. They were gung-ho, hard core types

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who barely resembled soldiers as I knew them.'

Dobby paused and looked at Nudge.

'Have you heard of the 'Bullet Principle' Nudge?'

'No, bud. What's that?' he asked.

'Take a bullet. It is designed for only one purpose; to kill. Of course, some people use them to punch holes in targets but that's neither here nor there; the original purpose is to kill. A bullet is pure; sleek and streamlined, barely affecting the surrounding air as it flies through it. Its surface is purposely smooth and flawless, a projectile designed to cut through air, flesh, blood, bone and fabric; anything soft you put in its path. Once sent on its way, it doesn't think and it won't divert from its goal without outside interference. When you think about it, it is the perfect product; you use it once and then you need another one. The people who make bullets make billions of dollars a year producing something that is solely intended to kill people. Makes you think, eh?'

Those soldiers up there were like that. Pure, innocent, trained killing machines. Give them a target and they would never disappoint you. I don't like to think of Robby like that Nudge, but war does things to a man, and if that is what he became then perhaps it is best he never came back to the world; I couldn't see him ever fitting in here again.' There was sorrow in his voice as he stared out the window.

'Soldiering over there was a lot different than in my day Nudge, especially among the men who were drafted. Anyway, I just had to hope that maybe one day Robby would be found or released and repatriated. The best guess was that insurgents, rebels, bandits or whatever you wanted to call them had stumbled across the men that day and had taken them prisoner or killed them off in the bush somewhere. I couldn't do much more there, so it was with great sadness that I headed home via Thailand, where I plugged into the nightclub scene to forget my worries. I fell off the wagon and

hit the bottom pretty quick. I ended up getting thrown in some dingy jail cell there for getting into a fight with another man who turned out to be the local police chief's son. When I sobered up a little, I could see it for what it was; a racket. The son would get into a fight; the dad would come along to the cells afterwards and suggest you make a donation, whereupon you could walk away. At the time, I made a huge fuss because I was a bit worse for the drink and there was no way I was going to pay this arrogant bugger when his son had started the fight in the first place. I started throwing accusations about and making all sorts of claims about diplomatic this and New Zealand that; generally being a right pain in the arse and sure enough, ole Dobby dug himself in deeper. I put in a call to Joe to see if he could get the embassy involved because it was turning into a right bloody mess. Good old Joe. He did more than that; he came over and paid some money to somebody, probably a few somebodys, and bailed me out -- under protest from me I might add -- and got me on the first plane home. He never said a word about it. You should have seen him Nudge, there in Thailand. The Thais aren't large people and Joe towered above them, almost twice the height of some of them. They thought he was a giant, at that stage they hadn't seen a lot of Maori people, and everyone wanted to touch him for good luck. Now Joe isn't one for being the centre of attention, but to see the whole street crowding around him and reaching out for him, that's one of the scenes I wish I had photographed; even so, I will remember it forever. They treated him like a God, and that day he deserved every minute of it.

I was beginning to feel a bit of a heel by now. I told Joe, in the kindest way I knew how, that he didn't have to come all the way to Thailand and spend his money bailing me out, but he wouldn't hear a word of it. He just turned to me and told me, matter-of-factly in that deep, fatherly voice of his that he

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owed me his life and that's all there was to it; he could never sit back and do nothing while I was in trouble. I promised him there and then never to drink or get into trouble again and so far I have been good to my word.'

By this time it was getting late and Dobby was looking pale and drawn, so Nudge suggested they call it a day. He noticed Dobby was tiring more easily than he usually did and put it down to the new pills he was taking.

'By the way how's that cough bud?' He asked.

'It's a little better, the pills help, but it's just one of those things.'

'You want me to grab you some more books Dobby? Anything in particular?'

'If you could that would be great Nudge. Pick anything you like; I trust your tastes. Can you do me one favour though?'

'Sure.'

'In the top drawer over there you'll find some money. Can you grab it and buy me a copy of 'King Solomon's Mines' by H. Rider Haggard? I loved that book as a kid and feel like reading it again.'

'I can always see if the library has it Dobby,' Nudge suggested.

'Well, I owned it once before, and I would like to own it again, for posterity.'

'No worries bud. King Solomon's Mines eh? Good book?'

'From memory Nudge, it's been many years since I read it, and it was written a long time ago, so it may not have aged well. Like me.' he added with a smile.'

'You have done alright Dobby; a lot of people don't get to your age in such good nick, considering the life of action and adventure you have led'

'All good things must come to an end sometime though, eh?'

Nudge didn't want to consider what Dobby was implying.

'Don't worry about the money for the book bud; it'll be my treat, an early or late birthday present.'

'You're a good bloke, Nudge. When can you drop by again,

More is revealed

I've lots more to tell you know,' he said it with a wink.

'Day after tomorrow OK bud? I might be meeting Joe tomorrow afternoon is all...'

'No worries cob, and say hi to Joe for me.'

Nudge looked at Dobby earnestly. 'You just get better soon, OK?'

'You bet, see you later eh cob.'

Nudge closed the door, mildly alarmed at the way Dobby was looking. As he left he had a word with Parker, who told him that Dobby was as good as could be expected under the circumstances and that they were doing all they could for him. The look in her eyes was not a happy one though, and Nudge began to suspect the worst. He couldn't ask her what was wrong with Dobby; well, he could, but she couldn't tell him, and he wasn't about to ask Dobby. He would have a word with Joe about it when he saw him tomorrow.

See Ya'll Later

The answering machine emitted a soft beep as Nudge checked for messages. There were two waiting.

Nudge pressed the play button and sipped his hot coffee while he listened. The first was from Joe, asking him if he wanted to get together sometime in the next few days. The second was from Toa, sounding even nastier than usual, demanding Nudge call him back and confirm a meeting for that evening at a bar he named in South Auckland.

Nudge called the number Toa had left. When he answered, Nudge agreed to meet him at the bar, a well known gang watering hole. He returned Joe's call, arranging with him to meet the following afternoon at a coffee bar they both knew. That taken care of, he had a few hours to kill, so he made himself some dinner, sat down at the table, pulled out a book and read while he ate.

The bar was straight out of "Once Were Warriors", typical of such establishments in South Auckland; beer and whiskey served by the bottle only, a jukebox stacked with songs by Marley, AC/DC and Herbs, leaners instead of tables and no women allowed. They were hard and unforgiving places as many a white boy found to his detriment when they had stumbled in, not realising where they were. Nudge arrived on time and sought out his group through the usual smoke and din of animated conversation. At this time of day the bar was packed with gang members, associates and hangers-on. He could feel the tension in the air as a hundred pairs of eyes watched him move through the crowd. He spotted Toa and the others, they occupied a corner leaner and Nudge made his way there, apprehensive but comfortable in the knowledge he was well able to take care of himself should it all turn to shit. Toa looked up as he approached, the look on his face telling

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Nudge all he needed to know about his mood.

'Nudge.' Toa grunted a scowling greeting.

'Toa.' Nudge nodded a reply, noting the rest of the boys eye-fucking him.

'You wanted to see me? Nudge made the first move.

Toa looked mean as he replied.

'About the money --'

'I don't have it and if I did, I wouldn't fucking give it to you.'

Nudge took the offensive.

'If you would let me fucking finish. Jesus Christ, you always had a quick fucking mouth on you,' Toa retorted angrily.

'Forget about the money. I don't know who you know but our agreement is off. Just don't you be fucking saying anything to anybody about us or what we do or I'll find you and fucking hurt you, understood?'

Though Nudge was stunned by the sudden turnaround, he did his best not to show it.

'Don't worry about me, I'm no fucking narc. I'm gone, and from now on to you I'm a fucking ghost.' He turned to leave.

'Not staying for one for the road with your old mates, eh Nudge?' Toa's tone was sarcastic.

'You're no mate of mine Toa, not any more. Or these fools,' he tilted his head toward the others, 'I think I'll take a rain check.'

With one last look around, Nudge turned and left. He could hear the catcalls and jeers from the gang but it didn't matter, his heart was beating too loudly in his ears. He was flushed with excitement and huge relief, wondering who had stepped on toes hard enough to make them back down. He had his suspicions, and would talk to Joe about it tomorrow.

Nudge Faces Facts

Joe was already waiting at the café when Nudge arrived. He was easy to spot, dwarfing the small tables and chairs, and Nudge suggested they go somewhere he might be a little more comfortable. Joe assured him with that wide grin of his that he was fine where he was, long used to furniture being on the small side. The waitress came and they ordered some coffee and cakes.

Nudge was unsure of how to open the conversation, and was thankful when Joe took the lead.

'Have you heard from our mutual friends, Nudge?' he asked.
'I have, actually; last night. They backed down and let me walk away,' Nudge couldn't help but smile.

'I see,' Joe nodded knowingly, 'that's a lucky break, eh?'

'Joe --' Nudge began.

'I know what you are thinking,' Joe interjected, 'but I didn't have anything to do with it.'

Nudge raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Noting his expression Joe smiled. 'Often in life, when you make one friend, you make all that person's friends as well. I mentioned your situation to one of my good friends and he told me he would have a word in someone's ear and see what they could do. I'm glad it has all worked out for you; I dislike seeing good people disadvantaged.'

'Well, to be honest, I'm not that good a person, but I'm very relieved, so if you could thank your friend for me I would be grateful.'

'You can thank him yourself one day, Nudge; no doubt you'll meet him at some stage. And although you may have done some bad things, it's what you do today that makes you a good or a bad person.'

'Thanks bud, I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for you.'

Nudge Faces Facts

'And Dobby; don't forget that without him we wouldn't be having this conversation.'

'You're right. By the way, I was in seeing him the other day, he was telling me some more about his life. Incredible and tragic at the same time. He didn't look too good though...'

'I know. Dobby is a very sick man. I told him for years those cigarettes would kill him but you know Dobby, stubborn as ever, he always half-joked that he would be dead long before the smokes killed him.'

'You mean --' Nudge's heart went into freefall.

'I'm afraid so, he has stage four lung cancer, and it doesn't look good.'

'Fuck!' Nudge exclaimed, slamming his fist onto the arm of his chair. Immediately realising his company, he quickly apologised. 'Sorry, Joe, I'm just so shocked. I mean, I didn't realise...'

'That's OK Nudge, I was a young man once, I've heard swearing before. And you weren't to know. Woodvale is a hospice; people go there to spend their last days.'

'I never twigged! Shit, what a bloody fool!' He looked at the sky, the clouds streaming low over the tops of the buildings.

'You're not a fool nudge. A fool is doomed to repeat his mistakes, a wise man learns from them. Dobby, true to form, is trying to beat it by denying that it is going to kill him, but this is one thing being stubborn won't help. The amazing thing is that they gave him six months two years ago. Even the doctors are puzzled as to why the cancer has slowed down. Maybe his being stubborn is helping him survive it after all,' Joe half-smiled sadly.

Nudge looked at the ground, his emotions going crazy, confused. His first instinct was to rush to Dobby, to see what he could do.

'Maybe there's another doctor, a specialist you haven't tried yet?' he asked hopefully, 'or some new treatment available?'

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Joe shook his head. 'Believe me Nudge; I've explored every possibility for Dobby. I took him to every specialist in the country; I even flew him to Sydney to see a man there who was extremely highly recommended but he just confirmed what our doctors had already said; that the damage is permanent, irreversible and progressive. There are no treatments for it. New Zealand has some of the best cancer care in the world, probably because our cancer rates are among the highest, but there is nothing anyone else can do. It is in the hands of the Gods now.'

'Damn damn damn!' It was all Nudge could say; the body trembling with frustration.

'There has to be something --' he began

'There is, Nudge; the love and support of his friends at a time when he needs it the most. Dobby tells me that my visits keep him going from day to day, and I know he looks forward to your visits too. I think he sees a lot of himself as a young man in you, for better or for worse. I think he feels that by telling you his story, somehow his life hasn't been for nothing; telling you about the things he has done, both good and not so good, may have helped you realise that there was time to change course. I think he is proud of how far you have come in the short time he has known you.' Joe sipped his coffee. 'I know I am,' he added.

Nudge blushed at the compliment. He felt completely deflated. He had known people who had died before, his father for one, but this was different. It seemed so wrong, so unfair. Dobby had made some wrong turns and made some bad choices, but he had also done some really good things, and here he is, dying, while other people -- like him, he thought angrily -- are out there doing even worse things and are still alive, apparently immune from the reaper.

'I'm not sure how to act now Joe, when I visit him. I mean; now I know?'

Nudge Faces Facts

'Just be yourself and trust your instincts Nudge, you'll be fine. Just remember, Dobby doesn't want sympathy, he wants someone to talk to, to share his life with. All you have to do is listen, and trust yourself.'

'Shit, thanks Joe, I'll try. I just hope I don't end up making it worse for him.'

Joe leaned over and put his hand on Nudge's arm. 'I'm here if you need someone to talk to Nudge.'

'I appreciate it, really. Thanks.' Nudge managed a weak smile.

'Anyway, have you had the chance to do any digging into your family history yet?' Joe changed the subject.

'Er, no. Not yet. I'm interested though. I've been thinking, once I have my life sorted out a bit; have a job, a place to live and all that I might buy myself a computer and use that to trace my family tree. I saw at the library they have this genealogy stuff you run on the computer that you can use to access databases of names and things like that.'

'That could be a good idea, Nudge, but there is another way you know, and it would be a lot more fulfilling than doing it on a computer.'

'How's that?' Nudge was intrigued.

'You can learn far more by coming down to the Marae and talking to the elders. If you went up north and visited your home Marae you would find out all you need to know. If your mother is still alive you can talk to her, ask her about her family and the stories she was told as a child.'

'I don't know. I mean, my mum is alive but I haven't seen her for a long time, and I haven't been part of that whole Marae thing, I'm one of those urban Maori you hear about so much on TV.'

'Oh, come on now Nudge, do you think that matters? You are ten times more Maori than half the white-skinned fellas I see down at the Marae, and they claim their heritage with only a drop of Maori blood. It seems to me they're the ones stirring

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up all the trouble, the rest of us just want to get on with our lives and make the best with what we have, like everyone else in this country, light or dark skinned. Look, I know it is part of popular culture these days to "do" the Maori thing, but you are Maori, and you owe it to yourself to go back and be a part of it. The first thing to do is go and see your parents and grandparents. Sit with them and listen to them; Maori culture is all about the spoken word Nudge; the stories handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Turning your back on your heritage is turning your back on who you are, and you will never be complete as a person without knowing where you have come from.'

'I know you're right Joe, I just want to get this other stuff sorted out before I get into it. I've only got another month at Woodvale and I have to figure out what I am going to do. I have to find work, a place to live --'

Joe held up his hand. 'All that will sort itself out in good time. Have a little faith; a little goes a long way you know.'

'Well, I'm a little short at the moment.'

Joe nodded. 'When you are ready to go to the Marae just let me know, OK? Here's my home number; you call me if you need anything; anything at all'

'Sure Joe, I will, and thanks.'

'One hand washes the other Nudge.' He replied as they shook hands.

Nudge called the waiter over and settled the bill. As they parted ways, Joe turned back to Nudge. 'When are you seeing Dobby again?' he asked

'Saturday. Why is that?'

Joe looked suddenly serious. 'Try to get in before Saturday.'

'I'll go tomorrow then,' Nudge replied, concerned.

'Good, Nudge. That's good,' he said as he walked away.

Nudge stood and watched Joe until he disappeared from view, a strong sense of impending doom clouding his mind.

Nudge Faces Facts

The next day on the way to visit Dobby, Nudge stopped by some bookstores to buy him the book he wanted. He was surprised that none of the big chain stores carried it and instead had been directed to a university book shop, where the female assistant, complete with pink dreadlocks and about a dozen body piercings looked at him like he was asking for a pint of blood. Her blank look prompted him to ask again, giving the author's name and perhaps she could look it up on the computer? She did, and the surprised look on her face confirmed they had a copy in stock. Running late, he quickly stopped at the library and replaced the books Dobby had read with another set and headed for Woodvale, disturbed and saddened by the fact Dobby was still reading books even though he knew he was dying. He was still pondering this when he arrived, coming in the back door as usual. He went out front to ask Parker if it was OK if he could visit Dobby.

'Good morning Sister Parker.' He said, trying his best to sound upbeat.

'Good morning James, how are you today?' she replied.

'Fine thanks; just come to see Dobby and drop off these books if that's cool.'

'That should be alright, but go easy, he isn't feeling that well today.'

'Oh, I will Sister. Thanks.'

'James,' she said quietly as he turned to leave, 'you can use the front door from now on if you like.'

'Thanks Sister, I will,' James replied with a grin.

His grin faded when he entered Room Four. Dobby was lying on the bed in his pyjamas and robe, looking very ill.

'Nudge!' his voice was weak but he still managed a broad smile.

'How are you feeling today, Dobby?' Nudge asked a brightly as he could.

'Not that great cob, but I'll get there. What have you got

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there?' He asked, eyeing the bag Nudge was carrying, 'some more books?'

'Yep, I bought another six for you to get through.' He passed them over one by one as Dobby studied the covers. 'I purposely picked bigger ones this time since you ripped through the others,' he said jokingly, 'which was a mistake because I had to carry the bloody things here! Talk about your weighty reading!'

They both giggled like schoolboys at the old joke.

'So Joe told you the whole story, eh?' Dobby stared at him.

'Um, yeah. How'd you know?'

'Oh, I can always tell by the look in people's eyes; that mixture of sympathy, sadness and awkwardness gives it away every time.'

'I'm sorry Dobby; I haven't been in this position before so I'm not sure what to do.'

'Aw come on old cob, don't worry yourself about it. I haven't been in this position either!' he threw Nudge one of those winks.

'Jesus, how can you joke about it?' asked Nudge, incredulous.

'Well cob, there's not much else I can do is there? My fate is pretty well sealed now; it's just a matter of time.'

'You're a braver man than me Dobby; I don't know what I'd do. It scares the shit out of me to be honest.'

'I'm scared too Nudge, but I've faced death before, and I've got an advantage over you because I've had to come to terms with it more than a few times in my life.'

'I don't see how that could make it any easier?'

'It's something that happens to all men, no matter who they are; kings and peasants alike. I'm grateful in many ways, not least because some of the people I have seen die have had slow and terrible deaths; mine will be relatively clean and, thanks to the staff here, relatively painless. When you think about it, there's so many ways to go; car crash, stroke, bird flu; you

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name it. Christ, you can even get killed by some piece of frozen shit falling from an aeroplane. At least this way I have some idea of when and will be surrounded by people I actually like; most people don't get that luxury.'

'But it seems so cruel, so unfair.' Nudge was struggling to comprehend.

'Life isn't fair though, cob, and the no-one said it would be. Sometimes the bad guy wins; evil triumphs over good. I don't think there is any reason to it; it's just the way life is. Dying is easy, it's living that's hard.'

He leaned toward Nudge.

'Everybody dies, but not everybody lives, if you get my meaning.'

'I hear you bud. If I can ask a blunt question; How long do they think?'

'Don't feel that you have to walk on eggshells around me, cob. I find that, more than anything else, hard to deal with. Be yourself; be honest.'

'I will, thanks.'

'The docs reckon it could be a week, or it could be a month; probably no longer.'

Nudge blanched. 'That soon? Jesus!'

'Ah, they're only guessing Nudge; it could be a year, they don't really know, they can only estimate by the amount of damage and the cancer's progress. They told me a while back I had three months, and that was nearly a year ago.'

'I read somewhere that positive thinking can often prolong, um, the end, in cases like this.'

'Yep, and I believe it. The problem with the theory is that cancer is an indiscriminate, relentless enemy and it never gives up. It may rest a while, but it will eventually win. Most people who die of cancer fight it successfully, sometimes for years; they die in the end because they tire of the battle. They get sick and tired of being sick and tired. My mother died of cancer;

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she beat it back once and lived another couple of good years, but it got her in the end. When she relapsed and they took her to the hospital, she pushed the doctors and their medicines away, telling them it was just her time to go. They made her as comfortable as possible and in a couple of days she went to sleep. That's what I see for myself. But I'm not quite ready yet, I have a few more stories to tell,' He grinned weakly and winked, 'but when I'm ready I will accept it and go, just like that.'

Nudge shook his head, trying to get his head around it.

Dobby held up a book, changing the subject.

'Who's this Stephen King bloke, seems I've heard of him before?'

'He's an American fella who writes a good horror story. Made him millions I would imagine. He seems to have a knack of picking up on people's fears and turning them into a good yarn. I actually only got it for you because it was the biggest book I could find!'

'It is big isn't it?' Dobby grinned, weighing it in his hand, 'that'll take me a good couple of days to wade through, so I can't go anywhere until then, can I?'

'I guess not,' smiled Nudge.

'Anyway, I'd better go, Parker will be in here shortly to boot me out. Can I pop back tomorrow?'

'Sure, Joe will be here at about eleven, so if you want to pop by then I'm sure he wouldn't mind.'

'Good stuff bud, you just kick back and save your strength, eh?'

'Will do cob, it's not like I have anything taxing to do here anyway. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Nudge left Room Four and found Parker. 'Sister, can I have a word?' he asked politely.

'Of course James, what is it?'

'Dobby, er, Bill Dobson, I just learned that he doesn't have

long to live?’

‘I’m afraid so. The doctors say his condition is in the last stages now.’

‘So there is nothing else that can be done for him?’

‘No, I’m sorry. All we can do now is let nature take its course,’ she shook her head sadly.

‘I feel a bit of a fool Sister; I didn’t realise this was a hospice.’

Parker sounded surprised. ‘Oh! James, I’m sorry, I thought you knew?’

‘No Sister, I had no idea,’ he replied sheepishly.

‘That’s why I warned you that first day James. It isn’t easy working in a place like this, and it pays not to get too emotionally involved or it will end up breaking you.’

‘I appreciate you trying to warn me Sister, I just didn’t understand at the time.’

‘And now?’ she questioned

‘Now, I don’t know. I think somehow I was meant to meet Dobby and share this time with him.’

‘I can see some changes in you, and I see Bill has changed as well, so perhaps it was fate that had you sent you here.’

They stood in silence.

‘Is there anything else? I have to get on?’ Parker asked.

‘Um, no. No thanks Sister. Thanks for the chat eh?’

‘No problem James, all the staff here support each other; we have to otherwise we could never get through it. If you need anything just let me know.’

‘I will,’ Nudge nodded gratefully.

Parker hustled off to do her rounds while Nudge stood there, deep in thought. He had to figure this out, and decided a coffee would be a good start, so he wandered out the front door and headed for his favourite café.

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Arriving at room four just after eleven the next day, Nudge found Joe and Dobby having a good laugh, no doubt over some old war story they both shared.

'Nudge!' Dobby was as enthusiastic as always.

'How're you doing today, Dobby?' Nudge asked, having already noted that he looked no different than yesterday except that now he had a few tubes running out of his arm.

'Same old same old, how about yourself?'

'Same here bud. How about you, Joe? He asked, turning to Joe.

'I'm fine thanks Nudge, nice to see you again. Dobby and I were just sharing a funny story from a long time ago, and I hope you don't mind, but I was just telling him how those friends of yours backed out of their plan to earn some money from you.'

'No worries mate; It's all thanks to you though.'

'Like I said, friends help each other out.'

Dobby chimed in. 'Did you tell Nudge about what we were just talking about?'

'No, I haven't old mate; I thought it might be best if you told him that one.'

'What is it, a joke or a story?' Nudge asked eagerly.

'It's a story, from when Joe and I were in business together down south; on the coast,' Dobby explained.

'Ah, I saw a photo on the wall. You were deer hunters, eh?'

'No. No cob, well, yes, I suppose in a way we were, but not hunters. After the things I had seen I wouldn't happily kill anything anymore,' Dobby looked over at Joe, 'and neither could Joe I don't think.'

Joe shook his head.

Nudge was puzzled. 'But in the photo you are posing with some dead deer or something?'

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'Not dead, tranquilised,' Dobby moved with obvious discomfort and drank some water. 'In the seventies, deer and other wild animals like goats and Thar were becoming a problem in the high country down in the South Island; back then they were regarded as pests. The government paid hunters and bushmen, like Barry Crump -- you know, the old guy in the Toyota ads -- to go in and kill them off, but they effectively only made a dent in the population. Around the same time some bright spark came up with the idea of deer farming; raising deer for their velvet, which apparently the Asians regard as some kind of magical love potion when the antlers are ground up and made into a tea. Well, there was no shortage of free stock in the hill country all along the West Coast of the South Island. Joe and I were both looking for something to do so we went into partnership with an ex-army helicopter pilot, Mike Taylor. We pooled our money and bought a second hand helicopter, and spent the next five years flying all over the countryside, with Mike flying, Joe doping or netting them and me jumping out of the chopper, recovering the deer. It was the perfect system, with each man doing the job he was best suited for. I was in my fifties; still physically fit, which was good because most of the day I spent wrestling the deer to the ground. I would tie them up and then sling them under the chopper so Mike could fly them out to a holding pen where the farmers would come to buy them. Joe, being such a big bloke and only having one leg, couldn't jump out like I did, but he was the best shooter there was. In the early days, he used a tranquiliser gun to dope the deer and Mike would follow it until it fell, then I would leap out onto it -- or he would drop me off downhill if the terrain got too dicey to fly over -- and I would bag it up for the trip to the pens.

We recovered hundreds of deer that way, but it was an expensive and literally hit-and-miss business with the dope. A bloke from one of the other crews operating came up with a

better way. He'd modified a shotgun, re-designing it to shoot a net instead of a bullet, and we adopted this system, enabling Joe to hit them with the net from the chopper while I would either hop out beside them, or hike up or down to them on foot and carry them down the hill far enough for Mike to sling them away. Sometimes we didn't have time or space for the net, so Mike would hover as close as he could and I would jump out on top of the deer, wrestle it to the ground and prepare it for slinging; we ended up only using the net when it was too dangerous to fly closer or jump out.'

'Incredible,' Nudge shook his head in disbelief, 'you actually jumped out of a helicopter, down a mountain, and wrestled deer?'

'Aw, I know we don't look like much now cob, but remember, this was thirty-odd years ago. We were still young men then.'

Joe nodded. 'It kept us pretty fit, I must say.'

Nudge was impressed. The adventure of it, the thrills these two must have had.

Dobby went on. 'Like all boom businesses, after a while the bottom fell out of it. Lured by big money, there were suddenly dozens of crews, all competing for an ever-shrinking target; there were only a finite number of deer up there after all. There were also many prangs; the pilots taking huge risks flying up in those mountains. The civil aviation lads would have had a field day up there, but what they didn't know didn't worry them, so it was pretty much a free-or-all. Mike crashed our chopper at least half a dozen times, maybe more.'

He leaned forward and dropped his voice. 'Those pilots were something else, Nudge, eh Joe?' he turned to Joe for affirmation. The big man nodded.

'The good pilots -- and Mike was one of the best -- could fly backwards uphill at full noise; me on the skids ready to jump and Joe hanging on his harness in the open door with the gun. The wind was strong and dangerously unpredictable up there

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and it caused many of the accidents. It was fortunate for us that helicopters fly much slower than fixed-wings and the crashes were not too bad; the major cost for us was mainly in parts and down-time; if we weren't flying we weren't recovering deer. Anyway, after a while the deer were starting to become scarcer, which meant we had to fly longer to find them and often there were other crews after the same deer; many a shot was fired in anger I can tell you. It was a miracle no-one got killed, though a few were hit with bullets or were injured in the prangs and had to give the game away. By this time farmers were starting to breed their own deer as well; they no longer needed to buy stock from us. It was time to get out. Mike, Joe and I had made our money and had our fun. It was a hard day's work, that's for sure, but good honest work; man against beast.' He paused for another drink.

'Mike ended up going overseas, flying for the Rhodesians. At the time, Rhodesia was heading into a civil war, black against black against white, and they needed able bodied men and fliers for their air force. They came and recruited many of our chopper boys because they had heard what brilliant pilots they were, and our guys were ideal because a lot of the fighting was in the bush and our boys had the experience.' Dobby's voice went quiet. 'We kept in touch, of course, but got word after a year or so that Mike had been killed. He'd been evacuating a Catholic mission, which was being shelled by the rebels, and he was carrying two priests and eight nuns. The rebels brought down his chopper with a shoulder fired missile and the crash killed everyone on board.' Dobby's sadness turned to anger. 'Bloody buggers! Imagine that; shelling a bloody church! Buggers!' He started coughing a little; then a lot. Joe bent over him and helped him try to drink some water, holding the cup and then wiping his mouth. The towel came away splattered with bloody saliva. After a few minutes, the fit subsided and Dobby lay down on the bed, grey, covered in

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sweat. 'Bloody hell!' he gasped, 'that's the worst yet.'

Nudge now stood by the bed, his concern obvious on his face.

'I'm fine cob; it's OK. Really.' He tried to allay Nudge's fears.

Nudge wasn't buying it. 'I can come back later...'

'No, please. Stay. I haven't gotten to the funny part yet!'

Dobby shot Joe a mischievous look. 'Just give me a minute.'

They all sat in silence, listening to Dobby's scratchy breathing, each man thinking their own thoughts and feeling the gravity of the situation.

Finally Dobby was able to carry on. 'Sorry about that, put a right damper on the funny part, eh?' he cracked. 'One time, we were working up in the high country, Mike flying like the devil and Joe manning the net. I was standing on the skid of the chopper, hanging onto a leather strap that was anchored beside the door. Mike got close to this one big stag, right up in the rocks, which was always a dangerous place to work. Joe hit him with the net and down he went. All was going well so far. Mike got closer and I jumped out onto this big bloody deer, which somehow freed itself from the net. I did my best to wrangle it to the ground but it was too strong and it thrashed around and got me a couple of good ones with his antlers. The first broke my arm, here,' Dobby pulled up his pyjama sleeve and showed Nudge a wicked looking scar on his left forearm. 'Then it hit me in the chest and down I went, hitting my noggin against the rocks. I was momentarily out for the count. Now all this happened in a few seconds, and as soon as Joe saw I was in trouble, he instinctively un-harnessed himself and jumped out onto the hillside after me. The deer had long gone, and poor old Joe,' Dobby gave him the look again, 'was stuck there, on the hill, trying to stand on the rocks and tussock. I had come to my senses by this stage but as you can imagine my arm was a bit sore. I looked up in time to see Joe lurching down the hillside on his wooden leg. I wondered for a second what the hell he was up to. I'll have to try to describe it, so

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bear with me; its one of those things that takes longer to tell than it did to happen. Anyway, he had taken a step downhill toward me on his good leg, and then his wooden leg, which he had at the time, was quite heavy, and it had fallen down the hill in front of him, you know, with gravity. The weight of the wooden leg falling forward made Joe balance forward and have to stand on the leg to stop himself falling. He then had to step with the other one to counter-balance his forward movement, and as soon as he took his weight off the wooden leg it would fall forward again, producing a very comical downhill goose-step lurching type motion. I know it doesn't sound that funny now, but to see this big fella,' he gestured toward Joe, 'trying to stay upright with his legs flopping around as he careered down the hill; well, I guess you had to see it.' He grinned at Joe and Joe grinned back; Nudge thinking at that moment they were just like a couple of schoolboys.

'Of course it only lasted a few steps before Joe went arse-over-kite, his wooden leg having fallen off by that stage, but it was just one of those moments, when ordinary people look extraordinary, you know?' Nudge had to admit, seeing Joe that way would have bought a smile to his face on any other day, but today he couldn't share the mirth of these two old friends, not with what was going on.

The men lapsed into silence again, dwelling on the images that Dobby had just described.

Nudge broke the silence. 'So, you were in business there for about five years, eh?' he looked at Joe.

'That's right'. Joe took over the story. 'It all went downhill -- if you'll pardon the pun -- pretty quickly after that. As Dobby explained; too many cowboys started giving the whole industry a bad name. We got out while the going was good.'

'What did you do before that, Joe?' Nudge asked.

Joe leaned over and checked to see Dobby was OK, who was

lying with his eyes closed, and went to answer.

Dobby, without opening his eyes, spoke first. 'I'm still alive, just resting my eyelids. You two chat away and I'll listen for a while.'

Joe winked at Nudge. 'You'll fall asleep before I say ten words, Dobby.'

'Nah mate, someone has to make sure you tell the bloody truth,' he opened his eyes and looked at Nudge. 'He's been known to exaggerate things Nudge; if I've told him once I've told him a million times; don't exaggerate things.' He threw Nudge a knowing wink. 'I'll be right here, listening.'

Joe feigned offence, raising his eyebrows and firing a hurt look at Dobby. He took up the story.

'Well, after the war I came home to my whanau and just chilled out for a while. They were trying their best to cope with me but they couldn't understand what I was going through. It wasn't the done thing to talk about it in those days, except with other fellas who had been there, so most of us just bottled it up and got on with life. I had to have more work done on my leg, even though the German doctors had been good -- the people here were impressed with the work they had done -- I wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. The operations and post-surgery care took about a year, and by that time I had readjusted pretty well. I ended up helping out around the hospital with men who were in much worse shape than I was, which helped me put things into perspective. I wrote on and off to Dobby, but he wasn't much of a letter writer, so it was years before I received a reply,' he winked at Nudge.

'Years be buggered!' Dobby cut in. 'More like six months! Mail was bloody slow in those days anyway, and I looked forward to every letter I got from Joe and I replied right away. Years. Bah! See, Nudge, I told you he exaggerates.'

Joe laughed that hearty, deep laugh of his. 'Just checking you are still awake Dobby,' he laughed again.

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Dobby, eyes still closed, sighed and shook his head in mock disgust while Joe continued.

'We kept in touch, but we were doing very different things. I was here and he was still back in Europe, so the distance was more than emotional. I could have gone on a government disability pension, but instead I chose to get off my backside and do something. The years in the camps had given me some food for thought, and I investigated the options of working with prisoners inside the prison system. I started out as an assistant administrator and by the mid-fifties I was running the maximum security prison up there at Rungaroa. Working with those men helped me sort my own stuff out and gave me a good understanding of human nature. After a few years of that I'd had enough; it was a high-stress job and it didn't help that the justice system was sending more and more boys our way without giving us any more resources to deal with them. The result was an overcrowded and often violent prison; many a petty crook went in only to come out a full-blown criminal. In the end the government was looking for a scapegoat to lay blame for the rising problems within the system, and prison administration was their first target. I got sick of the constant interference and badgering, so I got out and started my own consultancy group working at ground level with first-time offenders, helping them to avoid re-offending and reaching the next stage, which would have put them into the prison system. Many of those who went to prison and worked with us never went back; they came out and led productive and fulfilling lives. Many still keep in touch every now and then; I found it very satisfying. Of course, there are some who we couldn't help, who didn't want help, but we were there for those that did. Due to the success of that, we branched out and started working with at-risk people as well -- our theory being prevention is better than the cure -- and we targeted those in low income neighbourhoods and high-crime areas, including

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programmes for children of inmates, who incidentally are 70% more likely to end up in jail than children who don't have a parent in prison, and created drop-in centres and refuges where people could go and have anything from a cup of tea to somewhere safe to stay, all with professional care-givers.

As you can imagine, all this cost money, and lots of it. Of course the government wouldn't see itself clear to helping us out, so we relied on donations, fund-raisers and sponsorship from the business community. It's a funny thing, Nudge; no-one wants to help people like that, who are down and out and those most likely to resort to crime. You can have a fundraiser for cats with cancer and raise a million dollars, but have one for helping juvenile delinquents or kids with parents in jail and people don't want to know; you would be lucky to raise fifty thousand. What is it with a society when they care more about their pets than their young people? Over the years it wore me down; it got to be too hard. It was a full time job, having to hustle for money just to pay the professionals, and having to maintain the huge volunteer-based workforce as well got too much for me. It made it so much harder when our own people, and even the government, didn't give a damn. When Dobby came and offered me the chance to fly around the countryside in a helicopter for money, he didn't have to ask twice. I tell you Nudge, at that point I would have done it for nothing! I invested some of my savings in the venture.'

Dobby interrupted again, lying there with his eyes closed. 'You invested every last cent you had Joe, because you covered my third as well, remember? I had blown most of my money in the gambling dens in Thailand. Joe to the rescue again, eh Nudge?'

Nudge shook his head. 'He's the man Dobby, no doubt about it.'

Blushing slightly, Joe continued. 'It wasn't every last cent but yes, I thought it looked like a pretty good idea. As long as we

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could find the deer and catch them, it was money in the bank.' He leaned forward. 'As it turned out, it was money in the bank.' He smiled broadly, 'we all made millions.'

Nudge's eyes widened. 'Millions? Of dollars?' He was incredulous.

'That's right Nudge, five years hard work, including falling down the hill on my wooden leg, and it set me up for the rest of my life.' His smile faded. 'Sadly, Mike never got to enjoy his money; it went instead to his wife, Laura, who had gone to live with him there in Rhodesia. She used the money to buy a farm and married a local man -- a very good bloke by the name of Bobby van Doren -- and over the years they worked hard, raised a couple of children and about a million sheep. Dobby kept in touch with them more than I did, mainly because he was in Africa a lot with his work, but every now and then they came out here to meet Laura's family and I caught up with them then. Very nice people Nudge, honourable and people of the land.'

A few years ago, their farm was confiscated by the Zimbabwe government, part of a master-plan by Robert Mugabe and his cronies to repossess all white-owned land and return it to the blacks. The plan was a disaster, and it plunged the country into economic crisis and famine because many native Africans had no idea how to work the land they'd been given.' Joe shook his head sadly. 'A few years ago, all of them, Laura, Bobby and the kids, were murdered by a mob when they refused to give up their farm. They could have thrown it all in years before, like many others, when they saw the writing on the wall for whites in Zimbabwe but they decided to stay; their hearts and souls were in the land and the people. When he heard, Dobby travelled to Zimbabwe and buried them there, side by side in the land they loved.'

Joe paused and they both looked over at Dobby, a single tear traced a shining line down his face to the pillow.

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'He was very close to both of them,' Joe explained in a low voice, 'he often stayed with them on the station and he just as often had dinner with the very people who ended up killing them.'

Nudge let out a breath. 'That's bloody hard, eh? People can be such...,' he left the sentence unfinished.

Joe sighed and put a hand on Dobby's arm. 'You OK there old mate?'

'Yep, I'm OK. They were good people, eh cob?'

'They sure were, Dobby.'

Joe carried on.

'So here we were; two ageing men with a few million each and nothing to do with it. Dobby, wisely for him I might add, invested in commercial property. The canny old fool now owns about half of Auckland, including this place,' he waved his arm around him.

'No shit!' Nudge couldn't help himself, 'Er --, I mean --.'

Dobby opened his eyes and laughed, his chest rattling terribly beneath the mirth. 'It's alright Nudge, we don't mind a little bad language every now and then, and it is pretty cool, eh?' his eyes sparkled. 'It just goes to show you that a lucky break and a good move can make all the difference, eh cob?'

'It wasn't just luck Dobby, it was shrewd business,' Joe piped in.

'Well,' Dobby said, 'I figured that if I had money sitting around in the bank I would just end up blowing it, like I had in Thailand, and a savvy bloke named Jones I talked to one day down at the club told me that property was the way to go, so I bought a factory, tarted it up and had it re-valued, then borrowed money against the new value and used that to buy another one, which I did the same thing with. After a while I had a dozen or so, all earning money and paying themselves off at the same time. Now I've got much more money than I started with, as well as all the properties, freehold! I set up a

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trust for Woodvale. Joe runs it, I wouldn't know how. It's strictly non-profit, and Joe uses his contacts to help place veterans here who have nowhere else to go or who can't afford to get care elsewhere. Sadly, with the way the world is, I don't think we'll ever be short of guests for the place.'

'Wow.' Nudge was amazed. 'So let me get this straight; you didn't have to work but you did anyway?' Nudge asked.

'Well, what else would we do, cob? Sit on our arses? I had all this money and had always wanted to do something good, you know, give something back. Joe's the same; he invested in computers and now has more money than anyone! He helps fund the half-way houses and women's refuges around the country that he set up all those years ago. Apple wasn't it Joe?'

'Yep.' Joe grinned, 'And Microsoft. Back then, people thought I was mad; said these computer things were just a pipe-dream. I saw a future in it and invested. How wrong they were!'

'So what happened next for you two dark horses, eh?' Nudge asked excitedly. He was beginning to realise that it didn't matter when you started; if you wanted to do something badly enough, you could do it no matter how old you were and regardless of how much time you think you have.

'Well, we weren't finished yet. I think Dobby should tell you what we did next; it's really his story.'

'Well, not exactly Joe, we both were involved but I'll tell it anyway, your voice is making me go to sleep,' he cracked, grinning Joe's way.

'By this time we were both getting on a bit and having made some money we could have sat back and lived a life of luxury for the rest of our days. The only problem is that retirement is such a boring existence, and Joe and I weren't ready for it just yet. It was around this time that we saw the clouds of war developing over there in the Balkans. Yugoslavia was self destructing and the whole area looked as if it would go up in flames.'

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'I remember that Dobby, it was the late eighties, early nineties, eh?'

Dobby nodded. 'That's right.'

'I saw it on TV,' Nudge continued, 'and I remember thinking to myself, how could this be happening in this day and age? How could people in such an advanced society be shooting at each other?'

'Well, Dobby replied, 'in my experiences overseas it often doesn't take much to ignite tensions that go back centuries. Because we only have around 150 years of European culture we tend to forget that some countries have many thousands of years of history behind them. We tend to think of things only in the respect of what's happening now; not taking into account what happened hundreds of years ago, which is perhaps why the Treaty is such a hard issue for us to deal with; most of us white blokes are more inclined to just forget about the whole thing and move on, not realising that the Maori people don't think like us; they think in centuries, not years. Am I right, Joe?'

Joe nodded assent. 'In general, that's true, but not all Pakeha think that way. The more mutual history we discover, the more New Zealanders are starting to think the same way; there is no difference between Maori and Pakeha during a game against Australia, eh? We are all Kiwis then! The hope for many is that one day there won't be any difference at all; we will all be one people.'

'But surely,' Nudge interrupted, 'there are people who don't want that to happen, and won't let it happen? People on both sides want to stir up trouble. Every other day on the news some radical is claiming this or that or occupying some land somewhere.'

'Well, that's why we all have to work together, because New Zealand could just as easily go the same way the Balkans.'

'Jesus, that's a scary thought, Joe.' Nudge was worried. 'You

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really think something like that could happen here?"

'I don't know mate, but there's always the option in the back of some people's minds.'

'I hope it never happens,' Dobby chimed in. 'I've met some bloody decent people in my life, black, white and yellow, and if we all sit down and talk about it I don't see any reason everything can't all be resolved to everybody's satisfaction.'

They all nodded agreement.

'So what happened over there anyway Dobby, Yugoslavia?'

'Oh yes. Well, I'm not a hundred percent sure but this is what I know. Just don't quote me; I didn't do well in history at school eh?'

In the aftermath of World War 2, this bloke named Tito managed to unite the various countries in the region under one socialist banner and held them together for nearly fifty years as Yugoslavia, walking the tightrope of cultural and religious difference and intolerance. He died in the early eighties leaving a huge power vacuum in his wake. A few of the countries in the federation took the opportunity to separate from Yugoslavia, something they had long wanted to do but were unable to for various reasons. The Serbs, who by the sound of it controlled pretty much everything from the army to the local councils, weren't too keen and after a short war of words they started a land grabbing exercise in parts of what is now Croatia, forcing Croats from their houses and farms. The Croats weren't having a bar of it -- they're a pretty nationalist lot -- and fought fire with fire, and so the shooting began. It soon turned into a real mess, with world powers stepping in and making huge dicks of themselves in the full glare of the media. The UN couldn't cope and we were soon hearing about all sorts of atrocities committed while troops stood by, unable to do anything about it. It must have been a terrible thing for those soldiers to stand by watching people slaughtered, not allowed to fire a shot to help them. What bloody madness!'

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Dobby took a sip of water, his hands shaking with anger. Joe and Nudge traded resigned looks.

'The Serbs laid siege to some big towns in Bosnia, surrounding them and shelling and sniping indiscriminately, starving the civilian populations and not allowing anything or anyone in or out. I saw it unfolding here on TV and couldn't just sit back and do nothing, so Joe and I packed our bags and headed to Europe to see what we could do.'

We started in London, where we contacted some ex-pat Croats whose names we had been given by a Croat living in Auckland. Those people put us in touch with others in-country. We then flew to a place called Split, in Croatia, which was close to the front lines, such as they were, and only 160 k's from Sarajevo, our intended destination. We met with the local contacts who took us inland to a village, the last Croatian Army outpost up near the border; we would try and cross into Serb held territory from there. It was getting dark, so we kipped for the night in the house of one of the border patrol guards. He was a great bloke, his name was Branko Kolan, and although he didn't speak much English and we spoke bugger all Croatian we all hit it off right away. He was young, with a beautiful wife and kids, and his parents and grandparents lived close by in the village, so soon the whole family got together around the huge dining table and shared what food they had with us. Word spread quickly about the two mad old codgers trying to get to Sarajevo and all the neighbours came around to have a look. After a meal of bread, cheese and dried ham we sat and smoked cigarettes, drank coffee that would dissolve metal and talked about the situation there. Poor old Joe; he doesn't smoke -- never has -- but he must have smoked a pack or two that night eh cob?'

Joe nodded. 'I could hardly breathe Nudge, but hey, when in Rome...'

'One of the neighbours,' Dobby carried on with the story, 'a

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woman named Mariana, was a school teacher and spoke very good English, translating for us. They told us it was very bad up there; with snipers shooting anything that moved just up the road. One said that only days before two French reporters had tried the same route and one was killed outright by a sniper and the other hit in the face. Mariana was amazed we had gotten through this far; guards were turning people back at checkpoints all along the road we had taken but although we saw the checkpoints, they didn't stop our rental car for some reason.

I was keen as mustard to press on and get through but Joe had one of his feelings; the last time he had one, a grenade blew his leg off, so I trusted him and we held back. Branko kindly offered to put us up and we stayed at his house for a couple of days, watching the news at night and talking to the few others who made it through and were trying to get across the border. The locals were right; it was way too dangerous for two old buggers like us to travel up there. Not only would we have to deal with the snipers and regular army soldiers, but also roaming bands of what amounted to no more than armed thugs who killed and stole anything they could get their hands on. According to Mariana they were the most feared by the locals and were responsible for some of the worst atrocities, most of which went unreported to the mass media. They operated under the banners of "special police" or "special forces", but they were nothing of the kind. No real soldier would behave like these blokes. They also must have had the blessing of the local army field commanders to be able to operate in the area, and the commanders must have known what these idiots were doing. Apparently many of the units were led by organised crime bosses and warlords who assembled their own private armies, adopting names like "Tigers" and "Jackals". These blokes went where they wanted and did what they wanted to whoever they wanted, raping,

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killing, looting and burning. It was people like this who were mainly responsible for killing reporters, photographers and the hundreds of war junkies who flocked to the place for the show. If you were out there you were fair game; it didn't matter whether you were a nun, a child or a household pet, they would kill anything alive. It was a crazy and dangerous place; too crazy. We were both too old for that kind of carry-on so we decided to bid our friends farewell and see what we could do from behind the lines and behind the scenes.

We went back to London and started a campaign of phone-calls and letter writing, cajoling businesses and individuals alike into doing something about the crisis. We rented warehouse space in London and won pledges from suppliers for food, water, medicines and other essentials. They all said we were mad to try, but at least we were doing something. We purchased a couple of large trucks in Split and shipped all the stuff we had over there and loaded them up. The UN and the world media joined our convoy, and soon other agencies saw an opportunity to get their stuff through and in the end we managed to create one of the largest aid convoys ever assembled. We headed off to Bosnia, determined to get through and publicly dared the Serbs to try and stop us.'

Dobby paused, obviously tiring.

'And what happened, did you get through?' Nudge asked impatiently, eager to know the outcome.

'Eventually Nudge, but it was a bloody mess. We were stopped every kilometre by some force or another, turned back dozens of times and even had some volunteers from Denmark killed at one checkpoint; the "soldiers" manning it were so pissed or high on something there was no reasoning with them; as we turned back they opened fire on the front trucks. That said it all; here we were trying to help people and these bastards just wanted to kill us. We were determined to get through and we kept trying for over a year, but gradually the

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media attention faded and the convoy began to fall apart. Without any kind of military support it became far too dangerous and we had to accept there was just no hope of breaking through. The only thing these blokes understood was that if you had a bigger gun, you could pass. I was beginning to think that the world had abandoned this place and these people because the situation was getting more and more insane. No-one knew who was killing who any more. Every day there were more and more atrocities and everything escalated out of control. The whole thing was being filed in the 'too-hard' basket; governments preferring to just sit back and let it burn itself out. Essentially, that's exactly what happened in the end. Lines were drawn in the sand over a negotiating table somewhere, the parties agreeing to stop the shooting and go back home. Finally, almost overnight, the checkpoints disappeared and this time the trucks got through, people got their supplies and some kind of normality returned to the region. By this time Joe and I were done. We'd tried our best and threw every possible resource at it, but we failed. We'd spent too many nights sitting on our backsides, trying to negotiate our way through with people who didn't want to see reason. Of course, we met some nice people but we also met some very bad people.'

Joe broke in. 'They seemed to like Dobby because he would sit and drink and smoke with them all night; they appreciate that. Dobby loved that part of it, didn't you mate?'

Dobby smiled sadly. 'It had its good parts, I'll be the first to admit it,' he said, 'but overall it was a dirty and extremely nasty business; literally hundreds of thousands of people's lives being bartered over cigarettes and Slivovic. It took me a long time to recover from that, and I know Joe felt the same way.'

Joe nodded. 'It's true, I don't remember when so many ordinary people tried for so long to do the right thing only to

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have it thrown back in our faces time and time again. The only positive outcome of the whole mess was that by doing what we did we lay the foundations for creating an organisation that provides global transport and logistics to relief and aid convoys; we assist the big-name agencies in getting their aid where it needs to go. We have built a reputation of professionalism and impartiality, often going where others won't take the risk. There are other companies doing the same thing but they run as a business, making a profit out of people's suffering, which we think is shameful. Our trucks are manned by volunteers and funded by people like us, who have money to spare and don't mind putting it where it can do the most good.'

Nudge shook his head. 'You've done such amazing things. It must feel really good to have achieved all that.'

Dobby answered. 'Of course it does, but we don't do these things just to feel good. If that was the case we could just give at the office and congratulate ourselves on our contribution. The problem that we saw is that most donated money didn't get to where it's needed. Most of those big aid agencies peel so much off the top for what they call "administration costs" that very little gets through to the people who need it the most. Its obscene Nudge; we have seen administrators of those funds fly all over the world in private jets and enjoy performance bonuses in the millions while an unsuspecting public continue pouring money into the system; mums and dads sending in donations because of shameless advertising during the six-o'clock news. You've seen them; the ads portraying starving children with sad eyes. There's no doubt the children exist, and that the whole Africa thing is a tragedy of enormous proportions, but these organisations use slick, emotionally manipulative marketing techniques to induce ordinary people to spend just "one dollar a day" to give a child the basic necessities of life. The real tragedy is that only a fraction of that

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dollar will end up going to the child. Joe and I thought that wasn't good enough; why should some bugger in a suit, sitting in an office in Geneva, get a million dollars a year of donated money for doing something a volunteer can do on the ground in the country concerned? That's why we set up our foundation, and we arranged it so it will never end up like that. We won't bow to politics or make deals with corrupt governments; we'll get the stuff in without corrupting ourselves.'

Dobby sank back onto the bed, his breathing harsh. Joe took up the narrative.

'It goes much deeper than putting money in a collection plate, Nudge; that may do it for those Sunday Christians who absolve themselves of the wrongs they have done during the week by giving a little more out of their wallets, but for a real man, actions speak louder than anything else. The measure of a person is not what he says, but what he does. Our fundamental mission is putting into practise the basic philosophy of helping someone who needs help. We think it is one of mans' most important, yet most neglected, responsibilities, that of helping someone less fortunate than him. Those that live by this creed often find the rewards come back to them in many different ways. Eastern religions call it Karma, and it is real. One hand washes the other.'

Nudge smiled. This could be what he'd been looking for; a reason for doing something that made sense. He had grown up believing the main motivation for someone helping someone else was material gain; now he was beginning to realise that fulfilment as a person was the prize, and to him at that moment, it meant more than all the money in the world. It was so impossibly simple; all he had to do was to do good things to reap the reward. It was with sudden regret he realised that he needn't have waited for these two old men to point him in the right direction; deep down he had always known as he now

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recalled the same feeling from when he was a child; of giving something without condition; honestly expecting nothing in return; that feeling had to be the purest reward of all. He found he couldn't stop smiling; his body suddenly felt light and full of hope, as if a large weight had been removed from his soul.

'Can you excuse me for a minute please, guys?'

Joe and Dobby gave each other slightly puzzled looks.

Nudge stood and left the room. He was back in a couple of minutes, smiling broadly.

'You look like you just won the lottery,' Dobby joked.

'I just told Parker I would volunteer here on Saturdays from now on and she was actually happy to have me here, and it feels great. It's the least I can do compared to what you two have done.'

'I'm proud of you, cob,' Dobby said, a smile on his face, 'what about you, Joe?'

Joe looked as if he might burst.

'Nudge,' he held out his hand, 'I am mighty proud as well.'

Nudge shook his hand and then shook Dobby's. Dobby's grip was less than strong and Nudge realised that in the midst of all this he hadn't noticed how pale and drawn Dobby had become over the last few hours.

'You don't look so good, bud,' Nudge sounded concerned, 'is there anything I can get you?'

'Nah, cob, just feeling a bit tired is all; bit of pain in the old chest.' Dobby replied, obviously in some discomfort.

Nudge looked at Joe and Joe looked back; Nudge noting the worry in his eyes.

'I'll get Mills,' Nudge got up and left to find him.

He returned with Mills to find Joe leaning close to Dobby, whispering something to him. As Mills tended to Dobby, tapping hoses and adjusting the drip, Joe herded Nudge out of the door. They moved along the corridor, out of earshot.

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'I think we had better call it a day,' Joe said, 'he gets tired pretty easily.'

'Yeah, I know, I was a little shocked just now.'

'I saw. I was just telling him to hang in there; that we were there for him.'

'I wish there was something I could do,' Nudge said, the helplessness obvious in his voice.

'You are doing something, you are making an old man's last days bearable; that's a huge undertaking.'

'It doesn't feel like I'm actually doing anything though. If there is anything...'

'Don't worry yourself, if there is, you'll know. OK?'

'OK.' Nudge replied, not sounding convinced.

Mills came out of the room and along the corridor toward them.

'Hi guys, can I have a word?'

They nodded and followed him further from room four.

'He is having a little trouble breathing, so I've put him on oxygen. It's about all we can do, aside from up his medication, so keep an eye open and let me know if there is any change, OK?'

'Sure Brendan. No worries.' Nudge replied. Joe nodded solemnly as well.

They returned to find Dobby sitting propped up on a pillow, oxygen mask over his nose and mouth; the faint hiss of the oxygen rising and falling in time with Dobby's chest. He grinned under the mask. They grinned back, trying their best to look hopeful.

Joe spoke first. 'I'd better get going anyway, old mate. I have a few things to take care of.'

'You'll be back later today though cob, eh?' Dobby's voice was muted and croaky beneath the mask.

'I'll be back around nine, OK?'

'Good stuff cob, I'll wait for you eh?' Dobby seemed to relax.

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'I should go too, let you get some rest' Nudge made his excuses. 'I'll pop by tomorrow and see how you are doing. By the way, how are those books I left you?'

'I've finished some of them cob, though that Stephen King one gave me the creeps so I put it on the back burner.'

'No worries. Till tomorrow then. Have a good sleep tonight; I'll tell Mills to up the drip eh? He grinned.

'Heh, good on ya mate. See you tomorrow.'

The two men turned to leave.

'Oh, Nudge, one more thing ?' Dobby sat up slightly. Nudge turned back.

Joe continued toward the door, 'I'll see you outside eh?'

'Sure Joe, give me a minute.' Nudge replied.

Dobby struggled to sit up and pulled the mask down.

Nudge began to protest but Dobby held his hand up; Nudge noticed it was shaking.

'It'll be alright for a minute, don't worry.'

'Sure thing bud, what did you want to see me about?'

'You ever been down South, Otago?'

'Nah bud, been meaning to, but you know --' he shrugged his shoulders.

'Yeah, bit that way with me too, I haven't been back home for a long time now.'

'I thought you had a house there?'

'I have cob, but Otago has been a mixed bag. I love the place, it's home after all. Usually I couldn't wait to get back, but when I did, my memories haunted me and in the end I couldn't bear it.'

'Yeah, that would put a damper on things bud.'

'Well Nudge, I wonder if you could do me a favour.'

'Sure Dobby, anything, you know that.'

'Remember I told you that Nico's ashes are buried at Dobson's Point? I was wondering if you would go with Joe and put my ashes there next to hers.'

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'Shit Dobby, don't talk like that. You've got lots of time left yet, I mean, you are only half way through that book for a start.'

'Come on Nudge, you're as bad a liar as I was when I told Joe his leg was just a scratch. I know I haven't got long; that's the reality we have to deal with. So, can you go with him? Look after him? He's getting on you know, and I worry about the old bugger.' Dobby's breathing was ragged, his chest rattling. Nudge felt his throat get tight and a tingling in his nose. 'I don't know what to say, Dobby?' his voice cracking.

'Say yes, cob. It would mean a lot to me.'

Nudge pulled himself together. 'I'd consider it an honour, Dobby.' He reached out and put his hand on the old man's shoulder, horrified at how thin it felt under his pyjamas.

Dobby noticed his look. 'The old cancer weight-loss plan eh cob? Bet all those bored housewives trying to diet would kill to lose weight like me.' He grinned and Nudge couldn't help but grin back.

'I reckon they would bud, I reckon they would.'

'Well, I'd better get back to resting and reading. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Righto Dobby, take care now.' He extended his hand. Dobby took it and there again was that vice-like grip. They held the handshake for a few seconds. Dobby's eyes still sparkling with wisdom, friendship and strength; Nudge hoped that the anxiety, fear and doubt weren't showing in his.

Nudge turned and left, raising his hand in a quick wave as he left. Dobby waved weakly back, the mask back on his face and the gentle hiss of the oxygen audible in the room. Nudge found Joe waiting down the corridor outside.

'He doesn't look that hot, eh Joe?' Nudge couldn't hide the sadness in his tone.

'No mate, he doesn't,' Joe replied, 'I think it will be over soon; I have a feeling...' he left the words unsaid.

'What time will you be by tomorrow, bud? I'd rather catch up

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with Dobby when you're there; I'm not sure how I would go on my own.'

'I understand. I'll be there if you want me there.'

'Thanks Joe. I'm not used to asking for help.'

'I know Nudge, it does take a bit of getting used to, but like they say, fake it until you make it. See you tomorrow at around the same time?'

'Yeah, why not bud; seems to suit everyone eh?'

'Great. See you then.' Joe waved and headed toward his car.

Nudge waved back and walked off down the road, troubled; he couldn't get the image of Dobby lying there out of his mind; how thin and frail he had become. In the last couple of days he seemed to have grown smaller somehow, as if his body was consuming itself. His complexion was sallow; his cheeks and eyes were sunken into his skull and even his skin covered his bones like shrink wrap. He tried to think about something else as he headed for a café.

Over the course of the day Nudge found himself in a strange limbo, not knowing what to do; every time he tried to keep busy by doing something, the inescapable fact that Dobby was dying drained his mind of any other thoughts and he couldn't concentrate on anything else. It consumed him, saturating his very being. His body felt heavy and leaden but he couldn't lie down; nor could he sit in one spot for long. Walking helped, but he had the almost overwhelming urge to run, to try and distance himself physically from his worries, though he knew he couldn't hide. There was no way out except to face it and deal with it; what scared him most was the fact he had no idea how he was going to cope with it. He instinctive reaction was to wail like a baby; emotion pouring out of him in tears and spittle and noise. At that instant he understood why people collapsed at funerals, or screamed and lashed out in grief, their bodies malfunctioning due to overpowering emotion. He felt like kicking and screaming; the

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sensation rising in him was so strong that it took all his energies to fight the impulse. He did the only thing he thought would work, but even that failed him. Floyd, no matter how loud he played it, couldn't drown out the grief and the fear and the inevitability of what waited for him in room four.

Part Three

Nudge

The sun peeked over the horizon, lighting up the bedroom with the familiar faint grey-yellow light of dawn and waking Nudge from a troubled sleep. He had dreamed of devils, elephants and old school friends, of falling and landing with a start, of chocolate and guns that wouldn't fire; the sort of dreams that stay with you until the next sleep erases them. He had no idea what they meant, he just knew that he didn't feel good when he woke up from them. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and scratched his head, then did one hundred sit-ups and one hundred crunches; he had resolved to get fitter, mentally and physically. He showered and dressed, planning his day. He was going to see Dobby at eleven, so that gave him heaps of time.

He breakfasted at a café downtown, close to the university, where he needed to go and get some information on courses. He also went to his local electoral office and picked up some forms to fill out; asking about what he had to do to list himself with the register of urban Maori. It made him feel good to be starting the process of getting closer to his roots.

He was now headed for Woodvale and as he wandered down Grafton Road in the mid-morning sunshine he listened to Edith Piaf; he had decided to try something totally different. He had heard a song playing in a café the previous week and had been intrigued, though he couldn't understand what she was singing about because she sang in French. Even so, he could hear the anguish in her voice and in the music. He had asked around about her, and some guy at the record store said she'd been a tragic figure in real life. He said she had been abandoned at birth, ending up in the care of the madam of a

Nudge

local brothel. As a child, singing for money on the street was the only thing that kept her alive. She was spotted by a nightclub owner, who gave her an opportunity to sing at his club, and this launched her career. Her life had been filled with desperate love affairs and heartbreak; she sought comfort in drink and drugs and she died, broke and broken, in her late forties. Many of her songs were about desertion, lost love and death, and this is what Nudge could hear in her voice as she sang. While he didn't really like it -- he usually only liked music that made him think, or feel good -- but he didn't not like it either; it was something he could listen to when he was the right mood. Still, at the moment he was into trying new things; it felt good and besides, how could he have an opinion on something if he knew nothing about it? Just as the song finished, he heard his cell phone beeping in his bag and he took it out to see what it was.

'Damn,' he cursed under his breath, as he realised he had missed a call. It had come through an hour ago. He scrolled through the phone menu and checked the number, which was shown as blocked. He checked for messages; there were none waiting. He was curious, as most people are when someone calls and doesn't leave a message, but it also could have been a wrong number. He popped the phone back in his bag and turned his MP3 player down a few notches in case it rang again.

He continued around the corner and looked left and right as he went to cross the road. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught someone waving to him from the other side of the street. He turned his head and looked directly at the spot, expecting to see one of his mates, but there was no-one there, not within twenty metres anyway. The thing that had him spooked was that he was certain it was Dobby, though not the man he saw yesterday in bed, old and frail, but the Dobby in the photographs, the one who was young and strong, wearing

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his adventurer's vest, with a cigarette dangling from his lips and bright eyes peering mischievously at him over the Ray-Ban Clubmasters perched on the tip of his nose. Nudge stopped dead in his tracks, in the middle of the road, and stood there staring, eyes searching, trying to catch sight of the figure he was sure he had seen, until the beeping horn of an annoyed commuter stung him into motion. He jogged across the road to the spot, pulling off his sunglasses, circling and craning his neck to look everywhere around. His heart was pumping with nervous energy, the sound like a hammer in his ears, until it skipped a beat and went cold with sudden fear and dread. He started running. He ran and he ran, faster and faster, toward room four, his shirt flailing behind him and his bag bouncing on his back, Piaf warbling a tragic lament in the headphones that now lay around the base of his neck. Nudge didn't hear it; he wanted only to run, to get to Dobby, and he didn't dare stop.

Joe

Joe returned that night as he promised he would. He had walked around in the afternoon in a progressive funk; he too was feeling the inevitable and was preparing himself for the moment that was sure to come. He had posted some letters for Dobby and had been to hand-deliver a package from him to some lawyer uptown. The chores done, he had gone home to his wife and shared his afternoon tea with her, as was his custom, though his thoughts strayed to his mate lying there in that hospice room; the last place he will see in his time left on earth. He pondered his own passing, and it saddened him immensely that Dobby wouldn't be there to help him through that most final of ordeals. They had often talked about it; what each man would do for the other, what they wanted to be done. They had made a pact years ago over a beer to carry out each other's final wishes should one be left after the other. The years had flown past, and if it wasn't for the old body that couldn't move so well or the voice that wasn't as strong, he would consider himself still a man of twenty. He still felt like a young man; it was just the vessel that had perished over time. He sighed, and took another sip of his tea.

It had haunted him over the years; he was always waiting for the call that let him know Dobby had finally copped it over in some god-forsaken land. For years he was fully prepared to deal with going and doing whatever it took to bring his body -- or what was left of it -- back to Glenlea. In many ways that would have been so much easier for him to deal with than this perversion; the degradation of watching Dobby waste away to a shadow of his former self. If he had been a braver man, he would have put a pillow over Dobby's face months ago when he had asked him to do it, but he couldn't willingly take another life. Not anymore. He had made that particular pact

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with himself after the war. Dobby understood, of course, and he didn't think anything less of Joe for not doing it. Nevertheless, Joe had wondered if he should have done it. Would they send him to jail? Would he be damned to an eternity of hellfire and brimstone? He didn't know, but the question was still an open one; Dobby was still alive and he was suffering terribly. Dare he save Dobby the humiliation and horror of a long and protracted end? Maybe he would see tonight...

Nine o'clock that evening found Joe standing beside his old friend's bed. Dobby looked worse, a lot worse, and his breathing was harsh and shallow. Joe stood there for a full ten minutes, watching, thinking before Dobby opened his eyes and realised someone was there.

'Boy! Boy!' he cried weakly, his voice sounded panicked.

Joe looked around the room; there was no-one else there.

'Yes. You, boy!' Dobby appeared to look right through him. 'Look out the window and tell me if the MP's are coming will you? They're looking for me you see...' his voice trailed off as Joe laid a hand on his arm.

'It's just me old friend. It's Joe.'

'Oh, Joe.' He grinned weakly under the mask as he recognised him.

'You were asking me to look for the MP's Dobby.'

'I was? Oh, sorry mate. I get so confused. Its like I'm awake but I'm dreaming; must be the dope they're giving me. I had Mills in earlier and he helped out with the pain. It's dreadful Joe, and it's getting worse. I just wish it was over and done with.'

Joe seriously pondered Dobby's earlier request before again pushing it out of his mind. He couldn't kill Dobby, not even like this; not his dearest friend. His thoughts drifted back to the war. Would he have done it then? A quick shot to the head among a billion others, unnoticed, unquestioned, the humane

thing to do? He couldn't answer his own question, wouldn't answer.

'Be strong old friend. I'm here. Don't be afraid and be strong.' His heart ached to see him like this, and he wished there was something more he could do. Instead, he did the only thing he could. He held Dobby's hand and quietly whispered a prayer.

Dobby drifted in and out of consciousness during the night. At times he slept peacefully and other times he groaned and painfully moved around under the sheet, as if he couldn't get comfortable. Mills came in periodically adjusted the drip. At one point he took Joe aside and told him that it would be a good idea to ring around his family and tell them to come in the morning. As it was still very early, Joe just sat with Dobby and kept him company, reading to him, talking to him and holding his hand. At seven o'clock he was concerned enough to make the calls. Dobby had slipped even further and was now barely breathing, the sounds coming from his chest wet and dire. Joe called the apartment; there was no answer. He left a message telling Nudge he had better hurry down to the home, Dobby needed him. He didn't have Nudge's cell number, and he cursed himself for not getting it when he had the chance. He sent out a silent prayer, hoping he would make it in time.

Elaine and her husband arrived forty-five minutes later, Joe greeting them with a handshake and huge bear hug. He had known them for years; Elaine all her life, so to them he was one of the family. They all sat, keeping a silent vigil at the bedside, Elaine occasionally sobbing and dabbing the corners of her eyes with a white handkerchief, her husband looking out the window or off into the middle distance, his memories of Dobby playing like a movie in his mind. He thought about him often over the years he had known him; sure, he had his faults, just like all of us, but in his later years he had really tried to make up for it. Robert had been missing for thirty-five

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years; he knew that hit Dobby especially hard. He had met Dobby in Vietnam while he was serving over there with the Kiwi contingent. He had been good friends with Robert back in the day and had joined Dobby as often as he could, searching the bush on foot and spending endless hours sitting in helicopters, scanning the jungles for any trace of the missing men. He knew how difficult it had been for Dobby to leave Nam, leaving his son to the terrible hand fate had dealt him. He had served out the rest of his tour, asking questions and searching when he could, but deep down he knew it was hopeless. Robert became just one of thousands of people who had gone missing over there. Some had disappeared intentionally, deserting and starting new lives in some far off country; others got lost, dying of starvation and consumed by the jungle, never to be found. Some were kidnapped for ransom; either released or found in a ditch somewhere, but at least they were found. If they had a body to take home, then there was some closure and the healing could begin. It was unusual for men to be taken and never found or heard of again, which is what made the whole situation a lot more difficult to accept. He had long ago come to terms with the loss of his friend but he knew the loss of a son would be much harder to bear. He and Elaine couldn't have kids. Because he was in the services they had both spent years travelling overseas and children just weren't an option then. By the time they found out they couldn't have any it was too late, and he knew it was one of Dobby's regrets that there had been no grandchildren to bounce on his knee.

He was brought back to the room by Dobby suddenly speaking. He had raised his head and looked around the room at the people he loved and spoke three words in a clear, strong voice.

'This is it.'

And it was. He sank back onto the bed, and as the light left his

Joe

eyes and his last breath sighed from his body he faintly whispered one more word.

'Nico.'

Joe kept holding Dobby's hand, afraid to let go, and he felt the spirit leaving his old friend. He immediately began softly intoning a Maori death rite to ease Dobby's passing into the next world. Elaine hugged her husband and sobbed into his shoulder, her tears soaking his shirt.

'Goodbye old friend. Haere rā.' Joe's voice cracked as he laid Dobby's hands across his chest.

He stepped back and the three of them stood by the bed, heads bowed, lost in their own personal grief, thoughts and prayers. Suddenly, the door to flew open with a crash and they all jumped and turned around together at the sound.

Dobby

The pain was constant now, and it was getting harder to breathe. Even with the oxygen it was like he just couldn't get enough air. He could also hear and feel the rattle in his chest, and it didn't sound good. Inwardly, he almost wished he had flagged the smoking years before, but what else did he have? He couldn't drink anymore; smoking was one of those little luxuries of life that all who partook enjoyed, yet some fall victim to. Like war, he reasoned; some get killed, most do not, but everyone is affected in some way by the very fact of having done it. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, too weak to move and too mentally blunt to read a book or watch TV. His brain felt like it was wrapped in cotton wool; in soft focus. He guessed it was the dope; Mills drifted in and out every now and then, or did he? Dobby wasn't sure. He spoke sometimes, and Brendan would go about his business with the professional and detached air of the hospice nurse. Dobby didn't blame him; he had been around more than a few places like this; had seen mates come in on foot and go out feet first. It must be bloody hard on these poor buggers, even if they could force themselves to remain remote and unfeeling. They must have some kind of attachment; Dobby couldn't believe they wouldn't be affected in some way.

He turned his head and looked at the walls; Joe had bought in some photographs and mounted them; to make the place more like home he had said. More like home. Dobby felt his eyes start to water and a dry lump formed in his throat. Through the mist of tears and time he saw the people in the photographs and the frozen moments transported him back, back to when he was young and so alive with passion; for Nico, his work, and his beliefs. He should have gone back, he cursed himself; he should have gone back home to Glenlea. All

Dobby

those years of wasted time while Nico cried up there, alone in the hills. He should have been there. He should have been there for the kids, for his mum and dad.

Stupid bugger, he cursed himself.

He wondered if he would see her, Nico, when the time came; he had read about near-death experiences; people saying they had seen their loved ones on the other side before coming back. Scientists had rubbished the whole thing, claiming oxygen starvation, the patient hallucinating and seeing what they wanted to see; family, pets; whatever they loved most in life. There must be something to it, and he really hoped there was. He realised he was more scared than he had ever been in his life and he hoped to God Joe would be there at the end.

Hours went by, or was it minutes? He couldn't tell; his mind wandered all over the place. He heard voices, people in the room, but when he looked, there was no-one there. At one point, he heard the sound of a jeep pulling to a stop outside the open window; heard voices, talking about finding him in this building. He looked out the window he saw it was the MP's, their black and white armbands clearly visible. Panicking, he saw a young boy walking by. He tried to catch the boy's attention. 'Boy! Boy!' he whispered, waving his hand, beckoning him over. The boy looked at him, frightened. 'Yes. You, boy! Look out the window and tell me if the MP's are coming inside will you? They're looking for me you see...'

The boy reached through the wall, put his hand on his arm and spoke, but with a voice far beyond his years.

'It's just me Dobby. It's Joe.'

Gradually the room came into focus. Dobby struggled to explain; Joe told him it was OK. It was strange, he could have sworn he was back in Europe. Joe was looking down at him. He had a weird look in his eye that Dobby had never before, in all the time he had known his friend, and he wondered what Joe was thinking about. Joe seemed to shake his head and

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reached down and took his hand, quietly saying something in Maori. He didn't understand what he was saying, but he felt his soul lift, feeling Joe's strength and energy flowing through his gentle grip. At that moment, he felt intense love and contentment, and he was so happy Joe was here to share it.

Time stood still. He dozed fitfully, not sleeping and not awake; a kind of half-world where nothing existed except distant sounds and sights just out of view. Every now and then he could hear movement around him, but everything was a blur, the drugs dulling his senses. Through the haze he remembered how his mother lay in a bed like this one, reduced to a barely-alive skeleton, her liver scarred and toxic, dying of the cancer that raged there. The doctor had given her some concoction, a mixture of strong drugs reserved for the dying, and he imagined that's what they were giving him now. Whatever it was, it made him feel as if he was floating on clouds; like he was having an out-of-body experience. He could sometimes make out faint voices, and feel soft fingers stroking the back of his hand like his mother used to do when as a child he lay crying and frightened after a nightmare. He could hear low murmuring; someone talking just out of earshot. Opening his eyes, he could see shapes of people by the bed, though his eyes refused to focus. He thought he could make Elaine, and was that her husband? He hadn't seen him in a very long time so he couldn't be sure. That tall figure must be Joe. Joe, what would he do without Joe? What would Joe do without him? Was Nudge there? He strained to look but couldn't see. He tried to speak but his tongue was swollen and his throat dry, the air feeling cold and harsh as it entered his lungs. Tears welled in his eyes as he realised the inevitability of where he was. No more laughs. No more tears. Everything he had seen and done was about to be wiped from the earth. The wonders, the horrors and the ordinary; gone forever. There was only one more adventure left, and there was so

Dobby

much he hadn't seen, so much he hadn't done. No more anything, ever. His head started spinning; a weird falling sensation he had never felt before. Scenes appeared before him; somehow clear and untouched by the drugs. Slow motion slide-shows of himself as an adventurer in the Balkans, head back and laughing with the soldiers; standing on the skid of a Huey, peering down into the green jungles of Laos, searching for any signs of Robby. Robby, he never found Robby. Now he was a young and brave/scared combat photographer catching the perfect shot while trying to ignore the turmoil and death about him. The images started to get dimmer and hazier, flickering like a fifties home movie as now he played with his kids in the front field at Glenlea, Elaine and Robert happy and laughing as they danced about under the spray of the irrigator. The scenes faded to black and white as he saw himself as a young ex-soldier, and, his throat suddenly tight with emotion, there was Nico; smiling, beautiful and frozen in time at the café in Paris where he literally fell head over heels for her. The vision disappeared and now he was back in the trenches, his face grizzled and his smile crooked, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he cleaned his rifle with other men, all of them long-dead, as they joshed and laughed about simpler times. Dobby's head felt light, and he looked down to see he was sitting high above the ground; his horse snorted and reared, eager to blaze the winding, rocky trails of a high-country station. Then it all stopped; blackness. He could hear his heart beating in his ears, slowing, weaker with each beat, slower, slower, until he couldn't hear it anymore. With all his remaining energy he strained to see, and spoke, not hearing the words he knew he was saying.

'This is it.'

His body fell back onto the bed. He felt no pain; he was floating, soaring upwards, somewhere over the pain and misery. In the darkness a faint light dawned from somewhere

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beyond his eyes. The light got brighter, and he somehow moved toward it. Now he could make out shapes, shadows. Standing there in the light he saw his father and mother, arms outstretched in welcome; behind them came Robert, smiling and waving, and over there, walking toward him with the light shining behind her, radiant and beautiful; was Nico.

'Nico', he strained to call her name. His soul lifted and he finally let go in the knowledge that everything was alright, he was free. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a softly spoken Maori prayer, and he thanked all that was good that Joe was with him. He tried to tell Joe he was safe now, but it was too late. He reached out to Nico and she took him by the hand; her scent as pure, her skin as soft and her touch as delicate as he remembered it. She led him to his family and they stood for a moment, knowing, smiling and then waving as Nico spirited Dobby away, over the snow-capped mountains and the pastel blue lakes, the sunburnt golden fields and endless rocky hills toward Glenlea; Going home.

Nudge

He inadvertently flung the door open with a crash, misjudging his strength in the heat of the moment. He had seen the look on Parker's face as he raced past her in the hall, a mixture of sadness and apology. She was saying something but he didn't hear it as he burst through the double doors and into the corridor. She began following him and then decided against it, returning instead to her paperwork at the front desk. The occupants of the room spun around, startled at the sound in what was the quietest of moments. Nudge stood there, panting hard, trying to catch his breath after the ten minute run to the hospice. Something didn't feel right, and he knew right away that his worst fears were realised; one look at the frail, still form lying on the bed told him that.

'No,' he croaked, his voice failing him. 'Dobby?'

Joe moved slowly over and put his arm around him, comforting him as he tried to make his way to the bedside.

'Give them a minute, eh mate?' Joe's voice was full of sadness and sorrow, making it even harder for Nudge to contain his own feelings and he swallowed hard to stop the tears. He only then realised there were other people in the room, standing at the bedside, their backs to him. He recognised Elaine and the man looked familiar, but it wasn't until he turned around that Nudge saw who he was.

'Henderson?'

'Don,' he replied as he held out his hand in greeting.

'You know Dobby?' Nudge shook the proffered hand.

'Bill was my father-in-law, James.' Henderson noted the confused look on Nudge's face and led him to the far side of the room, away from the form on the bed. 'I arranged for you to come here. I thought it might help you get on track. From what Joe has been telling me it seems my hunch was right.'

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'So you arranged all this? How did you? I mean...' It was then that he realised who the other soldier was in the photo on the den wall.

'You were the one with Robert, in Vietnam.'

'Relax James, there's plenty of time to explain it all. Right now, I guess you want to say goodbye,' he nodded toward the bed. Elaine came over to join them, taking the offer of Nudge's hand in a silent consolation. Nudge left them by the window and approached the bed, and he found he was afraid; the kind of afraid a small boy gets when he is seeing something he knows is terrible for the first time. He looked over at Joe, now sitting quietly in the corner of the room with his eyes closed and his hands resting on his cane, deep in thought, or perhaps prayer. He opened his eyes and focused on Nudge, smiling as their eyes met.

'Dobby's waiting for you Nudge,' his voice once again full and proud.

Nudge hadn't seen a dead person before. He had seen pictures, but that was removed, surreal. Now, in the confines of room four, he could see the real thing was very different. Dobby's face looked serene, at least he didn't appear to have died in pain, but he was almost unrecognisable as the living, breathing person who had been joking with him just days ago. He looked skeletal; Nudge could think of no other way describe him as he looked down at his terribly frail shell. He gingerly reached out and took Dobby's hand; moving gently because he feared it would break if he was too rough. The skin felt dry and hard, like leather, and it was surprisingly warm -- he had always thought of the dead being cold -- though he guessed Dobby would be too soon. Instinctively Nudge pulled the sheet and blankets a little higher as if to protect Dobby from the approaching cold. He was self-conscious with the others in the room; he wanted to say something, but he didn't know exactly what. Even if he did, he was embarrassed to say

Nudge

it in case it was the wrong thing. It was a moot point; he could barely talk anyway; it was all he could do not to burst into tears, but on seeing the half-finished Stephen King book on the bedside cabinet, his resolve disappeared and tears rolled down his cheeks. Somewhere in the back of his mind he reasoned that a few months ago he didn't even know Dobby, and here he was crying over his corpse. How could things change so quickly? Was he this way all along, denying it, or had he really changed?

With some effort Joe stood and went to the dresser beside the bed and, opening a drawer, pulled out a package and handed it to Nudge.

'This is something Dobby wanted you to have.'

Nudge's hands shook as he turned the package over, deciding whether to open it here in front of everyone.

'We should wait outside,' Henderson suggested to the others as they moved toward the door.

'No, it's OK' Nudge reassured them. 'I'm the stranger here. I should go.'

'You're not a stranger anymore,' Joe's voice was reassuring, 'so don't think you have to leave, and you don't have to open that here either, it's a personal thing.'

Looking at Dobby's frail form lying on the bed, Nudge made his decision.

'I'd like to open it now, that is, if you guys don't mind?'

'Go for it,' Henderson replied. 'Elaine and I want to grab a drink anyway. We'll be back after that.' Joe sat back down in the corner chair while Nudge sat down on the bed next to Dobby and picked at the tape holding the wrapping together.

As he carefully unwrapped the package, Nudge quickly recognised the box that had contained Dobby's photographs. He opened it with the small key that Dobby had taped to the top of the box. The first thing he saw was a letter, and as he took it out, a medal fell into his lap from within the folds of it.

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He picked up the medal and looked at it. He could see it was an Iron Cross, guessing it was the one that Dieter Länge's wife had sent Dobby all those years ago. Nudge's eyes started to mist and he wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. Once his vision had cleared he opened the letter and began to read. It was neatly handwritten in clear script, the kind that doesn't get taught in schools anymore. It read:

To my new friend James (if you don't mind I will call you James because this is a solemn occasion and nicknames don't seem appropriate).

If you are reading this letter, then I have already gone to see Nico and Robert. I don't want you to cry for me James; there has already been enough sadness in all our lives for that.

The first thing I want to do is thank you; thank you for the time you invested in me and thank you for the hope you gave me. I'd like to think I lived a little longer because of your company. I enjoyed our chats immensely and believe it or not, I learned some things from you that made me a better man for knowing you.

I have left a few things for you. They are in the box that contained this letter and I hope you appreciate them.

No doubt you have already found Dieter's medal. It comes with all the letters and photographs he sent me all those years. I am giving the medal to you because it symbolises the great risks and sacrifices we have all made to be where we are today, some obvious, and some not so obvious. You might not think you deserve it now, but one day you will. His letters are to remind you that you have to grasp opportunity with both hands and don't let fear, pride or ignorance be an excuse for missing out on everything life has to offer.

The second item in the box is the title to Glenlea Station. It has been in my family for generations, and it is now yours to do with what you will. I would like to think you will be the guardian of it

Nudge

and maybe raise a family there, but don't let this old man tell you what to do.

The third item is a cheque for ten-thousand dollars. The money my father gave me helped me achieve certain things, and without the money it would have been almost impossible. I leave you this money (the modern equivalent of the one-thousand my dad left me) because it is a helping hand to your goals, whatever you want them to be.

The fourth items are the original negatives and the copyright papers to over a thousand of my photographs. I am entrusting you the guardianship of these, my most treasured possessions. The royalties don't amount to a lot, but they come in year after year.

The fifth and final item is my copy of King Solomon's Mines. Read it and enjoy it, and be sure to read the message I have written on the inside cover for you.

I hope these bequests help make your dreams possible, James and I look forward to meeting you again, one sunny day.

Your new old friend,

William 'Dobby' Dobson

Nudge sat and let the letter drop into his lap, his emotions reeling and his tears falling onto the paper.

He sat there for a long time, looking at Dobby, letting his thoughts ponder the frailties and vagaries of life. His mind swirled with the hugeness of what had happened and the newness of what he was experiencing. He had never felt such deep emotions before, even when his old man died, and he tried to allow himself to feel without prejudice. After a while, the tears stopped welling in his eyes and his frowning,

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choking grief transformed instead into a peaceful happiness for Dobby; happy that he wasn't suffering the cruel ravages of his unseen enemy, happy he was now with his family, wherever they were, and happy for Dobby because to so many people he had made a huge difference during his lifetime. How many people could say the same? He made a vow then and there to not let Dobby's faith in him be misplaced.

He looked down at the box still sitting in his lap and took out the copy of King Solomon's Mines he had traipsed all over town to find for Dobby. He opened the front cover and there, in the same handwritten script was the message Dobby had promised him.

To my friend Nudge.

I hope you enjoy this book as much as I did when I first read it a long time ago. At first, it was just an adventure tale (and a bloody good one!). After reading it again, I saw something different. On the surface it would seem the goal these men have is to find a lost brother or wealth beyond their wildest dreams, but I fancy they're searching to find themselves, seeking to discover who they really are. The challenge is not the desert or the mountains, it is whether they can live with themselves and the decisions they make. I hope you see it that way too Nudge and feel good about everything you have done.

Remember cob; Fortune favours the brave.

Dobby

Nudge's mind was clear. He knew what he had to do and he put all the items back into the box, said a heartfelt goodbye to Dobby, shook Joe's hand with a quiet nod and set off into a whole new world.

Epilogue

Home to Glenlea

The warm wind gusted strongly through the valleys and over the fields, making the journey up the hill to Dobson's Point that much harder for both of them. Nudge helped Joe navigate obstacles where he could and quietly marvelled at the older man's grit and determination. Joe always seemed to wear a smile, no matter how tired he got or how difficult the terrain. Nudge was puffed after the first ten minutes and he had two god legs; he could only imagine how hard this was for Joe, making slow but steady progress up the sheep trails, leaning on his trusty tokotoko. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Nudge surveyed the rocky outcrop above.

'Not far to go now Joe, maybe a hundred metres,' he called down the hill.

'I'll be fine Nudge, you go on ahead if you like. I'm enjoying the sun and the breeze,' he turned and looked back down the valley, 'and the view. No wonder Dobby loved this place, eh?'

'Nah bud, this is something we do together. There's no rush down here, it's not like Auckland,' he laughed. He had already been here for a few weeks -- Joe had arrived yesterday -- sussing out Glenlea and exploring the hills around the station. He was still getting used to the fact that it was now his. It didn't feel like his yet, but it was starting to. He had never dreamed of being a land-owner, and he had to admit that it felt pretty good to know he had the security of Glenlea behind him now. Looking around, it constantly amazed him how time stood still out here. The rocks had been this way for millions of years and will so for a million more. He felt insignificant among the sheer scope and grandeur of it and was beginning to develop a deep sense of responsibility for the land. He'd

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wondered (and resolved to ask Joe about it) if it was genetic; they say all Maori have an affinity for the land. Maybe it was inside him all along and it was re-awakening now that he was here, walking the tracks and rolling valleys. He had certainly never thought about it before, let alone felt it. He must talk to Joe about that.

Closing his eyes against the warm wind he could see Dobby riding the hills, rounding up sheep and whistling to his dogs; if he listened carefully enough on the breeze he could almost make out the voices and whistles, echoing back through the ages.

He shifted the pack on his back. The contents were surprisingly heavy for a small wooden box, and the straps rode a little uncomfortably on his shoulders. He side-stepped down the hill and held out a hand toward Joe, who took it and relied on it to traverse a small rift in the ground. Joe paused and took out a large white handkerchief, patting his forehead with it.

'I remember it being easier to get up here Nudge, mind you, that was forty years ago. Hasn't changed at all, well, except...' he left the sentence unfinished.

'I know Joe. I feel him here though, do you?'

'He was always here Nudge, no matter where he was. This is home to him and always will be. I think it was the thought of these very hills that kept him going through thick and thin.'

The two men took a breather, sitting on the rocks and staring out over the plains in the distance, welcome for a brief respite from the climb. They sat in silence, watching the heat waves that distorted the terrain and created mirages; floating lakes of hot air, shimmering in the sun.

'You saw him that day, didn't you?' Joe spoke, looking out over the plains.

'How could you know that?' Nudge asked, puzzled.

'Well, the look on your face when you came through the door,

for one.' He turned to face Nudge, 'and I saw him as well.'
'You did? Where?'

'In the room, as he was going.'

'No shit Joe, really?' Nudge immediately looked guilty, but before he could speak Joe laughed.

'No shit Nudge.'

Nudge shook his head. 'I thought I was seeing things. I saw him along Grafton Road. He was young, in his forties...'

'He was wearing his photographer's vest and sunglasses, smoking a cigarette?'

Nudge almost fell off the rock. 'That's right, he waved at me and then he was gone.'

'I saw him standing in the room, looking down at himself lying on the bed. He turned to me and smiled, winked and faded away.'

'Did the others see him?'

'Not that I know of, they certainly didn't say anything about it if they did. Funny thing is that it didn't scare me; he looked so good and free of his pain. I was really happy to see him like that, and it gives me the strength because I know I am going to make the same journey, sooner rather than later.'

'Come on bud, don't talk like that. I would say you have lots of time left but I said that to Dobby, and that was only a few months ago. I know that none of us know how long we have, so it seems living day by day and enjoying the moment seems to be the best way to cope with that inevitability.'

'That's one way to look at it Nudge, but there is another way.'

Nudge looked at him expectantly.

'Living for today is fine, but it has its drawbacks,' Joe continued, 'it leaves out time to plan for the future.'

'But surely if we don't know, planning doesn't really do us much good'

'Yes and no, mate. We can't live completely as people and not have some kind of plan for what lies ahead. I think that many

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out there can't or don't think about what might happen tomorrow because they are scared of what it may bring. Maybe they are afraid of growing old. In this day and age it is all about staying young and looking beautiful and the never-ending pursuit of happiness. The problem is that most people look for something outside of themselves to provide that happiness, not realising that real happiness only comes from within. What they end up doing is being unhappy because all their lives they strive for something that isn't there, and by the time they realise that it isn't there, it's too late.

No-one has the time for anything anymore. Just take our old people; farmed off to homes to spend the rest of their days; they feel alone and abandoned. Everyone these days want everything, and they want it yesterday; old people just get in the way. What happened to the family, Nudge? You know in Asian cultures the children consider it a great honour to look after their parents in their old age. Their philosophy is that because their parents looked after them when they were young and unable to look after themselves, so will they return the favour to the parents when the time comes. They live with them and learn everything they can from them, and about them, before they pass on; this is one of the most important roles in their culture. It used to be like that here too you know, when we were like one big village; nowadays you can live next to someone in the cities for twenty years and never know their second name. Someone drops dead in the street and people just walk around them; no-one wants to know about anyone else's problems.' Joe looked at the ground sadly. 'I don't know Nudge; it isn't like it was when I was a boy. Mind you, now that I think about it, my father once said something similar to me too, so maybe every generation is destined to mourn the loss of itself before it completely dies out. All I know is that people don't stick together and support each other like they used to when I was a lad, and though many of us know about

it we just don't want to do anything about it; just push it out of our minds and get on with whatever it was we were doing.' He stared off into the distance again.

After a few minutes he spoke. 'Without a plan, without setting ourselves achievable goals, we would all be lost, adrift and directionless. You might live to a hundred, and I bet you'd be annoyed if you had spent all your money or burned all your bridges by the time you were sixty.'

'I guess you're right, bud.' Nudge picked at a piece of tussock, running the long grass through his fingers. 'It does make sense when you say it like that.' He looked at Joe, his voice serious. 'Will you help me to get in touch with my people up north? You know, my whanau?'

'Of course I will.' Joe reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper. He passed it up to Nudge who took it and looked at it. 'It's the number of a friend of mine up in the Coromandel. Call him when you are ready and he'll see you in the right direction. He is expecting your call, and he understands it might be a while; you have your own stuff to sort out.'

'So you had the number already? How did you know I would ask?'

'You already asked me about it a while back, so I made some calls and talked to some people. You'll soon realise that we are all one big family; brown or white, brother or sister, and no matter what our own personal beliefs are, it is possible to all get along and make the world a better place for our kids, though if you believe everything you read in the papers or see on TV then we're going to be in trouble. Like I said before, people have a problem communicating with each other and they rely on information, or should I say misinformation, presented to us to by the media. What they don't realise is that TV, radio and newspapers are businesses; their bottom line is the dollar, not the truth and justice and freedom of speech they

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crow to us about from their steel towers. The news as we know it is filled with bias, prejudice, censorship and propaganda, as far removed from reality as it could be, yet that's what most of us base our opinions and beliefs on. We have ended up with a nation of people who don't go anywhere and don't do anything yet they all have an opinion on things they have never seen or experienced themselves. How can we have an opinion about something when we are not properly informed about it? He shook his head and stood stiffly, leaning heavily on his cane. 'Well,' he smiled, 'I could talk about it all day and just end up making myself depressed. What say we make for the summit, eh?'

'Good idea Joe,' he agreed, standing and stretching. 'Not far now.'

They covered the last metres in silence, the weight of their task starting to tell. When they reached the base of Dobson's Point they stood in silence and absorbed the scene before them. At the foot of the magnificent rocky outcrop that was Dobson's Point was a small and naturally flat plateau. The centre of the clearing was defined by a simple, rough-cut Oamaru stone memorial. The bronze plaque on the front dully reflected the afternoon sun. A low wrought-iron railing surrounded the monument and colourful, wild, high-country flowers blossomed all around, giving the spot a peaceful and wonderful ambience. Joe and Nudge weren't as surprised or stunned as they should have been when presented with such a beautiful scene, only because they had both seen it before. Nudge had recently made a habit of coming up here and sitting on a flat rock nearby, eating a picnic lunch of thick, country style sandwiches and sipping from a flask of home-made espresso while casting his eyes around the panorama. Further south he could see the outlines of azure-blue southern lakes shimmering in the sun. To the north it was incredible views of the Alps and the Canterbury plains stretching like a

golden table all the way to the ocean. It was so peaceful and calm up here; it had the same quiet atmosphere of a cemetery but without the oppressive gloom that such places always seem to possess. This was a place of ghosts past but also of hope for the future. Floyd couldn't match this anymore; as beautiful as the music could be, it was somehow fraudulent compared to this natural and still largely untouched wonderland.

Joe broke the silence.

'The local tribes call this place *Kaitiaki*, which means guardian.' He looked over at Nudge. 'I guess they felt the power of the place as well eh?'

Nudge nodded in agreement. As he gazed out over the area he imagined the villages and the people living in the surrounding districts all those years ago and quietly rued the loss of that history, the waste of life and custom as the villagers were integrated into mainstream anglicised society, leaving the old ways behind like baggage too heavy to carry into the white man's world. Some did of course carry those ways with them and were persecuted for it in one way or another. Unlike some, he wasn't angry, nor did he feel that deep-seated need to seek revenge; he saw it simply as a progression of human civilisation, for better or for worse. He often saw the same thing happening somewhere in the world when he had the time, or inclination, to switch on the TV or read the newspapers. It was one of mans' failures, or perhaps one of his strengths, to colonise, to explore and to impose himself onto anyone he met on the way. His path is always the right one, and he is willing to arm himself to ensure it survives. As he understood it, Maori had come to Aotearoa in their canoes as had others before them. The Maori had occupied the lands that belonged to the others through structured programmes of social integration and conflict; following the natural laws of jungle and land. The white man came the same way and he

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had treated the Maori the same way. It had happened, so there was no point in bitching about it, and what gave him hope was that with understanding and education, and with the support of the young people, a large part of those things lost could be recovered. The only problem he could see was that there were still people with fire in their hearts and chips on their shoulders standing on opposite sides; until they could patch up their differences there were never going to be any happy endings.

With that thought he hefted the bag from his back, sat it on the ground and extracted the contents. At least on this hill, at this minute, his mission was clear and his promise to an old man was about to be fulfilled.

Joe stood a little taller and started softly saying a prayer for Dobby. Nudge held the rosewood box above his head and opened the lid slightly, allowing a small amount of the contents to be picked up by the wind. They both watched as the ash dissolved into the air, carried away across the land Dobby had loved so much. Nudge closed the lid, sealing in the remainder of the ashes and they both turned to the stone at the base of the point. Nudge went forward and, using a screwdriver he had brought for the purpose, removed the stainless steel screws holding a panel set into the rear of the rock. He then used his fingers to pry loose the cover, working it back and forward gently to free it from the recess. It took a bit of effort, which wasn't surprising as it had been in place for nearly fifty years. Once the panel was free, he looked at Joe, who smiled slightly and nodded, then knelt and placed the box beside the one already present in the recess. Nico's box was identical, and Nudge imagined Dobby had the foresight even then to have a matching one made for himself. Running his fingers along the polished, smooth surfaces of the hardwood boxes, he was amazed at how the older box hadn't deteriorated at all; it still looked like new. He would remember

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those two boxes for the rest of his life; how something that was once as rough and raw as a lump of native wood was transformed into something beautiful and treasured. The similarities between those boxes and his own life were not lost on him. These thoughts whirled through his mind as he replaced the panel and screwed it shut, this time sealing the contents forever; Dobby and Nico side by side. Standing back, next to Joe, Nudge gazed at the stone and the rocks and the sky and the mountains. He had so many questions, yet he knew that he had the rest of his life to find the answers. For the what seemed like the first time he could see clearly, and he realised it didn't matter whether he was standing on the summit of a mountain or knee deep in a stinking, fetid hole; the spirit of his ancestors flowed through his veins and with hard work, the help of good friends and a little good fortune he could make a difference, just as Dobby had done. At that moment, with the sun on his face and the vast expanses of Glenlea stretching before him, he was the on top of the world.

Future Past

'I guess you'll be back off to the big smoke now, Joe?' Nudge asked across the table between mouthfuls of dinner.

'Not for a few more days, Nudge,' he replied, sipping a glass of wine. 'I have some people to visit down here. To be honest, I'm not looking forward to going back there; if it wasn't for my family I could happily come down here to spend my last days. It's so... peaceful, would be a good word for it.'

'Well, you'd be most welcome. You can bring the whole whanau down if you want, it's not like I haven't got the room!'

'It's a generous offer, Nudge, but it isn't as easy as that.' He wiped his mouth with a napkin. 'I think you need a bit more time to get adjusted here anyway without an old man getting in your way.'

'Nah, bud. You're not in the way at all. By the way, there are a couple of things I'd like to ask you about though, if you don't mind?'

'Of course, fire away.' Joe sat back and rested his hands on his stomach.

'There are some photos in the box Dobby gave me and I wonder if you know who the people are?' Nudge answered as he got up, retrieved the box, opened it and, after sifting through for a minute, pushed a couple of faded black and white images across the table.

Joe reached into his pocket and pulled out his reading glasses, placing them on the bridge of his nose.

'Another old man's curse,' he remarked as he put them on, 'can't see a thing up close without these anymore.'

Nudge nodded and waited patiently while Joe flicked through the images.

'I don't know about this one,' he said as he turned one of the snaps over, checking for notes on the back before laying it on

the table 'perhaps an old work colleague?'

He held one of the photos for a good minute, looking down at it.

'So that's him,' he said sadly, turning it over, then back again. 'This one I do know, though I didn't know Dobby had a photo of him. His name is on the back; Bob Smith, or Smitty as he liked to be called; he was a pilot Dobby met in one the prison camps. The poor man was badly hurt in a plane crash and ended up in hospital with Dobby. Remember a while back at Woodvale I mentioned Dobby had escaped back to England? Well, that night, as Dobby and the other blokes waited on one side of the camp, Smitty, poor brave soul that he was, threw himself on the electric fence on the other side, shorting it out and giving the others time to cut through the fence and get away.'

Nudge looked shocked. 'He killed himself then, to provide a diversion for the others?' He hated asking.

'I'm afraid so, Nudge. He didn't have much of a future, or so I imagine he thought at the time. He was horribly burned, you see, and looking at this photo now it was probably for the best that he did what he did; it would have been a hell of a life for him. As it was, Dobby made it home, so it wasn't all in vain. I mentioned the other men who escaped were tracked down and killed, but the fact Dobby made it back in some horrible way makes Smitty's sacrifice worth it.' Joe took another mouthful of wine, contemplating his glass for a moment.

'Typically, he saw to it that Smitty was awarded a medal after the war. Dobby always looked after those that looked after him.' Joe picked out a photo showing a serious looking man in a white coat posing for the camera. 'Like this bloke; Eidelmann, the German doctor who looked after Dobby and Smitty at the camp hospital. Dobby testified at his war crimes trial and saved him from the hangman. The fellow had been lumped in with some of the worst of the German criminals and

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Dobby's testimony saw to it that he received a fair trial. I believe they stayed in touch after the war but I'm not a hundred-percent sure of that; I remember Dobby saying something about someone giving him some information about that camp commandant I was telling you about a while back; Engel, the one who fled to South America. For some reason now I think about it, I remember it to be Eidelmann.'

They both sat in silence for a minute or two, thinking their own thoughts. Nudge took out another photo he had found and placed it on the table.

'What do you make of this one?

Joe took the photograph and looked at it grimly. 'Where did you find this?

'I found it when I took all the drawers out of one of the bedroom cabinets to clean them. This photo was tucked out of sight down the back.'

Joe looked back at the picture. It showed the corpse of a man lying on the ground with wounds to his knees, groin and head. After a minute he spoke.

'I think this is Engel. I mean, I'm only guessing because of these wounds,' he indicated on the picture, 'you can't make out much of the face any more but the wounds have a pretty distinctive pattern.' Nudge nodded.

'I thought it might be; I remember you talking about it; someone finding him and killing him like that. You think it could have been Dobby?' He sounded incredulous, unwilling to believe the kind old man he knew could be capable of such a thing.

Joe shook his head slowly.

'Anything's possible, mate. You have to remember it was a very different time then; people thought differently just after the war. Oh, I've always suspected, and this photo tends to support my suspicions but he could have picked this photograph up anywhere on his travels. He might have even

taken it, perhaps he was there when Engel was killed, but it doesn't mean he pulled the trigger. As I said, it was thought at the time to be the work of Mossad, and they certainly didn't deny it when pressed by the media; maybe Dobby tagged along for the ride. We'll never know, and I for one don't plan on spending a lot of time thinking about it. Engel, rightly or wrongly, got what he deserved and that's all there is to it.' Nudge nodded his agreement.

'Do you have a lighter and an ashtray?' Joe asked.

'Sure.' Nudge sounded surprised as he got up and dug out some matches and a glass ashtray; he knew Joe hated smoking. He placed the items on the table. Joe picked up the matches and struck one, the end flaring into life. He picked up the photograph of Engel and held the corner into the flame. The corner blackened and curled, then caught alight. Joe moved the photo around in his fingers as the fire burned upward until there was nowhere left to hold on to and he dropped the remainder into the ashtray where, with a dying faint blue flame, all traces of Engel were consumed.

'There. Gone and forgotten.' Joe nodded.

'So!' Nudge tried to sound bright. 'Do you recognise any of the others?'

Joe flipped through the few photos left and shook his head.

'No-one here I know, sorry.'

'Never mind bud,' Nudge replied, 'it's not important.'

They both sat back and relaxed into their seats, enjoying the after-dinner wine and the easy camaraderie of each other's company.

Joe broke the silence. 'What will you do now, Nudge?'

'I've worked it all out Joe. I'll stay here for six months or so, then I'm going to stay with my Mum up north for a while; talk to her about some stuff I need to resolve.'

Joe nodded. 'Good thing to do I reckon. What about the farm?'

'There's not much going on here at the moment, so I'll close up

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and come back this time next year; the fella next door seems like a good old stick and he wants to show me how to run the place properly; I think Dobby might have had a word with him. I also promised Sister Parker I would help out up at Woodvale, and when I'm staying with mum that's what I'll do; as much as I can anyway.'

'I'm sure they will appreciate any time you can give them Nudge', Joe replied, 'time is even more valuable than money to places like Woodvale.'

'Well, time is what I have most of at the moment. While I'm up there I'll go and see Elaine and Don as well; they've given me an open invitation to visit them when I'm in town. I didn't get the chance to thank them properly anyway.'

They both returned to their own thoughts.

After a few minutes, Nudge leaned over the table and filled both their glasses, raising his in a toast. 'Here's to Dobby', he proclaimed.

Joe took his glass and lifted it high. 'Dobby's gone, old mate; here's to you instead eh, my friend.' He smiled and raised his glass to his lips. Nudge grinned back and they drank their wine as the last rays of the day's sun slipped away from the wide-open windows and disappeared over the burnt, golden hillsides of Glenlea.

-- The End --

How Far is Home

Written by Dave Thompson in Vinišće and Trogir, Croatia;
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