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I

It started with a letter he wrote, sent that April care of my uncle's estate agency. A thick ivory envelope with my name in elegant type. There was always something too formal about his advances, as though this man's intentions were disguised even from himself. He enjoyed the civilities, but they made me uneasy. Wasn't the etiquette a suit of armour to keep him safe while calling me to battle? I read it standing by the shredder.

Dear Liese (or whoever you are),

Before you leave Australia to pursue your travels, I wonder if it might not round your experience to see life outside the city? Every visitor should take in the Bush. Warrowill, my sheep and cattle property in western Victoria (itself the third-largest volcanic plain in the world), is close to much pristine bushland, and any amount of wildlife.

I propose you join me on the long weekend of

June 11th–14th, and calculate for three days of your time payment would be \$XXXX.

Upon your meeting me on the Friday afternoon, half this fee will be given to you in cash, the other half transferred to your bank account on Monday afternoon at the end of your stay.

Kindly consider this proposal and let me know at your earliest convenience if terms are agreeable.

Sincerely,
Alexander Colquhoun

It was a ridiculous amount he offered, enough to delay my departure for two months, and so it was a relief when, at the appointed time, Alexander, dressed in a blazer and business shirt still creased from the shop, finally picked me up around the corner from the office. He stepped from his oldish Mercedes without meeting my eye. Taking my small suitcase he opened the passenger door, closing it behind me with a deferential nod. He was nervous. I was brusque, lest this whole weekend slide immediately into farce. The dashboard clock read 3.04.

He handed me an envelope. 'Do you want to count it?'

Inside would be cash in those bright colours like play dollars. 'No, I'm sure it's all in order.'

'Perhaps you can now tell by weight?'

'Yes.' Turning, smiling, it was the usual surprise to see his face. He had the kind of looks I regarded as typically Australian: untroubled, slightly sunburnt, slightly elsewhere. If you looked at each feature individually, as sometimes I had for long stretches,

they had their complications – an oversize nose; fleshy, inanimate lips, and one blue eye a fraction smaller than the other – but the combination was attractive, probably more so than he realised. He was forty-five, I guessed, his sandy curls now turning grey. I struggled to believe someone this tall and thin could be so preoccupied by flesh. My body, strapped into the car seat's beige leather, matched his sharp angles with hips and breasts. It didn't hide its interests.

'Thank you again for coming.'

'Not at all.'

'I hope you'll enjoy yourself, that this, this won't seem all work to you.'

'That's very thoughtful.'

'I've planned a few things.'

I waited. 'Things for us to do?'

'Yes.' He cleared his throat. 'Things I think you'll like.'

We travelled along the freeway through industrial parks and long, weed-ravaged patches towards the setting sun, and all the time Alexander clasped the wheel with both hands. I could hear him breathing carefully, reminding himself to exhale. He was close enough for me to smell the cedar-scented soap he used, and I knew how his skin would taste, and where that taste changed from the great outdoors to something gamey.

How often does desire arise to cover having nothing to say? Just under my skin I felt that old insinuating heat. Being clothed now seemed more awkward, as if drawing attention to the times we had not been. These three hours in the car would be the most we'd ever spent together, and neither of us was used to talking,

to making regular conversation at least. We'd had perhaps twenty meetings and in the beginning most of them were held in near silence. Long sessions with just a request, or – if he was in another kind of mood – a command. When we became better acquainted there were episodes of make-believe, but that was just sex talk. Afterwards, as we reassembled ourselves, I did not ask too many questions, and when he did they were banalities I took for deflection. We were both contriving to forget the fleeting things we'd just seen in the other. This man was shy and I sensed a code of conduct written in the air around him, which I tried to decipher and obey.

Through the car window came country towns – a church, a pub, a war memorial. Then strangely angled farmland. Paddock fences leaned askew; sheep clung to slanted grass (like everything was unstable and tilting). This was a pockmarked version of the country I knew: the Broads, the fens, all the sodden monochrome ground of Norfolk. And soon it was just as flat. A giant bulldozer or lava flow could have passed through once, long ago, and removed any rise or dip. The sky had taken over, stunting the hills and leaving no space for anything else. In the last hour we barely saw another car.

'Is this what you call the bush?' It was more subtle than I'd hoped.

'Patience,' he replied.

I shut my eyes.

The decision to leave Australia had been sudden and, in my head at least, part of me was already gone. I'd bought a new, larger suitcase, shipped home the bulkiest things I'd accumulated, and

begun buying little presents for my colleagues in the office. With some of the cash in the envelope I'd purchase an airline ticket. I planned to go via Shanghai, and as we drove I was doing sums on how long I could afford to stay there.

Alexander hummed, a tense mechanical sound, without seeming to realise. Out the window the sky and land were the same tawny colour, the road still a narrow single strip. In the middle of this void stood a Neighbourhood Watch sign, a kind of joke. No houses were in sight, except for those that had been abandoned.

Once I noticed one, more became apparent, and every few minutes I caught sight of a wavering weatherboard cottage moments from falling down, or a careful border of trees surrounding a pile of rubble like rails around a grave.

'What happened to these places?'

'Oh.' Alexander sounded surprised I'd asked. 'The old stone ones were possibly shepherds' huts; the others belonged to soldier settlers. The great sheep stations were broken up for returned servicemen after the First World War. Someone had a starry-eyed dream of creating a yeoman class . . .' His voice trailed off.

Fifty-year-old ruins were sadder than ancient ones. I felt a pang seeing fruit trees someone had planted, but Alexander viewed them as inconvenient. 'My family had to cede land, thousands of acres. Waves of smaller farmers have come and gone, they didn't have a chance, but we've stayed.'

'How long have your family been here?'

'A hundred and sixty years. I suppose that's not long where you're from.'

'It's long enough. Not that this doesn't seem a lovely spot.'

We'd just driven over a rise and seen the mountains. It was as though a backdrop had fallen, perhaps the wrong one. Crags rose up out of the flat grassland, deep purple against the dimming sky. The sun's angle hid any detail on the rock, and the jagged peaks brought to mind a graph of economic doom.

'Behold, the Grampians!' announced Alexander.

'I thought they were in Scotland – did someone move them?'

A tight smile. 'The native name is Gariwerd.'

'Are they the volcanos?'

'Some are.'

'When did they last erupt?'

'Four thousand years ago. The other mountains are sandstone that's faulted and shifted.'

I expected him to say more, to play the tour guide, but he must have been tired from driving. Shadows were settling on the road and his face had changed in the light, although his features did not soften. Staring straight ahead, he gripped the steering wheel with hands that were muscular from farm work, each finger knocked about, the skin around the nails raw pink from being scrubbed so vigorously, while his shirt cuffs were white and starched.

'Three hundred million years ago this was inland sea,' he said, squinting as though to picture it. 'So there were layers of sand and mud and silt, and later earth movements made them lift up and fold over.' Releasing one hand at last, he arched it, wave-like.

I put my hand down on his thigh.

Slowly he smiled again, and I suddenly realised I was actually enjoying myself. I was enjoying myself because soon I'd be leaving and this excursion, amidst the ancient rock, was already

lit sentimentally. And so when flocks of bright pink birds flew up from the side of the road, they seemed fantastically exotic; and when a kangaroo the very colour of the darkening paddocks appeared seemingly from nowhere on the bitumen and leapt effortlessly over a fence, some part of me felt light too.

'Did you see that?' My hand didn't move.

'Of course.'

'A kangaroo, wonderful.'

'A wonderful pest. But I'm glad you liked it.'

There was a sign for the Grampians National Park, which was a few kilometres on, although we turned off down a corrugated dirt road, red gravel hitting the sides of the car. This land had been cleared for grazing. I could make out the grey stumps of felled trees, and those that remained looked vigilant. If I glanced away, then back, they seemed to shift on the horizon.

'Who's that up there?' Determined to be a genial guest, I pointed to a bird waiting on a wire.

'A hawk of some kind,' he answered. 'It's the hunting time.'

'He's picked a desolate position.'

'This is my land, actually.'

'Excuse me.'

'I didn't take it personally.'

There came a low bluestone wall, framing a driveway. A wooden sign hung here, marked in faded black cursive *WARROWILL*. We turned and the driveway stretched on, a road unto itself.

'So this is home?' I asked, bewildered.

Ahead of us was a stone building with a pitched roof, machinery strewn around it.

'No, that's the old woolshed.' On the other side of the drive Alexander pointed to a windowless wooden cottage with a series of blank doors. 'And there are the shearers' quarters.'

The driveway became an avenue of poplars, their thick trunks sending up hundreds of leafless sticks. White cockatoos clung to these branches and the air was filled with their dinning: a killing sound like nothing I'd heard before.

Alexander was driving slowly, reverentially. We turned a corner – there was a spread of lawn and then the house rose up from the bare treetops. The second storey came into view: eight upstairs windows and each chimney intricate as a small mausoleum. As the car pulled onto a landscaped circle of gravel, there was the rest of the house. The physical fact of it struck me first: a grand Victorian mansion seemingly carved out of grey-black volcanic rock. The logistics of its construction seemed as complicated as that of a temple in a jungle. Erected in homage to the Old Country, to replicate a stately home, the house had all the period refinements one would expect – a columned vestibule, finials on the roof, classical moulding around the windows – but it was also swathed in a cast-iron veranda to shelter the ground floor from summer heat. I wondered how much the whole place, land included, would be worth.

My instinct was to laugh: a juvenile reflex that often comes upon me when I am in trouble. Mansions require a special quality of awe. But I wanted to laugh at how jarring it was to find this one in the midst of all that was weather-blasted and dirty and hard, and yet I suspected my host would take this as a sign I was delighted by the grandeur, by his choosing this

moment to unveil himself as a prince.

'Well, we're here.' Alexander stared at the building with undisguised pride. 'Welcome.'

'Thank you.'

'I hope you'll enjoy your stay.'

It was a cue to say something expansive about his house. Despite being paid to indulge him, though, I felt myself growing stingy with praise, and I climbed out of the car as if I were merely here to give a property valuation.

We were under a big sky, stars emerging. The garden beds and gravel were already covered in dew.

He took my case and led me to the vestibule.

The house had been built precisely so one would feel at its mercy. Following him up the stone steps, I told myself, Do not react. The front door was double regular size and trimmed in stained glass patterned with birds. To the right of the door's eaves was a swallow's nest; a ribbon of shit trailed down the grey wall. But next to it, in the glass, the jewelled birds perched on emerald boughs, garnet berries in their beaks, thinking, Maybe we won't fly north after all.

Opening the door, ushering me into the refrigerated air, Alexander reached for a light switch.

My eyes adjusted and we were standing in a tiled entrance hall with an absurdly high ceiling, and elaborate plaster, paint and wallpaper – the full Victorian works. *Do not react.* Straight ahead of us was a staircase. The stairs began broad enough for a procession and at the landing split off dramatically and became thinner, steeper, curving up on either side to the next floor. Above

the landing was an enormous arched window the height of the second floor and outlined in blue glass.

We looked at each other; if I'd wanted to, I might have set him at ease.

'Once I turn the heaters on this will warm up.' There was the slightest tremble now as Alexander spoke. He cleared his throat and looked around, checking all was in order. 'Right.' His gaze settled back on me. 'Let me show you to your room.' Picking up my case, he waited. 'After you, Liese.'

The house's first floor was not so finely decorated. One long corridor, closed doors on either side, it had the look of an institution, a sanatorium perhaps, with bare walls and old carpet. He walked down to one end and pushed open a door to a pink room with a rosebud-quilted single bed and a suite of white furniture. I gave him a sly smile.

'Well,' he glanced at the bed, 'I hope you'll be comfortable here.'

At this familiar moment I expected him to move towards me, to start to touch me. But he stayed where he was.

'Is there anything you need?' he asked.

What was not happening between us had a presence of its own.

'I shouldn't think so.'

'An electric blanket's on the bed.'

I stared at him. 'Thank you.'

'Turn it right up to three,' he said, hands on his hips, businesslike. 'The bathroom's across the hall if you want to freshen up.'

When he left, I stood for a moment staring at the closed door.

There was nothing coded about the message of the room. All the white furniture was slightly undersize: the wardrobe built to accommodate a child's party dresses, the chest of drawers, and the dressing table with matching fine-legged chair designed as if for a sprite. That queasy feeling children get in other people's houses washed over me: time suddenly bending and flexing, to fill fragile hearts with the uncertainty of how it will pass.

I took the cash out of the envelope and stared at it. This was the most money I'd ever had in my hand. Counting it would show the gods how it held my interest, and so instead I started unpacking the clothes I'd brought for this weekend into the too small drawers, hiding the envelope safely underneath.

Cold in the roots of my hair, I walked across the hallway. The bathroom was almost arrogantly unrenovated. My eye went to a heavily stained toilet bowl, and then the antique chain operating the thing. All of it was grimy, although there were signs that after long neglect someone had recently made an effort to clean. On a rusted rail hung two new white towels; little bottles of shampoo, conditioner, body lotion were lined up hotel-like by the sink. These gestures made the rest seem worse.

Leaning against the vanity, my head spinning, I tried to breathe deeply. One of the washbasin's taps had a red enamel disc, the other a disc that read COLD. Icy water spurted from both. Splashing my face, I raised my eyes and caught myself shiver in the small mirror. Feeling like an intruder, I did not look quite right. I did not look worth the money.