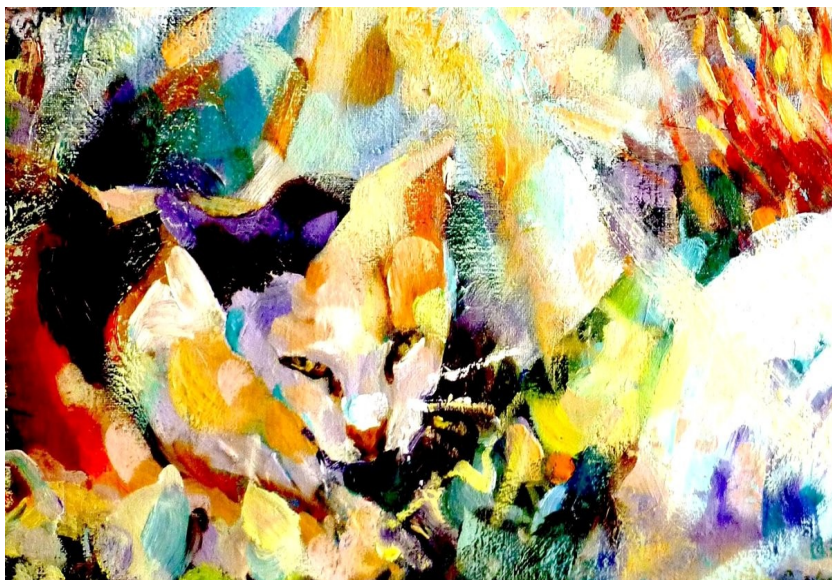


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Hemingway and the Gangsters

by Jeffrey Meyers

Hemingway believed that insults could be crushed and arguments settled, gangland fashion, with menacing threats or physical violence. His friends agreed that he could be violent when crossed and angered. His sidekick Toby Bruce said he ‘could be as mean as a striped-assed ape’; the photographer Robert Capa stated, ‘Papa can be more severe than God on a rough day when the whole human race is misbehaving’; and General Buck Lanham insisted, ‘When Hemingway was nasty he qualified as The King of All Nasties.’ The huge and powerful Hemingway was always dangerous. When the timid, weak-eyed James Joyce got into drunken arguments with strangers he could scarcely see, he’d summon his strongman and bodyguard, and declare, ‘Deal with him, Hemingway! Deal with him!’

The thin-skinned, quick-tempered Hemingway was easily provoked. When Don Wright, one of the bachelor tenants in their Chicago flat, was having an affair with his friend’s wife Hemingway wanted to punch him. When his satire of Chard Powers Smith in his story

‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliott’ provoked an abusive letter, Hemingway threatened to hit him. When Arthur Moss, the editor of the *Boulevardier*, had to cut obscenities from his essay, Hemingway threatened to knock his block off. After a drunken Polish engineer on a ship to Europe called him a ‘capitalist, bourgeois pig,’ Hemingway challenged him to a duel on deck with pistols, but the engineer failed to appear. Women were not immune from his fury. When his fourth wife, Mary, called him a son of a bitch, he warned her, ‘Most people would be running if they called me that.’

He carried out his threats in physical combat with Harold Loeb, who aroused his jealousy by having an affair with Duff Twysden in Spain; with Robert McAlmon, who called him a fairy; with Max Eastman who said he had no hair on his chest; and with Wallace Stevens, who publicly insulted him and made his sister cry. But he never went a few rounds with his arch-enemy Gertrude Stein.

Hemingway grew up in the genteel suburb of Oak Park. But during his teenage and young adult years Chicago had a worldwide – and to him exciting – reputation for violence, corruption and crime. In 1910, for example, the city had 7,500 legal saloons, and 192 houses of prostitution with 189 madames and 1,012 inmates. The average age of a prostitute was twenty-three and her professional life lasted for about five years. One gang boss earned as much as \$50,000 a

month for eight years.

The mobster Johnny Torrio had a saloon on the first floor of his Four Deuces club, offices and a horse-betting room on the second floor, a gambling den on the third floor, and a two-dollar whorehouse on the top floor. According to Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of Chicago*, Torrio 'bought and sold women, conferred with the managers of his brothels and gambling dens, issued instructions to his rum-runners and bootleggers, arranged for the corruption of police and city officials, and sent his 750 gunmen out to slaughter rival gangsters.' He gave liberally to political campaign funds, and bought attorneys and judges, prohibition and law enforcement agents, county officials and politicians. The corruption unleashed rampant crime in the city. Bandits who didn't even bother to wear masks robbed banks all over Chicago. Robbers who failed to survive were awarded lavish gangland funerals with oceans of flowers and long processions of limousines.

Alphonse "Scarface" Capone, the most notorious Chicago gangster, was born in 1899, the same year as Hemingway. He made money by corrupting labour unions, pimps and prostitution, gambling and extortion, racketeering and bootlegging. Capone ruled by leaden clubs and tommy-guns, and held power by inciting constant gang wars and frequently massacring his enemies. But he also had a Gatsby-like obsession with expensive haberdashery. His biographer Laurence

Bergreen writes that 'in 1927 and 1928 he had bought himself twenty-three suits and three topcoats,' which cost \$3,715. 'The shirts, which went for \$18 to \$30, he bought literally by the dozen, as he did the neckties, the collars and the handkerchiefs.'

Though Capone had an ironclad alibi, he was supposed to have organized the St. Valentine's Day massacre. On February 14, 1929 seven men, Asbury writes, 'waiting at the garage for a truckload of booze ... were disarmed and lined up against the wall by three gangsters wearing police uniforms. Then two other men, in plain clothing, stepped forward and raked the line with machine-guns.' *Some Like It Hot* (1959) parodied this scene when Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis accidentally witness George Raft's gangland massacre and have to disguise themselves as women to escape retribution. When Capone was convicted of carrying a concealed weapon, he 'continued to transact his business from the Eastern Penitentiary [in Philadelphia]. He was given a private cell, allowed to make long-distance calls, and to use the Warden's office for conferences with his lawyers.'

Like the great masculine writers – Joseph Conrad, André Malraux and George Orwell – Hemingway did not go to college but learned from practical experience in the real world, from reporting gang wars in Kansas City and Chicago and international wars in Europe. As Herman Melville said, 'A whale ship was my Yale

College and my Harvard.’ The young Hemingway first worked, from October 1917 through April 1918, as a journalist on the Kansas City Star. He then served in the First World War with the Red Cross and was seriously wounded in Italy. After returning from Europe he spent more than a year in Chicago in the early 1920s working on the Co-operative Commonwealth magazine. At a time when gangsters flourished during Prohibition (1920-33), he published many articles about crime in Chicago in the Toronto Star Weekly.

Hemingway’s time in Kansas City was his first break from the conventional values of his family in Oak Park and from the church’s tedious preaching about personal cleanliness, filial obedience, sobriety, piety and chastity. In Missouri he developed a lifelong fascination with whores and horror of venereal disease. He declared, ‘I never thought Chicago was a tough place,’ but allowed, in a characteristic understatement, that Kansas City ‘was a little rough.’

All discussions of his time in Kansas City, beginning with Charles Fenton’s *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway* (1954), emphasize how he learned to write clearly and concisely from the Star’s style sheet. But the gangsters he wrote about were even more important. Just as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) had exposed the exploitation of immigrant workers (one of whom gets ground up and packaged after falling into

a machine) in the Chicago meat-packing industry, so the vividly morbid newspaper articles by Hemingway and other reporters exposed the unchecked crime in those Midwestern cities.

Hemingway’s exact, crisp and violent ‘Battle of Raid Squads’, published in Kansas City on January 6, 1918, described the danger of trigger-happy officials, as well as of the real gangsters, in urban battles:

John M. Tully and Albert Raithel, revenue officers from St. Louis, may die, and two city detectives narrowly escaped injury as a result of a revolver battle yesterday through a case of mistaken identity. Tully and Raithel had gone to raid a house at 2743 Mercier Street, reported to be a rendezvous for drug users. Edward Kritser and Paul Conrad, city detectives, arrived a few minutes later on the same mission. Each party of officers mistook the other for drug peddlers.

Tully was shot in the right leg, left arm and lower abdomen. Raithel was wounded in the abdomen and left wrist. Both will recover. The two detectives were uninjured, but both had bullet holes through their clothing.

In ‘At the End of the Ambulance Run’, which appeared in the Star on January 20, 1918, Hemingway revealed his taste for gory details and use of inside information (which he later called ‘the true gen’), and described the different ways of inflicting damage in different parts of the city: ‘It’s razor wounds in the

African belt and slugging in the wet [liquor] block. In Little Italy they prefer the sawed-off shotgun. We can almost tell what part of the city a man is from just by seeing how they did him up.'

Two years later, in his post-war Toronto Star Weekly stories about Chicago, the seasoned veteran continued to concentrate on violent gangsters. In 'Rum-Running' (June 5, 1920), he reported the unrestrained liquor smuggling during Prohibition: 'Canadian whiskey can be bought by the case from bootleggers in almost all of the Michigan border towns for one hundred and twenty dollars a case.' 'Wild West: Chicago' (November 6, 1920) compared the escalating murders in Chicago – eerily similar to those in that city today – to the lawless shootouts on the old frontier:

in the city of Chicago during the present year from January to November there have been one hundred and fifty killings... By including the police bag, it would be pretty safe to say they kill somebody every day in Chicago... So there is murder, drink and gambling in the new Wild West just as in the old.

The professional murderers in Chicago were so highly regarded, Hemingway explained in 'Plain and Fancy Killings, \$400 Up' (December 11, 1920), that 'Gunmen from the United States are being imported to do killings in Ireland' during the war of independence. 'The price for a simple killing, such as a marked policeman or member of the 'Black and Tans,' is four

hundred dollars.'

Finally, in 'Ballot Bullets' (May 28, 1921) – whose title would be echoed in the Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson movie *Bullets or Ballots* (1936) – Hemingway connected politics with violent death and narrated the incident from the victim's point of view, as he would later do when describing the wounded lion in 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber':

Anthony D'Andrea, pale and spectacled, defeated candidate for alderman in the 19th Ward, Chicago, stepped out of the closed car in front of his residence and, holding an automatic pistol in his hand, backed gingerly up the steps.

Reaching back with his left hand to press the door bell, he was blinded by two red jets of flame from the window of the next apartment, heard a terrific roar and felt himself clouted sickeningly in the body with the shock of the slugs from the sawed-off shotgun... It's all part of the unfinished story of the gunmen's political war that is raging in Chicago at present.

Hemingway expressed his fascination with gangsters in his fiction, and evoked the atmosphere of Kansas City during the last year of the war in two minor short stories and an interchapter of *In Our Time*. In 'A Pursuit Race' (1927), a staggered bike race, an advance man for a burlesque show breaks down with drink and drugs. Hemingway wrote that 'It was very cold in Kansas City' and that the hopeless anti-hero 'did not

like Kansas City,' but 'knew there were good cures in Kansas City' for drug addicts.

The ironically titled 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' (1933) begins with a far-fetched comparison, 'In those days ... Kansas City was very like Constantinople,' and also mentions the Woolf Brothers' saloon and the city hospital. In this Christmas Day story, an incompetent doctor is unable to deal with a religious fanatic's attempt to castrate himself. Hemingway may have been thinking of the two most famous castrati. The third-century theologian Origen, slavishly following Matthew 19:12 – 'there be eunuchs, which made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake' – castrated himself for the love of God. Abelard, the medieval French philosopher, was castrated by the uncle of Héloïse for secretly marrying her. In *The Sun Also Rises* Jake Barnes's penis has been shot off in the war. In this story the would-be castrator amputates his own penis. But both mutilated men still have sexual feelings.

Interchapter VIII, based on an incident that took place in Kansas City on November 19, 1917, subtly connects urban violence with war and is related to Hemingway's news story of the gun fight between revenue agents and detectives. In this taut vignette a policeman, Jimmy Boyle, kills two Hungarians who have robbed a cigar store at two o'clock in the morning. His partner, Drevitts, fears there will be trouble, but he

is reassured by the murderer who insists there will be no difficulty because the victims were crooks and 'wops.' Since all 'wops' are crooks their deaths don't matter. Boyle claims 'he can tell wops a mile off.' His false identification, which reflects the racial hostility between Irish and Italian immigrants, will be accepted in court to justify the deaths of the Hungarians.

On April 15, 1921, Hemingway wrote to his father from Chicago: 'They hanged Cardinella and Cosmano and some other Wop killer today... Cardinella is a good man to swing I guess. Passed the County Jail this morning and there was a big crowd standing outside waiting for the event.' Sam Cardinella – the forty-one-year-old mobster, extortionist and leader of the Black Hand gang – was executed for murdering a saloonkeeper. When Cardinella refused to walk to the gallows, he was strapped to a chair, carried to the scaffold and hanged in his chair. When the jailers took his body to an ambulance (not a hearse) hired by his family, they found medical equipment, a nurse and a doctor who hoped to revive the corpse.

Hemingway's version, interchapter XV from *In Our Time*, takes place in the corridor of the county jail. One of the condemned men wraps a blanket around his head in an infantile attempt to escape reality. The guards carry Cardinella, accompanied by two priests who mutter meaningless words—another instance of unreality. The terrified prisoner loses control of his

sphincter muscle and the disgusted guards, one of them wearing an incongruous derby hat, strap him into a chair. The agile priest skips back onto the scaffolding just before the drop falls. Hemingway realistically described the callousness of the guards, the futility of the priests and the cowardice of the prisoner, who responds to the injunction to 'Be a man' by emptying his bowels before he is 'jerked to Jesus.'

Hemingway's influential story 'The Killers' (1927) is based on the comical-sinister gangsters of Al Capone's Chicago. Max and Al turn up in a diner, converted from a saloon during Prohibition, to murder a heavyweight boxer. Ole Andreson had agreed to throw a fight but betrayed the gamblers who backed his opponent. The suspense builds up as time passes, threats are made, motives are slowly revealed and Ole fails to appear for dinner at his customary time. In the story, which reads like a screenplay, the killers, passively awaiting the arrival of their victim, taunt and intimidate the workers in the diner with a series of insults that require immediate assent:

'You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?'

'Sure,' said George.

'Well, you're not,' said the other little man. 'Is he, Al?'

'He's dumb.'

The gangsters convey their indifferent, immoral but highly professional attitude – 'We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend' – which astonishes Nick

Adams but is passively accepted by the victim. The two main events in the story, the prizefight and the murder, are left out. The theme, Nick's discovery of evil and death, is also conveyed obliquely when he goes to warn Ole. The boxer stoically, if not heroically, confronts his fate and rolls over toward the wall: 'There isn't anything I can do about it... I'm through with all that running around.'

Nick moves from fear to compassion to disillusionment and realizes things are not what they appear to be: the clock is twenty minutes fast, the lunch-room serves dinner, the corrupt-honest fighter is strangely indifferent, Mrs. Hirsch is actually Mrs. Bell and Ole's friends are much more frightened than he is. The men in the diner are confused and obedient, Andreson is fatalistic and resigned. The gangsters boldly announce their intention to defy the law and murder the boxer, but do not hunt him down in his boarding house. Though the murderers don't kill Ole, they merely delay the inevitable and will surely come back to finish the job. The boxer, tired of running, awaits his inevitable fate and doesn't take his last chance to escape. 'The Killers' portrays Hemingway's recurrent theme of The Undefeated and suggests that pity can be earned only by men who never demand it.

One film critic maintained that gangsters did not 'know how they were supposed to behave. So Hollywood taught them.' But Hemingway taught Hollywood. The

gangsters of Kansas City and Chicago not only sparked his lifelong taste for violence, but also inspired his portrayal of the criminals that was adopted by movies in the 1930s. The menacing wisecracks, the sense of immediate experience and sharp cinematic scenes influenced the portrayal of underworld characters in films like Robinson's *Little Caesar* (1930) and James Cagney's *Public Enemy* (1931).

Hemingway, who emphasized the dramatic and visual aspects of gangsters, actually created the natty dress and unrestrained violence of stereotyped movie mobsters. One of the murderers in 'The Killers' 'wore a derby hat and a black overcoat buttoned across the chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves... [They] ate with their gloves on ... [and] were dressed like twins. Both wore overcoats too tight for them... The cut-off barrels of the shotgun made a slight bulge under the waist.' This precise description clearly foreshadows Bogart's smart attire in all his gangster roles from the early 1930s to 'Gloves' Donahue in *All Through the Night* (1942). As Bogart says in *Across the Pacific* of the Japanese villains who are trying to hide their weapons, 'tight clothes don't go with guns.'

Emphasizing the theatrical element, Hemingway compares one of the killers, giving orders to his captives, to a member of a vaudeville team and to 'a photographer arranging for a group picture.' The

murderer tells George, 'Ever go to the movies? You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you.' The detective in Hemingway's 'The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio' warns the wounded Mexican about confusing art and life: 'Listen. This isn't Chicago. You're not a gangster. You don't have to act like a moving picture. It's all right to tell who shot you.'

Hemingway's first-hand experience with gangsters encouraged his propensity to violence and attraction to violent themes in his fiction. His portrayal of criminals in a sceptical, stoical and belligerently masculine style, with speech and gestures cut down to a minimum, tapped into the Hollywood consciousness that recreated his laconic gangsters and doomed tough guys. There was a volatile connection throughout his life between the gangsters he wrote about while still in his impressionable teens, his passion for danger in war, boxing, bullfighting and big-game hunting, and his brain-splashed suicide. ♦

Cat Wars

by *Britt Petersen*

New Zealand's recent announcement of a plan to eradicate all invasive predators, including feral cats, sparked an immediate response – and not in defense of the stoat, up there with cats among the top 100 on the Global Invasive Species list. “Cat murdering New Zealand[ers] are for the birds,” one commenter vented on The Washington Post’s website. “Removing cats from an area is a futile effort – one that cannot succeed,” another warned. When Australia announced a plan in 2015 to cull 2 million feral cats, the singer Morrissey declared them “2 million smaller versions of Cecil the lion.” The actress Brigitte Bardot called the cull “animal genocide.” Needless to say, no celebrity outrage or online indignation has greeted New Zealand’s or Australia’s expensive and long-standing rat-eradication programs.

What makes an animal a pet – a creature to which our emotions attach, sometimes in logic-warping ways – is surprisingly difficult to pin down. Cats are a particularly puzzling case. Domesticated some 9,500

years ago, they still don’t strike humans as completely tame. They live with us, but even indoor cats aren’t entirely dependent on us, certainly not in the emotional way dogs are. They do many things that seem to defy rational explanation, which is no small source of their allure: the blanket-attack ritual, the full-body keyboard plop, the blank-wall stare, and perhaps most dramatic, the post-poop freak-out. One of my cats performs a ninja leap about three feet up one side of the door frame, then slides down, firefighter-style, to the floor.

Even the discoveries, in the past several decades, that cats carry a parasite that could contribute to schizophrenia, and that outdoor cats wreak ecological disaster, haven’t budged a curiously imbalanced relationship with this furry companion – or maybe cohabitant is more accurate. More than a third of all households in the United States now have a pet cat (the total count is estimated to be close to 100 million animals), which marks a 50 percent rise since the 1980s. Their owners feed them, stroke them, shovel their litter, spend ages trying to photograph their yawns from the cutest angle for Instagram. They ignore their owners, mostly sleep, intermittently deign to serve as purring lap warmers, and occasionally drop a half-dead mouse on the rug. Mysterious as cats are, however, the greatest mystery about cats centers on humans. Why do so many of us love them so much when they are so bad for us, and for our planet? And if we could resolve this first

mystery, would we be any closer to solving the world's cat problem?

In *Cat Wars: The Devastating Consequences of a Cuddly Killer*, Peter P. Marra, the head of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, and Chris Santella, a widely published travel writer, take the easy way out. They're so clearly not cat lovers that they can't really begin to comprehend those of us who are. The best they can do in their otherwise informative anti-cat polemic is to tell us that cats have long been "tolerated by their human neighbors because of their supreme pet-like characteristics."

Merely tolerated? Rat-catchers aboard colonizing ships in the 18th and 19th centuries, cats immediately inspired a craze when they were introduced to islands in the Pacific, the reporter Abigail Tucker writes in *The Lion in the Living Room: How House Cats Tamed Us and Took Over the World*. "A passion arose for cats," according to the log of a ship that landed in Samoa, "and they were obtained by all possible means." Tucker takes an intriguing stab at accounting for that still-thriving passion. "Cats look uncannily like us," she proposes, and locates their appeal not in their alien aura but in the spell their familiarity exerts and the protective fascination it elicits. "Even better, they look like our infants." Given their baby-size bodies; large, front-facing eyes; and yet oddly predatory mien, it's no wonder we find them "mesmerizing."

Tucker is certainly right to suggest that the current cat predicament is rooted in peculiarly fraught power relations between these cuddly yet opaque creatures and *Homo sapiens*. History reveals felines as the ultimate opportunists, biologically primed to exploit their human enablers – among many other creatures. As both books reveal, cats travel well, reproduce quickly, and are savage and omnivorous predators. When Mark Twain arrived in Hawaii in 1866, some 90 years after cats had strolled down the gangplanks of Captain Cook's fleet and conquered the hearts of the natives, he observed "platoons of cats, companies of cats, regiments of cats, armies of cats, multitudes of cats."

The bloody takeover was well under way, and has continued. Those felines, who have since multiplied in feral-cat colonies throughout the archipelago, prey on endangered birds such as the petrel, the nene, and the Laysan albatross, and have helped decimate the Hawaiian crow. In Australia, with its 3 million pet cats and 20 million feral cats (and about 23 million people), cats have contributed to wiping out several mouse, rat, and bandicoot species. They currently threaten the much-beloved greater bilby. Cats are implicated, according to one study, in 14 percent of all reptile, mammal, and bird extinctions on islands – 33 animal species in all.

And the feline menace isn't limited to islands. Cats

imperial species around the world, including our own, with which their relations have become – at least on the surface – more symbiotic. A century ago, when they were still viewed as a quasi-domesticated form of vermin control, cats were also regularly deemed vermin themselves – a germ-carrying danger to be treated as such. The New York SPCA, for instance, gassed 300,000 strays during a 1911 polio scare. The invention of kitty litter in 1947 heralded the thoroughly housebound cat, and a new identity, or rather, disguise: The pampered pet had arrived, but the semi-pest still lurked.

Toxoplasma gondii, mostly found in outdoor cats, is one of the most common parasites in humans. It is present in nearly half of the world's population, according to estimates. Often acquired by eating undercooked meat from animals who ingested tainted cat poop, it can cause a disease called toxoplasmosis, which is especially dangerous for infants and the immunosuppressed, but may pose risks for others as well. Carriers of the parasite seem to suffer at higher rates from Alzheimer's disease, anxiety, migraines, bipolar disorder, suicidal tendencies, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. There's evidence for a schizophrenia link, too. And in a twist worthy of a Cheshire Cat smile, *Toxoplasma gondii* may change our behavior in some bizarre ways, actually encouraging an attraction, in men, to cat pee. (In "How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy," which appeared in these pages four

years ago, Kathleen McAuliffe reported on pioneering research into the parasite's effects.)

Stop and think about the adaptive brilliance: More humans seduced by house cats means more besotted allies willing to take to the barricades in defense of all cats, ignoring the broader free-ranging-cat menace. And it is broad. Toxoplasmosis also afflicts nonhuman animals, from beluga whales to kangaroos. Because of runoff in the ocean from sewage containing cat feces, the disease has seriously affected marine mammals like seals (including the endangered Hawaiian-monk variety), sea otters, and manatees over the past several decades.

A 2013 study co-authored by Marra estimated that outdoor cats in the U.S. kill – not by disease – somewhere between 1.3 billion and 4 billion birds and between 6.3 billion and 22.3 billion mammals each year. It's fair to say, as Tucker does, that cats may be considered "nightmarish invaders, capable of ransacking whole ecosystems and annihilating feebler life-forms in their path."

If that characterization calls to mind another species (our own), perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that solutions for the cat problem have proved hard to come by. Both of these books emphasize that altruistic impulses and calmly rational responses have been in notably short supply. As birders have become poignantly aware of cats' impact on biodiversity, two camps have dug in:

cat people and bird people. Extremism reigns in a war of Tom and Jerry–esque brutality over how to handle the free-ranging-cat problem. Bird people want all outdoor cats to go. Some have gone vigilante and poisoned or shot strays. Cat people have fought back, occasionally with death threats of their own – against people.

Even if compromise did seem more feasible, both books suggest that a moderate and affordable solution doesn't really exist. The primary answer, at least in the United States (host to roughly 100 million outdoor cats), is trap-neuter-return. The approach, popular in many counties, involves just what the name suggests, with cats ideally returned to the cat communities they were part of, now spayed and under the official or semi-official auspices of "managers." Proponents argue that TNR prevents rampant breeding, and is more humane than euthanasia. But TNR, according to Tucker as well as Marra and Santella, is not especially effective at accomplishing its primary stated goal of keeping cat populations in check. To do that, you'd need to spay or neuter nearly all the animals in a colony, whereas most TNR programs target a small fraction. So the cats continue to breed – and hunt. They routinely get fed, too, by the colony supervisors. As one article in a scientific journal put it, the practice is "cat hoarding without walls."

Eradication, which has been tried on about 100 islands (from the Galápagos to California's San

Nicolas) over the past 30 years, is usually successful – but can be hard-won and very expensive, even in a self-contained space. To dig out every last kitten from an island's rocky crevices costs up to \$100,000 per square mile. Herding cats isn't easy. Most programs use traps and toxic bait; some rely on "specialist cat-hunting dogs." And then there are the daunting public-relations challenges.

With their eye on non-island countries, namely America, the authors of *Cat Wars* argue for a combination of spay/neuter programs, enclosed sanctuaries, and euthanasia. But they're well aware of the obstacles. "We would find it preferential – if not quite realistic – to see all free-ranging cats removed from the environment," Marra and Santella write. The not quite realistic is as much a nod to the power of pro-cat sentiment in the United States as it is to the practical impossibility of somehow stashing all the stray and feral cats in giant, smelly cat houses. They may well be right that the political difficulties are more daunting than the logistical ones. (Good luck even getting cat owners to keep their pets inside; according to studies the authors cite, 40 to 70 percent of house cats are allowed to roam, and the majority of them spend their time doing what outdoor cats do – hunting.) When a Kiwi philanthropist and activist named Gareth Morgan launched a website supporting an outdoor-cat-free New Zealand back in 2013, he said

much of his hate mail came from America. “It really feels like I’ve taken on the gun lobby,” he told Tucker.

Guns don’t purr, of course, or lie across your belly at the end of a long day like a small, furry pillow. Then again, cats – however cute – are lethal and heartless. That’s essential to their charm, I would argue: We care about cats so much because (unlike babies) they really don’t care about us. Even their purring seems to be all about them. They are egotistical and self-sufficient, and not really house pets, and we like the sense that we’re more dependent on them than they are on us. Otherwise we would get dogs. To make the rest of nature pay the price for that preference, though, is an act of supreme selfishness. You might think we were spending a little too much time with our cats. ♦

The Rat

by *Hannah Lowe*

The landlady watches herself in the living room mirror, phone held to her ear. In the blurred morning light her face looks young again, almost. She flicks her pale fringe from one side to the other. ‘Yes, well let’s hope it’s mice’, she says into the receiver. If only the tenant would hope too.

In the mirror she sees Mossi passing down the hall. In his white sports socks he hardly makes a sound. He is quiet as mouse, she thinks, her Mossi. ‘Right-oh!’ she says into the phone. ‘I’ll pop by this evening’. She hangs up before the tenant speaks again.

Mossi is bent over the cistern in the downstairs lavatory, tool box open on the toilet seat, spanner in hand. ‘Here you are, Mossi!’ the landlady says. She likes to use his name, for the name itself – a common one in Sierra Leone – and the sound of it in her mouth. She tells him about the phone call.

‘Sounds like a rat’, he says grimacing, ‘if the scratching is loud’. Mossi hates rats.

‘It’s always one thing or another with Ashgrove’, the

landlady sighs. She never uses her tenants' names, only the names of the roads they live on: Irving, Seraphim, Ashgrove, Elsiedene. 'Now rats in the kitchen'. A pause. 'Or mice. I hope mice. Mice we can deal with. If it's rats, I might have to pay'.

Mossi goes back to his repair. There was a time he had wanted to take the landlady to his home in Sierra Leone, but not now.

The Ashgrove tenant has a baby. The landlady hadn't realised she was pregnant when she rented her the flat. She wouldn't have let to a single mother, had she known. She is young and from the north somewhere, always in leggings the landlady notices, and today wearing a stretched white vest with Love spelt in faded letters. Her bleached hair is black at the roots and shaved under one side – punky, statement-ish. She might have been pretty if her face wasn't so – foetal. Yes, the landlady thinks, her pale eyelashes and pink skin make her look a little unformed. She balances the sleeping bundle in the crook of her arm, swaying from side to side.

'It was under the bed last night', the tenant says urgently, shifting the baby. Its pale moon face looks very peaceful. 'I could hear it right under us!'

'Why do you think a rat?' the landlady asks, her eyes narrowed. 'Mice are more common'.

'It's loud!' The tenant shifts the baby again 'Mice don't make that sort of noise'.

The flat is close to the bright takeaways that line the high street, so of course there are vermin. For baiting rats, the landlady has always relied on the eldest son of her friend Marguerite, who works in pest control and gives her a good price. But Marguerite died of breast cancer a month ago.

'Usually I have someone', she tells the tenant, 'but his mother died recently, so I can't ask, yet'.

'Oh', the tenant says, looking confused. 'Sorry about your friend. You will do something about them though, won't you? Should I call the council? Rats don't go away on their own'.

'No need for the council!' the landlady says too loudly. The council will charge she knows, even if the tenant doesn't. 'We can treat the problem. You can't be living with a rat, if a rat it is'. She thinks she means it, but also thinks: I must protect my property.

She rests her bag on the step and lifts out a plastic container that says Daz on the side. 'Not washing powder', she says, lifting the lid to reveal the small turquoise pellets. 'Poison!'

The poison is left over from when the landlady once had rats in the cupboard below her stairs. A few rats would die, then more appear, so Marguerite's son had left her with a large box. Oh it was awful, she remembers. It went on for months. In the end she had had the ground floor of her house hermetically sealed, a costly procedure, but absolutely worth it.

‘And here’s a dish for it’, she tells the tenant, pointing to the small plastic dish resting on the pellets, something she’s taken from an eyebrow tinting kit. ‘Just pop some down on the kitchen floor, yes?’ She clicks the lid shut and passes the container to the tenant, who takes it in the arm she isn’t holding the baby in. ‘Let’s try this before anything drastic. Agreed?’

Many streets run in parallel off the high street, lined with old red brick houses with chimneys, broad bay windows and ornate cornices. Some are carved up into bedsits where down-and-outs and immigrants reside. You can pick these out by their grimy peeling walls and the slew of rubbish in their front gardens. Others are smart conversions where young professionals live, like the four the landlady owns. The landlady bought her properties in close proximity to her own to keep an eye on her tenants, and so Mossi could deal with any maintenance swiftly. Only a few houses are still intact and well maintained like her own, with its beautiful wood floors which Mossi carefully stripped. She once joked that he must be the only African immigrant to live in one of grand residences, but he didn’t laugh, only corrected her that he was an African refugee.

As she walks home, the burden of being a landlady weighs heavily on her. The more money she makes, the more she worries. The area is going up, no doubt. Bright coffee shops and organic stores now nestle between the take-aways. This means a rise in rent.

Good. Money piled up in her account. If anyone saw her balance they would think her rich. But she isn’t rich. If you were rich, you wouldn’t worry about money in the way the landlady does.

Later, she lies awake in bed, too hot from the close weather. She listens to Mossi’s slow breathing and frets about things she might have to spend money on. The temperamental radiators at Irving Road could be fixed by him in time for autumn, but Seraphim Road would need a new bathroom soon. And now rats on Ashgrove. She prays the poison will work. The clock at the side of the bed says 2 am. Not a wink of sleep. She could almost curse Marguerite.

‘Do you think you might have rats?’ the landlady asks. She is at the front door of Mrs Ruperalia, the neighbour on Ashgrove. A week has passed, but the poison has not worked. The tenant phoned in tears at dawn. Apparently a rat ran across her foot in the bathroom. ‘The pest control man is here’, the landlady continues. She hopes Mrs Ruparelia has rats so they can split the cost.

‘Good morning, Mrs Marchant’, Mrs Ruparelia says. ‘No, we don’t have rats or mice. But I wanted to talk to you about the fence adjoining the properties. It’s not in a good state’.

‘But I’m sure you says you sometimes put traps down?’

‘Mouse trap’, Mrs Ruparelia says. ‘Sometimes we do.

They catch the odd mouse. But mice don't bother me. Back home we –'

'Don't want a free assessment?' the landlady breaks in. She glances back to where the van is parked, Kevin's Best Pest Control Solutions printed on its side. 'The man is here now. And it's free'.

Mrs Ruparelia looks at the van then back again. 'No Mrs Marchant. I'm telling you the odd mouse doesn't bother me really, but the fence –'

'Can we talk about the fence later? The tenant has got rats and it's going to cost me a fortune!'

'Poor Sadie. In there with a baby. Surely she should move out until – ' But the landlady is already back at the van, leaning down at the window.

'I'll give you a phone-call about the fence!' Mrs Ruparelia calls down the path. 'Please give your husband my best!'

Kevin from Best Pest Solutions lies on the kitchen floor. He and the land-lady are alone in the flat since the tenant is at baby yoga. The kitchen is in a poor state, the landlady has to admit. The lino is shabby and stained. The cupboard doors don't fit their frames. The flat smells stale and, well, ratty. She opens the back door to let some air in.

Kevin pulls his head out from under the sink. He has thick dark hair and a face that might once have been handsome. The landlady notes his tattoos. On one forearm, a bare-breasted mermaid, on the other, the

word Ecstasy spelt in dark blue capitals. It looks home-made. Kevin is a rough sort, the landlady thinks. You probably had to be, for this sort of work.

'Definitely a rat', he says, sitting up, looking pleased. 'Rat crap everywhere'.

'Damn it!' says the landlady.

'On the plus side, probably only one. You'll need a course of poison. Three treatments, but the first usually does it'.

'I did try poison'. She points to the small tray the tenant has placed by the kitchen bin, still full of blue pellets.

'We don't use that anymore,' he says, regarding the poison. 'Rats mutate all the time. They're probably immune. What I've got is new. Proper stuff. Industry strength'.

'And where do you think this rat has come from?' the landlady probes. 'I had all the holes blocked up last year'. She remembers Mossi outside on his hands and knees scraping cement around the gutters.

'Sneaky buggers, rats. Use the back door if it's open,' Kevin says, looking at the open back door. He cranes his neck to see the garden. 'That overgrowth won't help. Perfect for rats. And these old houses are full of holes and cracks. Rats come up the drains, the replaces. I can do a total service for you, if you like. It's not cheap, but –'

'No, no, no!' the landlady raises her hand. 'Just the

poison, please'. She sees Mrs Ruparelia pegging out her washing, beyond the tatty fence. 'I don't think she understood me'.

'What's that?'

'The woman next door. She can't speak much English. I thought if she has rats, we could split the cost'.

'Oh right', he says. He knows the landlady's sort too. 'Don't worry, Mrs Marchant. I'll give you a good price'. He grins. 'You could use me again. How many flats did you say you owned?'

'Four', the landlady says, and thinks: Irving, Seraphim, Ashgrove, Elsiedene. She doesn't say she's about to buy another.

'Lucky for some', he says, and goes for the poison.

Is it luck, the landlady wonders, watching herself in the kitchen window. Her lips are too thin, she thinks, pursing them together. It wasn't luck really. Her mother left her money. She invested. The profits of one helped buy another. The banks encouraged it. Who wouldn't do as she has done?

When the kitchen has been baited, the landlady stands at the front gate as Kevin loads his van. 'Give it a week, Mrs Marchant', he says, opening the driver's door and climbing in. He pops his head back out the window, sun-glasses on and a lit cigarette in his mouth. 'But one more thing', he says, exhaling smoke. 'If it dies inside, it's extra to get the body out'.

'Yes yes, I know', the landlady says to herself, as he drives away.

As she approaches her house, the landlady sees Mossi stood outside talking to the tenant. He is bent over the pram. He looks up as the landlady approaches.

'Lovely baby', he says, gesturing. The landlady looks for the sake of politeness, the baby's sleeping face just visible in the white blanket. Mossi and the landlady did not have children. It was never discussed.

'Just on my way back to the flat', the tenant says. She looks tired. 'Have the pest control people been?' The landlady notices the change in her tone. Brusque, less friendly.

'Sorry for the rat', Mossi says to her. 'I wish -'

'It's hardly our fault, Mossi!' the landlady says. 'I've just paid out to have it dealt with!' She turns to the tenant. 'The pest control man has been, and the good news is there's only one rat, and it should be dead in a week', she says. 'But the bad news is that you might well have rats because of the poor state of the garden, which, as you'll see in the contract, is your responsibility'.

'What?' the tenant says, surprised.

'Rats live and breed in overgrown gardens.'

The tenant pauses then says, 'It's hardly overgrown. The grass needs cutting, which I've not has much time to do, what with -'

'That's as may be', the landlady interrupts, her chin

lifted, not noticing the look Mossi is giving her. 'But I'm telling you what an expert has says –'

'I don't think Sadie can be blamed for the rat', Mossi says.

'No I can't!' The tenant looks from him to the landlady. 'Is that what you're saying?' she says. 'It's my fault?'

'I'm just repeating what I've been told by an expert', the landlady says calmly. 'It seems appropriate that you make some kind of contribution towards the cost of –'

'Are you kidding?' the tenant nearly shouts.

'No', the landlady says. 'Far from it. I just –'

'Forget it', the tenant takes the handles of the pram. She looks at Mossi and says, 'Nice talking to you', then walks away.

'– think we should split the cost!' the landlady calls out after her. She turns to Mossi. 'Goodness me', she says. 'It's a perfectly reasonable suggestion, don't you think, Mossi?' Mossi says nothing. 'But I can't say you helped, Mossi. It's no good apologising, you know. Really!'

Mossi sometimes thinks back to when he and the landlady first met. A party. Mossi's case-worker had invited him, just after his asylum hearing. He was lonely in London and so he went. The house was bohemian in style but everything was expensive. People sat around in the gold lamp-light, on plump sofas and

armchairs, one man balanced on a piano stool telling a long story Mossi couldn't follow. Others were out on the wide patio with their cigarettes. They all seemed incredibly well. Glowing with wellness and wealth, in fact. In the kitchen, another man talked loudly at him for an hour about his travels in Mali, while Mossi smiled and nodded.

He was pulling his coat on in the hall when he heard a woman crying. The landlady was huddled on the doorstep, a ladder in her thin tights that made her seem fragile, Mossi thought. That and the fact she is was so drunk on white wine she could hardly walk when he helped her up, talking about an ex-boyfriend who left her to go travelling, now suddenly back on the scene. Bastard. Bastard, she kept slurring, lurching against Mossi as he walked her home to the big house where she lived alone. It turned out the hosts of the party were the landlady's sister and her husband, both teachers she often criticised for their hippie ideas.

Mossi had certainly loved her once, he thought. Or had he confused love for gratitude? He had never described to her his life before they met. Lonely and traumatised, sick for home, days he would go hungry. Eight long months when he couldn't work, waiting for his case to come to court. No language for things. The cramped room he had shared with other poor men, five streets away from where he now lived. He had never described it, though of course she knew.

The next week, the landlady arrives at Ashgrove with a plastic bag of scented tea-lights. Some pink, others mauve. She can smell the dead rat from the doorstep. She inches when the tenant opens the door, the sleeping baby in a sling on her chest.

'This is the problem with poison', the landlady begins talking immediately, holding out the carrier bag. 'They do smell. This hot weather doesn't help. But it will go away. There's nothing to be done. We can't be pulling up the floorboards'. She breathes in and frowns. The smell is earthy and putrid, unyielding. She wonders how the tenant is putting up with it.

'Tea-lights!' the tenant exclaims, looking in the bag, then up at the landlady. She is laughing. 'Tea-lights! Haven't you got a nose? I'm going to a hotel. And sending you the bill. And I'm not fucking kidding.'

The landlady notices the small suitcase she is holding, 'But –'

'The rat isn't under the floorboards', the tenant interrupts, her hands spread. 'It's in the bathroom. Under the bath, I reckon. I can't open the bathroom door. I haven't showered. I can't use the loo in there. I can't believe you gave me a tub of fucking poison. I've got a baby.'

'No need to –'

'Someone has got to get it out. And I'm not coming back until they have.' She pushes past the landlady. 'You are a total joke'.

'But isn't there a friend you could stay with?' the landlady calls at her back. 'I can't be paying hotel bills! This won't be covered in the contract.'

'Sod the contract!' the tenant shouts back.

It's not in the contract, the landlady tells herself. Calm down. Calm down. She takes a deep breath to calm herself down. The smell of the rat is appalling. And is much worse inside. Worse than she has ever smelt. The tenant is right. It must be from the bathroom. The landlady edges slightly down the hall, stops for a second, turns and leaves. There is no way she is opening that door.

Outside, she dials Kevin's number, speaks then listens. 'How much?' she almost shouts into the phone.

'No', Mossi says. 'Not again.' He is wearing his old paint-splattered jeans to sand down the window-frames in the sunroom. 'No way.'

'Oh Mossi, please! It will cost more!' the landlady protests from the doorway. 'I only paid for the poison to be laid.'

'Those things have disease!'

'Oh please Mossi. It will take a moment only.'

He stops sanding and looks up at her. 'Don't I do enough for you?' he says quietly. The landlady says nothing for a minute, her eyebrows raised in a bemused expression.

'Isn't it more a case of what I do for you, Mossi?' she finally says. She pauses to let her words sink in. 'Pretty

please? Will you, Mossi? Mossi?

He holds a handkerchief over his mouth as he unscrews the bath panel. It takes a long time since the screws are rusty and old. He can't get purchase on them. The smell makes him gag as he pulls the side away. The high window lets little light into the bathroom. He can see nothing in the black space except for the pipes. He brings out his torch and shines it below the bath. There at the back wall lies the dead rat, a small pool of dried blood around its mouth. It is a large creature, its tail at least five inches long.

Mossi would like to think he had never liked rats since his grandmother fell ill from Lassa fever, bought to her village by rats. But the real reason is different. It was him that had to remove the many dead rats from the cup-board under the landlady's stairs, and once from the kitchen bin at her flat on Irving Road, and once from the attic on Elsiedene. Fat, rotting rats. The landlady will not pay for the bodies to be removed.

He reaches for the broom and awkwardly manoeuvres the rat out. Close-up he can see its distended stomach, and wonders if it might have been pregnant. There are a few maggots wriggling in its

back. With his hands in rubber gloves, he picks the rat up by its tail and drops it into the carrier bag. He almost feels sorry for it. It is only doing what it is programmed to do – see an opportunity and take it.

Mossi ties the bag, and ties the bag inside another bag, then takes the rat out into the garden and places it carefully into the hole he has dug. He peels off the rubber gloves and lays them in the hole too, and scrapes the earth back across them with his spade. When it is done, he stands for a moment in the long grass, the sun on his face. At the back of the garden is a tall tree he has always liked. He doesn't know the species, but it reminds him of the cotton trees in Sierra Leone.

In the kitchen he scrubs his hands three times with a brush and liquid soap. The landlady is waiting at the garden gate when he emerges.

'Thank you Mossi, thank you', she says, as she slips her arms through his. 'It wasn't so bad, Mossi, was it?'

Mossi says nothing as she leads him back to the house. ♦

Side by...

The Balm of Oranges

by M.L. Stedman

HARRY WOODRUFF IS SITTING across from me at my table in the Sydney Free Legal Centre. His eyes are a touch too large for his gaunt, weathered face, and white stubble dusts his lined jaw like a fine coating of cigarette ash. His jacket was probably tweed once, and his tie's the sort people wear as fancy dress nowadays – thin, with Hawaiian girls. Awful, the smell of meths oozing out of a man's pores. I've never got used to it.

He coughs an old man's cough, so it's a shock to see from the file that he's only five years older than me. But I've lived in a house all my life. I've had a job and a family and the luck of the draw.

His voice fights the catarrh. 'So, Mr Bartlett, what's it mean?' he asks, gesturing to the creased letter flecked with innominate stains.

“*Residuary beneficiary*” means you've been left some money. Or property. Whatever's left after the debts and specific testamentary dispositions.'

'Come again?'

'Anything that's not been specifically earmarked for someone else.'

...by side

Narancsvigasz

fordította Tárnok Attila

HARRY WOODRUFF VELEM SZEMBEN ül az ingyenes Sydney-i Jogsegélyszolgálat központi irodájában. Ösztövé, megviselt arcához képest a szemei túl nagyok, barázdált állát finom fehér, cigarettahamura emlékeztető borosta porozza be. A zakója egykor skót gyapjúszövet lehetett, a nyakkendője meg olyasfajta, amelyet manapság álarcosbálra kötnek: túl keskeny és hawaii lányokat mintáz. Még a pórusaiból is metilén párolog. Ezt soha nem fogom megszokni.

Vénemberként köhög, ezért is döbbsent meg, hogy a kartonja alapján, csupán öt évvel idősebb nálam. Ám nekem egész életemben volt fedél a fejem fölött. Mindig volt munkám, családom, szerencsém.

Huruttal küszködik, ahogy megszólal.

– Szóval, Mr. Bartlett, mit jelent mindez? – kérdezi a gyűrött, beazonosíthatatlan pecsétetekkel borított levél felé bökve.

– A '*reziduális kedvezményezett*' azt jelenti, hogy valaki pénzt hagyott Önre. Vagy ingatlant. Mindent, ami a követelések és a végrendelkezés végrehajtásának jogi aktusa után megmarad.

– Ne kíméljen!

– Mindent, ami nem lett más meghatározott célra zá-

He pulls a rolled cigarette from behind his ear and is about to light it. 'No smoking, Mr Woodruff,' I say, and point to the sign on the wall, which throws in 'No drinking' and 'No playing musical instruments' for good measure.

'Oh, don't be so grim. And the name's Harry. Want me to roll you one?'

'Not right now.' I glance again at the photocopy as I slip it onto the file. 'So, who is she?'

Another cough as he strikes a match. 'Who's who?'

"'Alice Therese Woodruff'."

'She's the *testator*.' He wiggles his finger, underlining the word in the air.

'*Testatrix*, actually, if you want to get technical. But who is she? A spinster aunt? A cousin?'

He investigates a thread of tobacco escaping his cigarette, as he says in a non-committal tone, 'My wife, maybe. Or my daughter.'

The words give me a jolt. Just hearing them makes his face seem different, and I can't tell whether it's something in him that they change, or something in me. My years here have taught me that family is the thing that makes the homeless homeless. 'Well, presumably you can tell from the name,' I say.

His smile is playful. 'Both got the same name, if you want to get technical.'

'Touché.'

I wait for more, but he's in no hurry to explain. They

rolva.

A füle mögül előhúz egy előre megsodort cigarettát, és rá akar gyújtani.

– Tilos a dohányzás, Mr. Woodruff – hívom fel a figyelmét a falon kifüggesztett táblára mutatva, amely csak úgy ráadásként az italfogyasztást és a zenei hangszerek használatát is tiltja.

– Ó, ne legyen ilyen szigorú. És a nevem Harry. Akarja, hogy magának is sodorjak egyet?

– Most nem kérek, köszönöm.

A másolatba pillantok, ahogy a dossziéba csúsztatom.

– Szóval, ki az illető hölgy?

– Milyen hölgy? – köhög újra, és meggyújtja a gyufát.

– Alice Therese Woodruff.

– Hát ő a '*testátor*', nemde? – az ujjával a levegőben jelzi, hogy aláhúzza.

– Éppenséggel '*testatrix*', ha már szakszerűek kívánunk lenni. De kije Önnek voltaképpen? Aggszúz nagynéni? Unokatestvér?

A cigaretta végén kikandikáló dohányyszálát vizsgálva, semmitmondó hangon mondja: – Talán a feleségem, talán a lányom.

Megütődöm a szavain. Már a szavak hangzása is egy csapásra mindent megváltoztat, de nem tudom, hogy vajon benne vagy bennem. Az évek során megtanultam, hogy a hajléktalanok leggyakrabban a családjuk miatt válnak hajléktalanná.

– Nos, felteszem, a névből könnyen következtethetünk – mondom.

never are, the older ones. The young clients – the dope-pedlars or the shoplifters or the joyriders – they're twitchy with hope of action or escape that the system hasn't yet worn down as doggedly as water wears down stone. By Harry's stage in the game, they go numb. Time's their only possession.

Our stints here are a bit like casualty: you let them in, you patch them up, you send them off. Just fix their immediate legal problem as best you can, and don't ask superfluous questions, otherwise before you know it the whole night will have gone and you'll be none the wiser, but a lot more miserable.

The wall clock clicks its way nearer to seven p.m., and through the glass atop the partition I can see prospective clients shunting along the row of chairs to make room for new arrivals. The clatter of typewriters drifts in from down the corridor.

There's a knock on the door and Mike Kostalidis steps in, with a young fellow in tow.

'Got a minute?'

'I'm just with Mr Woodruff, Mike. Can it wait?'

'Won't take a tick. Excuse us, Harry,' he says, and Harry raises a finger in salute as Mike guides the boy in. 'I wanted to introduce Neville. Just finished his articles at Showalter, Grace and Parr in Pitt Street, and he's signed up for Thursday evenings. I've promised him you're the full bottle on Housing Commission red tape. We're starting him off with a

A mosolyában játékoság bujkál.

– Mind a kettőt így hívják, ha már szakszerűek akarunk lenni.

– Tus.

Magyarázatra számítok, de nem kapkod vele. Az idősebbek soha nem sietik el a magyarázkodást. A fiatalabbja – a drogterjesztők, a zsebesek, az autótolvajok – szinte viszket, hogy a menekülés reményében magyarázattal álljon elő, hátha támad egy rés a hivatali rendben, amit nem mosott még tisztára a gyakorlat, miként a víz konokul tisztára mossa a köveket. A Harry korúak hallgatásba burkolóznak. Egyetlen tulajdonuk az idő.

A mi feladatunk itt olyan, mint az elsősegélynyújtás: bejönnek, kapnak egy sebtapaszt, és már mehetnek is. Rendbetesszük a legsürgetőbb jogi problémát, amennyire lehet, nem teszünk fel fölösleges kérdéseket, mert különben a fél éjszakát itt tölthetjük, és semmivel sem leszünk okosabbak, csupán szerencsétlenebbek.

A falióra majdnem este hét órát mutat. Az üvegajtón át látom, hogy a folyosón ücsörgők újabb érkezőknek szorítanak helyet. Írógép hangja szűrődik felém a többi irodából.

Kopognak, Mike Kostalidis lép be és egy fiatal fickót hív maga után.

– Van egy perced?

– Mr. Woodruff-fal van dolgom, Mike. Nem várhat az ügy?

– Egy pillanat és végzünk. Bocsásson meg, Harry – mondja. Harry megemeli egy ujját köszönésképpen.

few tenancy disputes.'

'It's not something I come across much in corporate,' says Neville, brushing his hair from his eyes.

'Not exactly something I come across in shipping arbitration, either,' I reply. 'Got to be Jacks of all trades around here. One or two of us are criminal barristers, but mostly we're solicitors: property or company or general commercial. Don't worry, I'll pop round later and go through things. You'll get the hang of it.' The two of them trundle out.

'Sorry about that. So, what are your instructions? Have you got a bank account to pay the money into?'

Harry gives a cackle, and takes a drag on his cigarette. His hands shake a little as he fishes another strand of tobacco off the end of his tongue. 'Bank account,' he laughs again. 'Oh yes, and a tailor.'

'You could open one. Depending how big the estate is.' God knows I've seen enough of them get damages or a bit of workers' comp and just piss it up against the wall. Or find the whole lot has disappeared from under their hostel mattress. 'I can sort out a bankbook for you if you want. Or you could have the money paid into the trust account here until you get yourself sorted out. Come on, things are on the up for you.'

His jaw sets. He considers the ash accumulating at the end of his cigarette, and as he flicks it onto the crusty soil of the rubber plant beside him, he says, 'I've got some "instructions" for you. Tell them they can

Mike maga elé tolja a fiút.

– Csak be akarom mutatni neked Neville-t. Most telt le a gyakornoki ideje a Fő utcai Showalter és társa irodában, csütörtök estére iratkozott fel. Megmondtam neki, hogy te vagy a legjártasabb lakáskiutalási ügyekben. Ráállítjuk egy-két lakásbérleti ügyre.

– Ilyen perekkel nem találkozik az ember a társasági joggyakorlatban – mondja Neville és félresöpri a haját a szeme elől.

– Ahogy nyilván a szállítmányozási egyezségi eljárások során sem – felelem. – Itt jobb, ha mindenhez ért. Egyikünk-másikunk büntetőjogi szakember, de többnyire csak kijelölt ügyvédként járunk el ingatlanügyekben, társasági ügyekben vagy általános kereskedelmi ügyekben. De ne aggódjon. Majd átugrom később és átvevünk egy-két dolgot. Hamar belejön.

Azzal mindketten kidöcögnek az irodából.

– Elnézését kérem. Szóval, miként kíván eljárni? Rendelkezik bankszámlával, ahova az összeget utaltathatjuk?

Gúnyosan elmosolyodik és beleszippant a cigarettába. Kissé remeg a keze, ahogy a nyelve hegyéről lehalászik egy szál dohányt.

– Bankszámlám! – nevet. – Ó, hogyan, és szabóm is van.

– Nyithat egyet. Persze a hagyaték összegétől függ.

A Jóisten a megmondhatója, láttam már eleget. Amint kapnak egy kis baleseti segélyt vagy munkahelyi végkielégítést, minden azonnal kifolyik a kezük közül.

raffle it.'

I've heard all sorts of things across that table since I started as a volunteer in 1959. Once a week for twenty years, I've heard stories of knives and burst pipes and barking dogs and head wounds. I've heard about evictions and betrayals and repossessions and custody disputes. But neither at that table, nor at the satinwood desk in my own office, have I ever heard anyone genuinely refuse money. 'You might want to think it over. Could be a fortune for all you know.'

'It probably will be.'

I look at him with a question, and he answers – 'I didn't always look like this.' Then, waving his cigarette towards his chest, he says, 'You think I'd buy this tie?' Something in that gesture makes me wonder if the jacket, loose on his frame, might be handmade; if the fingernails, now ridged and yellow, might once have been neatly manicured. I get a sudden vision of a younger, stronger man sitting before me, upright and commanding – the opposite of a ghost. Something in his eyes addresses me, one successful man to another, just for a second. 'Where do you think they got the money in the first place?' He says it slowly, an actual invitation to wonder.

Where does my wife get her money, or my kids? They get it from me. And I get it from clients and they get it from customers, and with that thought, for a second the whole world seems like one vast torrent of

Vagy egy nap arra ébrednek, hogy mindenük eltűnt a matrac alól a szállón.

– Segíthetek Önnek bankszámlát nyitni, vagy letétbe helyezheti a pénzt nálunk, amíg rendeződnek a dolgai. Örülhet, magára mosolygott a szerencse.

Összeszorítja a fogát. A cigaretta végén felgyűlt hamura pillant, aztán a szék melletti szobafikusz száraz földjére verve azt mondja: – Rendelkezni kívánok a hagyaték felől. Sorsolják ki tombolán.

Hallottam már mindenfélét ennél az asztalnál, amióta itt vagyok; 1959-ben kezdtem mint önkéntes. Minden héten egy este, húsz éven át. Hallottam késekről, szétrobbant csövekről, ugató kutyákról, fejsérülésekről. Kilakoltatásról, hűtlenségről, vagyoneosztásról, gyermekelhelyezési perekről. De sem itt, sem az állandó irodámban nem találkoztam még olyan esettel, amikor valaki visszautasította volna az örökölt pénzt.

– Gondoljon bele, lehet, hogy nagy összegről van szó. Soha nem tudhatja.

– Valószínű, egy vagyon.

Kérdőn nézek rá, ezért így folytatja: – Nem mindig néztem ki így.

Aztán a cigarettával a mellkasa felé bök: – Gondolja, hogy azelőtt felvettem volna ilyen nyakkendőt?

A mozdulatából valami miatt azt olvasom ki, hogy a túlméretezett zakója szabónál készült, hogy a jelenleg töredezett és sárga körmei, egykor manikűrözve voltak. Olyan vízióm támad, mintha egy fiatalabb, egyenes tartású, parancsoló modorú ember ülne itt velem szemben,

money sloshing around. Except for here, this little island of the Sydney Free Legal Centre, where some chemical property in the second-hand furniture or the moribund pot plants actively repels wealth. A haven above the floodwaters of mammon.

Into the vacuum, Harry says, 'Got a harbour view, I bet.'

'Sorry, you've lost me.'

'I'd bet five dollars you've got a harbour view.'

He's right. Point Piper at home, Circular Quay at work. 'Water gives you space. Gives you perspective,' I say.

'Probably worked your nuts off to get them, didn't you? And climbed over one or two bodies along the way ... Good of you to slum it here with the damned.' There's no bitterness in his tone, just amusement. Did Harry fall from grace because of the drink, or does he drink because of the fall from grace?

'Is this a sermon?' I ask, restoring a stray paperclip to its rightful place in the stack of papers.

Marjorie will be home from bridge at the Queen's Club. The kids will be back from school or uni, and doing their study. I'm pretty sure that of all the things going through their minds at this moment, I won't be one. And somehow that's all right. We're solid, secure.

There's a tap on the glass and Jeanette, the receptionist, points at her watch then angles a thumb toward the growing row of figures on the chairs

egyáltalán nem kísértetszerű. Valami a szemében egy pillanatig azt sugallja, sikeres ember.

– Mit gondol, honnan vették a pénzt? – mondja lassan, mintha csakugyan azt várná, hogy gondolkodjam el a felvetésen.

A feleségem és a gyerekeim honnan veszik a pénzt? Tőlem kapják. Én meg az ügyfelektől kapom, akik a vevőiktől kapják, és látomás szerűen egy másodpercre az egész világ, úgy tűnik, nem más, mint egy hatalmas pénzforgató gépezet. Csakhogy itt, a Sydney-i Jogsegélyszolgálat kis szigetén a lestrapált bútorokból vagy a satnya cserepes növényekből előpárolgó valamiféle vegyianyag kifejezetten taszítja a gazdagságot. A mammon áradata fölött állunk.

– Az öbölre néz, lefogadom – mondja Harry a légüres térbe.

– Bocsánat, elvesztettem a fonalat.

– Fogadok öt dollárba, hogy az öbölre néz a házuk.

Igaza van. Az otthonom a Point Piper-félszigeten, az irodám a Circular Quay-öbölben van.

– A víz látványa tágítja a teret – mondom.

– Hülyére dolgozta magát értük, ha nem tévedek. Menet közben átgyalogolt néhány emberen. Azért rendes magától, hogy itt senyved velünk, elátkozottakkal.

A hangjában nincs keserűség, inkább mintha szórakozhatná az ügy. Vajon az ital miatt lett kegyvesztett, vagy azért iszik, mert kegyvesztett lett?

– Most prédikálni akar? – kérdem, ahogy egy félrecsúszott kapcsot visszatűzők a helyére az iratcsomó te-

beyond. She flashes a smile and strides away to the photocopier.

Harry does his laugh again. 'You'll be able to tell them all about it back in your real office, in the real world. About the old derro who's so far gone on the drink he doesn't know what he's doing.' He looks me right in the eye: 'But I'm not drunk today, am I?'

If I had a dollar for every client who'd protested sobriety as they slid off that chair ... But, despite the whiff of meths, right this minute, Harry Woodruff is as sober as I've seen a man.

'You don't have to decide this right away, you know. I can write to the solicitors and say you're still considering; play for time while we find out how much it's likely to be. They haven't even applied for probate yet.'

'No thanks,' he says, like to an offer of tea.

'If you don't take it, it might end up bona vacantia – it could go to the Crown,' I say, more forcefully than I intended.

'What's your name?' he asks.

'Bartlett.'

'No, your first name.'

'Philip. Phil.'

'No thanks, Philip. I've had my days of harbour views.' He throws me a look, like he's just flashed me.

A sound of vomiting erupts from the waiting room, and I glimpse Jeanette rushing by with a bucket and a

tején.

Marjorie nemsokára hazaér a Queen's-klubbeli esti bridge-körből. A gyerekek is otthon vannak már a suliból vagy az egyetemről, a leckéjüket írják. Szinte biztos vagyok benne, hogy mindenre gondolnak pillanatnyilag, csak rám nem. És valahogy nincs is ezzel semmi baj. Révben vagyunk, biztonságban.

Jeanette, a recepciós, finoman megkocogtatja az üvegajtót, az órájára mutat, aztán a hüvelykujjával a mögötte ülő várakozók felé int. Dob egy mosolyt, és nagy léptekkel a fénymásoló felé siet.

Harry megint felkacag: – Majd mindenkinek elmondja a másik irodában, a való világban, miként találkozott ma egy elmeháborodottal, aki úgy elitta az eszét, hogy nem tudja, mit csinál.

Bárcsak mindenki után járna nekem egy dollár, akik a józanságukat bizonygatják, miközben csúsznak le a székről. De a metilszag ellenére, ebben a percben Harry Woodruff olyan józan, mint akárki más.

– Nem kell azonnal döntenie. Tudja, írhatok az ügyvédnek, hogy időt kér, és amíg halogatjuk az ügyet, tájékozódhatunk, mekkora összegről van szó. Valószínűleg még be sem adták a hivatalos jóváhagyási kérelmet.

– Köszönöm, nem – mondja, mintha csak egy teát utasítana vissza.

– Ha nem fogadja el, könnyen lehet, hogy átruházhatatlan vagyonnak fog minősülni, és a Koronára száll – vetem ellen, kissé indulatosabban, mint szándékomban állt.

law student, in time to catch a second bout from a woman who's doubled over. It's not a rare event – she might be drunk, or pregnant, or dying: plenty of our regulars are. Two of the other lawyers have emerged from their offices and someone's got a mop. It's under control. The queasiness that starts up in my stomach's probably just from the smell seeping through the partition.

As Harry takes the original of the letter and folds it gently back into its creases, I wonder what memories he's folding away with it.

'Won't hold you up,' he says.

'But don't you at least want to know who's died?'

'No. Death's a relative concept, I suppose. Besides, there are plenty of ways a life dies.'

'That's cheery.'

He seems to size me up before he says, 'You'll find out one day.'

As he slips the letter into his inside breast pocket, I catch a glimpse of something that makes me catch my breath before I even know why. The discreet, embroidered label – 'Partridge & Sons, Bespoke Tailors' is unmistakable, and matches the one in my own jacket.

Without warning, something like a panic rises within me. His life seems full of endings; of losses – and I see mine loom up in front of me, insurmountable, terrifying, as the accusation hits me: I have never lost

– Hogy is hívják Önt? – kérdezi.

– Bartlett.

– Nem, a keresztnévére gondolok.

– Philip. Phil.

– Nem, Philip, köszönöm. Én is az öbölre néztem egykor – olyan szűrő pillantást vet felém, mint a vaku fénye.

A folyosón valaki öklendezik. Látom, hogy Jeanette és egy joghallgató vödörrel siet egy kétrét görnyedő aszszony segítségére, a következő roham előtt. A jelenet nem ritka nálunk; lehet, hogy részeg vagy terhes. Vagy haldoklik: előfordult már, nem meglepő, az ügyfélkört tekintve. Két ügyvéd is kidugja a fejét a szomszédos irodákból, valaki felmos. Kézben tartjuk az ügyet. A gyomromban kezdődő émelygés bizonyára a váróból beszűrődő szag miatt van.

Miközben Harry fogja az eredeti levelet és a gyűrődések mentén gondosan összehajtogatja, azon tűnődöm, miféle emlékeket hajtogat vele vissza.

– Nem akarom feltartani – mondja.

– De nem akarja legalább megtudni, ki halt meg?

– Nem. A halál, úgy vélem, relatív. Mindazonáltal, egy élet sokféle módon megszűnhet.

– Szívderítő gondolat.

Egy darabig méreget, mielőtt kimondja: – Egy napon majd Ön is felismeri.

Ahogy a levelet a zakója belső zsebébe csúsztatja, eláll a lélegzetem a látványtól, amit megpillantok. Először fel se fogom. A diszkrét, hímzett márkavédjegy,

anything in my life. I live in a comfortable home with a reasonable wife who still welcomes me in bed and at the breakfast table with the same unquestioning love she declared twenty-five years ago. My children are healthy and happy. Christ, even my parents still live in the house I grew up in on the North Shore, fit as fiddles. There's such a long, long way to fall from happiness like that, with no practice along the way in how to survive the crash onto the rocks below.

The smell of sick is overwhelming now. I undo my collar button and loosen my tie a fraction. 'Stuffy in here. Sorry about the – uh ... ' I wave vaguely toward the corridor.

Harry fumbles with his coat pocket and after a bit produces an orange, past its best, leathery and unappetising. He pierces the skin with his thumbnail so that suddenly the air is fresh and redolent, and I'm thrown like Alice in Wonderland down the tunnel of my memory – lunch boxes packed by my mother; fruit-picking as a student; the buckets of orange quarters passed around at the final whistle of the kids' rugby or tennis matches; honeymoon near Valencia where the scent of the citrus groves wafted up to our hotel balcony as we watched the sea and the stars. My fingers can almost feel the delicate skin at the nape of Marjorie's neck, the finest veil of perspiration there. Then, a lurching in my guts brings back something I'd tried to forget – that first awareness of mortality. As I

Partridge és Fia Mértékszabóság, félreérthetetlenül ugyanolyan, mint a saját zakóm címkéje.

Minden figyelmeztető jel nélkül valami pánik kezd úrrá lenni rajtam. Ennek az embernek az élete csupa végérvényes veszteség, s ahogy a magamé előttem meredez, szédítőn, keresztülvihetetlenül, a vád szíven üt: soha semmit nem vesztettem el ebben az életben. Kényelmes otthonom van, normális feleségem, aki szívesen fogad az ágyban és a reggelinél, mindig ugyanazzal a szeretettel, ami huszonöt éve megkérdőjelezhetetlen. A gyerekeink egészségesek és boldogok. Istenem, még a szüleim is jó erőben vannak, és ugyanabban a házban élnek, ahol felnőttem, Sydney északi kerületében. Milyen hosszú a lejtő ettől a boldogságtól, és nincs semmi fortély a birtokunkban az életben maradáshoz, ha a lenti sziklákhöz csapódnánk.

A hányás szaga nyomasztó. Kigombolom az ingem felső gombját és egy árnyalatnyit lazítok a nyakkendőmön.

– Állott itt a levegő. Elnézést a körülmények miatt – intek tétován a folyosó felé.

Harry a kabátja zsebében turkál, aztán egy szebb napokat látott, nem éppen kívánatos narancsot vesz elő. A körmét a héjába mélyeszi, és a levegő egy szempillantás alatt friss, kellemes illatú lesz. Mint Alíz Csodaországban, az emlékek alagútján szállok: a kezemben az anyám készítette elemózsiás csomag, a gyümölcszedés jut eszembe diákkoromból, a gyerekeim rögbi- vagy teniszmeccsei után vödörszám körbejáró narancslé, a Va-

snapped closed the fastening on the gold necklace I'd given my bride, the icy realisation crept through me: my time with her would end one day. I pushed it down, and got on with life. I've made my weekly offerings here, helping those who never had my chances, but now I see I've just been trying to ward off bad luck with good deeds. Inoculating my life.

No more than a second has passed, as Harry places the orange on the table and taps the side of his nose. 'Old trick. Helps you forget, a good smell like that. Takes you back to life before the vomit.' He slides it towards me.

'But you could actually go back to that life!'

He looks at me with concern, and leaves enough silence to tell me there's something I haven't understood. Then his face is good humoured again. 'You've got my instructions.' He stands up slowly and his pocket clinks as he pats it. 'Cocktail hour.' His movement stirs the sick and the meth fumes and the smoke. 'You enjoy your week.' At the door he stops, half turns back, as his fingers stroke his pocket. 'It'll be all right, you know,' he says, and I wonder whether he's talking to himself. Then he's gone.

As I get up to close the door, I check the queue: seventeen, now. Seventeen lives, dressed in second hand rayon and shoes that don't fit; livers shrivelling, veins collapsing; hearts failing. Turning my back to them, something makes me head not to my seat, but to

lenciában töltött nászút emléke, ahol a citrusligetek illatát a szellő a szállodánk erkélyéig sodorta, és mi a tengert és a csillagokat bámultuk. Az ujjbegyemen érzem Marjorie nyakszirtjének puha bőrét, a veríték finom fátylát. Aztán egy apró görcs a gyomorban emlékeztet valamire, amit igyekeztem elfelejteni: a halandóság érzetére. Ahogy az aranyláncot menyasszonyom nyakára csatoltam, annak a ténynek jeges felismerése hasított belém, hogy az időm vele egy nap véget fog érni. De elnyomtam magamban ezt az érzést, és csak tapostam a mindennapokat. Hetente vezeklek itt, segítve azokon, akik előtt soha nem nyílt olyan lehetőség, mint előttem, de most látnom kell, hogy a jócselekedetekkel csupán a balszerencsét igyekszem távoltartani magamtól. Ez az én védőoltásom.

Alig néhány másodperc telt el. Harry az asztalomra teszi a narancsot, és az ujjával oldalról megdörzsöli az orrát.

– Régi trükk. Segít felejteni. A kellemes illat visszahozza a hányás előtti időt – felém tolja a narancsot.

– De Ön a valóságban is visszatérhetne múltbeli életéhez.

Töprengve tekint rám, és késlelteti a választ, hogy rájőjjenek, valamit alapvetően félreértettem. Aztán az arca újra felderül.

– Megmondtam, miképpen kívánok rendelkezni – azal feláll, és ahogy a zsebét megkocogtatja, valami csilingel. – Eljött a koktél ideje.

A mozgása felkavarja a levegőt, szesz, hányadék és

the client chair, still warm from Harry. I sit and gaze through the space on the other side of the desk, and wonder what Harry saw; what any of them see.

I widen the noose of my tie and gulp down air, then buzz the intercom to reception. 'Yes, Mr Bartlett?'

'I've got to leave early, Jeanette. Sorry.' I rummage for an excuse: 'Bugged up my diary – got another appointment.'

'Oh.' There's a pause as I hear her flick through pages. 'But you're rostered on till ten.' She lowers her voice a shade. 'We've got that whole block of codgers coming in about their eviction appeal. And your four Yugoslavian families. About that dodgy car dealer down the Parramatta Road? They're bringing an interpreter and everything.'

I turn, and over the partition I see the clients watching her, as she watches me, uncomprehending.

'I –'

I look again at the line of people. The woman who's been sick is sobbing quietly. A Vietnamese grandfather is slowly rocking. A girl not much older than my daughter is scratching her forearms and looking at the ceiling. Slumming it with the damned ...

'Are you all right?' Jeanette asks.

'Ah – fine, yes. I'm fine. Just trying to – could you send Neville around?'

A moment later, Neville appears, bearing a well-used edition of Chitty on Contract.

dohányfüst szaga keveredik.

– Legyen szép hete – szól távozóban, de az ajtónál megáll, az ujjáival végigsimít a zsebén és félig visszafordul: – Velem minden rendben lesz.

Felmerül bennem, hogy nem is hozzám beszél. Aztán eltűnik a folyosón.

Felállok, hogy becsukjam az ajtót. Kinézek a várakozók sorára: tizenheten vannak. Tizenhét műselyembe és formátlan cipőbe öltözött élet; zsugorodó májak, összeomló artériák, szívpanaszok. Ahogy megfordulok, valami arra készlet, hogy ne a saját székembe, hanem az ügyfelek székébe üljek. Még Harrytől meleg. Csak ülök és bámulok át az asztal fölött. Azon tűnődöm, mit láthatott Harry. Mit láthatnak a többiek?

Lazítok a nyakkendőmön, és iszom a levegőt. Aztán csengetek a belső telefonon a recepcióra.

– Igen, Mr. Bartlett?

– Ma korábban kell elmennem, Jeanette, elnézést – keresem a kifogást. – Összekevertem a napokat. Időpontom van a másik irodában.

– Ó – a csendszünetben hallom, ahogy a titkárnő a papírok közt lapoz. – De este tízig van beírva.

Aztán halkabban: – Itt vannak ezek a csórók a kilakoltatás ügyében. És a jugoszláv családok. Tudja, akiknek a Parramatta úti agyafűrt autókereskedővel van bajuk. Tolmácsot is hoztak...

Ahogy megfordulok, a paraván fölött látom, hogy az ügyfelek nagy szemeket meresztenek, a titkárnő meg engem bámul, nem érti a dolgot.

‘Jeanette said you wanted me?’

‘That’s right.’ My voice passes for calm. ‘I’ve got to leave early – diary mix up. Sorry to throw you in at the deep end. You run matters on your own at Showalters do you?’

‘Yes, sometimes, it depends on –’

‘Okay. I know this is a bit of a hospital pass, but there are a couple of things that’ll need babysitting tonight. One’s a possible Section 52 and Sale of Goods Act claim about a shonky car dealer. The other’s an appeal against a decision for a bunch of Diggers who’re about to be out of house and home because of a property re-zoning near the Cross.’

He nods, his face a mixture of nerves and eagerness.

‘Just start proofing the witnesses. Get their story, check that the facts make sense. There’s an interpreter for the car dealer matter.’ I pick up the two files from the corner of the table. ‘Any questions?’

He gives a quick raise of the eyebrows. ‘I suppose I won’t know until I’ve read the files.’

‘Fair point.’

Hefting the papers onto Chitty, he hugs the combined stack, and it’s like looking into a mirror, separated from another version of myself by two decades.

‘Mike’ll be here if you get into strife.’ I pat him on the shoulder. ‘You’ll be fine.’

Outside the barest breeze is stirring the hot

– Nos... – újra a várakozók sorára pillantok. A nő, aki hányt, most csendesen sírdogál. Egy vietnámi nagypapa hintázik a székén. Egy lány, alig idősebb, mint a saját lányom, a karját vakargatja és a plafont bámulja. Senyvedni az elátkozottakkal...

– Jól van? – teszi fel a kérdést Jeanette.

– Ó, hogyne. Jól vagyok. Csak megpróbálok... Átküldené Neville-t?

Kisvártatva Neville lép be, kezében egy agyonhasznált szerződésjogi kézikönyv.

– Jeanette szólt, hogy látni kíván.

– Igen – a hangom elég nyugodt. – Ma korábban kell végeznem, egy szervezési hiba folytán. Bocsánat, hogy rögtön a mélyvízbe dobom, de a Showalternél, gondolom, önállóan vitt bizonyos ügyeket.

– Igen, volt úgy néha. Attól függően, hogy...

– Rendben. Tudom, hogy ez most egy kicsit tűzoltás-szagú, de lenne néhány eset, ami nem tűr halasztást. Az egyik egy csibész autókereskedő ellen, Kereskedelmi javak elidegenítése, 52. fejezet. A másik egy jogos követelés: néhány aranyásót ki akarnak lakoltatni, mert a belváros új helyrajzszám-kiosztása során máshova kerültek a birtokhatárok.

Bólint, a tekintete izgalmat tükröz és várakozással teli.

– Csak hallgassa meg a tanúkat, jegyezze le, amit mondanak, és vesse össze a tényekkel. Az autókereskedő elleni ügyben tolmács is lesz – felemelem a két doszsiét az asztal sarkán. – Van kérdése?

darkness. There's no traffic at this hour, and I'm at Bronte Beach in less than fifteen minutes. I take off my shoes and socks, and grab the towel from the back seat. The sand on my bare feet takes me back to years of bringing the kids here, juggling hand-holding and car keys and buckets and trying not to get nipped by a sand crab one or another of them's decided to adopt. I can still see Tim, our eldest, wide-eyed at the sensation of his two-week-old toes meeting the Pacific for the first time as we performed that vernacular Australian baptism. The look that passed between him and me and Marjorie like an electric charge: we were a family. This was our life, and I would protect it, always. We went through that initiation with each of our four. Had Harry done something similar with the Alice Therese Woodruffs? Had he believed he could protect them? Which of them had died?

Tim's six-foot-four and a prop on the Sydney Uni firsts. Karen's got a boyfriend who dotes on her and walks her all the way home from Med School sometimes. Only another couple of years and the twins'll be at Uni too, with the marks to study whatever they want. An odd thought grips me: where are our babies now? In that split second I'm felled by the loss of them; the loss of Marjorie as a coltish hurdles champion; of myself, just starting out with that same blend of trepidation and eagerness I'd seen in Neville's face.

Gyorsan felhúzza a szemöldökét: – Úgy vélem, nincs, amíg bele nem néztem az aktákba.

– Valóban.

A dossziékat a kézikönyvvel a hóna alá csapja, s én úgy látom őt, mintha tükörbe néznék, elszakadva önmagamtól, húsz évvel ezelőtt.

– Mike még itt lesz, ha segítségre szorul – veregetem vállon. – De nem lesz semmi gond.

Az utcán a forró sötétségben enyhe szellő jár. Alig van forgalom, tizenöt perc alatt a Bronte-strandhoz érek. Leveszem a cipőm, a zoknim, és előhúzom a hátsó ülésről a törülközőt. A talpamat simogató homok évekkel repít vissza az időben. A gyerekeket szoktuk ide kihozni, fogtuk a kezüket, a kocsikulcsot, vödröket, és közben igyekeztünk elkerülni, hogy belénk csípjén a tarisznyarák, amit valamelyikük mindig örökbe fogadott. Magam előtt látom a legidősebb fiúmat; Tim nagy szemeket meresztett, amikor kéthetes korában, a szokásos ausztrál beavatási szertartás keretében a lába hegyét a Csendes-óceánba mártottuk. Az elektromos töltésű pillantás, amit Marjorie-val váltottam, elárulta, mit érzünk: akkor lettünk igazi család. Ez adott értelmet az életemnek, ezt bármi ellen kész voltam megvédeni. Mind a négy gyerekkel végrehajtottuk a beavatást. Vajon Harry is végzett valami hasonló szertartást a két Therese Woddruff-fal? Egykor ő is bízott benne, hogy képes lesz a családját megvédelmezni bármi ellen? És vajon melyik Therese az elhunyt?

Tim ma két méter magas, a Sydney Egyetem első csa-

It's nearly ten, and the beach is swathed in blackness, the waves still kicking up their foam skirts as they find their way to shore by moonlight alone. The clinging heat is too much and I shed my suit coat, then my tie. Without any conscious will, a minute later I find myself heading into the water, as naked as our babies were, my clothes folded neatly on the sand. Salty tears, the first for decades, are drowned by the salt of the water as I dive under and re-emerge to swim fast freestyle, and faster, until I've got no breath left in me.

Around the bay, a few lights still gaze benignly – people in houses or flats with ocean views, up late, studying or fretting or making love or comforting toddlers woken from bad dreams. Oblivious to the darkness pressing against the glass. 'There are plenty of ways a life dies.' It's like I've only just noticed the fine print in a familiar contract: I've been losing bits of my life quietly all these years – worried about falling off a cliff when all the time the cliff was falling into the sea.

There's not another soul around. The water against my skin strips away a last layer inside me and I find myself sobbing, howling with pain – the pain of I don't know what. That those babies, that their young father, are gone forever? That to grow, some part of you has to die? That one day there'll be a letter from the doctor's surgery or a ring on the door bell and it'll be bad news.

patának oszlopos tagja. Karenbe bele van zúgva egy srác, aki néha hazakíséri az orvosi egyetemről. Még két év és az ikrek is egyetemre járnak majd; olyan osztályzatokat hoznak, hogy bármire beiratkozhatnak, ami megtetszik nekik. Egy furcsa gondolat kerít hatalmába: hol veszett ki belőlük a négy kisgyerek? Ebben a pillanatban letaglóz, hogy elvesztettem őket. Elvesztettem Marjorie-t, az egykori, fiatal gátfutó bajnokot; elvesztettem önmagam, aki egykor ugyanazzal a hévvel és izgalmommal láttam munkához, mint amit ma Neville arcán láttam tükröződni.

Mindjárt tíz óra, a strandot feketeség járja át, a hullámokon hab fodrozódik, ahogy utat találnak a parthoz a holdfényben. A hőség nem enged szorításából; megszabadulok a zakómtól, a nyakkendőmtől. Egy perccel később, minden tudatosság nélkül, belegázolok a vízbe, meztelenül, ahogy egykor a gyerekeink, a ruhám a parton gondosan összehajtogatva. Évtizedek óta először, megerednek sós könnyeim, elvegyülnek a tenger sós vízével. Alámerülök, majd a felszínre bukva, gyorsban úszok, amíg ki nem fulladok.

Az öböl körül elszórtan szelíd fények égnek; néhányan, óceánra néző otthonukban fenn vannak még, tanulnak, aggályoskodnak, szeretkeznek, vagy kényelembe helyezik rossz álmotól felriadt gyermeküket. Tudomást sem vesznek az ablak túloldalán terjeszkedő sötétiségről. „Egy élet sokféle módon megszűnhet.” Úgy érzem magam, mint aki csak most vesz észre egy apróbetűs kitélt egy már megismert szerződésben: évek óta

The worst news, eventually.

A wave slaps the back of my head – thwack – and down I go, tumbled over and over like seaweed and there's water up my nose and down my throat and my face slams down against the sand that scrapes it as I'm dumped back on the shore, where I lie, retching up sea water and spitting out sand until I work out which way is up. In the chaos it comes to me: he's survived his endings, Harry. He's survived his fall, even been liberated by it, somehow.

Every nerve is awake. Every inch of me is in touch with air or water or sand and my heart's thudding not with the pain but with – the miracle of it. The miracle of everything. I let the waves wash over and away, over and away, over and away, knowing it's fractionally different water touching a fractionally different person with every passing second.

It's after midnight when I get back to the Legal Centre, long since shut up. I unlock the door and the fluorescent strip awakes with a buzz as I make my way to my office. My bare feet make no sound on the holey lino, and my wet hair sprinkles droplets as I pull my chair in to the desk.

In front of me, neatly stacked, and bound with their usual pink tape, are the files I gave to Neville, topped with a hand-written note:

apránként és csendben megfosztódom az életemtől. Aggodalmaskodok, hogy le ne zuhanjak a szikláról, miközben a szikla porlad a tengerbe.

Egy lélek sincs körülöttem. A bőrömet érő víz a legbensőbb rétegeimet is lemossa, és azon veszem észre magam, hogy zokogok, ordítok a fájdalomtól, de a fájdalom okát nem ismerem. Hogy a gyerekek felnőttek? Hogy fiatal apjuk már nincs többé? A fájdalom, hogy a növekedéshez valaminek bennünk szükségszerűen meg kell halni? Hogy egy napon a családom majd értesítés kap felőlem egy kórházból, vagy valaki rossz hírrel csenget be? A végső, a legrosszabb hírrel?

Egy hullám a tarkómba mar, alámerülök, többször megfordulok magam körül, olyan tehetetlen vagyok, akár a hínár, az orrom és a torkom megtelik vízzel, és az arcomat karcolja a durva homok, ahogy partra vetődök. Hosszan fekszem így, tengervizet és homokot öklendezve, lassan tisztázódnak az irányok. Az összeviszszaságban támad egy gondolatom: ez a Harry túlélte a saját halálát. A zuhanás után életben maradt, sőt valahogy szabaddá lett.

Minden idegszálam élénk. Minden porcikám érintkezik a levegővel, a vízzel vagy a homokkal, és a szívem nem a fájdalomtól dobog hevesen, hanem a csodától. A mindenség csodájától. Hagyom, hogy a partra futó hullámok át- meg átmossanak, és érzem, hogy minden újabb hullám, árnyalatnyi mértékben, mindig egy új személyt mos végig bennem.

Éjfél után érek vissza a Jogsegély központba, az iro-

'Dear Philip,

Files returned herewith. All ok. Attendance notes done, and rough draft proofs in for typing in the morning. Have to head off now – late for wedding planning and don't want to be in bad books. Thanks for the challenge. Look forward to seeing you next week.

Neville.'

I undo the tape and skim the file notes. He's done an impressive job.

On the other side of the desk sits the Woodruff file, still with the orange on it. I open the file, take up the Dictaphone and begin: "This is a tape from Phil. It's a letter on the Woodruff matter. It's to Messrs Parfitt, Parfitt & Delaney. Your ref. AAD/ py, Our ref PMB/ HW. Letter begins "Dear Sirs, Re The Estate of the Late Alice Therese Woodruff." I break off, and pick up the orange, tracing my own thumbnail over the scar left by Harry's. His smile comes back to me as I peel the fruit, breathing in the reassuring tang. ♦

dák rég bezártak. Előkeresem a kulcsom, és a fénycsövek zümmögve felizzanak, ahogy a szobámba tartok. Meztelen talpam hangtalanul lép a csupa lyuk linóleumon, a hajamból csöpög a víz, az asztalomhoz húzom a széket.

Gondosan rendberakva, a szokásos rózsaszín szalaggal átkötve, előttem fekszenek a dossziék, amiket Neville-re bíztam, a kupac tetején egy kézzel írt levél.

Kedves Philip! Itt vannak az akták. Minden rendben. A látogatási napló kész, az igazoló iratok piszkozatai holnapi gépelésre leadva. Most mennem kell, késésben vagyok az esküvői próbára, nem akarok rossz pontot szerezni. Köszönöm a kihívást. A jövő heti viszontlátásra, Neville

Kioldom a szalagot és belepillantok a feljegyzésekbe. Kiváló munka. Az asztal túlsó felén a Woodruff-akta, rajta egy félig hámozott narancs. Előveszem belőle az iratokat és bekapcsolom a diktafont: Phil szalagja. Levél a Woodruff-ügy kapcsán. Címzett: Parfitt, Parfitt & Delaney. Ref: AAD/py, Iktató: PMB/HW. A levél szövege: Tisztelt Uraim! Hivatkozással a néhai Therese Woodruff hagyatéki eljárására...

Itt félbe kell szakítanom a diktálást. Kezembe veszem a narancsot, végigsimítom Harry körmének a nyomát. Újra látom, ahogy elmosolyodik, meghámozom a gyümölcsöt, és magamba szívom csípős, megnyugtató illatát. ♦