

*“Emotional, heartfelt and heart-breaking,  
all brilliantly bound together.”*

# THE TURNING TIDE

*Adventure, passion and  
redemption in WWII Timor  
and atom-bombed Hiroshima*

**C.M. LANCE**  
**RADIATION BOOK 1**

# **THE TURNING TIDE**

**C.M. Lance**

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR (as Kate Lance)

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*Embers at Midnight*

*Testing the Limits*

*Silver Highways*

*Atomic Sea* (as C.M. Lance)

### **Non-Fiction**

*Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds*

*Redbill: From Pearls to Peace*

*To my family*

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## 1. Tidal River

The beach at Tidal River curves far away, a golden boundary between the mountains and the sea. On Little Oberon there are boulders half a hill wide, lifting like shoulders through the grey-green scrub. I could never put a colour to those rocks and still can't. Tarnished ash, rusted granite, melted bronze?

I know it must be a beautiful sight. I remember a time when the morning light on those mountains would bring me to a halt with joy, but today I feel nothing at all.

'Look, darling, it's spectacular,' says the post-doc's wife. He's staring out to sea and I expect he's pondering some engineering problem. They're a nice couple but I haven't had much to do with them while he's been in the department: we work in different fields.

I've reluctantly taken on the task of bringing them here to famous Wilsons Promontory before they return to London because no one else is free these holidays.

But I don't mind the department owing me a favour, and in my long habit of numbness since Marion's death I don't expect this place to move me. Not now.

The woman turns to me. 'I heard you were here during the war.'

To myself I curse the department's gossipy secretary. 'Yes.'

'Has it changed much since then?'

I laugh shortly. 'The beach hasn't. The people have.'

Two good-looking youngsters walk past us with a bag and towels. The girl smiles at us.

'So soldiers actually trained here? Extraordinary.'

'Commandos. We'd swim off this beach—'

Commandos? Children. I look at the water and see naked bodies, splashing and chiacking in the surf, back from a ten-mile hike. I see Johnny and Alan lying on the sand. Dark-haired Alan face down, a book beside him; golden Johnny, grinning, sprawled on his back, shameless as a god.

I notice the youngsters shaking out their towels. The girl's blonde hair swings around her shoulders and I feel a pang of memory.

'Don't forget the bus leaves at five,' says the post-doc. 'How long from here to Foster is it?'

'About an hour. Let's go.'

We walk back beside Tidal River, with its tea-brown waters that ebb and flow with the moon. Near the car park the couple divert to have a closer look at the commando memorial. I skirted around it earlier but there's no avoiding it now.

The double-diamond and dagger shape on top looks like a TV aerial. Then I see the dark blue colour-patch up high. Must be made of enamel not to fade, I think, trying to ignore the thump in my gut.

I hang back but can't help hearing the woman read aloud, "During 1941 and 1942 the 1st to 8th Independent Companies, the colour patches of which appear hereon and two New Zealand Units, were formed and trained in the Darby and Tidal River areas."

'That's appalling,' the post-doc says. 'Doesn't anyone know how to use commas nowadays?'

His wife turns to me. 'Was your company one of those?'

'Ah, the 4th.'

'Which colour were they?'

'I don't remember. Look, we've got to get a move on or we'll be late.' I set off abruptly for the car. My throat is tight and I wish they weren't here.

I take the high road between Fish Creek and Foster to show them the panorama from that spot where the grass is worn away from everyone else stopping, like us, to stare. There's Wilsons



Promontory, mountain after indigo mountain, across the water to the right. To the left, the rolling green Strzelecki Hills. Before us, fields dotted with sleek cows, and beyond, wide blue Corner Inlet. As it ever was.

My passengers are going on a tour for a week before returning home. Their bus is waiting near the park in Foster, engine rumbling softly. They thank me for taking them to see the Prom and the post-doc says how much he enjoyed his time in the department and we shake hands.

I say, 'Must go, I'd like to be back on the road to Melbourne before dark, it's a few hours from here.' I wave goodbye and get into the car.

Then I surprise myself by driving down the street and booking in for the night.

First I try the Exchange in the middle of town but the barman says they don't do rooms any more, so I go to the nearby motel instead. The walls look as if they haven't been painted in twenty years, but the bed is comfortable.

I hear the occasional car passing outside as the light fades and cool air drifts through the half-open window. I get up, shut the window, put on my jacket and walk over to the Exchange for a meal.

The steak isn't bad, nor the beer. Better than back then, anyway. The fire's a pleasure too, and I have another beer so I can watch the flames through it. I realise the girl serving at the bar is the one I saw at the beach this afternoon. That's not surprising, Foster's a very small place. She reminds me a little of Helen. But not really.

The toilets are inside now, not out in the yard. I suppose the old ones are long since demolished, along with the letters I carved in the wall with a pocket knife that night before leaving for the Prom. M-H. My fingertips tingle with memory.

I don't expect to sleep well but I do. Still, I'm alert at first light and lie there snug in the warm, hearing the sweet gurgle of

maggies in the dawn outside. What will I do today?

It's the holidays, Easter 1982, with no reason to rush back to Melbourne. The children have their own lives. Terry's a teacher, two kids and a nice wife. Sue's a vet, never married, lives with her friend Gail. The situation was always clear to me but it used to worry Marion. She said a mother shouldn't ask, but I expect, after everything, she didn't want to know.

The bathroom is cold but the shower's warm and my shoulder gradually loosens up. The face in the mirror, all auburn stubble and rust-grey hair, doesn't much gladden the heart, but at least I'm still lean. If I squint—a lot—I can almost see the tall young man who used to swim at Tidal River.

I keep a small bag of essentials in the car so I've got the means to civilise myself: that's what my dad Danny used to say, shaving with his open razor in our humid bathroom in Broome, on the other side of the country. Dad, with the same green eyes as me, dead these ten years now.

I pay for the room at the desk and buy some apples at a shop. I get into the car and head back to the Prom.

I'm enjoying the drive, the views from the hills and the low Yanakie fields, looking forward to the rising switchback past Darby River and that breathtaking moment at the top when you come round the corner and there's Bass Strait right in front of you, with all those rounded rocky islands like the Prom's baby mountains.

I wonder for an instant why I've stayed away for so long, but then I remember why. I'm almost at the Darby Saddle when I see a car by the side of the road.

The rear tyre is flat and a girl in jeans is looking into the open boot. I pull over, get out and ask if I can help. Unsurprised, I realise she's the girl behind the bar who'd reminded me of Helen: this really is a small place.

She looks at me with gratitude, then recognition.

'You were in the Exchange last night,' she says. 'Thanks so

much. The spare's flat as well, damn it, I meant to fill it up the other week.'

'That's no good,' I say. 'Can't use my spare either.' My car's one of those little Japanese things—used to be my wife's—but this is a big old Holden.

'Can you give me a lift to Tidal River? They've got a public phone and I can ring my boyfriend.'

She takes her bag from the front seat and we settle into my car. I'm a little surprised she's so trusting, but then remember that's how it is in this part of the country.

'I'm Mike Whalen, by the way,' I say.

'Lena Erikssen. This is great, you coming along. There's so little traffic out this way in the mornings. I wanted to grab a swim, won't be many nice days now before it's too cold.' She considers me. 'Weren't you at the beach yesterday too?'

'I was showing a couple of tourists around. Thought I'd have a quiet look at the place again today by myself.'

Her hair is wavy and reddish blonde, I see now, and her eyes turquoise; not the same as Helen's thick gold hair and sea-blue eyes. But she still looks familiar.

'I used to know an Erikssen family here, oh, forty years ago now,' I say. 'Not related to John Erikssen by any chance?'

'He was my grandfather. He died in the war.'

'Good God. You're *Johnny's* granddaughter?'

At that moment we get to the point in the road where you come round the corner and there in front of you, like a revelation, is the teal of the water and the high soft clouds and the round silvery islands. But this time I see gold, not silver. Just gold and blue.

'So your grandmother ... Helen? Is she—?'

'You know my nana?' Lena says. 'She's great. I'm named after her. Well, sort of.'

Of course. I pull over to look at the view. A pain I cannot believe possible twists my heart for a moment.

'I never get used to the sight either,' she says, glancing at me.

We go back onto the road and ten minutes later we're driving

into Tidal River. I point to Mount Oberon rising steeply to the left.

‘We had to run up there when we started training. If you couldn’t make it they sent you home.’

‘You and my grandfather?’

‘Yeah.’ I smile at the thought of Johnny, glorious Johnny, called a grandfather. But no, he was never a grandfather. He barely got to see his son, let alone this nice young woman.

I drive slowly along the narrow road past the few blocks left from the war. They took the huts away after they moved the training school to the tropics in 1943.

Some bright spark realised, yeah, this place was usefully brutal as hell, but maybe stinking hot and wet, not freezing cold and wet, might better prepare men for island war.

Stupid idea. Nothing could have prepared us for that.

Lena rings her boyfriend from the public phone and tells me he’ll be at her car in an hour with a new tyre, then he’ll come and pick her up.

‘Sounds like a nice bloke,’ I say. We’re eating apples and walking along the track to the beach.

‘Chris? He’s fine. But I’m not in any hurry to settle down, I want to travel first. And I’m doing uni—second-year physics.’

‘Physics?’ I’m impressed. ‘Which uni?’

‘Melbourne.’

‘You’re kidding. I lecture in engineering there.’

‘What, you’re a real professor?’ she asks teasingly.

‘You’d better believe it, young lady,’ I say with mock dignity.

We’re walking over the sand towards the water. A few people are scattered around but the only sounds come from the hissing surf and the seagulls.

‘Nana’s pleased about uni. She hopes I’ll end up teaching at the local high school, but I think she knows I’m off to see the world first!’ She laughs and suddenly I see her dimples, like Helen’s. She gets her towel from her bag.

‘Can you mind my stuff, Mike? I really want a swim.’

Lena takes off her jeans and T-shirt. Beneath she’s wearing a one-piece blue swimsuit. She walks away towards the water, completely at ease in her youth and beauty. For a moment she’s so much like Helen my eyes sting.

Since losing Marion, things long forgotten have been rising like wraiths around me, and dear God I wish it would stop. Every fucking moment reminds me of something else, till I’m exhausted with trying not to remember. Or exhausted with remembering. And now this. No wonder I never came back before.

I sigh and lean back and lie down with my old canvas hat over my face. The air is comfortable in the hazy morning sun. My thoughts gradually slow and I doze.

After a time I hear Lena come back and lie down on her towel. A while later she gets up and calls out and runs towards the path. I roll over to see. She’s hugging a muscular lad, then they walk hand in hand towards me. As they get closer he stares hard at me for a moment, then grins. He’s clearly reassured I’m no threat to his Lena.

Funny. That’s how Johnny used to look whenever he saw me with Helen.

We walk back to the car park. On the way Lena stops to gaze at the commando memorial and this time I’m prepared.

‘I always wonder what he was like, my grandfather. In the photos he looks sort of fun, always smiling. Was he like that?’

‘Yes. Yes, he was a good bloke, laughed a lot, kept everyone amused.’

When he could, I think, when he wasn’t in pain from dysentery or malaria or tropical ulcers, or no boots and no food and no sleep. When he wasn’t being tortured.

Lena says, ‘I live with Mum in Foster when I’m not at uni. But Nana’s further out in the hills. You know she remarried after the war? But she’d love to see you.’

‘Actually, I have to go back to Melbourne now,’ I say. ‘I don’t think there’s any chance of getting to see her today.’

Lena borrows my notebook and writes down Helen’s phone number and address.

‘Promise me you’ll go and see her sometime?’

‘Yes, of course. Give her my best wishes, say I hope she’s well.’

Lena looks at me, doubt in her eyes. Chris calls, ‘*Leen-ah*,’ from the car.

She puts her hand on my arm. ‘Thanks so much, Mike. I’d have been stuffed if you hadn’t come along. You promise?’

‘Yes,’ I say. I’m tired.

She beams and hops into Chris’s car, waving as they pull away. I open my door and sit down heavily. The car park is where the old parade ground was. I can hear magpies again, calling tree to tree. I think of this morning, the first time I’d looked forward to the day in ages.

Dear God. Why didn’t I go home yesterday?

I drive back along the road through Fish Creek to Meeniyán, avoiding any possibility of Foster, even from a distance. Old Harry O’Brien would take me that way sometimes in the cart. I can smell the big brown horse for a moment, feel her velvet ears, hear her snuffle, as she nibbled grain from my hand. Betty? No, Bessie.

Betty was someone else entirely. But her eyes were as brown and her lashes as long: I laugh at my absurdity. Oh, Betty my dear.

The O’Briens had been in service with Mum’s family before the Great War, then they bought a small dairy farm here. Sally O’Brien looked as tough as nails but she was kind to me when I was so homesick: only seventeen and soon to attend the great University of Melbourne.

My parents thought a few months on a farm before starting uni would do me good. They didn’t want me hanging around Broome with nothing to do. Not because they didn’t like having me there—Mum was red-eyed for days before I left—but because of Betty.

They worried we might be getting too close, too young.

No, don't think about Betty, I scold myself, or Ken. Don't think about the Egawa kids, friends of my childhood in that red and green and turquoise place, so different from anywhere else in the country. Almost alien.

Alien. Funny word. That's what they used to call Betty and Ken's dad, Yoshi. And their mum too—Australian-born, but always Japanese. Always alien.

I sigh. Stop it, you old fool. Concentrate. I'm here now, driving in this rich green and blue countryside, an academic close to the end of his career, an adequate researcher, not a bad teacher. But I'm back there too, a boy yearning for the colours, the smells, the sounds of red-dust Broome, two thousand miles away.

The O'Briens worked me kindly—harvesting, milking cows, repairing, keeping me busy on the endless tasks around the farm—until it all slowly became familiar. Their small weatherboard farmhouse, off the appropriately named Muddy Lane, was surrounded by green fields running down to Corner Inlet.

Across the water was the Prom, and sometimes from my bedroom I'd watch sunlight and shadows dancing over the mountain peaks for hours.

I turn onto the highway and keep going. The road humming past, I think of young Lena and the first time I met Johnny, her grandfather. Harry brought him to the stable one day when I was feeding the horse.

'The Erikssen lad,' Harry said, 'come to give a hand with the harvesting.'

He was tall and strong, fair-haired with a slow smile. 'Johnny Erikssen,' he said, and shook my hand like a man.

Johnny was great company, easy to work with, no shirking, no bullshit. I would have been in awe of him except he was so down-to-earth. A year older than me, he was as charmed by my life in exotic Broome as I was by his in green-blue Gippsland.

His family were Swedish, common background in this area, and when they weren't working on their farm they were fishing.

Corner Inlet fish were famous, Johnny would say, served in the best of Melbourne's restaurants. I'd grown up sailing small boats and was happy to offer him a hand.

Johnny's family lived not far from Foster on the road to Port Franklin, a little harbour at the mouth of a river, all mangroves and small scuttling crabs. It reminded me pleasingly of Broome.

During very low tides Corner Inlet's blue waters would drain away, revealing acres of seagrass and rippled mud, again like Broome. As a child I would watch the moon rising over Roebuck Bay, the strips of light on the mudflats like a ladder to the sky.

That summer in Foster was idyllic. I was anchored, safe, harboured by the green hills around me and the Prom across the water, as I worked with Johnny in the paddocks or out on the boat or milking the cows at dawn.

Often I'd breathe the scent of mown hay and be filled with a great joy: as if I were about to glimpse something wonderful, something I'd never thought possible, something I'd wanted, without even knowing, all the brief years of my life.



## 2. Foster

Johnny and I stayed mates even after I went away to Melbourne in early 1939, because I'd go back to Foster in the term breaks to help the O'Briens.

University wasn't easy but I'd been at boarding school in Perth and was used to study and keeping my head down in a crowd of lads. In any case, I enjoyed the work.

In third term I started going out with a girl I met in a pub one night. That was Kitty, dark-haired and quiet, a secretary in an insurance company. She'd let me feel her small round breasts through her jumper, no further. But just being allowed to kiss her was a revelation.

It was a shock that September when war in Europe started. The threat had rumbled on for so long it hardly seemed real. Of course, Britain's war was Australia's war and change happened quickly. One of Johnny's brothers joined the 2nd AIF in October 1939 and was sent to Palestine.

Johnny itched to join up too but was needed at home to keep the farm going. I stayed put as well because the government didn't want to take recruits from universities or industry, or anywhere vital to the war effort.

\*

I walk quickly along the Carlton street through the wet leaves, hands in my pockets and shoulders hunched, expecting the rain to start again at any moment. A colleague is with me who wants to have a chat over lunch about the latest reshuffle in the department. I've lived through so many I barely notice them, but he's young and still thinks it matters.

We enter the lounge of the Royal Oak as the rain begins and order lunch. As my colleague frets about his future I tell him not to agonise, he's safe for now.

He's unmollified and goes over the state of play again. I watch the flames in the fireplace and eat my sandwich and nod every now and then. He's a good lad but I wish he'd shut up.

Looking around, I'm pleased to see the old pub hasn't much changed over the years. In early 1940 my parents came over to Melbourne for a few weeks, and this was where we'd had lunch one afternoon. I took my girlfriend Kitty along to meet them.

When they saw her, Dad got that expression he'd use when he was being careful (something about his eyebrows always gave him away) but Mum—Lucy—was lovely, just as she was to everyone.

She must have been in her late forties then, grey streaks in her brown hair and laugh lines around her eyes. I thought she was beautiful, but then I always did. Kitty seemed to enjoy herself, though it was hard for her to keep up with our family jokes and fast-moving gossip.

The weeks of my parents' visit passed quickly. We took the train to Foster and visited the O'Briens, who hadn't seen them since before the Great War. There was a lot of talking about people I'd never heard of, but Mum was so happy it didn't matter.

My parents met Johnny Erikssen too and liked him. That night was the first time I ever stayed at the Exchange. Mum said how nice Kitty was but I shouldn't rush into anything, I was still studying, shouldn't tie myself down. Dad grinned and didn't say much.

My parents sailed home to Broome in February 1940. I was a little sad when they left and Kitty took pity on me.

One night we went to the cinema to see the Marx Brothers and laughed ourselves silly. I thought Kitty looked a bit like Maureen O'Sullivan and said so.

She was pleased and after I'd walked her home to the rooms she shared with her friend Dottie, she asked me up for a cup of tea. When we opened the door we found Dottie was out.

We were soon lying together on the couch, arms around each other, legs and clothes entwined and hot. I'd assumed it was to be another evening of aching frustration and limited liberties, when Kitty whispered shyly into my neck, 'Would you like to lie down in my room?'

I had imagined this moment over and over, breathlessly wanking, but hadn't thought the details through very precisely. All I could do was nod, get up clumsily, and follow her to a neat little bedroom.

She undressed, draping her clothes over a chair as if she were by herself, until she was wearing only her white brassiere and panties. She pulled back the cover and lay down on her single bed.

I somehow got out of my clothes and sat beside her in my underpants, tented by an erection I pretended not to notice. I leant down and kissed her, wriggled into bed and pressed against her. At last, at last, oh thank you, Lord.

After a moment of awkwardness I managed to get the brassiere undone and finally saw those adorable breasts, more beautiful and mysterious than I'd ever imagined.

I stroked her nipples and thought, how could this be happening? Amazingly, she caressed me with her pretty hands and pulled my underpants off, kissing me all the while.

Then she turned away, reaching to her bedside drawer. 'Mike, we need protection,' she whispered. She handed me a small rubber object and I managed, awkwardly, to get the thing on.

I still feel shame today at my shock. Kitty wasn't a virgin, she knew what to do. She even had a stock of frenchies in her drawer! But the shock certainly wasn't enough to stop me in my tracks. I pulled her panties off and rolled on top of her.

She parted her legs and guided me inside to a heat I hadn't expected. Dazed with smoothness and thighs and belly and breasts I lasted only a minute or two, but in the glorious wave of climax was shocked again to realise she was returning my thrusts, utterly lost in her own pleasure.

Oh Kitty. What a gift you were.

I'd promised to go down to Gippsland to the O'Briens' farm after my parents left, so had an excuse to get away a day or so later, part exultant and part ashamed at leaving Kitty so suddenly. As the train drew closer to Foster I imagined Johnny's look of awe and respect when I told him.

I dropped my bag at the farm, kissed Sally and shook Harry's hand, and rode a rusty bicycle into town to meet Johnny for a drink at the Exchange. I told him my wonderful news, trying all the while to pretend it wasn't so earth-shattering, so marvellous (me, a man of the world).

He gave me his slow, affectionate smile and stubbed out his cigarette and I realised, without a word being spoken, that Johnny had done it already, long ago, with half the girls in town.

He nodded his head towards the barmaid. 'See her?'

I'd been so taken with my own news I hadn't. I looked, and looked again. She was fair, gold-blond, and even from ten feet away I saw the perfect blue of her eyes and the quick dimples in her pink cheeks as she handed someone a glass. Later I'd see she had a tiny flaw, a dot of brown in one iris, but it only made her all the more fascinating.

Johnny's smile was calm, confident. 'Her name's Helen, Helen Cunningham. I'm going to get her to go out with me.'

'She's gorgeous,' I said, overwhelmed by my own ordinariness. A girl like that; a boy like Johnny. It was only natural. People like me ended up with the everyday Kittys of the world, the secretaries with French letters in their drawer. I got self-pityingly drunk that evening.

I'm sitting at my desk in the study, trying to mark papers, a half-empty glass of wine to one side. I put my hands over my eyes and groan in horror at my stupidity, my own young, male, heartless stupidity.

I didn't even have the conviction of my beliefs. When I went back to Melbourne I kept seeing Kitty, kept accepting the

generosity of her sensuality over months of my own pleasure and growing confidence. I didn't understand for an instant the risks she was taking with her reputation, her health, her future.

Kitty must have known how superficial my commitment was. When the inevitable happened after about eight months together, when she was late and desperate and came to speak to me, I could see she already knew there would be no reprieve by marriage.

I had enough in my bank account to pay for an abortion. She refused to meet me afterwards and I never saw her again; although once her friend Dottie passed me in the street and gave me such a look of contempt it still makes me hot with shame today.

I take a mouthful of wine and think of young, confident Lena—pregnancy sidestepped with a pill, reputation based on character, not sex life. You're getting maudlin, I tell myself; even now, in the early eighties, it's not easy for women. But it's better. At least it's better than it was for Kitty. Isn't it?

In that odd way thinking of someone seems to make them appear, the next day I'm flipping through something in the Union bookshop and Lena's there across a stack of texts. Our eyes meet at the same time and she's delighted. I'm feeling unsociable but she insists we have a cup of coffee next door.

'I was hoping I'd run into you, Mike,' she says, spooning sugar into her cup. 'I'm having such a great time, second semester's amazing! We're doing electromagnetism.'

'You didn't do it last year?'

'Not in this detail. We had to really concentrate. Equation after equation on the blackboard, but it all went together so incredibly. Then at the end, like magic—'

'I know ... E equals MC squared?'

'How did you know?'

'It happened to me too, a long time ago. Amazing moment.'

'Did your class applaud too?'

'Lena, it was just after the war. We knew atomic bombs had

been dropped on living people, that radiation was killing many more. I think we sat there stunned that something so ... beautiful ... could lead to that. No, we didn't applaud.'

I've hurt her a little. She says coolly, finding a flaw in my story, 'Nana said you were at university before the war, not after.'

Oh, Nana said, did she?

'I started before but didn't finish till afterwards. A serviceman's grant—the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme,' I say with bureaucratic precision.

She looks at me and I notice for the first time she has the same little brown dot in her left iris as Helen. I tell her so.

She's silent for a moment. 'A boy at school used to tease me about it.'

'But it's lovely. I remember—' I stop. 'It's good to have something special like that.'

She smiles a little. A thought hits me.

'My God, we've been talking about you and your grandmother. But what about your dad? Johnny's son, what's his name? Is he in Foster too?' I suddenly recall she'd said she lived with her mother and pray I haven't screwed up again.

'He's called Ian. He lives in Hong Kong.' She looks up and sees the surprise on my face. 'He and Mum divorced when I was ten. But now she lives with Mitch. He's really nice.' She sighs. 'Dad was in the navy in Vietnam and when he came home he was different. Horrible. That happened to my friend at school's dad too.'

I can't speak for shock and nausea. Johnny dead in the Pacific War and they sent his son to fight in that disgusting, evil, arselick of a war? All the way with those shits who learnt nothing, *nothing*, from what we went through?

I take a breath. 'Lena, I'm sorry about your dad. That's ... Jesus, I'm so sorry.'

'He visits every year,' she says lightly. 'And always brings me nice things. He's happier nowadays, he doesn't get so angry. Or sad. He's captain of a boat. I think he likes that.'

Ian. Ian Erikssen. Oh Johnny, how did we let them get away with

it again? I feel an agony of responsibility. We tried to stop them, Johnny. Argued, joined anti-war groups, marched in demos. Dear God, your son—Helen's baby—in Vietnam.

'Mike, it's all right,' says Lena hesitantly. She can't know why my face twists with pain, but it doesn't scare her. She's a kind girl.

'We honestly thought war wouldn't happen again,' I try to explain. 'But it did and it steamrolled right over you and your family, again. It's ... wrong. Wrong.'

She looks at me, her head slightly to one side. 'What about your family, Mike?'

'Oh,' I say. 'Well, my wife Marion died about three years ago now. I've got a daughter who's a vet and a son, a teacher. They're my stepchildren really, but I've raised them since they were small.'

After a moment she says, 'Why don't you come down in the September holidays and see Nana? She said she'd like that.'

No, Lena, I don't think she would. And I'm absolutely certain I wouldn't.

'I'm afraid I've got another commitment,' I say, trying to think of something plausible.

Lena looks at me sceptically. 'Uh-huh. What about the Christmas break, then? Three months of it?'

I open my mouth but can't think of anything, so shut it again.

She smiles. 'I told you Nana remarried, yeah?'

'Yes.' My expression is under control.

'They divorced, ages ago. She's by herself, Mike. She'd really like to see an old friend.'

'That's very thoughtful of you, Lena. I'll certainly try to get away for a visit,' I lie.

### 3. Broome Interlude

In April 1940 the Germans invaded Denmark and Norway. In May, they walked into Holland, Belgium and France. In September, Japan signed a treaty with Germany and Italy and officially joined the Axis.

Dad sent me a letter, as strict as he ever got, insisting I finish my education. An engineer would always be more useful than a foot soldier, he said.

In the Great War he'd been captain of a steel sailing ship that was torpedoed by a submarine. As a child it sounded like a marvellous adventure, but when I grew older I noticed he rarely mentioned it, and if he did the memory seemed to distress him.

So I stayed at uni. In any case, for much of second year I was still bedazzled by Kitty and sex, but not so much I suffered too deeply when our affair ended. My exams went well.

At the end of 1940 I went home to Broome for the first time in two years. It was a journey of a few weeks in those days: steamer from Melbourne to Perth, then another ship for the twelve hundred miles from Perth to Broome.

We stopped at all the small ports going north, the air hotter and dustier every day. Approaching Broome I could see the orange bluffs, the luminous bay, feel the shimmering heat pouring from the sky.

I look up at a small painting on the wall and smile to myself. Dashes of turquoise water and rust-red sand and ruffled green mangroves, the familiar sweet lines of a lugger winging off into the distance.

One of my brother Liam's painting. Well, half-brother really, but the distinction was pointless. He was ten when I was born, and



always my protector and best friend.

Liam and I had a sister too, Anna. She was only a year older than me so we were rivals in childhood, but almost friends by the time I went away to university. She was in Perth at secretarial college. Anna was happy, her scribbled letters told me, caught up in the thrill of war and the glamour of young warriors.

My parents had a small lugger-building business in Broome. Luggers were sailing boats especially designed for pearlshell fishing. But the industry was hit hard by the Depression so we didn't have much money when I was young, at least not until my parents received a legacy that made life a lot easier.

It came from my English godfather, but I don't remember him. I do remember his wife though, my godmother Min-lu, because she came back to live in Perth after he died and we'd visit her every year when the summer got too hot in Broome.

She was small and fine-featured, with kind eyes and beautiful cheekbones, and silver hair pulled up on her head with golden combs that fascinated me as a child.

She'd lived in this country for many years before going to England, and I remember her saying in her precise, beautiful voice, 'Oh, I'm so happy to be home at last and to forget that appalling weather.'

She'd gained her Australian residency before Federation in 1901, which was a good thing, as otherwise she'd have been barred from the country. You see, my godmother was Chinese.

Her son Sam had been a sailor with my father and a close friend of my parents—they gave me the middle name of Samuel. When Mum's own mother died when she was only fifteen it was Min-lu who'd taken care of her.

Brought up in Broome, a very different place from the rest of the country, I didn't realise having Japanese friends or a Chinese godmother was odd, at least not until I went to boarding school in Perth. Then boys would pull up the corners of their eyes and chant imbecilities that were nothing at all like the gentle murmurings I'd known since childhood.

But I learnt a lot at boarding school; especially when to lie low and when to attack, and after a while I had to do neither. I was stronger and more savage than anyone had realised, and wisely they left me alone.

Mum and Dad met me off the steamer and with the other passengers we took the little tram along the jetty to shore. Dad put my bags in the boot of his new car parked under a tree, saying, to my delight, he'd give me driving lessons.

As we passed along the foreshore I looked out at the lugger camps. It was the lay-up season but there were fewer boats drawn onto the beach than I had ever seen.

'Are some of them still working outside?' I asked.

'No, love,' said Mum. 'That's all that's left. There's only about sixty luggers in Broome now.'

'Sixty?'

'There's maybe another fifteen or so at Onslow and Cape Leveque,' said Dad, 'and Captain Gregory's taken ten or twelve to Darwin over the last few years. But that'd be all.'

'There used to be *hundreds*,' I said, astonished. It was the first time I'd realised what I'd assumed from childhood to be unchanging was nothing of the kind.

At least the house was much as I remembered, with its shady latticed verandahs and white paths of crushed pearlshell winding around the garden, but even then I noticed the trees had grown and there was new furniture in the lounge. Still, tea and cake on the verandah was a comfort, followed by the familiar afternoon doze: in midsummer Broome, a siesta was a necessity.

That evening a storm in the distance blew cool breezes as we ate at the table on the verandah and gossiped about friends and family. I heard my sister Anna had a new boyfriend, an RAAF pilot. 'She got sick of last month's sailor then?' I said.

Mum said, 'She should concentrate on her studies.' Dad touched her hand and she smiled wryly and a look passed between them.

They'd always been intensely close, playing fiddle music together, seeming to understand each other's thoughts, laughing at the same time without a word.

As a child I hated being excluded that way, but Mum would say they'd been together for so long they could read each other's minds. I didn't understand, then, how rare their bond was.

'And Liam's having his first big exhibition in Perth next month,' said Mum. She adored my brother Liam, even though he was actually my dad's son from before they got married. A boy at school said Liam was a bastard so I beat him up, but not too much because it was true.

'I suppose you'll be wanting to hear about the Egawas now?' said Dad in his soft Irish accent, carving the roast for the main course.

'How *are* they?'

'Old man Egawa's still at the boat repairs, though he must be over seventy. And Yoshi and Mary had their twenty-fifth anniversary a few weeks ago. And a very good party it was too.'

'Dad.'

He chuckled. 'Oh, you mean the youngsters?'

'*Dad.*'

'They're both around.' His smile faded and I saw concern in his eyes. 'But not for too long. They're going to Japan in a few weeks. Ken wants to join the army. Betty's going because Yoshi thinks she'll be safer there.'

'Safer?'

Dad sighed. 'Ah, son, the odds of war with Japan are getting greater every day. If it came to that, what do you suppose would happen to the Egawas?'

'Nothing! Mary and the kids are Australian, not Japanese. You don't think anyone would hurt them?'

'Not in Broome. But governments usually lock up enemy citizens in time of war. That's what Yoshi's afraid of.'

I was silent with shock.

Mum leant towards me. 'Sweetheart, Betty hasn't changed. But

Ken ... he fell in with some nationalists and now his head's full of rubbish. He wants to fight the Koreans, the Chinese, anyone, everyone, for the glory of that awful emperor.'

I looked at her, amazed. Even before I'd gone away to university I'd heard of the horrors the Japanese army had inflicted on China. My old friend Ken wanted to be part of something like that?

I'm sitting in the Union cafe, avoiding colleagues and trying to catch up on a research paper I should have read a week ago. I look around and think how it would have shocked my grandparents' generation: young people from every country under the sun together, queuing, eating, laughing.

A group of animated Asian kids are at the table next to me. I notice a ray of light refracting into tiny spectra on one girl's glossy black hair. I used to see that iridescence in Betty's hair too, though I didn't have the words then to understand it: it was just some magical thing that happened in the sunlight.

I remember her sitting beside me on a seat near Town Beach, facing onto aqua Roebuck Bay. We were waiting for Ken, who was splashing in the water with friends.

'I don't want to go to Japan, Mike,' she said, looking down—that's when I noticed those little rainbows. 'But my father is determined I should experience some Japanese civilisation, he calls it, with his family. At least until the threat of war has passed.'

'That could be a long time, Betty,' I said, unable to keep the dismay out of my voice.

After my affair with Kitty I saw Betty with new eyes. Still the gentle, amusing friend she'd always been, but different too.

She'd grown up while I was away. She gazed at me, and gleams of light turned the brown of her eyes into velvet; her lashes and eyebrows like charcoal feather-strokes against her skin.

'You've been away a long time, Mike. Everything has changed. Ken became friends last year with a new diver who used to be in the Japanese army. Now all the time he talks about empires and

conquests and subservient races—it's terrible.'

Betty had always been stoic. I'd never seen her cry, not when she scraped her knees in childhood games, not even the time she broke her arm in a fall. I was shaken to see tears in her eyes now. I held her slim hand and we sat quietly side by side for a time. She blinked and sniffed and took a breath.

'I'm so afraid, Mike. What if war does come? I'll be stuck in Japan, away from my friends. And Ken is determined to join the Japanese army. He could get killed, it would destroy my family. I can't see any way out of a terrible future.'

'The Americans might still get involved in the war, and if they do the Japanese would never try to go up against them,' I said with more confidence than I felt. 'They'd have to be insane.'

Betty looked at me steadily. 'I think they are, Mike, I think—' She let go of my hand. Ken was walking towards us, a towel around his waist, water droplets sparkling on his black hair and brown shoulders.

'Mike! You're here!' I stood and he slapped my back and shook my hand. He laughed and said, 'Look at you, so big and strong. Why aren't you in the army, mate?'

'Got to finish my studies first, mate,' I said, happy. Despite Betty's fears he still looked just like my friend Ken. As tall as me now, healthy and handsome as always.

'So what's this sorry tale I hear about you going off to join the Japanese army?' I said jokingly.

His face became serious. 'Mike, it's not a game. Japan is destined to have its own empire, like Britain. It's the natural progress of civilisation. The stronger races always win out over the weaker ones.'

'But most of the spare real estate was colonised ages ago,' I said. 'It's already taken.'

'Then we'll just have to take it back,' he said, and for the first time he looked like a stranger. 'It's my duty to support my country.'

'*This* is your country, Ken. You were born here, for God's sake.'

He laughed cynically. 'Really, Mike? I'm an alien, a bloody Jap,

and will be forever. And Japs can't join the Australian army, so there's not much alternative. But the Japanese Imperial Army is very keen on recruits who speak English.'

I looked at him in amazement. 'That's so you can translate when they invade us.'

'No,' he laughed. 'Not *here*, Mike. What do you take me for? No, it's those Asian colonies—Dutch, Portuguese, British—who've all made a hash of it, and now we're going to show them how it's done.'

'What about China?' I said. 'That invasion didn't do much for the Chinese. Rape of Nanking mean anything to you, Ken?'

'Chinese? Decadents. Stupid pigtailed and crippled feet. Come on, Mike. The Emperor's doing them a favour.'

'Is Billy Wing a decadent?' Betty burst out. 'You were happy enough to eat lollies from his shop and play with Eddy Wing at school. Are they decadents too, Ken?'

His face became dismissive. 'Girls don't understand important things like this.'

There was a shout and he turned. A muscular, hard-faced Japanese man was calling him from the water. I knew enough of the language to understand Ken was being summoned, crudely, by a superior.

'See you later, Mike,' he said, and ran back to the water. But in the end we only met a couple of times during my stay. He was usually too busy.

When I had to return to Melbourne in February 1941, Betty and I went for one last walk in the warm evening. There wasn't much to say by now. We'd talked the problem over and over and couldn't figure out a way to keep her in Broome and save Ken from himself.

We ambled slowly back to her house and stopped outside the door. No one was around. I looked at her in misery, convinced I'd never see her again.

Betty put her hand to my head and drew me down towards her, kissing me gently, then with a passion that surprised me. Despite all the time we'd spent together, it was our first kiss (if you don't

count an experiment under a frangipani tree when we were eight).

She moved away and murmured, 'Goodbye, Mike.'

'We'll meet up again, Betty, I promise you,' I said, my heart thumping.

She smiled sadly and closed the door.

Four weeks later Mum sent me a letter saying Betty and Ken had sailed for Japan.

## 4. Mount Best

‘I *thought* I’d see you here,’ says Lena. ‘I notice you don’t go to the staff cafeteria very often.’

I look up in surprise. ‘Too much chance of running into someone who wants to chat academic politics. How are you, then?’

‘Very well, thanks. This is James, my study buddy.’

A tall skinny boy is beside her, holding a tray of food. I recognise him from one of my tutorials.

‘Mr Kingston, welcome. How’s that assignment in electronics going?’

He blushes. ‘Um, okay. I finally worked it out, Professor Whalen. Submitted it yesterday.’

‘Good. You two want this table? I’m about to go.’

‘You didn’t choose the curry, did you?’ says Lena. ‘There’s looking for trouble.’

I smile, hearing one of Helen’s turns of speech. ‘I know it now. I’ll never make that mistake again.’

Lena pushes back her hair, pulls out a chair and motions James to sit too. ‘It’s all right, James. He’s practically a member of my family.’

‘Hardly that, young lady,’ I say as I stand up. ‘I think I’d be safer as an orphan.’

She laughs. ‘Hey, do you want to come to my Christmas party? James is coming.’ Her study buddy goes red. ‘It’s at my mum’s place in Foster. She said you’d be very welcome.’

I look at her aqua eyes, enthusiastic and warm, and feel exhausted. ‘Lena, I really can’t. It’s very kind of you and your mum but ... I can’t.’

After a moment she nods and says quietly, ‘Okay, Mike. Some



other time.'

I feel like a complete shit. 'Perhaps I can drop in, I don't know, maybe in the new year.'

She grins. 'That'd be good. I'll be working in the bar at the Exchange again. You can always find me there.'

In March 1941 Johnny's brother Richard came home from Tobruk. He'd lost his left hand and been discharged from the army. Grimly he took up work on the farm again, fitted with a metal and rubber contraption.

Sometimes I'd see him look at it in puzzlement, as if he couldn't quite comprehend how it came to be there on the end of his arm. I thought it was the saddest thing I'd ever seen: I still had a lot to learn.

Johnny was desperate to join up, his mother equally desperate he shouldn't. In a way I found it hard to understand his fervour because he had at last landed the glorious Helen. It had taken him well over a year and I'd witnessed every phase of the campaign.

At first she was only an ambition. His blue eyes calculating, he said, 'Mike, she's so gorgeous, she's going to be my girl. That'd show everyone.'

This would hardly have been my main concern if I'd had a chance with someone like Helen, but I'd started to understand a little more about the vulnerability behind Johnny's beautiful facade.

One drunken evening he'd revealed to me how unhappy he'd been at school. Because of his looks some of the boys had called him 'queer' and 'poof'.

In revenge he'd charmed away their girls. It hadn't made him any new friends but at least it had stopped the jibes.

Then he hit his first obstacle, indignant: 'Mike, she won't go out with me. She wants to be a school teacher and says it could harm her reputation.'

'And that surprises you?' I said and he chuckled and threw

something at me.

A few months later, worried: 'Mike, her mother's really sick, in the hospital. She lets me drive her there and back. Won't let me touch her though.'

Then her mother died and Johnny found he cared more for Helen than he'd realised. 'She was so brave at the funeral. She let me kiss her afterwards. God, it was amazing. I don't understand, she's just a girl.'

'Maybe you're falling in love with her,' I said and he scoffed unconvincingly and punched my arm.

Helen's father did not recover from the loss of his wife. He started drinking heavily, let their small farm go to ruin and drank away Helen's chances of going to teachers' college, Johnny told me angrily. By now we both knew he cared deeply for her, and for nearly a year he flirted and cajoled and tried to persuade her to become involved with him.

Finally, once Helen had accepted her hopes of teacher training were gone, she let him into her life. Within a few months she was passionately in love and they became engaged early in 1941, while I was away visiting Broome.

Because of my studies I had come and gone from Foster but had never had more than a passing chat with Helen. That changed during the following holidays, when we sat beside each other at a farewell party for one of the local boys who'd signed up.

She didn't know how much I already knew about her, so she told me a little about the loss of her mother and her failed hopes of teacher training. She wasn't bitter or even sad at her lost opportunity. She missed her mother terribly and had only pity for her father.

It was so easy to be dazzled by Helen's looks, it took time to recognise the calm depths of her mind, her wit, her kindness. And she was certainly dazzling: tall for a woman, her brows well shaped, her lips pink, her blonde hair caught back into waves.

She was rather like Lauren Bacall, but to my eyes Helen was prettier. I see her now, dimples deepening as she smiled, in a floral

cotton dress that brought out the warm sea-blue of her eyes.

Johnny's eyes were blue too, a pure light blue, and with his slow smile he had charm to burn. His fair hair, falling over his forehead, was almost platinum blond. With his height and build he would have been startling enough by himself, but beside Helen the two of them were as if made for each other.

Over time Helen became close to Johnny's family, especially his mother, Inge. Inge was religious but Helen's mother had been devout too: Helen often wore her mother's small gold cross at her throat. Her father was now staying at a local boarding house, so Helen went to live with the Erikssen family.

There she was chaperoned, but she and Johnny had waited a long time and the old customs had lost their power before the urgency of war. As we sat talking over drinks at our friend's farewell party I could see Helen's contentment: she was loving and loved.

Harry O'Brien had an old truck. He let me use it to practise for my licence and then to drive friends around when he didn't need it. One day Johnny was busy with the farm so Helen asked me if I'd take her to her parents' place, to pick up belongings she'd left behind when she moved to the Erikssens'.

We still didn't know each other well then, so I was feeling shy as we drove the narrow winding dirt road up to Mount Best, about half an hour from Foster. I was slowly negotiating a sharp bend when she cried, 'Stop!' so I did.

She jumped out of the car and ran to a large lizard in the middle of the road. I followed, assuming it was dead. It wasn't.

Helen tried to make it get off the road but it would only back away a little, stick out its wide blue tongue and hiss, ludicrously, attempting to be fearsome. By scuffling the gravel beside it, giggling, we persuaded it to the edge of the road.

It stalked away indignantly through the grass, head held high, as if getting off the road had been its own idea all along. We were

almost hysterical with the absurdity of it by then.

As we set off again I glanced at Helen with new respect. No one else gave a damn about what they ran over as they dashed around the old dirt roads in their new motor cars. I liked that she cared enough to save even an unbeautiful lizard; it was something my mother might have done.

The small place near the top of the mountain looked south beyond rolling green and gold fields to a steep, astonishing view of Corner Inlet and the Prom, a different perspective from my now-familiar view from the O'Brien farm.

I stood at the window, enchanted at the sight, while Helen busied herself packing books and clothes and odd things she wanted into a suitcase.

'How could you possibly leave this place?'

Helen looked around the small room, with its cold fireplace and empty kitchen and said wryly, 'I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter.'

'Oh I'm sorry. I didn't mean—'

'It's all right. Yes. This is lovely but it's brutally cold in winter, and getting down to Toora or Foster for groceries used to be quite an expedition.'

'It must have been lonely.'

'No, it only seems isolated, there are more farms around than you'd think. I went to that little school down the road. There were maybe thirty or forty of us, all ages. I loved it. I had some good teachers too. That's why I wanted to be one.'

She trailed her fingers over the old kitchen table, looked around once more, then picked up the suitcase with a small sigh.

'Come here. I'll take that,' I said. She smiled and handed it over.

By the time we'd chatted our way down the mountain we knew we were becoming friends. After that I worked hard at throttling back my response to her as a female, happy to be around someone with the same sly sense of fun; someone, man or woman, I could talk to with such ease.

But all too soon I was back at university and work was intense,

concentration difficult. There was so much going on in the world and I yearned to take own my part in it, not sit in stuffy libraries.

I returned to Foster in the middle of 1941 and met Johnny in the lounge at the Exchange. A couple of months beforehand he'd finally overridden his mother's objections and enlisted in the AIF.

'So what's it like in the army, soldier? I asked, putting beers down in front of him and Alan, a friend of his from basic training.

'I didn't expect to enjoy it so much, Mike. The parades and saluting are bullshit but training wasn't bad at all. I was already a good shot from the farm, but demolition,' he said, smiling slowly, 'now that's fun.'

'I can imagine you enjoying blowing things up. I remember you making the rabbits pretty unhappy with gelignite that time. But how come you've been given leave so soon?'

'I've volunteered for secret and hazardous duties,' he said, raising his eyebrows as he looked at me over the top of his glass. 'The leave was a bribe but I'd have done it anyway.' He leant closer. 'I had this hunch. You know the base at the Prom?'

The Wilsons Promontory road had been closed off by armed guards at the start of the year. The locals had to pretend they knew nothing, but well-behaved and well-built young men were billeted with families for meals before the football or the pictures on Saturdays. They said they were from the 7th Infantry Training Centre, which seemed curious because everyone knew there were only five such centres.

'I'm sure that's where we're going,' said Johnny. 'Report for training, go to Foster and get on a truck at the station. Got to be it. We've been told on the quiet they learn all sorts of irregular tactics down there.' His eyes brimmed with satisfaction.

'Irregular tactics?'

'Unarmed combat, explosives, commando fieldcraft,' said Alan. 'Serving in small Independent Companies, nothing at all like the regular army.' He too was a volunteer for the secret duties and, like

Johnny, had been promoted to corporal.

‘And those natty stripes?’ I said. ‘Part of the bribe too, I bet.’

‘Nah, just sheer virtue and all-round brilliance,’ said Alan. He had curly black hair, grey eyes and white teeth, and would have been annoyingly good-looking if he hadn’t been so funny.

‘Al’s an engineer like you, Mike,’ said Johnny.

‘A tiny cog in the great machine of the Postmaster-General’s Department,’ said Alan. ‘Electrical engineer—that is, until a few months ago. What about you?’

‘Halfway through third year. Yeah, I love electronics. What’s it like as a job?’

Alan bent close to my ear. ‘Bloody amazing. There’s stuff happening I can’t even talk about, they’d have to shoot me. But that’s the place to be in the war, Mike, signals, communications.’

Johnny scoffed. ‘*Signals*, mate? Jesus, you sigs’ll be up the back fiddling with wires while us he-men are out in front saving your bacon.’

‘Yeah, and us sigs’ll be warning you he-men about the thugs round the next bend so you don’t waltz straight into their arms whistling “Poor Blind Nell”.’

They looked at each other laughing and Johnny punched Alan’s shoulder affectionately. It didn’t seem to bother him, but I knew from experience how much heft Johnny could put behind a jovial thump. The three of us chatted easily over the next few drinks. Alan told me more about his work and what he hoped to do in the army, teased by Johnny all the while but giving as good as he got. He was a lot of fun.

A little later Helen arrived and my heart leapt. She was with a friend, Delia, a nurse, who was my occasional date for the pictures. But Delia was as little interested in me as I was in her, and after a brief greeting she quickly turned her attention to Johnny and Alan.

‘Are you with us for long this time, Mike?’ said Helen, sitting down beside me.

‘Two weeks, then back to the grind. How’s Mrs Erikssen taking Johnny’s recruitment?’

Her dimples deepened. ‘Plates were thrown, Swedish curses cast, Mr Erikssen took to the woodshed and I think the cows stopped milking. Other than that she took it well.’

When I stopped laughing I said, ‘Hey, I managed to find that book for you in a second-hand store.’ I passed over an old leather-bound book of poetry she’d wanted. She flushed with pleasure and we had a brief argument about her paying for it and me refusing because it had cost so little.

She flipped through the pages, occasionally murmuring a line to herself, then looked at me. ‘You’re so kind, Mike. I really—’ She stopped and swallowed.

‘Helen?’ I was surprised. ‘Are you okay?’

She nodded and smiled reassuringly and moved her chair slightly to join in the general conversation. When she looked at Johnny she glowed as she always had, but I had an odd feeling there was a thread of ... what? Was it yearning? But she had him, he adored her.

I watched Johnny, as did everyone else. He was compelling—handsome and electric with happiness. A real man’s man. He turned to Alan and said something quietly that made them both chuckle.

Poor Helen: she must have been worried about him going away to war. I saw him grin over the table at her, reaching out his hand to stroke hers for a moment. Helen smiled, then turned the pages of her book.

## 5. An Incomparable Joy

There's a knocking on my office door, and a grey curly head appears around the edge.

'Alan, you old bastard! I was just thinking about you. Come in and sit down.'

I meet him halfway and we hug. He's still handsome, grey eyes and white teeth, but he wears glasses now.

'I'm here for a client meeting this afternoon, back to Sydney first thing tomorrow,' he says. 'I've been to see Sue already. She doesn't stop, does she, my little girl? And dinner with Terry and the family tonight.'

'Come on then, you're stuck with me for lunch,' I say, 'I'm fed up with marking papers.'

We walk over to Lygon Street in the December humidity, not talking much because Alan's partly deaf—lost an eardrum in an explosion—and the street's too noisy. Finally we're settled with some drinks in a cool corner at my favourite Italian place.

I see he's near exhausted and say, 'How's Jan?'

He looks away. 'Mike. I don't know. It's spread everywhere. Liver, lungs. There's nothing the doctors can do. It looks like it's only a matter of time.' He picks at the fingertips of his left hand, the ones without any nails.

'I'm sorry, old mate. That's awful.' Not much more to be said.

Alan was a great support to me when Marion died; I hope I can help him as much in return when the inevitable happens to him. In her middle age, Marion forgave him for leaving her so many years before: you see, Alan was my stepchildren's natural father.

He hadn't been around much when they were small but later he'd helped a lot with them (and Sue was such a tearaway, I'd



needed the moral support).

We'd joke about the two of us adding up to one real father, but I know and he knows I've done a pretty good job with the family he left behind.

Our meals arrive and we don't speak for a while. Then Alan says, 'So you were thinking about me? What particular misdeed? And it wasn't me, sir, it was bloody Erikssen.'

'Funny you should say that. Found myself down at Tidal River earlier this year. Of all people, I run into Johnny's *granddaughter* and, even worse, she's a student here. And she wants me to visit her nana and won't take no for an answer.'

'Unthinkable. Beautiful Helen a nana? But why don't you want to see her?'

'No. I can't. I don't know. It took so long to get over those dreadful years. Marion rescued me and I don't want to go back.'

Alan looks at me. 'I knew you were mad for Helen, but I sometimes wondered. There was something else, wasn't there? Something you won't, what, forgive each other for?'

I put down my fork and can't say anything for a while.

'Yes. There was. And she'd be as disinclined to see me as I am to see her. And that's all I'll ever say.' I take another mouthful but the flavour is cardboard.

'Oh Mike, you were always such a drongo! Life's too short, it really is. Whatever happened with Helen was so long ago. Johnny can't care now, and he didn't care then. Trust me, I know.'

'It's between her and me, not Johnny and me, Al. Sorry, look, you're right, of course you are. But Christ, it was hard enough being at Tidal River, that bloody commando memorial. Too many memories.'

He nods. 'Yeah. Too many.' He thinks for a moment. 'Do you ever go to the reunions?'

'No. I get the newsletter but just flip through it. I don't want to see anyone.'

'A few years ago I went, but there was no way on earth I could talk about my life to the blokes, much as I love them. Not possible.'

‘Yep.’

Betty Egawa wrote to me twice in 1941 after she went to Japan. The first time was a postcard after they’d arrived in April. It didn’t say anything much beyond conventional greetings: I had the feeling she’d written it with someone looking over her shoulder, checking she wasn’t writing anything inappropriate to the Aussie boy she’d left behind.

The other, in early September, was a real letter. She told me where she was living—Hatsukaichi, on the Inland Sea. She was learning calligraphy and had a language teacher to improve her Japanese.

She was sometimes bored but she liked her relatives. Ken had joined the army as he’d hoped and had been quickly promoted. His training camp was a long way away so they didn’t get to see him very often.

*I miss speaking English, Mike. And laughing at jokes, especially with you! It’s very green and mountainous here, either misty cold or boiling hot. I miss Broome terribly too, but there’s no question of me returning. My Great-Aunt Kiyō, who’s a darling, cries if I say anything about going home.*

*There’s so much talk here about the steel and oil embargo, they call it an act of aggression by the Americans, British, Chinese and Dutch—the ABCD encirclement! The papers talk about war all the time. Oh, how I wish I could come home!*

Poor Betty, it was such a strange time of suspense.

The Germans had recently attacked Russia, successfully at first, but now they were faltering and everyone hoped they’d taken on more than they could handle. But Japan was still itching for a fight and no one knew where or when—or even if—it would ever happen.

I went down to Foster in the September holidays and met Helen

for a drink at the Exchange. She told me Johnny and Alan were immersed in their training at the Prom but were due for some leave soon.

She was wearing something green and pink, I recall, and I couldn't believe how lovely she was. But as we spoke, I started to feel an edge of concern. There were faint smudges under her eyes and she was drinking more than I remembered was usual.

'Is everything all right, Helen?' I asked.

'Yes. Of course. Why wouldn't it be?' she said, looking away.

'I'm not sure. You don't seem very happy, gorgeous girl,' I said in a Clark Gable growl.

Despite my best intentions, my feelings for Helen had not only refused to stay throttled, they had deepened, so I took refuge in movie leading-man imitations. A Bogart-drawled 'sweetheart' or a gravelly Gable endearment were safe outlets for inadmissible yearnings.

She didn't smile at our old joke. 'It's not an easy time to be happy, Mike.'

'That's true.' I shut up. She didn't want to talk about herself. We changed the subject to friends. Delia had fallen hard for Alan, who wasn't the slightest bit interested; Johnny's other brother had joined up too and Mrs Erikssen was furious.

I told her about Betty's recent letter from Japan and my fears for her. Helen looked sympathetically at me for the first time, and suddenly the easy flow of affection between us returned.

'Mike, I'm so sorry for being snooty,' she said shaking her head, light glinting off the gold cross at her throat. 'I've been low. And lonely. Johnny hasn't had more than a few moments spare for me the last few months.'

She glanced at her hand with his modest engagement ring. 'I'm not even sure he wants to get married now.'

'Are you joking? He's crazy about you.'

'He was until he got me,' she said quietly. 'I mean, I know he loves me, but other interests, other people, are more important now. Even when we have the chance to be together he's always

with Alan, drinking, hiking, fishing—'

'It may seem that way,' I said, 'but they're training to be soldiers, Helen. They have to spend time together, learn to trust each other in all sorts of dangerous situations. The same thing happened to some people I know in Melbourne. Once Johnny settles in properly he'll be all right again.'

'I understand that, I really do. And I *know* there's a war on and we all have to make sacrifices,' she said bitterly, twisting a hank of hair around her beautiful long fingers. She closed her eyes for a moment. 'Dear God, I sound horrible. Can I say sorry again, Mike?'

'Any time, sweetheart.'

She dimpled and I knew we were at ease with each other again. After a moment she looked down and said softly, 'Can I ask you a question, Mike? I don't have anyone else to talk to and I'm worried.'

I nodded and after a few moments she said, 'You've had girlfriends ...'

'Only one real one,' I said with honesty.

She looked around. No one was near.

'When you spent time together ...' She put her face in her hands. 'Oh, God, I'm so embarrassed.'

'It's all right. My mother was a nurse once, you know,' I said. 'You couldn't imagine what I used to hear over the dinner table.'

Helen laughed softly. She took her hands away from her face and looked at me.

'Mike, how long does it last, usually, for a man, you know?'

I thought for a moment. 'It depends how new being ... together is. A few minutes at the start. Later, ten, twenty minutes? I didn't use a stopwatch.'

She said shyly, 'And the woman, is she supposed to feel something—pleasant too?'

'Well, yes, of course. I thought women, and again it's a very small sample here, usually enjoyed it as much as men. Don't they?'

She shook her head. 'I want to be close to Johnny so much when we're together, but it's over so quickly and I'm left feeling, well,

disappointed. I don't understand.'

'The two of you haven't had a chance yet,' I said. 'You need more time to get used to each other. I guess that's the point of marriage.'

'But you weren't married to—what was her name—Kitty?' (I'd been indiscreet at a party a few months ago.)

'No, true. But that was rather overwhelming.'

'I'd like overwhelming. I don't much like perfunctory.' She sighed. 'I don't understand how fierce my feelings have become and I can hardly ask the minister at church.'

I said gently, my heart aching, 'Perhaps you and Johnny should wait a while before getting married.'

'No, Mike, I love him! I don't want to wait. He's so wonderful, we're perfect together.' She shook her head firmly, the light catching the swing of her golden hair. 'No. It *must* be the training making too many demands on him. I'm sure we'll work it out.'

I nodded, hoping to offer reassurance. 'It'll be fine, Helen. Just give yourselves some time.'

A few days later I met Johnny and Alan in town on leave. They were tanned, muscular, hard. They told me tales, quietly and confidentially, of new skills: fieldcraft, stealth, silent death.

They laughed about endurance marches, impossible loads, foodless days, sleepless nights; they glowed with private jokes and shared memories.

I found myself wondering if Helen—if any woman—could compete with that ...

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