

The Salt of Broken Tears

a novel



M I C H A E L M E E H A N

THE *salt* OF
BROKEN TEARS

a novel

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To my parents, Francis and Sheila

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THE *salt* OF

BROKEN TEARS

Well I remember how she blew in off the track that windy day more than a year ago, borne in like a thistle seed on the hot winds that beat in from the north, clothed in nothing but the green cotton dress that flicked and chopped about her, a patched and faded relic of some other person's life, and she carrying nothing, bringing nothing of her own but her taut bare freckled body and sandwhipped hair in auburn streaks that ran before her in the wind, a smile of impertinent white teeth and an improbable tale about a wagon on the road and a farmer gone suddenly unhelpful, a ragged tear in her dress at the waist and a broken wheel and a recommendation—no paper, mind, just her own account, such a thing didn't make much sense in the telling anyway—from a Lutheran pastor over at Rainbow who might for all that we knew never have existed at all.

Well I remember how she landed in on us that day and the whole place a-blow at the time, the screen doors crashing and no-one ready then to push her back out onto the track again in that kind of wind, no-one going into town that week and she offering as soon as she could walk again to stay on and help with the children or down at the shed or just about anything we could want, and we—both my husband and I—feeling that it was our duty before God at least to feed her and put some decent clothing upon her back before setting her off back down the track towards the no-thing from which she had come, no family she could speak of and her only past the fading voice of some unknown pastor of another creed.

Well I remember, too, how she made her way slowly up the track towards the house with the children calling me wethanded from the copper to watch a thing unlike we had ever seen before, a bareheaded and barefoot girl making her way up along the track alone, with the nearest town twenty miles distant and not to be walked by man or beast in the heat and wind and the sand toiling hard between her bare toes and the sandflies piping and teasing at the flapping hem of her skirt, with the farm dogs bounding and snapping in play about her and the men whistling as she limped hatless past the sheds, the ragged dress blowing up over her legs and half up around her woman's waist and she part blushing and part seeming to be loving it, half crazed and half excited by fatigue.

Up along the track she came, with Old Tollie and Joe Spencer bent over the twisted plough, unbolting parts gone rustfixed long before, the last stump too high in the ground for the spring to save it, one horse down and all the side pulled over and no plough to take its place this side of the town. Old Tollie made as always for the shade and a shovel or a crowbar to lean on and Joe Spencer hammered away at the bolts, thinking that if they can't be fixed then they can be broken proper, thinking that if any busted up old stump can break it so must he, the weakness and the anger growing about him in the heat and the sweat coursing in gleaming rivulets across his bare moving shoulder while he beat away in a toil of anger with the hard bolts ringing, the sweat running and the sandflies teasing away at him and at that busted but un-giving share.

Up through the broken beat of sledgemetal she came, with no-one even thinking then to lend a hand, as though anyone who walked through the sun on that day must have a power beyond helping, alone on the track and in with the dust and the breeze, Joe Spencer did not notice for a time with all the sweat and anger that ran about his eyes, until Old Tollie touched his arm and toothless grinned him over that green flapping figure blown up across the sandy rise that led past the sheds and the hoots and whistles of the others, on towards the house where we stood silent now and waiting with the water barrel. Joe watched her pass in silence and caught the look of someone that had passed through it all somewhere down there along the track, the dry look of dying in her eyes.

And I remember how she could scarcely speak when she arrived at the verandah, slipping and stumbling upon the steps, how without a word but only a nod she grabbed with two hands at the waterbag as I offered it to her, and took the dripping canvas to her lips. She took it and drained the half of it without letting it fall, one part straight down her gullet as if she never needed to swallow like other people do, and the rest down the front of her dress and around and over her breasts with the watered cloth clinging to her and she laughing and lifting the cloth away from her body with a dusty laugh like the croak of a fading crow. Then she raised the bag above her head and showered herself with the last of it, the best of it working down her front, over her skirt and through the ragged tear at the waist and down around her knees bared by her arms raised high, the water running in dusty rivulets around her calves and over her bare feet as she showered herself right there and then on the verandah with the children won over to laughing with her. They laughed, it seemed to me, without really knowing why, as if there were nothing but cool tankwater on this place awaiting to be poured about, our world all but blowing away on that day had she cared one moment to see, as if we had no thought on our minds but to admire these obscene gambols borne in upon us along with the dust and the rolling tussocks of lignum that had worked loose in the wind, the best part of the soil, on that day I do so well remember, strung out across the reddening skies and coasting far and away from us on that harsh northern wind.

Well I remember how she showered herself from the waterbag in a laughing waste of cool water and how the dress came apart as she raised the bag above her head. I quickly sent the boy from the verandah, the girl then falling into the wicker layabout, her hair lying in wet and muddy lanks about her shoulders, her torn dress awry and the whole world gone still as she trudged in out of the scrub and over the lakebed and up to the house, the men shuffling in unease at having greeted what might be a form of dying with cries and hoots and whistles. Old Tollie and Joe stood fingering their tools, Tollie leaning heavily on the crowbar and Joe Spencer caressing the hard blunt head of the hammer and picking at its splintered wedge and staring up at the girl up on the layabout and the movement of the women about her as at some new thing he'd never seen before, as though he too knew that the unexpected would no longer come to us in the simple form of flying axeheads or a fall from a horse or the wrenching of an arm in a machine.

Hannah I remember watching, Hannah not much younger than the girl, my daughter still almost a child but growing and now trying to help perhaps for the first time and not standing back with a sullen lank of hair drawn across her mouth, her dry and straggling locks now dragged back and tied in a ragged stook behind her ears, her freckled skin and thin arms still raw from the burrs from the sheeps we marked the day before and her yesterday's dress still shot across with long fine arcs of dried lambsblood. She took water in twisted handfuls in the flap of her own skirt and raised it to cool the girl's forehead, sitting to one side of the girl and mopping her brow with it and looking across to her brother, watching her brother to see how he would watch the girl, to see how he would see the forbidden tangle of her legs splayed out across the layabout and the wet shape of her body moving with long gasps against the dampness of the torn green dress.

Not quite leaving he hovered at the verandah's rim, watching me as always, setting as always in a sullen violence the post between himself and my command, gawking at the girl as she fell upon the layabout, gawking from the depths of his cuffed and castoff clothing always too large and tied about him with lengths of bindertwine, with his painful stretch of wrists and ankles and spider hands ticking at the lanks of hair that spiked from underneath his hat, or fumbling in the long pockets of his peajacket, his thin shoulders slumping low to meet their bagging depths, clasping at the post with

mittened pockets, glancing from the layabout down to the plough, down to the plough to catch Joe Spencer's face, looking always as a doting puppy to Joe Spencer, looking up to the girl and back down to Joe again to see how he should see this girl.

Perhaps the strangest thing of all was old Auntie Argie leaving her silence for one moment to sit next to the girl, Auntie Argie with not the sense left to her to push a mosquito away or come in out of the sun, moving across from her rocking chair such as she never quitted without the help of others and with a kind hand bringing her crocheted rug to cover the girl. She sat next to the girl and placed with a smile her hand upon her burning hand, holding her hand that was banded in ribbons of water and dust, as the girl clung to the wheeling rim of the wicker layabout with the whites of her eyes rising and her whole breast moving against the clinging wetness of her dress.

Finally Joe Spencer wiped the taste of it from his mouth and went back to his work, striking a nail to set the world amoving yet again but knowing as did all who watched her arrive and even Old Toll in the broken toil of his slow thinking that this shred blown in with the dust was something that no-one had told us could ever happen. Nothing had prepared us for this unnamed girl with no other garments nor shoe nor bag nor hat nor anything but that insolent smile she carried as she trudged up along the track and out of a likely death in all that dryness, through the heat and the midday sun and the distances that lay between us and the nearest town. Well I remember the rhythm breaking out again on iron upon iron down by the shed, and Auntie Argie's rug in the name of common decency thrown over her as she lay upon the layabout, the untalking boy still staring from the edge of the verandah and passing down all that he saw in looks to Joe, and all our minds touched with wonder by the sight of a young woman coming half naked from the dust, our minds moved by something that now ran beyond even the things that Cabel Singh had told us around his evening fires; even Cabel Singh who knows each living insect and can trace the movement of the drifts, in all his stories had not told of women had never told us of a girl who walked across the drifts and ridges, as Eileen had walked, alone and blown and hatless, and uncovered to the wind.

Thinking of the torn and bloodied dress amid the straw and dung, the boy moved through the darkness of the cooling house. He heard nothing but the crack of iron cooling in the chill night air, the motion of bodies moving restless in the night and the rising sound of turkeys gobbling from a farm distant to the east, moving in faint waves through the dark and through the thin walls of the house. He crept across the creaking boards, thinking always of the bloodied dress, laid out as though about to be put on, laid out as though with care and neatness across the tousled heaps of straw and fragrant horsedung, the crumpled cardboard of her borrowed suitcase and the scattered remnants of all that she possessed flung out across the stable floor.

Wearing still the heavy garments he had worn the day before, for hours he waited in his hessian leanto, the waving fabric of the walls admitting bands of moonlight, waiting for the last of the lamp to fade. He waited for the last mumblings of dispute and the creaking of the beds and the sound of Hannah's sobs to ease. Then he rose and drew from beneath his stretcher the things that he had prepared to take, all that he had prepared in secret through the later part of the day, after Lonnie Cooper had gone and the last of the curious neighbours had followed in his dust; Lonnie Cooper sweating heavybellied over him, struggling with the mystery of the torn dress and scattered oddments kneading the fabric of the bloodied dress between his fingers, the old green dress mended and not torn again, as though he could tease from it some special knowledge. Easing his heavy thinking around all that they had told him, Lonnie Cooper had picked up clues where there were no clues and fitted them into stories where there were as yet no stories, stories that made sense of everything except the stable, the emptiness, and Eileen.

They had sat about the evening table in the dying of the light, in silence apart from the stifled chatter of the younger children, all sitting in silence like Auntie Argie, and Auntie Argie only differed from the others in her secret and unchanged smile. His father and Old Tollie had talked of nothing, not even of the work of the day to come, and even Joe Spencer had been dark and silent and for once unboasting in his eating, chewing silently in his corner and starting at each alien sound. The boy, his mother and the younger children were subdued and solemn amid the crusts and pools of tea, with not one daring to mention the name of Eileen, as though Eileen must now never have existed at all, though the very speaking of the name Eileen might serve to bring her back, and some wondering with hope and some perhaps in dread that the flywire door might shriek and crash and that her noise and laughing insolence might fill again the spaces that had opened out between them.

When they were done with eating, Joe and Old Tollie had taken the lamp and stepped into the night with all the doors of the house left open to take in whatever breeze might crease the still night air, and the rooms left open to each other but with nothing flowing between them, no sounds of Eileen restless with calls and whispers and sleepless curses following her about the house.

He took the things he had prepared, the black woollen jacket that had been his father's, which would protect him in the nights, and two heavy cotton shirts and a rolled blanket and his boots. His boots he carried with him, creeping barefoot through the broken flywire door that led across the back veranda and into the shack of weatherboard and iron that was the kitchen, thick with the smell of fat and trapped heat and charred woodsmells from the stove. From there he took matches, a pan and metal pannikin, a tin opener and as many tins of food as he could carry, and a cold leg of lamb that stood in the dank Coolgardie safe that dripped softly beside the door. These things he placed in the canvas

haversack he had brought, and carried them back into the sleeping house, lifting the scraping door on its hinges as he closed it so that no-one would wake, moving down the long passage that ran through the house and out onto the verandah at the front.

He looked into the room where his sister Hannah had cried through the rest of the day and far into the night, his sister Hannah who had slept in Eileen's arms and talked and laughed deep into the night weeping long after the others had all gone to sleep. He had waited below the waving hessian and listened to the sobbing until it faded, to be followed only by the sound of turkeys, the sound of distant gobbling rising and falling, and now and then the restlessness of dogs down at the yard, the yelping of the pup and then the howling of the other dogs into the night, howling as they always did when they felt his father slip from them and into sleep. His thoughts ran with the howling, beyond all the questions of Lonnie Cooper that he could not answer and all the easy wrongness that Lonnie Cooper was intent to seize upon. His thoughts moved again upon the sounds beyond the dogyard, of the nighttime cries and the weeping in the dirt beyond the dogyard, of Eileen quietly sobbing as she fumbled with her torn clothing and limped her way in darkness to the house.

He looked into the room where his parents slept, another flimsy sleepout like his own, tacked against the western wall of the house and walled with flywire and heavy wooden screens now raised to catch the cooling air. The room was dark but with the moonlight sifting through the screens, and the boy could make out the shapes of his father and mother on the bed, his father facing the far wall and sleeping deeply without covers in pyjama trousers and an old and torn white singlet, his shoulders hunched and the thick odour of sleeping mansweat coming to him with the filtered breeze that passed through the rusted flywire and carried on into the house. Closer to where he stood his mother lay close so that he could reach out and touch her if he chose, his mother clad in a long and heavy cotton nightshirt which had rucked up about her knees. She lay with her long dark hair let out in oily lengths that coiled across her face and shoulders, her legs and knees lying towards him, but her right shoulder turned back and her arm flung towards her husband, as though to restrain him from some sudden and intemperate act, as though she might keep him from creeping from that bed and roaming out into the darkness, for hours moving in silence and pain across a country that he seemed to prefer in darkness than in the necessary labour of the unforgiving light.

She was turned back with her arm across him so that her body was slightly twisted and her chest pushed forward, and the boy saw as for the first time, as he watched her taut and in discomfort even in sleep, that it was still the body of a young woman and that in her sleeping she was not unlike Eileen. And then he saw too that she was watching him, that her eyes were open and she was staring at him, perhaps just sleeping with her eyes open and that the moonlight was catching a tear or some other motion, though still it seemed that her sightless eyes measured him intently, as though knowing that he was seeing as for the first time, as though he knew that the girl had gone off with Cabel Singh, though knowing that he was leaving to seek out Eileen and Cabel Singh, beyond Wirrengren Plain and far up past Windmill Tank, and out into the wastelands to the north.

'It's Eileen's dress. Come quick, it's Eileen's dress.'

'Look! It's all bloody!'

'Move away from there! Come away!'

'Has Eileen got no clothes on?'

‘It’s all smelly!’

‘Come! Come away from there!’

The torn but neatly set out dress had lain amid Eileen’s scattered things, the borrowed cardboard suitcase trampled and broken, and falling from it her clothes and a metal clock and cheap perfume and scattered underwear. The same green dress it was that she had worn a year before, torn at the time but mended since, and now laid out upon the straw, with hat and shoes and stockings and even the gloves she never wore set out in place as though in some dry mocking echo of the way she never wore them. The dress was mocking except for the tear in the frock and a run of dried blood across the breast and to the waist, the dress spread out across the horsedung and the odorous tangle of straw.

The stable was as always cool and dark, even in the high heat of the day, but with the heat and sweat and light soon growing in an air that was thick and close with smells of dung and dustcrusted greasiness from old machinery parts mingled with the dry hard smell of old and cobwebbed harness hanging in the shadows, harness that had warped and stiffened in ancient horsesweat and hardened long ago into rocklike forms, now moulded deeply into the cobwebs and shadows of the pinesplit walls.

His father still told of how this had once been his home, and that the forks and roofing timbers were all that had been left after the dry of ‘fourteen, after the luckless previous settler had torched the lot on leaving. He had arrived and slept out in the open beside the black ruins of the stable and had patched it on three sides with new pine slabs and covered the roof with fresh loads of straw. He built up the tangle of yards and cattle races from piled stumps and tongue and groove, and they had all lived in the stable for a time, he and the children and their mother, before the first parts of the house arrived, and for a time it was the only space for living, the stable still cluttered here and there with clothes and a bedstead wreckage and parts of a toppled iron stove.

The dress of Eileen was laid out before the long manger, the flat unmoving fabric spaces that might have been Eileen set out below a deep trough formed from mallee stakes and fencing wire and a curved sheet of corrugated iron, set out below a frayed and familiar rope that dangled from the beam, a frayed rope now moving gently with the movement of air through the pine slabs of the stable, swaying with the movement of the children, turning amid the sound of the flies attracted by the blood and dung. High above the boy the crossbeams creaked under the thick roofmound of broom and straw and windborne dust, pushing upon the timber forks which bowed as though they felt again the weight of a turning girl, and Eileen squealing with joy again as at those times when she had swung and turned and toppled for them in the dripping darkness. She filled again the dim and odorous spaces, Eileen swinging from the roofbeams on a crude trapeze made from a stick that had been twisted and tied to that same rope, leaping from the manger and coiling around and swinging back, tucking her legs up and twirling in the air, and then flailing for a toehold on the iron.

On wet days in winter they would all go down through the mud to the stable, to the close dampness and the dark and smelly water that leaked down through the roof, the dampness drawing memorable odours from the pine slabs and the straw. Eileen turned on her trapeze, her dress tucked in her knickers, flying in monkey arcs across the straw, with the beams creaking with the weight of it, and the wisps of straw and falling dirt showering her and the children below, Eileen stopping with a wicked splinter in the ball of her thumb, but falling still in laughter to the straw below, upside down and falling in a crazy tangle of legs and straw and matted hair, and all the children, despite Eileen’s nasty splinter, calling for their go.

He pushed the younger children away, now roughly as they tried to play with Eileen's things, and the tears and protests began. He hauled the yelping pup away and forced his sisters to the narrow door and back into the stable yard. Fixing the squirming pup with a length of twine, he bid the children run up to the house, to fetch their father or their mother, or Joe Spencer or even Old Tollie, to come and see what they had found. They jostled each other and strained against his shepherding arms to peer one more time into the darkness, to see the scattered things. He hauled at their clothing, dragging them away from the door, yelling at them now to keep away.

He appealed to Hannah then to move, to do something, to find help, and Hannah broke from her daze and ran out of the yards and up towards the house, beginning to yell as she ran for someone to come and see what they had found. The little ones then followed at the run, and he entered again alone into the darkness of the stable, moving carefully in the half darkness that met his return from the outside light, edging his way again through the sharp points of farm wreckage that had built up through the years, the broken engines and dumped and tangled harrows and rusting coils of fencing wire, to make his way back to Eileen's scattered things, the gloves and hat and stockings set out in the shape of a woman who could never be Eileen.

Taking off his hat, he waited in the growing light and heat, with the sound of the flies and the creaking beam, hearing now in the distance the ceasing of the beat of a hammer upon some metal pan over at the forge or the machinery shed, and up at the house the slamming of doors and the beginning of an older woman's calling, and the high pining of a child's voice. He stood before the dress in the close and darkened air, able to bend down and run his hand across the fabric and touch the mark of blood running across the dress which was the same dress that she had worn unbuttoned on their way back from Windmill Tank just days before, that she had worn as she clung to him on the bench of Cabel's cart as they rolled north together, that she had worn in the hours that they had spent together upon the track as they trudged back to the Ridge, amid the crickets and the evening mosquito hordes.

He ran his fingers down the crust of darkened blood and wondered if it turned on what they knew at Windmill Tank, on the long afternoon they had passed in the heat and in the green waters of the tank and on the long walk back to the south, both knowing that there would be trouble when they arrived, both knowing that the sunburn and the mud and signs of washing in her hair must mean a scolding, both hungry and blown about with evening flies and then mosquitoes as the dark began to fall, his body aching with a new kind of fatigue and Eileen with some wild spirit still brimming in her eyes. Eileen singing cheerfully to the onset of the night, refusing to do up her clothes properly until they came up to the house, the two of them reeling still as they moved through the first netting gate and a low fence which now span and coiled about them as they passed, and the boy had clung with hand-like claws to the strainer post for just one steady moment. They trudged on in the evening darkness through the gates and over fences and towards known things run unfamiliar, and there was no reassurance in the outline of the Ridge, or the high palms and patter of falling water, or the sound of the windmill spinning in the wind, or the noisy bounding welcome of the dogs.

*

He crept through the sound of moving crickets, beyond the sleeping house and down to the forge where he took two waterbags from the wall and filled one from the rainwater tank, knowing that he could fill the other in the morning from the mossgreen waters that dripped from the pipe up to Windmill Tank. He took his rifle, the old .22 single shot with the front sight gone and two packs of

bullets that were not his to take, pliers and his father's marking knife, because it was the one knife he could find. He crossed down to the stable, finding his way carefully through the strewn machine parts and rubbish and not looking at the scattered baggage of Eileen left strewn in the straw after Lonnie Cooper went, his mother not wanting perhaps to touch them and the men and the children feeling it was not for them to gather up the scattered underthings of Eileen.

He took his bridle from the walls and his light saddle with the pommel split and weathered, another rope and halter and a set of hobbles, and went out again into the night to find, somewhere in the timber housepaddock to the east, the horse that was called his. The horse, which was in fact a large and shaggy unshoed chestnut pony of indeterminable breed, was standing as though waiting by the fence that was nearest to the house, and he bridled it in silence and led it to the saddle, brought it over to the stable with the dogs now beginning to stir and bark at the pony and at the stray sounds of the night. He gathered as much as he could carry of oats and chaff from the manger and stuffed it into an old chaffbag, and then found a way of roping all the pieces to the saddle or around his shoulders so that the tinkling of the hobbles would not ring out in the night.

He adjusted the girth and the length of the stirrups, and without mounting the pony he set off to the north. They walked past Old Tollie's leaning shack, past the snoring of Tollie or perhaps it was Joe Spencer, and past the high wheeling of the windmill and the slow patter of water into the tank, the water falling loudly in the night. He stopped briefly at the dogyard, risking the yelping of the dogs. He let the pup out, his brown mongrel kelpie twisting and coiling with excitement and its eyes bright in the moonlight, for this was not the first time he had taken the pup for a secret stroll in the night. He tied it on a long lease of bindertwine and drew it away from the other leaping and excited dogs that ran up and down the length of their yard, and he crept with the horse and the pup across the ridge and down towards the netting gate.

The gate was an unwieldy tangle of wire and stakes and a crude straining lever formed from a foot of mallee that the boy had never moved without Joe Spencer's help. He found now a special strength to open and even close it behind, to let the horse and the pup pass through, leading them out onto the sandy tracks and along the line of the fence that could scarce be seen in the half darkness of the night and along the cart tracks that would take them through the few cleared paddocks to the north and on into the open lands beyond.

The boy had often travelled this way, but always in daylight, for when it had been time for Cabel Singh to go, for almost as long as the boy could remember, he had pulled himself up on the wagon when Cabel was finally packed and ready, the horses harnessed and the spare horse tethered behind. He would wave to the others and sometimes Cabel had let him take the reins, and they would lead the cart out through the netting gate which Joe or Old Tollie would open for them. Up they would ride through the cleared lands and past the sand drifts that marked the furthest fence, off upon the track that soon led to where there were no tracks at all, along the western reaches of Lake Wirrengren which no-one had ever known to be a lake, and deep into the seas of blue mallee scrub beyond, blue seas that opened into pine country, and then beyond, the lands of salt and desert to the north.

When they reached as far as Windmill Tank, which lay amid a patch of shade at the northern edge of the first vast stretch of open country, long after the tall palms and spinning windmills of the house were out of sight and miles to the south, Cabel Singh would set him down upon the track and give him a drink and cold johnny cakes, and they would shake hands and say goodbye until the next time. The boy would then sit in the shade of a tree and watch until Cabel's cart was finally out of sight, for

across the open plains and into the huge belt of gums that marked the northern rim of the ancient lakebed, waving now and then Cabel's dust and the unsteady rolling shape of the wagon as rumbled to the north. As the day began to fall, he would find his way slowly back towards the Ridge and to the routine jobs that led to the end of the day, of bringing in wood and helping with the milking and he would soon begin again to watch for another visit of Cabel Singh, living the slow weeks on the farm and the long trudge to school for the end of whatever story Cabel had been telling and for the beginning of some new tale to take its place.

But the last time they had gone, just three days before, Eileen for the first time had come running alongside the cart, which had set off as always at a lively pace once the netting gate was passed, with Cabel's horses fresh and Cabel's dog and his father's and Old Tollie's dogs still fighting their last battles around the cart and tripping at Eileen. She had bunched her skirts up in one hand and held on with the other, to be lifted up, running alongside the cart and begging to come with them, with the sharp voice of his mother lost somewhere behind them in the dust. He had let out a hand to help her, clinging to Cabel with the other, and she had jumped up next to him on the rocking cart, hatless and barefoot and her long auburn hair awry, laughing back towards the figures which emerged from the house on the cry of his mother, looking back through the dust towards the netting gate and the palm trees and the windmill on the ridge.

They sat unsteadily on the narrow seat beneath the welcome shade of Cabel's flapping canvas, the boy feeling the powerful body of his friend Cabel Singh next to him and his firm hand knotted in the whip and reins, the smell of Cabel Singh not the smell of his father or Joe Spencer, and Eileen rocking and squirming next to him as she struggled still for her unstable edge of seat, her arm clenched around his shoulders and her hair in his face and the odour of her happy perspiration mingled with the green smell of toppling horse-dung and the leather and the dust. Cabel had smiled happily at his rolling jamboree, knowing that in taking Eileen he was risking his welcome on the next round that brought him to the Ridge, but all looking only onwards towards the track and the adventure and the sun gleaming upon the sand drifts and the soft and gateless tracks that lay ahead.

They went down to his camp in the summer evenings, even the little ones, down to the familiar place beside the machinery shed in the evenings when it was fine. There, Cabel would be expecting them and would give them coloured jellies to eat and have them sit about his fire. He would sit among them and smoke his bubble pipe, and the little ones would call for old stories, stories that were now familiar though never less than strange.

Cabel would laugh with them as he sat before his fire, sometimes drawing on his bubble pipe, and sometimes stirring at a curry, which he would also share. He would share with them his johnny cakes, the thick flat pads of fried dough that he dipped for them in a simmering curry and they would tell their own stories to Cabel, tales of birds' nests and rabbits and the long trek with Hannah down to Baring school. Sometimes Cabel would join in to tell them stories of his own childhood, so long ago and far away. He was far younger than the other hawkers they had seen, and younger, it almost seemed each time he passed the Ridge. But they could not imagine Cabel without his dark beard and his cap, could not see the ageless Cabel as a child like themselves, and always preferred the tales that Cabel told of the wastelands to the north.

'What did I say? What did I tell you, the last time I was here?'

The children would begin to tell him in a rush of bits and pieces the outline of some story he had

told, and finally Cabel would seize upon some detail, some fragment that reminded him of another story, and he would begin to talk. Then they would settle into silence, the boy's eye catching sometimes the eye of Hannah or of Eileen, and they would smile to each other the smile of deep immersion, of a profound and familiar pleasure as Cabel began his tales.

Sometimes he told them stories from his distant childhood and of places far away, but mostly he told stories from the country which lay about them, a country scarcely to be known as Cabel told it, a country bare and featureless to view but which in Cabel's stories took on a motion and a life where one bare and vacant stretch of scrub peeled off into another and threw his wanderers together in new and fragile combinations. He told them always of the far country, of the wastelands to the north, of abandoned towns out in the desert, and of the river that ran through the country to the east, and of the green lands to the south. He told stories of travellers like himself, and often like Eileen, wanderers who came in off the road from nowhere and who lived in the luck of chance, where the next track they chose might be a track leading only to another track, and to a death beyond luck among the soaks and sandy ridges. All ran into worlds they only knew when Cabel spoke, when Cabel's voice ran softly on into the falling darkness, with the night creeping in upon them as though to listen, clinging to the fading rim of the circle cast by the fire.

Cabel sat in the half darkness of the night but always nearest to the fire, always at the centre and the special shirt he would put on in the evenings, a shirt of a whiteness they never saw elsewhere, and sometimes with a turban of a brighter colour and sometimes with nothing on his head at all but with his long hair falling free about his face and down his shoulders, or sometimes just tied behind. His skin was dark against the white but no more so than those who worked in the sun. He had once been a soldier, the boy had been told, and was said to know more of horses than anyone. Even as they sat about the fire, Cabel would sit erect, crosslegged but with his back and shoulders straight, as though sitting at attention even as he told his tales. Even the boy's father, who had little to say of anyone, admitted that he was a fine stamp of a fellow, after Cabel once saved a team of horses that had got into the wheat. And as Cabel talked, the boy would watch always the colour of his eyes, deep black, unlike the soft brown eyes of Eileen whose eyes so quickly took on the glow of the fire and the light of the sun. He would watch Cabel's eyes as they looked deep and black into the glowing of the fire.

The boy would watch Eileen as she sat crosslegged in the dust, her hands bunched in her lap and her eyes shining as she stared into the gleam of the dying ring of fire, as the soft voice of Cabel teased them away and into worlds that lay beyond the world that dropped away as they sat about his fire. He watched the motion of the flames about her eyes as she sat crosslegged by the fire, as they listened to the stories that reached far into the night. He would watch Joe Spencer too, Joe Spencer always sitting back a little and busying himself with sticks or piles of stones, but drawn despite himself to Cabel's fire, scarcely seeming to follow Cabel's stories but always there to watch Eileen, watching Eileen draw her knees up in her arms or brush away the insects on her skin.

They would watch his gaze and listen, and the boy would watch the face of Cabel Singh as the moving light ran up across his beard and face and magnified the deep gleam of his eyes. As he spoke they would all move closer to the shrinking embers, listen ever closer to his stories, and look now with the eyes of Cabel Singh, look deep into the lands of Cabel Singh. They listened as his stories ran on through the flickering of the fire against the drooping fringe of pepper trees, as they reached out to shape the sand drifts, the ridges and the dark fringe of the retreating scrubland, stories with no real beginnings and no endings, of strange and ancient godlike beings who moved across the country in a

eternal wandering and at every moment held their whole fate in their hands, where the river goddess Ganga and Arjuna the archer and Bhishma the warrior who lay upon his bed of arrows mingled freely with the wandering trappers and shootcutters, channel dredgers and bagsewers to the north, and other characters who in some of Cabel's stories vanished or came to grievous and untimely ends, but who would always come back later in another time and place and on another of Cabel's visits; and all his stories were of people moving across an open country upon which all things might come to pass.

He spoke too of the land about them, of the northern deserts and the vast saltpans and low and trackless forests that they would one day cross together. They learned of the dry country beyond the high drifts to the north, the green lands and open flowing rivers to the east and south, and of Cabel's journeys that took him always up through the seas of low forest that lay beyond Wirrengren Plain, and out across the drifts and vacant plains, and on towards the silver lakes that lay far to the north, green lakes where you could walk across the surface of the waters and never once get wet, where all the water was made of air and faded and blew about you as you crossed. They learned about the dry flat lands that lay beyond Monkeytail Tank and to the east, and Pheeny's Rise and Rocket Lake and the tank at Last Chance, where they would ride with him one day, before moving out across Raak Plain and towards the solid earth of Carwarp Downs. From there they would ride on through taller forests to meet the river on one of its crazed foldings as it wound out beyond Kulkyne. There they would meet a vast and rolling river with more water than they could ever imagine, sweeping through the dry country with nothing but dust and thirsting trees and dry and yellow country to either side. Beyond the river they would ride into the swamplands, where trees grew upon the waters and strange birds lived like fish beneath the surface, of giant stranded seabirds that had stayed so long as to lose the art of flight and of bright banded snakes that sped like thoughts across the brink. There, Cabel said, they would sleep on broad beaches of crumbling bark and soft damp sand, and they would stay for as long as they pleased, and live upon mussels and duck eggs and riverfish and rabbits and wild honey.

'Joe?

'You all right, Joe?

'What are you going to do, Joe?'

Because the boy knew that Joe must do something. He watched but from a distance as Joe shuffled from foot to foot, beating his fist from time to time against the slab walls of the stable and threatening violence to the trees and to the blank heat of the day, and then retreating in misery to the shade of the pepper trees, to sit and splinter sticks and kick aimless patterns with his heel amid the dirt, glancing back now and then to check on the others, the boy's father and Old Tollie, who stood about the gateway to the stable, scratching their elbows and stroking their chins and gazing helplessly out across the lakebed and the spaces that lay vacant to the east.

Joe Spencer had lost his high ruddy colour and his cocky smile when he was told, and finally he was taken by Old Tollie even gently to the fallen log that lay beneath the shade of the pepper trees, on the place where the hawker's cart had been. He sat with his shoulders hunched over an enamel mug of tea that Hannah brought, alone until the boy approached, sitting with Joe for a time in silence and, like him, just fooling about with bits of stick.

No-one had talked to Joe Spencer for a time, for it was known that he spent more time than anyone with Eileen through the recent months, taking her with him in the Ford collecting stumps, and

sometimes playing cards in the evenings up at the house, and more often just sitting with her on the wicker layabouts on the verandah, Joe in his armless and unbuttoned shirt, blowing his smoke ring off the verandah and out into the night, teasing and joking with Eileen who would rarely simply read or sew as the boy's mother did and who it seemed could never be without some other person, even silent smiling Auntie Argie, to banter and provoke. Eileen would lie on one of the layabouts, laughing and teasing with Joe, placing her ankles over the rail and spreading her knees and raising the fabric of her dress to catch whatever cool breeze might filter up the ridge, and she and Joe would pass hours in the falling darkness, ribbing and poking at one another and sometimes with ancient Auntie Argie sitting quietly beside them as though she were not there at all. And when it was time for Joe to amble back down past the dogs, past the netting yard that had been coiled about a clump of mallee, his passage was marked out for the girl and the old woman who lingered on the verandah in the rise and fall of the red glow of the last of his cigarette.

'Joe?'

'You all right, Joe?'

But Joe dismissed the idea that things might not be all right with a harsh snuffle, wiping his bare forearm across his face as though it were the sweat of work that he was clearing, pitching a stick of wood towards the pup, who leapt and yelped with the joy of it and then came back with the stick for more.

'Bastard! Bastard, bastard, bastard!'

That was bastard for whatever had happened to Eileen and bastard that his feelings about it were so strong and bastard that the boy and his pup should see him in this way.

'What're you going to do, Joe?'

'Dunno, yet.'

'What do you reckon happened, Joe?'

'Dunno, yet. Jesus, kid!'

Why did you hit her, Joe?

Which was the question that he did not ask, and he did not ask about the sounds that he had heard of Joe arguing with Eileen in the night and the sound of the dogs restless and the pup yelping as he crept down past the dogyard and the sound of the blow and the weeping in the dirt. He was silent for some time, knowing not to push Joe too far, not wanting to leave Joe because of the questions the other might ask, his talking with Joe a refuge from questions and silences and strange looks of the other with Joe slumping forward with his elbows on his knees, his chin pressed against his clasped fists and cracking knuckles, staring with a concentrated gaze of anger down across the vacant spaces of the lakebed.

'What do you think, Joe? What are you going to do about it?'

'I reckon we ought to talk to the Indian, for one thing. That's one thing we gunna do. That's one thing we need to do.'

'Why Cabel Singh, Joe? Why talk with Cabel Singh?'

'I reckon he knows something. He told her something, when they were on the track. Give her funny ideas.'

‘What sort of ideas?’

‘Just stupid bloody ideas. That’s all.’

And Joe Spencer’s shoulders began to square again with the growth of an idea that might mean some kind of doing.

‘I’d like to have a bit of a yarn with this Cabel Singh. That’s all. That’s what I’d like to do.’

‘He’s gone up to the north, Joe. You saw him. Days ago. He won’t be back for a couple of months. That’s what he said.’

‘He knows this country He knows this place. He lives out in it. He told us once that he hasn’t slept under a roof for ten years. He knows every inch of it, every damn twig and rock of it, like none of us do. He knows things we don’t. He even watches the sand drifts move. He told us that once. He remembers where they were, ten years ago, and he watches them move and cover things, bushes, trees. He knows the place.’

‘Doesn’t mean he done anything, Joe. Why would he hurt her, Joe?’

Why did you hit her, Joe? Why was she crying?

And neither did he ask about the blood that was on Eileen’s dress, not asking if the blood was from the blow that he had struck her beyond the dogyard, not asking about Eileen as he had seen her, as she had limped past where he was hidden, sobbing and trying to fix her dress and stumbling up toward the house.

‘What was it that he told yers anyway?’

Joe turned on him.

‘What did he tell her? What did he say to the two of yers, out there by Windmill Tank? What the hell were yers all doing out there anyway?’

Joe turned back and gazed out to the dry lake.

He could come and go without any of us knowing it. Without leaving a track. Better’n an abbo. Maybe she seen him in the nights. With none of us knowing a damn thing about it. I’m going to find him and talk to him. Just talk to him, that’s all. That’s what I’m gunna do.’

Joe thumped his fist against the palm of his hand and snuffled and spat, and gazed out again across the lake and steadily cursed it all in a soft and steady stream, cursed Eileen and Cabel Singh and the cleared country and the country still to clear, the boy for his questions, and the pup that would not shut up, and all the empty spaces and dark ideas that rose before him off the empty lakebed, of Eileen stealing naked out to meet the darkness, this time to greet the smile and secret knowledges of Cabel Singh, who crept back in silence from the north, leaving no mark as he moved across the moonlit plains. Joe’s eyes gazed sightless into the heart of it, and he coughed and spat at the reek of what he saw, turning now and then to glare down at the stable and the boy’s father and Old Tollie still shuffling about.

‘In and out like an abbo. None of us knowing a damn thing about it. Not a damn thing.’

They sat about in silence, until Joe was released by the boy’s father, who called him over and to

him to get the stumps off the truck and take it into town to fetch the policeman from up at Ouyen though no-one rightly knew if it was a police matter at all, if scattered clothing and a girl of her age gone off meant anything at all. He might have a chance, they thought, of raising someone who could open up the Exchange on a Sunday and get word up to Lonnie Cooper in Ouyen, to see if maybe she had taken the main road and turned up there.

Joe leapt to his feet and whistled to his dog and cranked the truck and brought it across in seconds in a great jolt of smoke and whining metal and ground gears, leaping into the rear and tearing the black and tangled stumps from the tray, the stumps that he and the boy had collected the day before and piling them in a dusty and unsteady stack below the pepper trees, toppling them across the hawkers' ring of stones, across his tracks and the mark of his pickets in the dirt.

The boy sat on Joe's log, watching the rage of Joe's labour, watching Joe's anger spill out into thankful violence, watching him raise the larger stumps above his head and pitch them in the air and crash and topple, the anger running out into a rage of muscles heaving as he flung the roots upon the pile, kicking the last of the stumps from the tray with one heavy boot and then the other and slamming the tailgate closed with a shriek of grinding iron. Without a word to the boy, and with another harsh assault upon the gears, he set the truck bucking and jerking off upon its way, ignoring the boy's request to take him along and moving off down the track in clouds of dust and oily smoke, the Ford straining and bucketing as he tackled the furrows by the gate, setting out over the dry lake in a low billowing stream of dust and towards the pine clumps and scrublands that lay between them and the town.

In the heat of the day he would sit on the edge of the oat-stack, hiding in the shadow of his broad felt hat, watching as Joe took oats up from the wagon, his muscles taut and the sinews standing out upon his arms, and he would watch as Joe's legs took up the weight as the bags toppled and his body staggered and then held. He watched Joe's body take on strength and balance as he straightened and shifted his feet and locked his back into a steady hold, then lumped the bag across the unsteady footing of the stack and dropped it, with a last grunt of delicious effort, precisely in its place.

He watched him at other times, too, when he worked nearer to the house or around the garden with his shirt stripped off and his muscles firming and easing to the steady thrust of the shovel delving the clay, the driving of the pick-handle into the knotted roots of old rosebushes, or oleanders to be grubbed out. And the boy would watch with a pleasure that was like the pleasure of his own body when he saw the straining arch of Joe Spencer's back and the force of his legs driving down into his heavy and workmoulded boots, fixed hard against the beaten earth.

He watched him as they swam together naked in the dam or washed together after work, and he would see the white skin tight across Joe's chest, the thick curly hair that was beginning to appear there, and the thin line of hair that grew from his loins and his navel upwards, the sharp acidic odour of stale filth and oil and mansweat that rose from him as he began to wash, and the long rivulets that the brown water made as it coursed down upon his back and stomach and clung in soapy froth about his groin. He watched the thick contours of Joe's back and shoulders as he stooped to dry his feet, and the turn of the muscle and the darker hair that he saw when Joe raised one arm and then another to slap roughly at his body with the thin towels that his mother would leave out for them, slapping with harsh affection at his own body as he slapped the necks of his horses after a day's hard work, flicking and cracking the thin wet towel about him like a whip.

When they worked together, the boy would place his spindlebody next to Joe and try to learn Joe's rough and careless way of moving, exploring the spaces of his own ungrown body and speaking in a voice that was like Joe's, speaking only in words and through thoughts that he knew to be Joe's. He slapped roughly as Joe did at his own bony frame, and lumbered about as though under the rich weight of muscle in the way he saw Joe do, because he knew that one day he would need to know how to crawl for and move within a body that would be like Joe's body, with its thick flesh like the flesh of a horse that rolled and strained beneath the skin, with its own dark coils of thick and secret hair that stored the heat and odour of the sun and work, with arms burned red and brown against the whiteness of his body, with a deep red vee at his neck where the sun would beat in, where his shirt too would fall open as Joe's shirt always fell open, as he laboured in the sun.

He tore at the sleeves of his shirts in the way Joe always tore the sleeves from the shoulder of each new shirt that he put on; and when he saw how the gaping holes mocked his thin arms and flapped about his bony chest, he wrapped himself in his father's heavy peajacket and wore it even through the high heat of the day and had worn it from that day since, as he wore each day the battered army slouch hat that Joe had given him, and the heavy boots that were not boy's boots at all, boots that needed the aid of rolled newspaper and bandages just to stay upon his feet.

For years he had clung closely in this way to Joe Spencer, with his ragged blond and curly hair, his face cut about and always poorly shaven, his movements brute and awkward unless heaving and straining in some mindless test of strength. Joe Spencer never seemed to ask for more of life than a tough job to do, a clean shirt at the end of the week, a trip into town and a beer at the Patchewollock pub, and some daily labour, some daily resistance to bring back to him his power, something to move or bend or break, to keep his blood quick and his ready spirits chanting. Joe Spencer was a good straight shot, whether in the bush or at bottles behind the Patchewollock pub, and a good straight lumberer too, with a name for it on stacks as far away as Speed and Tempe.

Joe seemed not to give a damn where he had come from, or where he was going, but gloried only in the name of a damn good toiler who could last from sunrise to sundown at the plough or the shovel without complaint, who could always get an acre or two more from his horses than even the boy's father, who had worked them all his life. Joe seemed to know the thoughts of dogs and horses and had a feeling for the insides of machines, the oily bowels of the neighbour's tractor and the endless trickling cogs that spilled from the truck's gearbox one day when Joe had taken it all apart, and he worked all day through the silence and curses of his father, to put the whole thing back together again without the loss of so much as a drop of oil, and it working perfectly from that day to this.

The boy's clinging never seemed to bother Joe, because Joe was still half a boy himself and had grown up in this way within the shapes of other men. He laughed at this splinter of a boy who was his skinny echo, and ruffled his hair and teased him, but always with rough kindness, and he showed the boy that he understood, every time he twisted his arm or knocked his hat off and ruffled his hair and cupped his hand behind the boy's neck and sent him twirling in the dust. Sometimes in the evening or when wallowing in the dam, or out collecting stumps, he would wrestle with him and let the boy feel the strength that was in his back and arms. He taught the boy lots of things before his time, and many things that boys his age could never hope to do, and even, once or twice, had told him of Eileen. And when Eileen herself leaned over the boy, as now she often did, and caressed him still as a child but always with her eyes and hands roving about him in a mocking and intruding way, he felt the start of desire and found he hardly knew whether it was his desire or just a knowledge of the desire of Joe.

Spencer. When Eileen smiled at Joe as she moved about the table and Joe grinned back and his father scowled at them and caught his mother's eye across the table, the girl would be sent scuttling from the kitchen on some useless errand and the boy would watch Joe's eyes follow her.

Then Joe would turn and wink at him, and he wondered at these times how much they knew of his nights amid the bushes past the dogyard, wondering about these winks of Joe and the gentle hands of Eileen, and what they told him of the movement in the nights beyond the dogyard; and in thinking of it he slipped yet further beyond the silence and the dark looks of his parents, beyond all the chatter of the other children and the last of his childhood world, of nests and jacks and rabbit traps, to cling more tightly to this secret life of Joe Spencer and Eileen.

He moved in silence far beyond the house, following the fenceline that faded close ahead into the darkness of the night, the darkness lifted by the moon which hung above the drifts, the silent night-time spaces theirs alone. They moved through the bands of cleared country and past the open reaches of low stubble that led out towards the drifts, where the cleared country ended and the high drifts and pine country began. The moon threw long shadows across his path, and the sound of distant turkeys and the fading yelping of dogs only told how far he had left the familiar world behind.

For miles he moved through familiar places made unfamiliar in the darkness, opening and closing gates for the horse along the tracks that led towards the eastern edge of the vast Wirrengren Plain. They climbed the low hills and over the tall sand drifts that lay just to the north of the ridge, and soon they broke into the unfenced country, moving out in the half light of the night on to Wirrengren and following the dim outline of a winding track that took them north and through the thin and wavering grasses towards the centre of the low expanse. For hours they walked through the open heart of the country, through the bed of the lake that had never, in anyone's memory, been in water. They walked in silence along the looping track which ran off towards the north and the west, the pallid speargrass drawing low the light of the moon and gleaming off into the distance towards the rim of scattered timber that marked the boundary to the east and, far to the north, the sight of moonlight on the low slopes and sand drifts that lay beyond the rim of ancient gums that lay along what was once the sandy shore. The boy trudged alongside the horse and the pup padded softly behind, and they walked the way until they saw the first signs of morning light.

He stopped at Windmill Tank, where he had been just days before with Eileen and Cabel Singh. The sound of the spinning vanes came to them from the distance, long before they were near, before they could see in the faintness of the early morning light the dark patch of low timber and the scattered troughs and farm wreckage, of rusted iron tanks and old car seats. The boy filled his waterbags from the water which slowly dripped as always from the buckled overflow. He released the horse in hobble to graze on whatever it might find in the low fringe of grasses that lay about the troughs and amid the tufts of saltbush that lay a little further out. He built up a small fire with scattered windfall timber, and he and the dog lay down and away from the dull glow of the fire, so they could watch the last of the stars. They listened to the crickets singing in the bush, and to the distant moaning of an owl somewhere towards the north. He wrapped up as best he could against the early morning chill and curled up with the warmth of the pup, and they listened together to the sound of the wind in the trees and the sound of the horse's hobbles and the trickle of water from the tank, to the steady rattling sounds of loose paper-bark against the trees and the beating of floating strings of flaking bark that rattle out in the wind. They listened to all the sounds of the windmill patch of scrubland, which creaked

about them as though it were creeping from them in the night, as though all the world that was familiar to them to that moment was now flaking and peeling and breaking away in sheets like ancient paper and coursing off upon the winds.

‘What did you hear last night? You must have heard something.’

‘Nothing. The dogs were restless, but they always are. Nothing apart from that.’

‘How did she seem, when you last spoke to her? Did she seem all right to you last night?’

The boy would only tell her that the girl had seemed well enough last night, sitting as usual under the light of the lamp in the living room, playing a game of cards with herself, not trying to talk to anyone but sitting quietly under the light of the big Colman lamp. He had passed and looked at her reflection in the oval mirror, had watched her game of patience inverted in the mirror that hung upon the wall of the living room, had watched the tip of her tongue between her teeth as always when she played with care, watched the freckles on her nose and her nose wrinkle in annoyance when she made a fault. He often watched her in this way, watching Eileen in the mirror so that others would not see that he was watching, and she had looked up, Eileen’s sleepy eyes catching his eye as he looked at her. She smiled secretly in the quiet of the room, smiling at his secret admiration, at perhaps his knowing that she was waiting for the world to sleep and for her time to slip down yet again in the darkness of the dogyard.

He watched her reflection in the mirror, Eileen at the centre of the room’s reflection, her tousled auburn hair softlighted in the Colman’s glow, and she smiled her warm and always halfsleepy smile at him, happy that he should admire her in this way. She seemed to know his thoughts of her much better than he did himself, seemed in her smile to carry some special knowledge of him, and her smile moved always about him like the touch of a kind hand. She ran her hand through her thatch of hair that was loosely tied behind but straggled out around her ears, her large brown eyes taking in the mirror of the room, the children lying and playing on the floor, and the backs of the heads of his parents as they sat silent in their chairs, his father’s hair pasted in a rim about his ears by the sweat of the day, his head nodding, almost sleeping, and his mother buried deeply in a book.

‘What are you doing?’ he would ask, though it was always clear what she was doing, and yet it pleased him just to ask, as he knew Eileen would then grin and reach across and rumple his hair, run her fingers through his hair and roughly shake his head, and then go back to her cards. Then Hannah would drop her book and come also to the table, and she and the boy would force Eileen to take up the cards and deal them out a hand. This, he told his mother, was all that had happened, that last night, and on a hundred others.

At times throughout the day his mother had taken him aside, measuring always his resistance, knowing that he knew more than he said, knowing that Eileen had talked to him, as she had talked to Hannah, talking to them of adult things, of things that might explain. She knew well enough that the boy had listened, and too often, to those wild stories of Eileen, her one consolation being that, however wild the stories were, the truth was surely worse. When he would not answer, she ran a worn hand through her hair and gazed out into the glare at the stripped and naked plains that lay about them, though what had happened in the stable, and the boy’s knowing, and all the boy’s stubborn resistance were rooted in that glare and emptiness.

‘Did she tell you anything? Did she say anything to you when you were out with her last week?’

The boy moved deeper within his hat, lowering the brim so that he could not see her eyes.

‘On the way back from the tank? Anything else you should have told Mr Cooper? Is there anything else that we should know?’

‘Well,’ she murmured finally, when she failed to provoke him, ‘I’m not surprised. I can’t say I’m surprised. The way she carried on. But I didn’t think that this would happen, in this way. I didn’t think that it would happen just like that, on our place. Not in this way.’

Thinking that it would come, but slowly, as all fate came to them slowly, like the dryness that crept on day by day, or the slow dust of the Debt Adjuster’s car as it crept towards them from far across the lake. She furrowed her hair with nervous fingers and looked again to the men fanning flies away in the shade by the stable. She looked at Hannah too, a sad little figure throughout the afternoon, in her yellow pinafore and ragged fuzz of hair, now pallid and silent underneath the pepper trees, sitting with her head in her hands on Joe’s log, staring into the pile of stumps that Joe had left, staring deep into the pile of stumps and to that hidden place where Cabel had kept his fire.

She was aware that some special thing was needed, that someone needed to attend to the grieving girl, who now neither cried nor spoke, but it was not in her now to offer that thing. It had not been her to offer that form of kindness for some years, except in flashes to Auntie Argie as she dazed about the house. Instead of looking to the breaking girl, she moved over to the stable again and backward and forwards from the house, looking for some relief in blaming, blaming the flies, blaming that rude and inconsiderate hussy who had brought them so much trouble, cursing the grieving and the relief and the confusion that she had left behind, scolding the pup who grew louder on the excitement of scolding, and the son who had fallen upon some secret female obscenity displayed in this obscure way and who had spent she knew not how long dwelling upon it, alone in all the monstrous depths of whatever it was that happened there. She blamed this ditherer of a son who was determined to be no help at all, who let her know in his silences that he knew something, sheltering from her beneath his slouch hat, setting himself and his silence against her in this business and taking up all that he knew into whatever cloudy and resenting incommunicable world in which he passed his time.

‘Go and talk to Hannah,’ she said finally, but in a softened tone.

‘She’s finding it all very hard. Go and help your sister. Tell her something. Just see that Hannah is all right.’

She moved at last to go up to the house.

‘You can do that, at least.’

The boy did not speak to his sister but only gestured to her to come with him. She rose from Joe’s log and they found their way together down to the gateway that led out onto the lake, down to the clump of trees that stood about the gate, that gave out onto the lakebed and the track that led through the spare forests of scattered native pine that lay between them and the town. She climbed upon the strainer post and the boy climbed the dead tree by the gate, and there they simply waited, whispering now and then to each other, their voices softened by the sight of adults still milling about and talking in muted voices over by the stable, and by sad thoughts about Eileen.

They watched the last of the dust that followed Joe Spencer rise slowly and disperse in the air, and they waited still, knowing that long hours and the heat of the middle of the day must pass before Joe Spencer would return, before they would see another cloud of dust in the distance and then the sound

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