

REVIEW *of*  
AUSTRALIAN  
FICTION

Debra Adelaide  
*The Ministry of Reading*

Eleanor Limprecht  
*Sao*

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# REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN FICTION

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DEBRA ADELAIDE & ELEANOR LIMPRECHT

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*Imprint*

The Ministry of Reading

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# THE MINISTRY OF READING

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# Debra Adelaide

## 1 The Reading Room

The minister stared at the cover of the report before her, nothing else on her desk apart from a glass of water, not even a pen. She had already underlined the crucial passages. Her staff would be here shortly. Five copies of the report awaited them on the conference table in the centre of the reading room, specially booked and unavailable to the public for the occasion. At the first knock, she took her reading glasses from her pocket and polished them on a corner of her silk shirt. Her assistant Ainsley rose from her desk and went to the door.

The Capital had always featured a reading room, but Dr Wheeler's administration had transformed it. The thick dark curtains had been replaced with gauzy ones that let in the light, which was not so cruel at all, though generations of librarians had once decided otherwise. The windows were thrown open, allowing strong breezes that made the curtains salsa wildly into the room. The original books that had sustained more than a century of administration were now gone. A serious culling had seen off every mustard-yellow bound volume to the government repository in an industrial estate south of the city. The shelves were filled with books on any topic but selected according to a strict criteria: that they not be boring. Hardcover and paperbacks, new and secondhand, cheap and not so cheap. But they were all bargains, as far as the minister was concerned. She had already abolished the tax on books, restored the trade restrictions that protected local authors from encroachments by foreign multinationals, broken the apparatus that was leading to near-monopoly of the industry by chain stores, and set up a Book Club (she refused to employ

terms like inquiry, commission, or committee) whose primary objective was to tell people to go stick their head in a book.

Like equal pay, the ministry of reading had been around for a long while but, like feminism, was still finding it needed to justify itself. In the early months of Dr Wheeler's position, it became necessary to make some adjustments against the ever-present old guard who preferred books to be kept in libraries and readers to remain anonymous, passive. No one had ever questioned the fact that there always had been an entire portfolio devoted to numbers, and the minister was rather weary of words playing second fiddle to numerals. If the nation saw fit to have its finances controlled by someone called the Treasurer, then they could accept that the Reader would be in charge of its language as well.

The minister was devoted to words. An ex-librarian, the only one in the current government—dominated, as was the usual case, by well-groomed lawyers and slightly less kempt party officials and organisers—she persuaded the President to provide more support for her portfolio and more authority to her position as the nation's Reader.

## **2 Fossil Ridge**

Dr Wheeler's credentials for her position were immaculate. She had spent a crucial formative period in the remote north of the country, a region dominated by primary industries and dangerous wild creatures, where working and drinking were the main occupations. She had run the Fossil Ridge library-come-hardware store for twenty years and had stood for office at the urging of numerous devoted citizens who had ensured her reputation had spread far across the vast region whose electorate she came to represent. After her election, the President had been intrigued.

'A library and hardware store in one?'



‘Only way to get the locals to notice the books. The place was so remote they had to come to me for bolts and fence strainers. Even light bulbs and batteries.’

‘What happened to the municipal library?’

‘You’ve never been to Fossil Ridge?’

The President had not. Nor had he travelled anywhere near the great stretches of land north of the Capital, where every other place was named something Hills or Ridge or Downs, as if there were features—rolling meadows with gambolling lambs and hopping rabbits, picturesque stands of shady trees—instead of the bleak rocky landscape that stretched into an endless distance, and light that skewered the eyeballs.

‘There is no municipality, as such. And the closest thing to a public library was a travelling one, a Kombi van that arrived once a year.’

‘Once a year?’

‘Nearly every year. Sometimes the floods kept them out. But when the council headquarters shifted to the coast, the library service went too.’

The President had only a vague idea that from the coast Fossil Ridge would have been well over a thousand kilometres away by road. And not particularly good road. It was country where no one stayed by choice, except for eccentrics. But Dr Wheeler seemed normal. In this climate, she had persuaded the entire town to read her books, a collection that had commenced when she was a young council trainee working in places so remote that the post was only weekly. She had started a reading group, an exclusively men’s one, women being rare in that place. It was perhaps a national first. Back then she’d relied on Reader’s Digest catalogues (a company she blessed, for they would send their publications anywhere on earth) and a series of book clubs that sold their wares like reproduction miniature vases or commemorative spoons. Consequently her collection was big on condensed versions of popular male authors and facsimile

editions of classical titles, leather-bound. But books like the novels of James A. Michener and Morris West, the complete set of Dennis Wheatley (a freebie thrown in when she ordered a twin set of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* were popular among her male readership. It helped, too, that the books were sturdy hardcovers. Even after years of constant circulation, her copies of *Exodus* or *The Dam Busters* were still intact.

In more recent years Dr Wheeler had opened an Amazon account and obtained books more efficiently than if she'd ordered from booksellers in the main cities. The postage, she discovered, was the same from Seattle to anywhere, and it seemed the Amazon accounts department was yet to work out that shipping to Fossil Ridge was considerably more time and trouble than to Birmingham, Samarkand or even the Canary Islands.

She had selected titles on an arbitrary but workable system. For instance, each year she ordered all the shortlisted titles, multiple copies, from the major literary awards. She opened a book at the Fossil Ridge Hotel, setting out a blackboard where the odds were noted and adjusted as the announcement drew close. Every year, the locals voted in favour of an alternative title, while guessing the actual winners almost every time. When Peter Carey won the Booker for *Oscar and Lucinda*, Fossil Ridge had favoured the imminent controversy with *The Satanic Verses*. In 1992 they'd spurned the joint winners for a clear outsider, *The Butcher Boy*, which remained a favourite among the local meatworkers. Later they'd resisted *The Sea* for the same reason they would also reject *Breath*. Coastal themes and watery metaphors held little appeal for landlocked, drought-choked readers.

When Penguin issued its first Popular reprints she displayed all fifty of the bright orange books in the hardware store window alongside a display of colour-coordinated paint tins. Fifty titles at ten dollars each, free delivery for bulk orders. Some of the customers could spend that on alcohol over a few weeks.

And the rewards were massive. Each reader paid ten dollars deposit in exchange for reading any number of these titles, and interest soon developed into obsession, readers lining up for books with reputations, authors whose names were near-legendary. She bound the paper covers in clear plastic contact, and the readers were respectful: they had handled folio editions and gilt-edged volumes for years and knew not to read in the bath or over their breakfast sausages.

High in demand at first were *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Lolita*, *The History of Sexuality* and *Delta of Venus*. Nevertheless, after the idea of books about sex was replaced by the reality (they discovered that *Lolita* actually contained no sex, while Foucault's account was more history than sex), readers gradually promoted their own favourites. For Dr Wheeler it was fascinating, like watching yeast rise then clarify in a barrel of home-brew beer. After the heady ferment of Lawrence or Nin, or the intoxication of love (in a cold climate, or in the time of cholera, either was preferable), readers settled for the comparative sobriety of ethics and philosophy. High in favour was Paul Davies's *The Mind of God*, closely followed by *The Consolation of Philosophy* and *Six Thinking Hats*. She was surprised to find that one favourite amongst the fiction was not as she'd expected, given the town's regular diet of authors like Chandler and Capote. So popular was *Pride and Prejudice* that she had added extra copies from her collection of quality reprints to the Popular Penguins set to satisfy demand. She could not attribute this to recent Austen mania, for the movies, the television miniseries, the reading clubs, the raft of contemporary books from *Bridget Jones's Diary* to *The Jane Austen Book Club*, had failed to have an impact on the readers of Fossil Ridge. She could only attribute it to the novel's intrinsic witty wisdom and its satisfying moral, social and cultural patterning.

Or maybe it was style. For the number one book of all fifty of the Popular Penguins surprised even her, who thought she gauged the pulse of her

readership fairly accurately. It was Eric Partridge's *Usage & Abusage: A Guide to Good English*. There, she thought, was something for the theorists to ponder, for the marketing geniuses to work out. Why a town like Fossil Ridge with its ore and semi-precious metal miners, who spent their waking hours underground and their sleeping hours drinking; or its itinerant station hands, who sank wells and mustered cattle, built fences and dredged dams; with its collection of council workers who filled potholes or stamped and filed rates notices; its core population of bartenders (eight), schoolteachers (one), nurses (one-half), priest (one-quarter) and meatworkers, agricultural advisors and engineers (anything from ten to hundreds depending on the time of year and the amount of rain), plus its scattered leaseholders, tradespeople and one taxi driver — why they elevated a book of grammar to the number one title was worth perhaps several research projects in linguistics or anthropology or cultural studies.

The minister held great affection and admiration for the readers of Fossil Ridge. Indeed it was their devotion to the act that was the reason she was here today in the reading room in the Capital, awaiting her staff, about to discuss a report. When as a minister of the government, as the nation's first Reader, she had reflected on the singular success of the Fossil Ridge lending library, she decided she must examine the implications. What had her readers there revealed about the nature and effects of reading? The place represented a rare, perhaps unique, experiment in the reading process, and she was keen to absorb its lessons. It was a Petri dish of reading culture. She had long held the idea that reading was a good thing to do, but could never justify it or back it up by hard data. In a culture of commodity, where reading was an essential skill as opposed to a desirable pastime, it would be good to assess the real results of sustained reading on an entire population.

At the time, certain questions had intrigued her: was the crime rate in Fossil Ridge lesser or greater? Were the people more generous and charitable,

gentle and pacific? Or did they become introverted, selfish and irascible? One meditative book about reading that Dr Wheeler consulted shortly before she left for the Capital had espoused the virtues of reading as if it were a health regime that went hand in hand with bowel regularity and dental hygiene. This author had gone so far as to claim that devoted readers were likely to be more fastidious in their personal habits than non-readers. Did the citizens of Fossil Ridge floss more frequently than the rest of the nation?

‘I don’t know about that,’ the visiting dentist had informed her when she put it to him. ‘They always seem a pretty regular bunch to me. I tell you one thing, though, about what I know of these men, compared with a lot of other places I visit. Not one of them has the slightest interest in writing themselves.’

It was true: no one had ever expressed such a desire in all her years there. They were happy to remain consumers. To receive the word, not impart it.

‘And I can tell you,’ he added. ‘It’s not for want of stories. Not out there.’

By the time Dr Wheeler had left Fossil Ridge for the Capital she had read just about everything there was to read on the topic, yet could see that further study was clearly required. But many reams of paper and much congested jargon could be expended in research and result in no one learning anything about the success or failure of anything, and the example of her lending library, in a place where books were rare and reading valued, would be no exception if she were not careful. She was conscious that while the theorists, the cultural critics, the pragmatists and the educationalists had for decades wrestled with the nature, function and value of reading, there was one clear gap. That was when she contacted the International Brain Institute and commissioned a research study.

### **3 Reading is sport**

Kendall, Jonesy, Helen, and Morrissey filed in one after the other. A few

minutes later there was Tim, flicking his ponytail and stroking his beard. All her staff were efficient readers. Morrissey could have scanned the report faster had it been on her iPad, but the minister was not prepared to issue electronic copies. The pages would be taken to her private office after the meeting and destroyed. She had hand-picked her senior advisers and they rarely let her down. Even Tim, the poet. Between the five of them they covered all possible bases. Small literary novel (Helen) to mass market fiction and the self-help department (Morrissey). Poetry, which Tim covered from folk ballad to urban rap, Snorri to Vendler. Tim was her most democratic adviser. He read poetry as diverse and as divisive as Laws and Lawson, Hallmark and Hughes, even the inspirational verses of Helen Steiner Rice.

But she had a special soft spot for Jonesy. He had confessed to her, his first day on the job, that he hadn't always been a reader, that in his younger days he'd really been interested in sport. Specifically water sports. And fishing, if that counted. The minister fixed him with a look and said, 'But reading is sport, surely?'

Back in her junior high school days Dr Wheeler happened not to be what is known as a team player. She had tried to enjoy netball but despite craving to be like any normal girl who looked forward to Wednesday afternoon sport, who, in fact, regarded this as the highlight of the school week, she quite simply and thoroughly loathed it. Wednesday sport dragged around with a cruel inevitability as far as she was concerned, and she became obsessed with avoiding as far as possible this part of the school curriculum. Banished to the position of goalkeeper, and bored with the action always at the other end of the court, she was usually found holding a book when the ball came in her direction; there was always a chance she could get to read it, given the infrequency of that.

In her fourth year a timetabling hiccup meant that avoidance became a reality. She and a clumsy overweight friend eluded the lists of netballers, golfers,

hockey players and swimmers, finding out, several weeks into the term, that no one seemed to miss them. They spent sports day in the music room reading romance novels and writing their journals, which they sometimes also compared, as was then the custom among fifteen-year-olds, until they were sprung by none other than the sports mistress herself who was roaming the corners of the school, whistle in one hand, clipboard in the other, on a quest to flush out the unfit and the unfaithful. She screeched at them so loudly they dropped their books, stood to attention, and shivered in their non-sport shoes. When demanded to provide an explanation as to why they were not participating in sport, the young future minister seized on the only possible answer. 'Reading is sport,' she said. The sports mistress's rather bug eyes became very prominent. 'A sort of sport,' she had added. 'You exercise your mind...' The whites seemed almost blue, glowing. 'And your eyeballs...'

Why bother trying to explain, she thought. The woman never read a book in her life, the whole school knew that for a fact. Only magazines like *Netball Weekly* or *Refereeing for Life*, and even then she tended to look at the pictures. This school was deeply riven. On the one side were the sport and PE faculty and all the maths and science teachers (mostly men), who boasted of never reading a *book*. On the other was the handful of staff teaching humanities, who were alleged to have read a book or two. This was the school, after all, made famous because the deputy principal went on to become a major league coach. The school captains were annually chosen for their ball skills rather than their academic achievements, least of all for their proficiency with words. Speech nights were always torture.

They were marched down to the principal's office, after which the sports mistress left, eyes still bulging, her long beaky nose quivering in anticipation of hunting down more recalcitrants. Fortunately for Dr Wheeler and her friend, the principal himself was in that afternoon, a rare situation: his relationship to the

rest of the school was refreshingly casual and he tended to make full use of his deputy. The principal arrived late at school, when he was there at all, ambling through the back gates around recess time, having enjoyed a leisurely walk from the train station. He had long since had his licence cancelled due to driving under the influence, and could reliably be encountered in a jovial mood at staff parties, and functions at the local club. It was fortunate, because this principal maintained a sort of old fogey-ish disdain of matters of the flesh—apart from nourishment of the stomach and liver—and evidently was as unenthusiastic about organised sport as the two students. His chief activity consisted of emerging from his office once a week to aim a flaccid hose at the one tree that grew in the quadrangle. The exertion of this over, fifteen minutes later he'd be back in his office reviewing his domain through a thick haze of cigar smoke.

On this particular afternoon he had eyed the two students quizzically, expelled a long stream of blue smoke, then asked what they were reading. They had both been caught with a contraband and much-thumbed copy of *Forever Amber*, however the young minister also had *The Catcher in the Rye* in her schoolcase, actually a book banned from the school—not that the principal would have known nor cared—while her friend also always carried and devotedly perused a copy of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. He seemed dissatisfied with this and, after lighting up a fresh cigar and inhaling deeply, recommended they turn to The Classics for edification. Which classics, she wanted to ask, but was afraid, in case there was only the one of that title, and that she would betray her ignorance by asking. Eventually she came to understand that The Classics referred to any black Penguin, and she read them accordingly and developed her lifelong regard for all those black, green and orange Penguins. He then dismissed them with a mumbled instruction to make sure they were on some sort of sport list, somewhere, and to turn up to something, somewhere, and they skipped off, not back to the music room, but home, deciding to walk instead of



catching the bus, thereby proving they weren't entirely anti-fitness.

Evidence of the existence of at least two bookish, unsporty students in the school probably had nothing to do with it, but next term the perfect sport was offered for the first time: walking. This involved catching a bus to the beginning of a trail in a nearby reserve, alighting, ambling along for an hour or so, then catching the bus at the other end of the trail and returning to school. All the despised skinny or pudgy, uncoordinated, uncompetitive types opted for walking which had everything going for it: no balls to run after, kick, catch or throw but mainly drop. No sweating, huffing, fainting, turning blue from cold or red from exertion. No despised team spirit. No team. No scores, and hence no humiliation at the end of the game. And no game as such. She was not smothered in mud, nor did she have her shins kicked in, her shoulders dislocated or her character thoroughly abused, as had been the case in other sport.

Walking attracted no honours. There were no pennants, trophies, district carnival representation, or assembly applause for walkers. But they did not care. Walking meant that there was no one to yell at you, blow whistles in your ear, or tell you off for dropping the ball; there were no endless playing fields to traverse, no hordes of fit and jaunty girls laughing at your baggy gym shorts or the bare legs your mother wouldn't let you shave. It was just you and your friends out there in the fresh air and sunshine strolling along admiring nature. You could even take along a book and read, if you wanted. And Dr Wheeler did.

#### **4 Reading is a verb**

It was assumed that the position would be pretty much ambassadorial and promotional. Visiting primary schools and prisons, running the annual

President's Reading Challenge, creating new literary awards and competitions, hosting book launches and initiating anthologies, websites and magazines to raise the profile of literature.

But as the first national Reader, Dr Wheeler saw matters more clearly. Reading was a verb and she intended to be far more active. She bought spare reading glasses and invested in a quality recliner, and although her reading activities were intended to take place as much inside as outside her office, visitors to her office quickly became accustomed to the sight of the Reader outstretched, shoes off, with a copy of *Crime and Punishment* or *On the Origin of Species* or *The Robber Bride* in her hands. If the Treasurer could sit at his desk poring through lists of numbers, she could do the same with words. As she saw it, her brief was to read widely, broadly. To read uncensored and to be blind to genre or gender. To read openly and optimistically, and while she could abandon any reading matter on the basis that it was boring, ill-conceived or poorly expressed, she could also approach every new book, magazine, journal or article with the same well-intentioned expectation of edification or amusement. Her only requirement of a book was that it transport her to another place. Most importantly, her job was to be *seen* to be reading. In public, the minister for reading read. She stood on railway platforms, patronised charity events, watched the races, attended the cricket, donated blood, opened garden parties and school fetes, had her hair cut, appeared at media dinners and social functions with an open book in her hand. Reading, she doorstopped at the Capital and fielded questions from journalists: 'Is it likely we will see another Salinger title now he is dead? What about the rumours of unpublished manuscripts?'; 'Why do you think the narrator of *Rebecca* doesn't have a name?'; 'Who's your favourite poet?'

She would answer their questions succinctly, in perfect sound bites for the evening news, waving the novel or essay she was reading, the latest issue of the *New Yorker* or *Granta*, or commenting on the lead-up to her appointment of

Novelist Laureate, hotly speculated in the press.

Her advisers had all been appointed on the strength, speed and resilience of their capacity to read. A simple test administered by Ainsley under strict conditions—the applicant in a reading chair, given similar editions of *Ulysses*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Paradise Lost* and the *Twilight* series, the rates at which pages were turned, eyes were rubbed, yawns, sighs and smiles produced and requests for drinks of water or Jamesons all monitored via video and run through a simple program assessing the Delight-Boredom Index, followed by an old-fashioned comprehension test, multiple choice, pencil ticks. Soon they were all surrounded with stacks of books, brought from the stores of the libraries, the dump bins of chain stores, the back rooms of secondhand bookshops, and from the warehouses of publishers. They were armed with Kindles, iPads and their iPhones, loaded with apps for literary and cultural journals and poetry chapbooks and stuffed with their favourite book bloggers. And she advised her advisers. Have opinions, she urged them. Don't be afraid to voice them. Don't be afraid you may be wrong. Show the public you can take it. That you can read anything and respond to anything. And when at moments Dr Wheeler herself may have felt unnerved, a shrinking in her spine, a crack in the confidence of her reading judgement, a fear of the crowds and their questions, she recalled the most controversial facts ever known about reading. The fact that international fashion models could survive the announcement of their never reading books—unless they were ones written by themselves—and that world leaders could lead worlds and still struggle to read—even if the texts were magnified, reduced to monosyllables, on autocues—was encouraging. The President himself, it was well known, refused to read a paperback. A book to him was something bound in card, preferably leather, and she suspected every one sat on his shelves unopened. That was something the minister was determined to address before her term ended. Each month, she presented him with a new paperback, and like

Yann Martel and Canada's prime minister, waited patiently for a result. One day he would crack.

Meanwhile, the changes she had made! On her very first day at the Capital, a few years back, she had had a quick tour. They had started on the top floor of the vast compound and worked their way down, past the President's personal quarters, past the main chambers of government, the public galleries, and into the offices of the ministers and their staff. The place was a city within a city, bisected by paths and cycleways, and dotted with gardens and lawns. When they arrived at the reading room, Dr Wheeler was almost out of breath. It had taken twenty minutes of brisk walking along corridors, past atriums and down stairs, from the time she left the President's first briefing for ministers after the election. When her guide and assistant, Ainsley, then stopped at a set of double doors which opened inward, the minister paused, a hand on her chest. And then her breath stopped, for a moment. The implications sank in. A reading room. That a whole room in the Capital could be devoted to this pursuit alone was a luxury more extravagant than the personal gyms she had just seen, with machines that hummed and whirred at the touch of a button, the research and administration support rooms with staff waiting to type one's notes or check facts, the sitting room bars stacked with reserve spirits and award-winning wines, or the bathrooms, men's and women's, equipped with heated towel rails and pneumatic self-closing toilet seat lids.

She was to be disappointed. At first she savoured the experience, every nanosecond of it. With a sense of the ceremony of the moment she sat in one of the green leather armchairs, next to her at hip height a low table, just large enough to hold a few books, a cup and, in the past, an ashtray. The chair faced the east window, with a view of the rhododendrons along the fence, no other distractions. Ministers had sat here for decades with their pipes and their glasses of port or brandy. What had they read?

But the chair was too sturdy to be comfortable. It was not a chair to sink into, to drift away into. Clearly it was a chair for consulting books rather than for serious reading, perhaps the reference volumes that lined the walls. Past years, more prosperous years, there had probably been several attendants for this room alone, servants of the Capital, older men on the verge of senior citizenship, devoted to handling, cataloguing, reshelving and dusting these books, and attending to the politicians—mainly men—who consulted them. They would have been called Stanley, Merv, Walter. They would have brought diamond-cut crystal tumblers of Dimple or Black & White whisky on a silver tray, plates of ham and mustard sandwiches for late-night snacks, fresh ashtrays for cigars and pipes, as ministers read on through the volumes of statistical bulletins and parliamentary handbooks. The edifying volumes, the worthy tomes.

Dry and dull, the lot of them. Dr Wheeler was already uncomfortable in this chair. She would never sit here and read. It was a chair designed to keep the mind alert and occupied, ticking over with facts and figures gleaned from the pages before her, ready to convert those details into confident utterances, speeches and written statements that would affirm one's authority and maintain the nation's faith. It was not a chair to let the mind wander and become lost, to disappear so completely into another world that meant returning to the present would be like snapping out of a hypnotic trance. Reading in this chair would be a punishing but virtuous attack on the system, a cold swim on a winter's morning kind of experience. And no one would be on hand to bring her light refreshments or empty her ashtray, let alone return the books she read to their shelves behind the glass cupboard doors and replace the bulb in her reading light.

Three minutes in this tightly upholstered dark green chair and Dr Wheeler had felt intimidated. Like she was meant to sit up straight and behave. It

reminded her of her great aunt Muriel who had displayed the most magnificent figure until her dying day: erect bust and statuesque hips gripped in a longline bra and something she called step-ins, structured undergarments that kept her posture impressive and regal and which, her grand-niece was convinced, contributed significantly to her moral fortitude. Like Aunt Muriel, the chair resisted an embrace. It maintained its distance. She couldn't imagine settling down here to a session of reading with her collection of paperbacks, with anything. Were she even to attempt a systematic and literary course of reading—such as the latest Booker Prize shortlist, all the novels of Nevil Shute, or the collected stories of Alice Munro, she would not be able to devote herself to the task. She would be looking too often out that window, hoping for a glimpse of something to distract her. She would be reading with only one purpose: to learn. What she wanted, though few seemed to appreciate this, was to escape.

But would she want to escape this? Here was her dream position, the national minister for Reading. And a room especially for her. A room that for the first time said that it was okay—more than okay, that it was obligatory—to sit down, and read. Surely she should appreciate the value of that. But first surveying this room, her heart had numbed at the sight of nothing but large leather-clad volumes behind glass fronted cabinets. Without opening a single one Dr Wheeler knew that these worthy tomes would never be read. She longed to see a row of her sunny Penguins or a shelf of the charming and subversive contemporary writers she'd been reading recently (Mavis Cheek was her current favourite, her name perfectly suited to her work). She didn't need to look closer to know that among all the dry books about early exploration, the dull histories of state, the political memoirs and biographies, the yearbooks and atlases and Who's Whos, the only thing approaching literature in all those books would be a *Compendium of English Poems* or *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere*.

That first day it had been midmorning, and the sun on the south eastern

quarter of the complex where the reading room was situated was seeping through the sides of the window drapes. She got up and pulled them wider. The light pranced throughout the room.

‘We don’t normally open them that wide, Dr Wheeler.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Well, the sun fades the spines of the books.’ Ainsley walked over to the bookcases. ‘Some of these had to be rebound ten years ago. We don’t open the curtains wide until the afternoon, as a precaution.’

The minister pulled the curtains closer but left a broad band of light that ran out the door.

‘Tell me, how often is this room used?’

‘Not much.’

‘And for a room that’s rarely used, the redecorating is ongoing? Presumably costly?’

‘That’s right. We did the curtains three years ago. The carpet about the same time as the books.’

‘And Aunt Muriel here?’ She waved to the reading chair. ‘And her sisters?’ There was a collection of furniture, two squat sofas with sturdy legs, ones that invited perching on rather than sinking into, and several other armchairs, all leather, studded, deep russet and dark green—depressing gubernatorial colours, the unoriginal idea of some president past, or their spouse, or the benign contribution of a public servant with a dutiful rather than inspired approach to interior design—and which all looked as if they disdained human contact. Satellites of small side tables designed to resist rather than accept plates of food, piles of books, boxes of tissues and empty coffee cups, the normal paraphernalia of the constant reader. Several spindly low-wattage standard lamps loomed in corners like gaunt chaperones ready to dart out and tweak a misbehaving reader into line.

‘These have been here since the 1960s. But before my time, so I can’t be sure.’ Ainsley’s voice warmed. She met the minister’s eye. ‘It’s a great shame. This room has rarely been used since I’ve been here. Twelve, nearly thirteen years.’

‘Well, it will be used now, I promise you.’

## **5 Massaging the brain**

Her staff took their seats. Morrissey, recently returned from a tour of the western states including a conference on the coast. Kendall, the department’s representative on the UN’s International Reading Committee. Jonesy, whose favourite authors were all in the speculative realm and who kept his finger on the pulse of genre writing. Good old Jonesy. And Helen, who’d come in to work while on leave. Helen was their resident author-reader, a foot in both camps. She’d taken leave to write another novel. At least, it was thought to be a novel. And Tim, the poet.

‘Ainsley, shut the door please. Now this is confidential, I stress that. Nothing to leave this room please, and I’ll have to ask you to leave these reports here after the meeting.’ Morrissey raised a nicely arched eyebrow. The minister noted her tan as she replied. ‘Yes, confidential. But feel free to mark the pages.’ And Morrissey’s hair seemed a little blonder than usual. Perhaps there’d been more to that conference on the implied reader than she was aware.

‘As you know, the President has charged me, our office, with the task of raising the government’s ratings in the polls. We need to lift our game, and quickly, if we’re to get re-elected. Another way of putting it might be shackling the opposition. I’ve taken a creative approach in commissioning this report. I haven’t insulted you all with an executive summary, but there is a section highlighted towards the end that captures the main findings.’ Dr Wheeler leaned



back in her chair as the others took up their copies. Kendall, a mad terrier sort of reader—one became exhausted just watching him—was already a few pages in, liberally exercising a pink highlighter. Jonesy was murmuring comments to himself while jotting notes in the margins. While she waited for them to finish, she leaned over to the shelf for a copy of *Summertime*. It would be the perfect title with which to test-run her latest idea.

Now in the reading room, fiction sat beside non-fiction. The shelves were colourful, eye-catching, splendid in their careful disarray. The room was divided into nooks with chairs and small tables, newspaper holders, lamps, screens and potted palms. The effect was something like a cross between an Edwardian tea room and a secondhand bookshop. Only it was not so crowded, despite the array of books and furniture. Aunt Muriel and her stiff sisters had long been disposed of. Instead, Ainsley had brought in examples of the Capital's original furniture, discovered in storage in the basements. Fine delicate pieces, their native timbers warmed to a soft sheen after polishing with beeswax, given a new dignity when their upholstery was replaced. There were a set of ladder-backed chairs and a small square tea table. Six elegant bucket armchairs upholstered in a pale green silk slub. A three-seater sofa, as good for sitting on as for reclining, and a matching divan that definitely invited repose. Dr Wheeler augmented the furniture with a couple of new chairs designed especially for reading. These were curved and padded recliners that tilted back as far as the reader wanted, and contained adjustable trays to hold books, Kindles, laptops, refreshments or all at once. She had conceived the idea when at the movies, noting the comfortable width and depth of the chairs, the convenience of cup holders and footrests. Thinking about this now, she wondered about the feasibility of establishing similar facilities for the purposes of reading: theatre-like places with a large screen featuring a text for those who wanted a collective experience, smaller alcoves and personal screens for those who read extra fast, or slow. There could

be gentle waves of sighs and murmurs and laughs rippling through these places, as readers discovered at their own pace the jokes of *Catch-22*, the romantic climaxes of *Gone with the Wind* or the thrills of the latest Lee Child. She reached for a notepad and jotted the thought before it escaped her, as Morrissey, Helen and the others approached the final section of the report.

The reading room was full to capacity with books. Overfull. Cartons from sales counters and household closures, from deceased estates and merging book businesses had been brought in over the years. When the shelves were too quickly filled, they had built more, developing a system of folding shelves hinged and mounted on gliding casters, that pulled out like a fan to display their contents then folded back against the walls when not in use. This way, Dr Wheeler increased the capacity of the collection by thousands of titles. She managed to include every one of the complete novels of some of her favourite authors: Anthony Trollope, who had published four a year, and was thus an intimidating prospect for most personal libraries; Ruth Rendell, in all her guises; Balzac, whose human comedy seemed endless; and Dick Francis. And she installed, from thrift stores and charity deposits around the country, every single Reader's Digest title she could find, for what was a ministry of reading in a democratic country if it only included the literary elite? She ensured that every genre and subgenre, however specialist or lowly, was represented. Mills and Boon romances and Bible Society children's stories. And Bibles, several of them, in various translations.

Finally the reading room was equipped with the most important features of all: readers. The Capital was not necessarily known for its inclusiveness, indeed security had increased since the last election to the point that Dr Wheeler felt the President was becoming a little too presidential. She herself felt more, not less, threatened by the presence of men in black suits and sunglasses with small wires in their ears.

Morrissey was rather slower than the others, who had now all finished. They waited, sipping water, as she came to the final page. Helen and Jonesy were murmuring something about the wet and the crowds. They must have been discussing the recent Torquay literary festival, thought the minister, not an event she cared much for these days, though it had been her initiative several years back. Like all literary festivals it had rapidly grown—not that this was a bad thing—but it was one of these festivals where the author was in danger of outnumbering the reader. If the Torquay trend continued, there would be a real danger of supply outstripping demand. Very bad textual economics.

Finally, Morrissey too was done. She leaned back in her chair, gently cracking a thoracic vertebra.

‘You can see we have a problem,’ the minister said.

Tim’s ponytail shook from side to side. ‘Tricky,’ he said.

‘As you all know, this was vital research. We were on a turning point with our policies. And now this threatens to undermine so much of what we do.’

Kendall took off his thick-rimmed spectacles and polished them. ‘Well, I dispute that,’ he said. ‘The political monopoly of knowledge should be challenged. All the products of the textual industry are flawed and indeed reports hitherto have proved that consumers accept this as part of the contract.’

‘Kendall.’ He looked up at the minister’s sharp tone. ‘You’ve spent far too much time on that UN committee. I know that liberation of the reading class is a tenet of your politics—’ Kendall was a partially unreconstructed Marxist with structuralist leanings ‘—but you’re among friends here, remember. This is the ministry for reading. We’re *all* about empowering the reader. We always have been. And the flawed text is a given. We had Culler et al to thank for that back in the eighties.’

‘But the report says...’

‘The report says inferior texts, not flawed. There’s a difference.’

‘Why, may I ask,’ Helen said, ‘Fossil Ridge?’

The minister had invited researchers from the International Brain Institute to carry out work on her former lending library readers. These results were recently consolidated with studies conducted in several other places, including the citizens of Frankfurt, undergraduate scholars at Cambridge, UK, and retirees who patronised the public libraries of Miami, Florida.

‘They are the perfect subjects, uncontaminated. And besides, the news is not all bad. Let’s first run through the positives.’

The results were crystal clear: not only did reading stimulate regions of the brain that were separate from the usual language-processing ones, but reading fiction aroused the sensory cortex. Stories stimulated the mind in every way. The IBI’s team had scanned brains of people who had read a short story or a sonnet. Their sensory cortices had lit up like Christmas trees when reading the line, ‘Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May’, while remaining dark and dormant reading the simpler, ‘The wind was strong during May’. Metaphor was the key here, unlocking the door, but it was narrative that threw it wide open. When participants in the studies read sentences like ‘The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off’, their motor cortices were revealed to be as active as if they too had just missed being stabbed by their dead mate’s girlfriend and were running away from danger. It explained the curious sensation of elation and restlessness readers often experienced, sometimes for days, after finishing a title like *The Far Pavilions*, and indeed the sheer exhaustion felt by those who had made it to the end of a Bryce Courtenay novel.

‘This report states unequivocally that novels go beyond simulating reality,’ she said. ‘It confirms what you and I have known instinctively: readers enter fully into the mind, feelings and entire world of fictional characters. And that this is a good thing.’

All her life the minister had read novels, often guiltily with an idea she would be better off reading something utilitarian. But now here was the proof: reading fiction was work for the brain, as good as experiencing life directly. Reading a novel was literally massaging out the brain's knots, sticking it on a treadmill, getting it to lift weights, and asking it to swim laps, all at once. And all in the comfort of a lounge chair. Of course reading was sport, of *course*. She'd known that instinctively, facing up to the bug-eyed sports mistress back in high school. And what could be healthier for the nation than this?

But then she sighed. Jonesy sighed. Morrissey followed. They all sighed. A long drawn out exhalation that expressed what was in all their hearts. They turned to the penultimate page of the report, the section they had all underlined. 'Fiction,' it stated, 'offers a rich replication and a vivid simulation of reality. The brains tested did not distinguish between any sort of fiction but responded to all examples that explored human social and emotional life.' There followed a list of sample authors and their texts utilised in the research.

Kendall snorted. 'May as well tell Franzen and Atwood to give up now,' he said.

The wonderful and thoroughly frightening result of the IBI study was the fact that the brain—that complex, unpredictable, maddening organ—the brain, in its apprehension of what stimulated sensory, motor or olfactory cortices, did not distinguish between good literature or bad. It responded equally to the mangled metaphors of James Patterson or the clichéd imagery of the local town poet as it did to the sublime prose of Sebald. In identifying so closely with the stories of Nicholas Sparks or the poems of Walt Disney the brain neglected to discriminate between the quality of the language. Depressingly, it seemed that Gina Rinehart's poem 'Our Future' was equal to *Intimations of Immortality*.

Theirs was a democracy and the minister had striven to represent all forms of literature and demonise none, but this was a bitter blow. Poor little Helen put

her small head in her delicate hands and groaned. 'We may as well give up now.'

'Pull yourself together, Helen.' The latent librarian in Dr Wheeler spoke more harshly than she meant.

'I'm more worried about this,' Kendall said, tapping at the section reporting on two smaller studies conducted earlier and incorporated into the report. Professor Grayson T. Greer and Dr Thurston Davies Ward (the minister loved the names of American academics) had concluded that people who read fiction regularly were better able to understand others, to sympathise, to empathise. They were, undeniably, better human beings. 'Fucking Leavis was right, apparently.'

'Now, no need to get carried away. It's not that clear,' Jonesy said. 'It could be flawed research. Maybe it's just that more empathetic kinds of people read novels in the first place.'

'It can't be right,' said Helen. 'My English lecturers at uni were the worst types. The very worst.' She shuddered. 'Living disproof of the theory that reading made you a better person.'

'But we want that, don't we?' Her staff all looked at the minister as if she'd gone mad. 'I mean, we want proof that reading is good for you in every way. Not that moral nonsense, of course. But we want this scientific research to support our work, to show that the brain is enlarged and improved by reading fiction.'

'These findings prove that readers identify with the independence of Sybylla Melvin, or the paedophilia of Humbert Humbert,' Morrissey said. 'Readers will turn to any author to seek role models. Miles Franklin or Vladimir Nabokov.' The minister threw a glance at her. Morrissey was not normally so perspicacious. 'Or Ayn Rand or Harold Robbins or Barbara Cartland.'

'Or Kathy Lette,' Helen said.

'Exactly,' Kendall said.

They all stared at the desk at that.

‘Well,’ Dr Wheeler finally said. ‘Let’s concentrate on the positives. Reading great literature enhances us in every way. So, apparently, does reading bad.’

‘What about the opposition?’ Jonesy said. ‘They’ll crucify us when they find out about this.’

‘They’re not going to, are they?’ She waved her hands at their copies of the report. ‘All completely confidential. You’re not even going to take these away. And Ainsley can be trusted implicitly. She’s the only one who’s liaised with the International Brain Institute.’

‘But the IBI could send their report to anyone!’ Morrissey was chewing a fingernail.

‘No,’ Dr Wheeler said. ‘There’s an exclusivity clause built into the brief. I commissioned it, and paid for it. It’s mine alone. Ours.’

‘How much?’ Tim asked.

‘Enough.’ Her left cheek twitched a little. ‘Look, you really don’t need to know. Jonesy has just raised the whole point of this exercise. The opposition. Now, I’ve had an idea.’

## **6 Ramelli’s reading machine**

The President considered the idea rather ambitious, but agreed it should be attempted. Several important pieces of legislation had recently been stymied thanks to a couple of independents, hitherto cooperative, becoming rather too independent. An increasingly empowered opposition whose popularity was rising in the opinion polls could only mean one thing come the next election. The President was smart enough to know that success would rely almost entirely on his own personal efforts, but not intelligent enough to understand how to do that. He needed to offer an alternative to the tireless capers of the Leader of the

opposition and his circles. But he was neither intellectual nor athlete, occupying an unhappy place that saw him most comfortable attending the rugby rather than participating in it. Better still, watching it on TV, before *MasterChef* or *The Voice*. During all the years of his leadership he feared being found out to be neither sportsman nor nerd. Not for him the ability to dismiss cricket in favour of Mahler. He regarded bat and ball sports and classical music with equal confusion and boredom. He preferred a magazine to a book but would read the odd crime fiction paperback despite what Dr Wheeler assumed about his preference for hardbacks. But her monthly titles were simply shelved behind his desk where they featured in the occasional news photo: the nation would have assumed he was as au fait with David Malouf's latest works as he was with the national debt. But with an election on the horizon, he needed to act. He needed to boost his popularity and plant himself firmly in a distinct cultural space and so capture the hearts and minds of the voting public. Resistance to reading aside, he'd known the best person to sort this out was Dr Wheeler. And now, looking over the drawings and notes she'd presented him with, he thought she might just have done it.

'And it will be a way of getting that lot off their iPhones,' she said.

The careless use and abuse of handheld devices had contributed to much recent controversy, specifically surrounding the shadow treasury office whose phone logs were in disagreement with claims its staff were in Brussels or Houston for conferences and summits. These cities, it was well known, were considered the most boring in the world, and therefore the public was alarmingly tolerant of the alleged jaunts of the shadow treasurer in places like Majorca and Cancun.

'I'm not sure that would be feasible. And don't people love their handhelds?' The President had a deep attachment to all his devices. He wondered if she knew how long he spent in the bathroom with his iPad.



‘I think it’s worth a try,’ Dr Wheeler said. ‘Besides, Ramelli’s reading machine is considered by historians to be the original hypertext program, predating the world wide web by four hundred years.’

‘Is that true?’

‘It says so on Wikipedia.’ They both laughed.

It was an idea so original to the point of being mad. But Dr Wheeler exuded implacable confidence. Fossil Ridge had clearly been an exceptional training ground if it nurtured this sort of temperament. The President congratulated himself on appointing her to the ministry. When she’d argued for the title of Reader, he’d remained privately unconvinced at the time, even though he’d concurred. Now he suspected she might be a genius.

The machine allowed a reader to scroll through several texts at a time. In fact Dr Wheeler commissioned two prototypes, not one. The first followed Agostino Ramelli’s design and was like a small Ferris wheel, delivering opened books on trays to the reader who could then browse through up to ten at a time. Seated comfortably, the reader only had to push down on levers either side of the machine to bring the next text forward, or to recall the previous one, with the pages remaining in place where the reader left them, and positioned at a perfect angle for neck comfort. And the other machine was simply an immense lazy Susan, a circular table mounted with ball bearings on top of another slightly larger one, on which the reader could assemble as many texts as would fit, and twirl the top layer to read in order or at random, making notes if they wished on small tablets of paper fixed to the ledge left by the bottom layer. Paper-shy readers were not neglected. For them the minister commissioned a design that incorporated an easy chair and a screen. Readers could sit back in comfort, their legs raised, and read an e-reader held in place by a slender bracket, adjusted for size. By brushing their fingertips over a remote touchpad on the arm of the

chair, they could turn a page with the least effort. The minister circulated copies of the woodcut images of Ramelli's reading machine to designers and draughtspeople and within a short time had two sample machines supplied by a furniture maker who specialised in bespoke items like revolving bookcases and spiral steps for small private libraries. The revolving bookcase and the sliding book panels, as well-known and ingenious as they might have been, were only a means of storing books. The reading machine was storage and use combined. And the design meant that reading was addictive. Of course reading already was, for Dr Wheeler and many like her, but for the opposition, addiction needed to be cunningly nurtured. The samples seemed perfect. She would test them at once.

After less than a day trialling the Ferris-wheel-like reading machine the President was waving away his media advisers and policy directors and cancelling important meetings. He had even refused a long-anticipated lunch with the chief executive officer of Qantas. When Dr Wheeler went to check on him in the afternoon he was wolfing down a peanut butter sandwich brought to him by a worried assistant, keeping one hand on the lever that operated the machine.

She peered over his shoulder. He was leafing through *Tristram Shandy*, smiling broadly through his sandwich. On the tray below it, just at knee-level, was an issue of *Griffith Review*. As the President pressed the lever, the machine rotated with the most satisfying gliding movement and with a smooth stop delivered a copy of *All The President's Men* right below his face. When she finally spoke to him, the President did not even turn his head to reply.

'So,' she repeated. 'Success?' He nodded, a few crumbs falling from his mouth onto the next novel, which she could see was a gold-embossed one. She brushed them off discreetly. Even a Robert Ludlum title deserved respect. More than respect, if it meant that it helped corral the reluctant reader.

‘We’re good to go then?’ The President only nodded again.

It only took a few weeks. The Leader of the Opposition was pleasantly surprised by the spirit of bipartisanship demonstrated by Dr Wheeler. Previous ministers had tended to treat the opposition with contempt, especially the more conservative and rural members who were considered incapable of engaging with narrative beyond stock or weather reports published in *The Land or Agriculture Weekly*, or whose appreciation of literature began and ended with ‘The Man from Snowy River’. Now when the minister’s departmental assistants began demonstrating the features of the reading machines, they were respectful, generous-minded. The Leader himself settled into the chair of the Ferris wheel machine and instantly relaxed. An active soul, a man who naturally gravitated towards pursuits like mountain climbing and kickboxing, he was generally disinclined to sit still for long enough to read a short story. Even in the chamber he was active, flexing his biceps, bouncing on the balls of his feet while speaking, or scurrying around consulting or plotting when not. Once he had even brought his weights to the chamber, unselfconsciously lifting a set of pink barbells up and down as he stared at the President with what he hoped was a cynical eye.

After a good hour of perusing the collected works of Alan Bennett, he pressed the lever—it operated with the merest touch—to bring the next title down, and commenced reading a selection of fiction from the *New Yorker*. That was followed by a Tom Keneally novel, and as Dr Wheeler’s advisors observed from the vantage point of their CCTV security room, it seemed that the Leader was actually following a sustained narrative line.

‘We should be eye-tracking him,’ Jonesy said. ‘See if he’s reading every word or not.’

‘At least he’s not mouthing them,’ Helen said.

‘Look,’ Morrissey said. ‘He’s selected another Tom Keneally. This is getting better and better.’

Tim stood up and peered closer to the screen. ‘It’s a Tom Something,’ he said, ‘but not Keneally. Oh yeah, Clancy. Tom Clancy.’

Kendall sniffed. He drew the line at Tom Clancy. The guy didn’t even write his own drivel. It was produced like a franchise or something. He was the McDonalds of thrillers. Kendall doubted he was even still alive. It was probably a business in Baltimore—or Langley, more likely—churning out titles like so many beef patties.

But it didn’t matter. It was the fact that the Leader of the opposition was sitting, not speaking, and possibly not thinking, or not thinking much, his only bodily movements around the eyes.

‘So long as he’s still,’ Dr Wheeler said, entering the room, ‘he’s not causing us any mischief. And if Professor Greer and Dr Ward are correct, then his brain will be doing all the exercise his body will ever need. His body will be tricked into thinking that he’s gone for that bike ride or run that marathon.’ The opposition Leader was a demon for iron-man events. ‘Or that he’s walked to the chamber, debated, voted, and walked out again. He won’t leave that chair for hours, trust me. By the time of the next election he’ll have no interest in campaigning.’

‘Or he’ll assume he’s already done it?’ Helen said.

‘Exactly.’

‘So, what are you going to do about the President?’

Dr Wheeler’s lips twisted. There was that small problem. Was it possible to read *too* much? The thought had never once occurred to her before this, but when she last looked, the President was working his way through all 209 of Nora Roberts’s romance novels and refusing to leave his room. Refusing even to walk his beloved terrier, Ralph. Refusing to eat a proper meal, anything that

required two hands.

Helen was giving her that look. She had always been a bit of a troublemaker, the minister remembered, right back when, as the young author of a slim but celebrated first volume, she had insisted on using the f-word in a high school speech. What troublemakers authors could be, generally.

‘At least,’ she said, ‘he remains a devoted reader.’ She spoke to all of them gathered in the CCTV room but it was directed especially to Helen. ‘And like the readers of Fossil Ridge, he remains a true consumer. He has no aspirations to write. Supply and demand, and all that.’ She left the room before anyone could take offence.

SAO

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## Eleanor Limprecht

‘The light is green.’

‘Huh?’

‘Green light! Go!’

Di’s voice was joined by the beeping of the cars queued up behind them in traffic. Greg dropped his phone into the centre console and stepped on the gas.

‘You’re not meant to text while you’re driving. It sets a bad example.’ She gestured towards the backseat, the boosters where Jack and Max sat.

‘They don’t have mobile phones yet. And they’re not old enough to drive.’ Greg swerved to avoid a rubbish truck reversing. ‘Fuckin’ hell.’

‘Greg!’

‘How much further?’ Max kicked the back of her seat.

‘Five minutes.’

Greg sped through the last amber of a right turn signal as it changed to red. ‘Let’s all just have a nice afternoon. A nice barbecue with nice friends.’

‘Acquaintances,’ Di said.

Greg’s phone buzzed in the centre console. He made a grab for it, but she blocked him with her forearm.

‘It can wait til we get there,’ she said. Her jaw felt tight. She turned and smiled broadly at the boys in the backseat.

She walked across the lawn, carrying a plate of food and a bottle of beer. She sat on the outskirts of the party, her plate beside her and the bottle against the inside of her knee, so it wouldn’t spill.

Already she had run out of people to talk to. A family from Max’s new school had invited them, Sue and Sam. He was some sort of lawyer, and she was president of the school P&C. Greg worked with one of the dads but she had

only chatted briefly with the other parents, of teacher gripes and play-date logistics while the children swung from the monkey bars after school.

The kids were nearly all on the trampoline, shrieking and leaping, throwing themselves against the netting. A few were in the cubbyhouse. At least Jack and Max were playing happily, she thought, taking a long gulp of beer. Not tugging on her shirt or needing to use the toilet. Whatever they wanted, they'd get it quicker if they asked her, and so Greg was ignored unless she wasn't there. He was engrossed in some conversation with his work colleague – about barbecues, or boat engines or battery packs for electric drills. The boys would have to whinge at him for five minutes before getting his attention and by that point the littlest would have wet his pants and the older one would just give up and give him a sharp kick in the shins. Take that, Dad. Sure to end in tears. Easier to ask Mum.

She loaded a forkful of quinoa salad and tried not to spill it in her lap on the way to her mouth. One of the dads came over and sat on the lawn beside her.

'G'day Di.'

She waved with her fork, a gesture that probably looked more like 'get lost', and then brushed little grains of quinoa from her jeans. She'd forgotten his name. She knew his kids' names, Rupert and Quentin, yet she couldn't remember his. Probably Jim, or Joe, or John.

'Gorgeous weather,' she said, taking a purposeful swig of beer. It would make her lightheaded and sleepy later. She hoped Greg wasn't drinking too much so that he could drive them home.

'Anyone decided on a table for the school fete?' the dad asked.

'Last I heard it was a draw between making us all hand roll sushi or someone's beautician mum offering eyebrow tints and leg waxes to a bunch of primary school kids.'



‘Whatever happened to how many lollies are in the jar, or pin the tail on the donkey?’

She shrugged. ‘I suggested letting the kids do the work—like, let’s make them roll sushi or give people leg waxes. Wasn’t too popular, though.’

‘Can’t imagine why.’

She took another sip from the bottle and let the bubbles roil against the inside of her cheek. Rupert and Quentin’s dad had eyes that were like pond water, which sounds shitty but is actually a lovely colour. If only she could remember his name. He looked as though he had just shaved that morning and there were those tiny dark stubble hairs just beginning to emerge through skin that would otherwise be smooth to the touch. He was always the one at pick-up and drop-off, so if he did work, she imagined it to be some sort of creative pursuit. His wife must have the real job.

He started talking about something that Quentin had done to his brother that morning with the cricket bat. She scraped her fork against the last morsels of food on her plate and laughed at the right moment.

Her previous conversations since they arrived had been about someone’s new timber flooring and another’s ability to turn chickpeas into chickpea flour in their brand new German-made Thermomix.

Rupert and Quentin’s mum sat down on the grass beside them and placed a hand on her husband’s knee. ‘James, would you mind checking the baby’s still asleep?’

James! Di knew it was something like that. Only now he was going to walk off and leave her with his wife, whose name she couldn’t recall either. His wife looked pleased that she could still publicly tell her husband what to do. James ducked his head and struggled to his feet. Greg would have nodded and said ‘Sure thing’, but then taken so long to do it that she would have given up and done it herself. We all have our tricks, she thought, smiling at James’s wife.

‘How old is your little one?’

‘Four months,’ the woman said. ‘Clarice. I’m just relieved that I’ve finally had a girl.’

Di nodded. How could a person name their child Clarice and not think *The Silence of the Lambs*? ‘Have you seen—’

She stopped herself at the last moment.

The woman had her eyebrows raised and was looking at Di strangely. ‘Pardon?’

‘Have you seen the boys?’ Di said. ‘They were on the trampoline a moment ago, maybe they’ve gone inside.’

‘Probably.’ She waved over Di’s shoulder. Her gaze had shifted. ‘Lisa’s here, I’d better go say hi. She’s been *so* unwell, did you hear? Some sort of food poisoning she picked up in Bali.’

Di widened her eyes in what she hoped looked like horror. ‘Poor thing,’ she said. ‘I’ll go see if I spot the boys indoors.’

She stood and put her paper plate and empty bottle in the bin. Greg was still deep in conversation, and Clarice’s mum was flapping her arms and shrieking at a woman like a demented bird. Di never understood the commotion when certain women saw their friends in public. The louder the commotion, the less genuine it appeared. Conversation paused while everyone turned to watch the women air-kiss.

Di walked up the steep timber staircase onto the veranda that led indoors. The house was a renovated Queenslander and she could look down on the party from above, the tops of heads gathering and parting, the plume of smoke rising from the barbecue, the children’s small bodies rocketing on the trampoline. The grass had gone crispy from the heat. There was a bed planted with button grass and a bed filled with herbs and scraggly vegies. Di thought briefly of the gardens of share houses when she was a student—the patchy lawns, the abandoned

furniture, the bins that overflowed because no one remembered to put them out. She sniffed the air. She could have sworn it was pot she smelled, briefly, but perhaps it was the smell of her memory.

She walked inside, through the kitchen, pausing to wash her hands at the tap. The liquid hand-soap smelled herbal; expensive, like rosemary and lavender. The house was silent and suspiciously clean. The boys must be elsewhere. She looked at the refrigerator and the kikki.K family calendar charted with everyone's activities—colour-coded for each person. Flapping beneath magnets were reminders for swimming carnival and sports day and mufti. There was an invitation for a birthday party that her son hadn't been invited to. She recognised the boy from his class. Her hand went to her chest, the tightness there, the coiled spring of *unfair*.

There was a photo of the family on a ski holiday, their faces obscured by helmets. Di had never been skiing. She thought she should mention it to Greg. Something they might do for the boys.

The smell of marijuana became strong again, unmistakable, this wasn't just her memory. She followed her nose through the house. Off the kitchen and living room was a long hallway with bedrooms through open doors. In the last bedroom she saw the source. It looked to be a guest bedroom from the absence of personal items. On the double bed was a sleeping baby swaddled in pink muslin, arms free, fists beside her head. Clarice, surely. There was a careful square of pillows around her. Beside the open window stood James, a lit joint between his thumb and his finger. He was blowing the smoke out of the room.

'The breeze is just catching that and blowing it back through the house.'

James glanced over. He looked for a moment as though he would flick it out the window, but then paused and offered it to her instead. She sat on the edge of the floral quilt and grasped it gently. Her lips were dry and stuck to the paper. She inhaled. It burned, dry and sharp against the back of her throat. She

held it in and looked at Clarice, who was actually quite cute. Not a bit like Jodie Foster.

She exhaled and passed the joint back to James, who pinched the lit end and put it in his shirt pocket.

‘I don’t think this is what your wife meant when she asked you to check on the baby.’

He shrugged. ‘Fast asleep. Do you need another drink?’

Di nodded. She was glad to leave the baby and the bedroom behind. She led the way to the kitchen. James opened the fridge.

‘Beer, sav blanc, or something stronger?’

‘Beer, thanks.’

They walked outside onto the verandah.

‘So, how do you know Sue and Sam?’

‘Just through the kids’ school. What about you?’

James took a swig of beer before answering.

‘Sam and I went to school together. Eastbrook.’

She recognised the name. It was one of the most expensive boys’ schools in Brisbane.

‘So, you’re old mates.’

‘Not really. Not at all.’

‘How come?’

‘He was a raging dickhead.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yep. Let’s not dwell. Grow up here?’

Di shook her head. ‘Sydney.’ She wasn’t going to offer him where she went to school. She could keep that to herself.

‘I’m curious, now, what did Sam do?’

She tilted her head so her hair fell against the bare skin of her shoulder.

The tag of her sundress itched at an unreachable point in the high middle of her back. They were both looking down at the party now: she could see Greg and over by the garden bed her boys, squatting in the dirt, looking at something.

‘There was this game they used to play, soggy Sao. They’d put a Sao in a dish, like a plastic takeaway container. All the guys would wank on to the Sao biscuit, and the last one to come had to eat it.’

Di gasped with a mouthful of beer, which travelled up and out of her nose.

‘Are you serious?’ She mopped her face with a tea towel that was hanging from the railing. It smelled like sausage grease. ‘That’s revolting.’

‘Did you just spew beer out your nose?’

‘No. Who would do that?’

‘What, spew beer out their nose or eat a soggy Sao?’

‘The Sao.’

‘Mate, you didn’t have a choice. Ever heard of peer pressure?’

‘Did you ever?’

James shook his head. ‘You’re sick. You think it’s hil-arious.’

‘You did, didn’t you. That’s why you hate him.’

He was looking up at the sky and for a moment she thought he was going to cry. It wasn’t until the sound escaped his mouth that she saw he was laughing.

‘God it was disgusting. Haven’t been able to eat a Sao since.’

They stood there in silence watching the gathering below.

‘Don’t you dare tell.’

‘I won’t. At least not until I make a toast later.’

There were fast, light footsteps on the staircase, and a snuffle as Jack appeared at her waist.

‘Mummmmy,’ he wailed. His face was streaked with dirt.

‘What’s wrong?’ He had his arms around her waist, his little body pressed against her. His chin poked into her pubic bone.

‘Mummmmmmy.’

‘What is it?’ She lifted him up and sat on a chair, settling him into her lap.

‘I can’t help if you don’t tell me what happened.’

‘They called me baby because I wouldn’t hold the spider. A boy threw dirt and it got in my eyes.’

‘Let me see. Blink for me. You’re okay. You’re not a baby, Jack. You know that.’

‘Who was it?’ James said. His eyebrows looked heavy. She could see, then, the lines beside his mouth, the beginnings of jowls.

‘The boy in the green shirt.’

One of James’s boys, the older one, Rupert, wore a green shirt.

‘Him?’ James pointed.

Jack nodded.

‘I’ll go sort him out. You wait here.’

‘It’s fine,’ Di put her hand on his arm. ‘Jack’s fine. Don’t worry.’

He shook his head and stepped away.

‘Wait here. He’ll come say sorry.’

She held her son as James marched down the steps. She felt an odd sense of distance from it all. ‘Rupert!’ she heard him bellow. She needed not to drink anymore. She couldn’t lose her grasp in a place like this, with her boys to look after. Jack snuggled into her and she inhaled the smell of his scalp, felt his elbow poking into the soft bulge of her stomach, his chin against her breast. His snuffles grew quieter, she was stroking his back and thinking perhaps he would fall asleep, how lovely if they could both sleep here, a little nap in the afternoon sun.

The shouts from beneath broke her daze. James had his son by the arm, his face was blotchy and red. Rupert was crying, snot and tears and a high whine, cowering. Their mum was shouting.

‘That’s enough, James. Leave the boy alone.’

‘I won’t. He’ll come and apologise or he’ll see what it’s like to get dirt in his face. He’ll see how it feels.’

‘Mate,’ Sam was standing beside them now, just the top of his head visible to Di. ‘Leave him alone.’

James turned towards Sam and let go of his son’s arm. ‘Don’t tell me how to raise my kids. I’m not going to let them act like little fucking princes who think everyone’s here to do their bidding.’

‘Get over it. Stop scaring the kid, hey? Go back to your pot. Smoke another joint. I thought that shit was supposed to mellow you out.’ Sam looked at the crowd that had gathered for approval, smiling at his own joke.

For a moment, Di thought that James was going to hit Sam. She saw his fist clench and pull back, she felt the desire as though it were her own. God it would feel good. The knuckle against jaw, the snap of his neck, the flesh and bone beneath. She knew how good it would feel. Rupert was in his mum’s arms now, and Jack was still in hers. He watched the men closely.

Greg looked up at her from beside the barbecue, the first time he had looked at her since they arrived. He held a pair of tongs in one hand, and stood forward on his toes.

The moment passed and the men turned from each other, the conversations picked up, hushed at first. Greg turned back to the sausages. James walked over to the garden beds, the outskirts of the party. He stood alone. She saw how his hair was thinning from above.

Di turned away from him, towards the open door of the house. She tilted her head. There was a faint noise, muffled at first but growing louder. She pushed Jack from her lap and stood, taking him by the hand.

‘Come. I hear a baby crying. Let’s go find her and take her to her mummy.’





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