Zusak has eloquently encapsulated loyalty, sensitivity and the boldness of youth
AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW
markus zusak is the author of five books, including *The Messenger* and the international bestseller, *The Book Thief*, which is translated into thirty languages. He lives in Sydney with his wife and daughter.
Also by Markus Zusak

*The Messenger*
*The Book Thief*
Special thanks to Anna McFarlane for her faith in my writing.

First published 2001 in Pan by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Limited
1 Market Street, Sydney
Copyright © Markus Zusak 2001, 2010
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity (including Google, Amazon or similar organisations), in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:
Zusak, Markus, 1975–
When dogs cry.
I. Title.
A823.3
Typeset in 11/15 pt Sabon by Post Pre-press Group
Printed in Australia by McPherson’s Printing Group

Papers used by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.
For Scout
and for Mum and Dad

Let’s start with that.

It just happened to be me that lost out because of it.

See, I’d always thought that at some point I’d grow up, but it hadn’t happened yet. It’s just the way it was.

In all honesty, I’d wondered if there would ever come a time when Cameron Wolfe (that’s me) would pull himself together. I’d seen glimpses of a different me. It was a different me because in those increments of time I thought I actually became a winner.

The truth, however, was painful.

It was a truth that told me with a scratching internal brutality that I was me, and that winning wasn’t natural for me. It had to be fought for, in the echoes and trodden footprints of my mind. In a way, I had to scavenge for moments of alrightness.

I touched myself.

A bit.

Okay.

Okay.

A lot.

(There are people who’ve told me that you shouldn’t admit that sort of thing too early, on account of the fact that people might get offended. Well, all I can say to that is why the hell not? Why not tell the truth? Otherwise there’s no bloody point really, is there?

Is there?)

It was just that I wanted to be touched by a girl some day. I wanted her to not look at me as if I was the filthy, torn, half-smiling, half-scowling
underdog who was trying to impress her.

Her fingers.

In my mind, they were always soft, falling down my chest to my stomach. Her nails would be on my legs, just nice, handing shivers to my skin. I imagined it all the time, but refused to believe it was purely a matter of lust. The reason I can say this is that in my daydreams, the hands of the girl would always end up at my heart. Every time. I told myself that that's where I wanted her to touch me.

There was sex, of course.

Nakedness.

Wall to wall, in and out of my thoughts.

But when it was over it was her whispering voice I craved, and a human curled up in my arms. For me though, it just wasn’t a mouthful of reality. I was swallowing visions, and wallowing in my own mind, and feeling like I could happily drown inside a woman.

God, I wanted to.

I wanted to drown inside a woman in the feeling and drooling of the love I could give her. I wanted her pulse to crush me with its intensity. That’s what I wanted. That’s what I wanted myself to be.

Yet.

I wasn’t.

The only mouthfuls I got were a glance here and there, and my own scattered hopes and visions.

The beer ice blocks.

Of course.

I knew I was forgetting something.

It had been a warm day for winter, though the wind was still cold. The sun was warm, and kind of throbbing.

We were sitting in the backyard, listening to the Sunday afternoon football coverage, and quite frankly, I was looking at the legs, hips, face and breasts of my brother’s latest girlfriend.

The brother in question is Rube (Ruben Wolfe), and in the winter I’m talking about, he seemed to have a new girlfriend every few weeks or so. I
could hear them sometimes when they were in our room—a call or shout or moan or even a whisper of ecstasy. I liked his latest girl from the start, I remember. Her name was nice. Octavia. She was a street performer, and also a nice person, compared to some of the scrubbers Rube had brought home.

We first met her down the harbour one Saturday afternoon in late autumn—and she was playing a harmonica so people would throw money into an old jacket that was sprawled out at her feet. There was a lot of money in it and Rube and I watched her because she was damn good and could really make that harmonica howl. People would stand around sometimes and clap when she was done. Even Rube and I threw money in at one point, just after an old bloke with a walking stick and just before some Japanese tourists.

Rube looked at her.

She looked at him.

That was usually all it took, because that was Rube. My brother never really had to say anything or do anything. He just had to stand somewhere or scratch himself or even trip up a gutter and a girl would like him. It was just the way it was, and it was that way with Octavia.

‘So where y’ livin’ these days?’ Rube had asked her.

I remember the ocean green of her eyes rising then. ‘Down south, in Hurstville.’ He had her then already. I could tell. ‘You?’

And Rube had turned and pointed. ‘You know those crappy streets past Central Station?’

She nodded.

‘Well that’s us.’ Only Rube could make those crappy streets sound like the best place on earth—and with those words, Rube and Octavia had begun.

One of the best things about her was that she actually acknowledged my existence. She didn’t look at me as if I was an obstacle stuck between her and Rube. She would always say, ‘How’s it goin’ Cam?’

The truth is.

Rube never loved any of them.

He never cared about them.

He just wanted each one because she was next, and why not take the next thing if it was better than the last?

Needless to say, Rube and I aren’t too much alike when it comes to
women.

Still.

I’d always liked that Octavia.

I liked it when we went inside that day and opened the fridge to see three-day-old soup, a carrot, a green thing and one VB can sitting inside. All three of us bent down and stared.

‘Perfect.’

It was Rube who said it, sarcastically.

‘What *is* that?’ Octavia asked.

‘What?’

‘That green thing.’

‘I wouldn’t have a clue.’

‘An avocado?’

‘Too big,’ I said.

‘What the hell *is* it?’ Octavia asked again.

‘Who cares?’ Rube butted in. He had his eye on the VB. Its label was the only green thing he was staring at.

‘That’s Dad’s,’ I told him, still looking into the fridge. None of us moved.

‘So?’

‘So he went with Mum and Sarah to watch Steve’s football game. He might want it when he comes home.’

‘Yeah, but he might also buy some on the way.’

Octavia’s breast brushed my shoulder when she turned and walked away. It felt so nice it made me quiver.

Immediately, Rube reached in and grabbed the beer. ‘It’s worth a shot,’ he stated. ‘The old man’s in a good mood these days anyway.’

He was right.

This time last year he was pretty miserable on account of having no work. This year he had plenty of work, and when he asked me to help on the odd Saturday or two, I helped him. So did Rube. My father’s a plumber.

Each of us sat at the kitchen table.
Rube.
Octavia.
Me.

And the beer, sitting in the middle of the table, sweating.

‘Well?’
Rube asked it.

‘Well what?’
‘Well what the hell are we gonna do with this beer you stupid bastard?’
‘Settle down, will y’.’
We all smiled, wryly.

Even Octavia smiled, because she’d grown used to the way Rube and I spoke to each other, or at least, the way Rube spoke to me.

‘Do we split it three ways?’ Rube continued. ‘Or just pass it round?’
That was when Octavia had her great idea.

‘How ‘bout we make it into ice blocks?’
‘Is that some kind of sick joke?’ Rube asked her.

‘Of course not.’

‘Beer ice blocks?’ Rube shrugged and considered it. ‘Well, I s’pose. It’s warm enough, ay. Have we got any of those plastic ice block things? You know, with the stick?’

Octavia was already in the cupboards though, and she found what she was after. ‘Pay dirt,’ she grinned (and she had a lovely mouth, with straight, white, sexy teeth).

‘Okay.’

This was serious now.

Rube opened the beer and was about to pour it out, in equal amounts, of course.

Interruption.

Me.

‘Shouldn’t we wash ’em out or somethin’?’
‘Why?’
‘Well they’ve prob’ly been in that cupboard for ten years.’
‘So what?’
‘So they’re probably all mouldy and mangy, and—’
‘Can I just pour the goddamn beer!?’

We all laughed again, through the tension, and finally, painstakingly, Rube poured three equal portions of beer into the ice block containers. He fixed the stick on each of them so they were straight down.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Thank Christ for that,’ and he walked slowly to the fridge.

‘In the freezer bit,’ I told him.

He stopped, mid-walk, turned slowly and carefully back round and said, ‘Do you seriously think I’m pathetic enough to put beer which I just took from the fridge and poured into ice blocks back in just the fridge?’

‘Y’ never know.’

He turned away again and kept walking. ‘Octavia, open the freezer, will y’. ‘

She did it.

‘Thanks love.’

‘No worries.’

Then it was just a matter of waiting for them to set.

We sat around in the kitchen for a while, until Octavia spoke, to Rube.

‘You feel like doin’ something?’ she asked him. With most girls, that was my cue to leave. Octavia though, I wasn’t sure. I just cleared out anyway.

‘Where y’ goin’?’ Rube asked me.

‘Not sure.’

I went out of the kitchen, took my jacket for later and walked onto the front porch. Half out the door, I mentioned, ‘Maybe down the dog track. Maybe just out wanderin’. ’

‘Fair enough.’

‘See y’ later Cam.’
With a last look at Rube and a glance at Octavia, I could see desire in each of the eyes I met. Octavia had desire for Rube. Rube just had desire for a girl. Pretty simple really.

‘See y’s later,’ I said, and walked out.

The flyscreen door slammed behind me.

My feet dragged.

I reached each arm into the jacket.

Warm sleeves.

Creased collar.

Hands in pockets.

Okay.

I walked.

Soon evening worked its way into the sky and the city hunched itself down. I knew where I was going. Without knowing, without thinking, I knew. I was going to a girl’s place. It was a girl I had met last year at the dog track.

She liked.

She liked.

Not me.

She liked Rube.

She’d even called me a loser once when she was talking to him, and I’d listened in as my brother smacked her down with words and shoved her away.

What I’d been doing lately was standing outside her house, across the road. I stood and stared and watched and hoped. And I left, after the curtains were drawn for a while. Her name was Stephanie.

That night, which I think of now as the beer ice block night, I stood and stared a bit longer than usual. I stood and imagined walking home with her and opening the door for her. I imagined it hard, till a reaching pain pulled me inside out.

I stood.

Soul on the outside.

Flesh within.
‘Ah well.’

It was a fair walk because she lived in Glebe and I lived closer to Central, on a small street with ragged gutters and train line just beyond. I was used to it though—both the distance and the street. In a way, I’m actually proud of where I come from. The small house. The Wolfe family.

Many minutes shuffled forward as I walked home, and when I saw my dad’s panel van on our street, I even smiled.

Things have actually been okay for everyone lately.

Steve, my other brother.

Sarah, my sister.

Mrs Wolfe—the resilient Mrs Wolfe, my mother, who cleans houses and at the hospital for a living.

Rube.

Dad.

And me.

For some reason that night when I walked home, I felt peaceful. I felt happy for all of my family, because things really did seem to be going okay for them. All of them.

A train rushed past, and I felt like I could hear the whole city in it.

It came at me and then glided away.

Things always seem to glide away.

They come to you, stay a moment, then leave again.

That train seemed like a friend that day, and when it was gone, I felt like something in me tripped. I was alone on the street, and although I was still peaceful, the brief happiness left and a sadness tore me open very slowly and deliberately. City lights shone across the air, reaching their arms out to me, but I knew they’d never quite reach.

I composed myself and made my way onto the front porch. Inside they were talking about the ice blocks and the case of the missing beer. I was actually looking forward to eating my share of it, even though I can never finish a full can or bottle of beer. (I just stop being thirsty, to which Rube once said, ‘So do I mate, but I still keep drinkin’ it.’) The ice block idea was at least halfway interesting though, and I was ready to go in and give it a shot.
‘I was planning on drinking that beer when we got home.’

I could hear my father talking just before I went inside. There was an element of bastardry in his voice as he continued. ‘And whose brilliant idea was it to make ice blocks out of my beer, sorry, my last beer, anyway? Who was it?’

There was a pause.
A long one.
Silent.
Then, finally, ‘Mine’ came the answer, just as I walked into the house.
The only question is, who said it?
Was it Rube?
Octavia?
No.
It was me.

Don’t ask me why, but I just didn’t want Octavia to cop a bit of a battering (verbally, of course) from Clifford Wolfe, my father. The odds were that he’d be all nice to her about it, but still, it wasn’t worth the risk. Much better for him to think it was me. He was used to me doing ridiculous things.

‘Why aren’t I surprised?’ he asked, turning to face me. He was holding the ice blocks in question in his hands.

He smiled.
A good thing, trust me.

Then he laughed and said, ‘Well Cameron, you won’t mind if I eat yours then, will you’?

‘Of course not.’ You always say of course not in that situation because you figure out pretty quick that your old man’s really asking, ‘Will I take the ice block or will I make you suffer in a hundred different other ways?’ Naturally, you play it safe.

The ice blocks were handed out and a small smile was exchanged between Octavia and me, then Rube and me.

Rube held his ice block out to me. ‘Bite?’ he asked, but I declined.

I left the room, hearing my father say, ‘Pretty good actually.’
The bastard.

‘Where’d y’ go before?’ Rube asked me later in our room, after Octavia had left. Each of us lay on our bed, talking across the room.

‘Just around a bit.’

‘Down Glebe way?’

I looked over. ‘What’s that mean?’

‘It means,’ Rube sighed, ‘that Octavia and I followed you once, just out of interest, and saw y’ outside a house, starin’ into the window. You’re a bit of a lonely bastard aren’t y’?’

Moments twisted and curled then, and off in the distance I could hear traffic, roaring almost silently. Far from all this. Far from Cameron Wolfe and Ruben Wolfe discussing what in the hell I was doing outside the house of a girl who cared nothing for me.

Then I swallowed, breathed in and answered my brother.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I guess I am.’

There was nothing else I could say. Nothing to cover it up. There was just a slight moment of waiting, truth and feeling, then a crack, and I said more. ‘It’s that Stephanie girl.’

‘The bitch,’ Rube spat.

‘I know, but—’

‘I know,’ Rube interrupted. ‘It makes no difference if she said she hated you or called you a loser. Y’ feel what y’ feel.’

Y’ feel what y’ feel.

It was one of the truest things Rube had ever said, just before a quietness smothered the room.

From next-door’s backyard we could hear a dog barking. It was Miffy, the pitiful Pomeranian we loved to hate, but still walked a few times a week anyway.

‘Sounds like Miffy’s a bit upset,’ Rube said after a while.

‘Yeah,’ and I laughed a bit.

* * *

A bit of a lonely bastard. A bit of a lonely bastard...

Rube’s statement reverberated inside me till his voice was like a hammer.
Later, when I got up and sat on the front porch and watched shadows of traffic filter past, I told myself it was okay to be like this, as long as I stayed hungry. It felt like something was arriving in me. It was something I couldn’t see or know or understand. It was just there, mingling into my blood.

Very quickly, very suddenly, words fell through my mind. They landed on the floor of my thoughts, and in there, down there, I started to pick the words up. They were excerpts of truth gathered from inside me.

Even in the night, in bed, they woke me.

They painted themselves onto the ceiling.

They burned themselves onto the sheets of memory laid out in my mind.

When I woke up the next day, I wrote the words down, on a torn-up piece of paper. And to me, the world changed colour that morning.
words of cameron

Nothing comes easy to a human like me.

It’s not a complaint.

Just a truth.

The only problem now is that I have visions spilt on the floor of my mind. I have words in there that I’m trying to get out. To write.

Words I’ll write for me.

A story I’ll fight for.

And so it begins . . .

It’s night and I walk through the city of my mind. Through streets and alleys. Between buildings that shiver. Between houses hunched, with their hands in their pockets.

As I walk these streets, sometimes I feel like they walk through me. Thoughts in me feel like blood.

I walk.

I realise.

Where am I going? I ask myself.

What am I looking for?

Yet, I walk on, moving deeper to some unknown place in this city. I’m drawn there.

Past wounded cars.

Down grimly lit stairways.

Till I’m there.

I feel it.

Know it.

I know I’ve found the heart of me in a shadow-beaten alley, in a back street in the somewhere of this place.

At the bottom, something waits.
Two eyes glow.

I swallow.

My heart beats me.

And now I walk on, to find what it is . . .

Footstep.

Heartbeat.

Footstep.
My oldest brother Steven Wolfe is what you’d call a hard bastard. He’s successful. He’s smart. He’s determined.

The thing with Steve is that nothing will ever stop him. It’s not only *in* him. It’s on him, around him. You can smell it, sense it. His voice is hard and measured, and everything about him says, ‘You’re not going to get in my way.’ When he talks to people, he’s friendly enough, but the minute they try one on him, forget it. If someone tramples him, you’d put your house on it that he’ll do twice the job on them. Steve never forgets.

Me on the other hand.

I’m not really like Steve in that way.

I kind of wander around a lot.

That’s what I do.

Personally, I think it comes from not having many friends, or in fact, any friends at all, really.

There was a time when I really ached to be a part of a pack of friends. I wanted a bunch of guys I’d be prepared to bleed for. It never happened. When I was younger I had a mate called Greg and he was an okay guy. Actually, we did a lot together. Then we drifted apart. It happens to people all the time, I guess. No big deal. In a way, I’m part of the Wolfe pack, and that’s enough. I know without doubt that I’d bleed for anyone in my family.

Any place.

Any time.

My best mate is Rube.

Steve, on the other hand, has plenty of friends, but he wouldn’t bleed for any of them, because he wouldn’t trust them to bleed for him. In that way he’s just as alone as me.

He’s alone.
I’m alone.

There just happen to be people around him, that’s all. (People meaning friends, of course.)

Anyway, the point of telling you about all this is that sometimes when I go out wandering at night I’ll go up to Steve’s apartment, which is about a kilometre from home. It’s usually when I can’t handle standing outside that girl’s house, when the ache of it aches too much.

He’s got a nice place, Steve, on the second floor, and he has a girl who lives there as well. Often though, she’s not there because she works in a company that sends her on business trips and all that kind of thing. I always thought she was pretty nice, I s’pose, since she tolerated me when I went up to visit and she was there. Her name’s Sal and she’s got nice legs. That’s a fact I can never escape.

‘Hey Cam.’

‘Hey Steve.’

That’s what we say every time I go up and he’s home.

It was no different the night after the beer ice block incident. I buzzed from downstairs. He called me up. We said what we always say.

The funny thing is that over time, we’ve become better at talking to each other. The first time, we just sat there and had black coffee and said nothing. We each just let our eyes swirl into the pools of coffee and let our voices be numb and silent. There was always a thought in me that maybe Steve held a sort of grudge against everyone in the Wolfe family because he seemed to be the only winner, in the world’s eyes, anyway. It was like he might have good cause to be ashamed of us. I was never sure.

In recent times, since Steve decided to play one more year of football, we’ve even gone to the local ground and kicked the ball around. (Or in truth, Steve had practice shots at goal and I returned them.) We’d go there and he’d turn the lights on and, even if it was extra cold and the earth was coated with frost and our lungs were trodden with winter air, we always stayed for quite a while. If it got too late, he even dropped me home.

He never asked how anyone was. Never. Steve was more specific.

‘Is Mum still workin’ herself into the ground?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Dad got plenty of work?’
‘Yeah.’

‘Sarah still goin’ out, getting smashed, and comin’ home reeking of club and smoke and cocktails?’

‘Nah, she’s off that now. Always workin’ overtime shifts. She’s okay.’

‘Rube still Mr Excitement? One girl after another? One fight after another?’

‘Nah, there’s no-one game enough to fight him any more.’ Rube is without doubt one of the best fighters in this part of the city. He’s proved it. Countless times. ‘You’re right about the girls, though,’ I continued.

‘Of course,’ he nodded, and that’s when things always get a little edgy—when it comes to the question of me.

What could he possibly ask?

‘Still got no mates Cameron?’

‘Still completely alone Cameron?’

‘Still wanderin’ the streets Cameron?’

‘Still got your hands at work under the sheets Cameron?’

No.

Every time, he avoids it, just like the night I’m talking about.

He asked, ‘And you?’ A breath. ‘Survivin’?’

‘Yeah,’ I nodded. ‘Always.’

After that there was more silence, till I asked him who he was playing against this weekend.

As I told you earlier, Steve decided to have one last year of football. At the start of the season, he was begged to go back by his old team. They begged hard and, finally, he gave in, and they haven’t lost a game yet. That was Steve.

That Monday night, I still had my words in my pocket, because I’d decided to carry them everywhere with me. They were still on that crumpled piece of paper, and often I would check that they were still there. For a moment, at Steve’s table, I imagined myself telling him about it. I saw myself, heard myself, felt myself explaining how it made me feel like I was worth it, like I was just okay. I said nothing though. Absolutely nothing, even as I thought, I guess that’s what we all crave once in a while. Okayness.Alrightness. It was a
vision of looking inside a mirror and not wanting, not needing, because everything was there . . .

    With the words in my hands, that was how I felt.
    I nodded.
    At the prospect of it.
    ‘What?’ Steve asked me.
    ‘Nothing.’
    ‘Fair enough.’
    The phone rang.
    Steve: ‘Hello.’
    The other end: ‘Yeah, it’s me.’
    ‘Who the hell’s me?’
    It was Rube.
    Steve knew it.
    I knew it.
    Even though I was a good distance from the phone, I could tell it was Rube, because he talks loud, especially on the phone.
    ‘Is Cameron there?’
    ‘Yeah.’
    ‘Are y’s goin’ up the oval?’
    ‘Maybe,’ at which point Steve looked over and I nodded. ‘Yes, we are,’ he answered.
    ‘I’ll be up there in ten minutes.’
    ‘Right. Bye.’
    ‘Bye.’

    Secretly, I think I preferred it when it was only Steve and me who went. Rube was always brilliant, always starting something and mucking around, but with Steve and me, I enjoyed the quiet intensity of it. We might never have said a word—and I might have only kicked the ball back hard and straight, and let the dirt and smell of it thump onto my chest—but I loved the feeling of it, and the idea that I was part of something unspoken and true.
Not that I never had moments like that with Rube. I had plenty of great moments with Rube. I guess it’s just that with Steve, you really have to earn things like that. You’d wait forever if you wanted one for free. Like I’ve said before, for other reasons, that’s Steve.

On the way down to the ground floor a few minutes later, he said, ‘I’m still sore from yesterday’s game. I got belted in the ribs about five times.’

At Steve’s games it was always the same. The other team always made sure he hit the ground especially hard. He always got up.

We stood on the street, waiting for Rube.

‘Hey boys.’

When he arrived, Rube was puffing gently from the run. His thick, curly, furry hair was too attractive for its own good, even though it was a lot shorter than it used to be. He was wearing only a jersey, sawn-off track pants and gymnies. Smoke came from his mouth, from the cold.

We started walking, and Steve was his usual self. He wore the same pair of old jeans he always did at the oval and a flanno shirt. Athletics shoes. His eyes took aim, scanning the path, and his hair was short and wiry and tough-looking. He was tall and abrupt and exactly the kind of guy you wanted to be walking the streets with.

Especially in the city.

Especially in the dark.

Then there was me.

Maybe the best way to describe me that night was by looking again at my brothers. Both of them were in control. Rube, in a reckless, no matter what happens, I’ll be ready when it comes kind of way. Steve, in a there’s nothing you can do that’s going to hurt me way.

My own face was the usual, for me. It focused on many things, but never for too long, remaining eventually on my feet, as they travelled across the slightly slanted road. My hair was sticking up. It was curly and ruffled. I wore the same jersey as Rube (only mine was slightly more faded), old jeans, my spray jacket, and boots. I told myself that although I could never look the same as my brothers, I still had something.

I had the words in my pocket.

Maybe that was what I had.
That, and knowing that I’ve walked the city a thousand times on my own and that I could walk the streets with more feeling than anyone, as if I was walking through myself. I’m pretty sure that was what it was—more a feeling than a look.

At the oval Steve had shots at goal.
Rube had shots at goal.
I sent the ball back to them.

When Steve had a shot, the ball rose up high and kept climbing between the posts. It was clean, ranging, and when it came down, it rushed onto my chest with a complete, numbing force. Rube’s ball, on the other hand, spun and spiralled, low and charging, but also went through the posts. Every time.

They kicked them from everywhere. In front. Far out. Even past the edges of the field.

‘Hey Cam!’ Rube yelled at one point. ‘Come out and have a shot!’

‘Nah mate, I’ll be right.’

They made me though. Twenty yards out, twenty yards to the left. I moved in with my heart shuddering. My feet stepped in, I kicked it, and the ball reached for the posts.

It curved.
Spun.
Then it collided with the right-hand post and slumped to the grass.
Silence.

Steve mentioned, ‘It was a good shot Cameron,’ and the three of us stood there, in the wet, weeping grass.

It was quarter past eight then.

At eight-thirty, Rube left, and I’d had another seven shots.

At just past nine-thirty, Steve was still standing behind the posts, and I still hadn’t got it through. Clumps of darkness grew heavier in the sky, and it was just Steve and me.

Each time my brother sent the ball back, I searched for a note of complaint in him, but it never came. When we were younger he might have called me useless. Hopeless. All he did that night, however, was kick the ball back and wait again.
When the ball finally fought its way up and fell through the posts, Steve caught it and stood there.

No smile.

No nod of the head, or any recognition.

Not yet.

Soon he walked with the ball under his arm, and when he was perhaps ten yards short of me, he gave me a certain look.

His eyes looked differently at me.

His expression was swollen.

Then.

I’ve never seen a person’s face shatter like his did.

With pride.


enter, the dog

I edge closer, towards the glowing eyes I’d previously seen inside me.

The city is cold and dark.
This alley is filled with numbness.
The sky’s sinking. Dark, dark sky.

I’m there now, maybe five yards from an animal that stares back. My eyes adjust and I see all of him, crouched to the ground.

I see the eyes.
The rough, ragged, rusted fur.
Breathing.
Panting smoke.
Slowly, I move closer.
Too close.

I get too close and the dog buckles to his feet and arcs around me, watchful. His head’s down, but trying to reach up.

He goes past me but stops to look back.
‘What?’ I ask.
But I know.
I have to follow him.

Gradually, he takes me back through the streets and to the oval. He moves with what I can only call a jagged grace.

Then.
There’s a place on that ground.
On the dew-covered ground.
He stops and sits there and the city seems dead around us.
I like his eyes.
They look like desire.
FAGGOT. POOFER. WANKER.

These are common words in my neighbourhood when someone wants to give you some, tell you off, or just plain humiliate you. They’ll also call you one of those things if you show some sign that you’re in some way different to the regular, run-of-the-mill sort of guy who lives in this part of the city. You might also get it if you’ve annoyed someone in some inadvertent way and the person has nothing better to say. For all I know it’s the same everywhere, but I can’t really speak for anywhere else. The only place I know is this.

This city.
These streets.

Soon you’ll know why I’ve mentioned it . . .

On Thursday that week I decided I should go and get a haircut, which is always a pretty dangerous decision, especially when your hair sticks up as stubborn and chronic as mine. You just have to pray that it won’t end in tragedy. You hope beyond all hope that the barber won’t ignore all instructions and butcher your head to pieces. But it’s a risk you have to take.

‘Har-low mate,’ the barber said when I entered the shop, deeper into the city. ‘Have a seat, I won’t be long.’

In the scungy waiting area there was quite a good range of magazines, though you could tell each one had been sitting there for the last few years, judging by the dates of issue. There was Time, Rolling Stone, some fishing thing, Who Weekly, some computer thing, Black and White, Surfing Life, and always a favourite, Inside Sport. Of course, the best thing about the Inside Sport magazine is not the sport, but the scantily clad woman who is planted on the cover. She is always firm and has desire in her eyes. Her swimsuit is nice and open, her legs long and tanned and elegant. She has breasts you can only imagine your hands touching and massaging. (Sorry, but it’s true.) She has hips of extreme grace, a golden, flat stomach and a neck you can only
imagine yourself sucking on. Her lips are always full and hungry. The eyes say, ‘Take me.’

She’s always brilliant.

Absolutely.

You remind yourself that there are some pretty good articles in Inside Sport, but you know you’re lying. Of course there are some good articles in the magazine, but that sure as hell isn’t what makes you pick it up. It’s always the woman. Always. Trust me on this one.

So, typically, I surveyed the area and made sure no-one was looking when I picked up the Inside Sport magazine, opened it quickly and pretended to scan the contents page for any good articles. I was (predictably) seeing which page the woman was on.

Seventy-six.

‘Okay mate,’ the barber said.

‘Me?’

‘There’s no-one else waiting is there?’

Yeah, but, I thought helplessly, I haven’t got to page seventy-six yet!

It was futile.

The barber was ready and if there’s one man you don’t want to keep waiting it’s the guy about to cut your hair. He’s all-powerful. In fact, he might as well be God. That’s the kind of power he has. A few months at barber school and a man becomes the most important person in your life for ten or fifteen minutes. The golden rule: don’t give him the shits or there’ll be hell to pay.

Immediately, I threw the magazine back to the table, face down so the barber wouldn’t know right away what a pervert I am. He’d have to wait until later when he tidied the magazines.

Sitting in the chair (it sounds about as dangerous as the electric chair), I considered the whole woman on the cover situation.

‘Short?’ the barber asked me.

‘Nah, not too short please, mate. I’m just tryin’ to have it so it doesn’t always stick up.’

‘Easier said than done, ay?’
‘Yeah.’

We exchanged a look of mutual friendliness and I felt much more at ease in the firing line of the scissors, the chair, and the barber.

He started cutting and like I said a minute ago, I reviewed the woman on the cover situation. My theory on this subject was and still is that I obviously desire the physicality of a woman. Yet, I honestly believe that that part of my desire for a girl is somewhere on the surface of my soul, whereas further and much deeper inside is the fiercer desire to please her, treat her right, and be immersed by the spirit of her.

I honestly believe that.

Honestly.

Still, I had to stop thinking about it and talk to the barber. That’s another rule of the barber shop. If you talk to the man and get him to like you, maybe he won’t screw it up. That’s what you hope for anyway. It doesn’t mean you’ll have instant success, but it might help, so you try it. There are no guarantees in the world of barber shops. It’s a gamble no matter which way you look at it. I had to start talking, and fast.

‘So how’s business?’ I asked, as the barber cut his way through the thickness of my furry hair.

‘Aah, you know mate.’ He stopped, and smiled at me in the mirror. ‘Here ‘n there. Keepin’ my head above water. That’s the main thing.’

We talked for quite a while after that, and the barber told me how long he’d been working in the city and how much people have changed. I agreed with everything he said, with a dangerous nod of my head or a quiet ‘Yeah, that sounds about right’. He was a pretty nice guy to tell you the truth. Very big. Quite hairy. A husky voice.

I asked if he lived upstairs from the shop and he said, ‘Yep, for the last twenty-five years.’ That was when I pitied him a little, because I imagined him never going anywhere or doing anything. Just cutting hair. Eating dinner alone. Maybe microwave dinners (though his dinners couldn’t be much worse than the ones Mrs Wolfe cooked, God bless her).

‘Do you mind me askin’ if you ever got married?’ I asked him.

‘Of course I don’t mind,’ he answered. ‘I had a wife but she died a few years ago. I go down the cemetery every weekend, but I don’t put flowers down. I don’t talk.’ He sighed a bit and he was very sincere. Truly. ‘I like to
think I did enough of that when she was alive, you know?’

I nodded.

‘It’s no good once a person’s dead. You gotta do it when you’re together, still living.’

He’d stopped cutting for a few moments now, so I could continue nodding without risk. I asked, ‘So what do you do when you’re standin’ there, at the grave?’

He smiled. ‘Just remember. That’s all.’

That’s nice, I thought, but I didn’t say it. I only smiled at the man behind me in the mirror. I had a vision of the large hairy man standing there at the cemetery, knowing that he gave everything he could. I also imagined myself there with him, on a dark grey day. Him in his white barber’s coat. Me in the usual. Jeans. Flanno. Spray jacket.

‘Okay?’ he turned and said to me in the vision.

‘Okay?’ he said in the shop.

I woke back into reality and said, ‘Yeah, thanks a lot, it’s good’, even though I knew it would be standing up within forty-eight hours. I was happy though, but not only for the haircut. The conversation too.

With my hair congregating around my feet, I paid twelve dollars and said, ‘Thanks a lot. It was nice talking to you.’

‘Same here,’ and the large hairy barber smiled and I felt guilty about the magazine. I could only hope he would understand the different layers of my soul. After all, he was a barber. Barbers are supposed to have the answers to running the country, along with taxi drivers and obnoxious radio commentators. I thanked him again and said goodbye.

Once outside, it was still mid-afternoon so Why not? I told myself. I might as well head over to Glebe.

Needless to say, I got there and stood outside the girl’s house.

Stephanie.

It was as good a place as any to watch the sun collapse behind the city, and after a while I sat down against a wall and thought again about the barber.

The importance of it was that he and I were really doing similar things, only in reverse order. He was remembering. I was anticipating. (Hopeful, almost ludicrous anticipation, I admit.)
Once it was dark, I decided I’d better get home for the dinner. It was leftover steak, I think, with vegetables boiled into oblivion.

I got up.
I slipped my hands into my pockets.
Then I looked, hoped and walked, in that order.
Pathetic, I know, but it was my life, I guess. No point denying it.

It turned out to be later than I thought when I finally left, and I decided to get the bus back to my own neighbourhood.

At the bus stop there was a handful of people waiting. There was a man with a briefcase, a chain-smoking woman, a guy who looked like a labourer or carpenter, and a couple who leaned on each other and kissed a while as they waited.

I couldn’t help it.
I watched.
Not obviously, of course. Just a quick look here and there.
Damn.
I got caught.
‘What are you lookin’ at?’ The guy spat his words at me. ‘Don’t you have anything better to do?’
Nothing.
That was my reply.
Absolutely nothing.
‘Well?’
Still nothing.
Then the girl got stuck into me as well.
‘Why don’t y’ go and stare at someone else, y’ weirdo.’ She had blonde hair, green eyes shrunken in under the streetlight and a voice like a blunt knife. She beat me with it. ‘Y’ wanker.’

Typical.

You get called that name so many times around here, but this time it hurt. I guess it hurt because it was a girl. I don’t know. In a way, it was kind of
depressing that this was what we’d come to. We can’t even wait for a bus in peace.

I know, I know. I should have barked back at them, nice and hard, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. Some Wolfe, ay. Some wild dog I turned out to be. All I did was steal one last look, to see if they were about to level some final fragments of abuse at me.

The guy was also blond. Not tall or short. He wore dark pants, boots, a black jacket and a sneer.

Meanwhile, the briefcase man checked his watch. The chain smoker lit up another. The labourer shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Nothing more was said, but when the bus came, everyone pushed on and I was last.

‘Sorry.’

When I got on and tried to pay, the driver told me that fares had just gone up and I didn’t have enough money for a ticket.

I got off, smiled ruefully and stood there.

The bus was pretty empty.

As I started walking, I watched it pull away and shove itself along the street. Many thoughts staggered through me, including:

– How late I’d be for dinner.
– Whether or not anyone would ask where I’d been.
– Whether Dad wanted Rube and me to work with him on Saturday.
– If the girl named Stephanie would ever come out and see me (if she knew I was there at all).
– How much longer it would take for Rube to get rid of Octavia.
– If Steve clung to the memory of the look we’d exchanged on Monday night as often as I did.
– How my sister Sarah was doing lately. (We hadn’t spoken for a while.)
– Whether or not Mrs Wolfe was ever disappointed in me or knew that I had turned out such a lone figure.
– And how the barber was feeling above his shop.

I also realised as I walked, then began to run, that I didn’t even have any
bad feelings towards the couple who’d abused me. I knew I should have, but I didn’t. Sometimes I think I need a bit more mongrel in me.
the cemetery

We move on, but the dog still keeps his distance. There are no words. No questions.

He takes me out, beyond the city, to a darkness that smells like evil at first. As we get closer, though, I realise it isn’t evil we walk towards at all. It’s death.

Just mild-mannered death, in all its patience.

We stop under a charcoal sky, and I know that this is the graveyard of the world. It holds every person that’s ever lived and died, and every person that’s going to live and die. We’re all here. Everyone.

The dog stops.

His head hangs.

It always hangs. Almost sags.

There are graves as far as the eye can see—an infinity of death.

We move through it until the dog sees another person simply standing at a grave.

She holds no flowers or spoken words in her hands.

It’s just a person, remembering.

She sees us, takes a last look at the grave and leaves.

We walk.

Heads down, to where she stood.

When we get there, I look at the name on the grave. There are words I can’t decipher, and dates I can’t read.

I can only read the name:

CAMERON WOLFE.

I hope it’s true.
THIS DOG’S AN ABSOLUTE EMBARRASSMENT,’ SAID RUBE, and I knew that some things would never change. They would only slip away and return.

After the whole bus stop issue, I got home, and after dinner, Rube and I were taking Miffy, our neighbour’s midget dog, for his usual walk. As always, we wore our hoods over our heads so no-one could recognise us, because in the words of Rube, the sight of Miffy was an absolute shocker.

‘When Keith gets another dog,’ he suggested, ‘we’ll tell him to get a Rottweiler. Or a Doberman. Or at least something we can be seen in public with.’

We stopped at an intersection.

Rube bent down to Miffy.

In an over-friendly voice, he said, ‘Aren’t you an ugly little bastard Miffy, ay? Aren’t you? Yes you are. You are you know,’ and the dog licked its lips and panted quite happily really. If only he had some idea that Rube was giving him a good mouthful. We crossed the street.

My feet dragged.

Rube’s feet ambled.

Miffy pranced, and his chain jingled next to him, in time with his breathing.

Looking down at him, I realised he had the body of a rodent and the fur of something that can only be called stupendous. Like he’d gone a thousand rounds with a spin dryer. The problem was, we happened to love that dog, in spite of everything. Even that night, when we got home, I gave him the piece of steak Sarah couldn’t finish at dinner. Unfortunately, it was a bit too tough for Miffy’s pitiful little teeth and he nearly choked on it.

‘Bloody hell Cam,’ Rube laughed. ‘What are y’ tryin’ to do to the poor little bastard? He’s gaggin’ on it.’

‘I thought it’d be all right.’
‘All right, my arse. Look at him.’ He pointed. ‘Look at him!’

‘What should I do?’ I asked.

Rube had an idea. ‘Maybe you oughta get it out of his mouth, chew it up a bit and then give it to him.’

‘What?’ I looked at him. ‘You want me to put that in my mouth?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Maybe you should.’

‘No way.’

So basically, we pretty much let Miffy choke a bit. In the end it didn’t sound all that serious anyway.

‘It’ll build his character,’ Rube suggested. ‘Nothin’ like a good choking to toughen a dog up.’ We both watched intently as Miffy eventually finished off the steak.

When he was done and we were sure he hadn’t choked himself to death, we took him home.

‘We should just throw him over the fence,’ Rube said, but we both knew we never would. There’s a big difference between watching a dog half-choke and throwing him over the fence. Besides, our neighbour Keith would be pretty unthrilled with us. He could be a bit unpleasant, Keith, especially when it came to that dog of his. You wouldn’t think that such a hard man would own such a fluffy kind of dog, but I’m sure he probably just blamed it on his wife.

‘It’s the wife’s dog,’ I can imagine him telling the boys at the pub. ‘I’m just lucky I’ve got those two shithead boys next door to walk him—their old lady makes ’em do it.’ He could be a hard man, Keith, but okay nonetheless.

Speaking of hard men, it turned out that Dad did want our help on the upcoming Saturday. He pays us quite generously now, and he’s always pretty happy. A while back, like I’ve said before, when he struggled to get work, he was pretty miserable, but these days it was good to work with him. Sometimes we went and got fish ‘n chips for lunch, and we played cards on top of Dad’s small, dirty red esky, but only as long as we all worked our guts out. Cliff Wolfe was a fan of working your guts out, and to be fair, so were Rube and I. We were also fans of fish ‘n chips and cards though, even if it was usually the old man who won. Either he won or the game was taking too long and he cut it short. Some things can’t be helped.
What I haven’t mentioned is that Rube also had another job. He left school last year and got an apprenticeship with a builder, despite getting an abysmal result in his final exams.

I remember when he got them delivered.

He opened the envelope next to the slanted, slurred front gate of our house.

‘How’d y’ go?’ I asked.

‘Well Cam,’ he smiled, as if he was thoroughly pleased with himself. ‘I can sum it up in two words. The first word is completely. The second word is shitbouse.’

And yet, he got a job.

Straight away.

Typical Rube.

He didn’t need to work with the old man on Saturdays, but for some reason, he did. Maybe it was an act of respect. Dad asked so Rube said yes. Maybe he didn’t want anyone to think he was lazy. I don’t know.

Either which way, we were working with ol’ Cliff that weekend, and he woke us nice and early. It was still dark.

We were waiting for Dad to get out of the bathroom (which he’s always likely to leave in a pretty horrendous state, smell-wise), when Rube and I decided we’d get the cards out early.

As Rube dealt the cards at the kitchen table, I recalled what happened a few weeks earlier, when we had a game during breakfast. It wasn’t a bad idea, but somehow I managed to spill my cornflakes all over the deck because I was still half-asleep. Even this week there was still a dried cornflake glued to a card I threw onto the out-pile.

Rube picked it up.

Examined it.

‘Huh.’

Me: ‘I know.’

‘You’re pitiful.’

‘I know.’ I could only agree.

The toilet flushed, the water ran, and Dad came out of the bathroom.
‘We go?’

We nodded and gathered up the cards.

At the job, Rube and I dug hard and talked and laughed. I’ll admit that Rube’s always good for a bit of a laugh. He was telling me a story about an old girlfriend of his who always munched on his ears.

‘In the end I had to buy her some bloody chewy, otherwise I wouldn’t have my ears any more.’

Octavia, I thought.

I wondered what story he would have about her in a few weeks’ time, when it was dead and gone and thrown out. Her searching eyes, ruffled hair and human legs and nice feet. I wondered what quirks of hers he’d have to talk about. Maybe she insisted on him touching her leg in a movie, or liked turning her fingers in his hand. I didn’t know.

It was quick.

I spoke.

I asked.

‘Rube?’

‘What?’

He stopped digging and looked at me.

‘How much longer for you and Octavia?’

‘A week. Maybe two.’

There was nothing for me to do but continue digging then, and the day wandered past.

At lunch, the fish was greasy and great.

The chips were sprayed with salt and drenched in vinegar.

When we ate, Dad looked at the paper, Rube took the TV guide and I started writing more words in my head. No more cards today.

That night, Mrs Wolfe asked me how everything was going at school, and I returned to my earlier thoughts that week of whether or not she’d had cause lately to be disappointed in me. I told her everything was all right. For a moment, I debated whether I should tell someone about the words I’d started writing down, but I couldn’t. In a way, I felt ashamed, even though my
writing was the one thing that whispered okayness in my ear. I didn’t speak it, to anyone.

We cleaned up together, before dinner’s leftovers had a chance to get stagnant, and she told me about the book she was reading called *My Brother Jack*. She said it was about two brothers and how one of them rose up but still regretted the way he lived and the way he was.

‘You’ll rise up one day,’ were her second-last words. ‘But don’t be too hard on yourself,’ were her last.

When she left and I was standing alone in the kitchen, I saw that Mrs Wolfe was brilliant. Not smart-brilliant, or any particular kind of brilliant. Just brilliant, because she was herself and even the wrinkles around her ageing eyes were the shaded colour of kindness. That was what made her brilliant.

‘Hey Cameron.’ My sister Sarah came to me later on. ‘You feel like goin’ out to Steve’s game tomorrow?’

‘Okay,’ I replied. I had nothing better to do.

‘Good.’

On Sunday, Steve would be playing his usual game of football, but at a different ground to the local, out more Maroubra way. It was only Sarah and me who went to watch. We went up to his apartment and he drove us out there.

Something big happened at that game.
the colour of kindness

We arrive back in the city from the graveyard, and the night is still beginning.

As we stagger forward, I think about the colour of kindness, realising that its colours and shades are not painted onto a person. They’re worn in.

The dog glances at me.

He knows my thoughts.

Soon he stops again, and we’re standing in front of a building that spires to the sky.

It has glass doors, like dark mirrors, and we stand.

The dog barks.

A defiant, deep bark, making me stare at my reflection. I have to.

I look straight into me and see the colour of awkwardness and uncertainty and longing.

And for the first time ever, I don’t shrug myself away from that. I get inside it, to feel the force of it.

I get ready.

To climb through it.
ON THE WAY UP TO STEVE’S, I WONDERED WHAT THE HELL my sister Sarah was going to do with her life. She walked next to me, and most men who walked past us watched her. Many of them turned around once they’d gone past and took a second look at her body. It seemed that to them, that’s all she was. The thought of it made me a little sick (not that I can talk), and I hoped she would never end up actually being that life.

‘Friggin’ perverts,’ she said.

Which gave me hope.

The thing is, I think we’re all perverts. All men. All women. All disgruntled little bastards like me. It’s funny to think of my father as a pervert, or my mother. But somewhere, in the crevices of their souls, I’m sure they’ve slipped sometimes, or even dived in. As for me, I feel like I live in there at times. Maybe we all do. Maybe if there’s any beauty in my life, it’s the climbing out.

Like always, Steve was pretty quick to come down once we arrived at his apartment. He was on the balcony, raised his head, and next thing, he was with us, keys in hand. Steve’s never been late for a single thing in his life.

He chucked his gear in the boot and we left.

We took Cleveland Street which is always a bit choked, even on Sundays, and the radio was quiet as Steve drove. People cut him off and buses pulled out in front of him, but nothing moved him. He never blew the horn or yelled. To Steve, such things were irrelevant.

It was good for me to be at the ground at Maroubra that day. It was good to watch Steve and his ways. Just like the words I’d been writing made me feel and see things differently, it also gave me a greater curiosity. I wanted to see the way people moved and spoke and the reactions they were given. Steve was a good person to take notice of.

There was a rope fenced around the field and from where Sarah and I stood, I could see Steve approach the other members of his team. Every one
of them looked his way and said something very briefly. Only one or two spoke with him longer. He stood at the edge of them and I could tell he wasn’t close with them. With any of them. Yet, they liked him. They respected him. If he wanted it, he could have laughed with them and been the one that everyone listened to.

But it meant nothing there.

Not to Steve.

In the game though, when he said he wanted the ball, he would get it. When something big was needed, Steve would do it. In the easy games the others would shine, but when things were hard, Steve was there, even if it was on his own.

They got ready and there was a lot of shouting and carrying on from both dressing sheds and both teams ran out. Steve was the captain of his team, and like I thought he would, he spoke a lot more on the field. Never yelling. I could just always see him mentioning something to another player or telling him what he had to do. Each one listened.

It was three o’clock when the game started.

The crowd was pretty big, with most of them drinking beer or eating pies or both. Many of them shouted things out, often losing food or spit from their mouths.

As was often the case, there was a brawl in the first few minutes, which Steve stayed right out of. There was a guy who leapt up and hit him around the throat, and everyone ran in. Punches collided with skin and fists were cut up on teeth.

Steve only got up and walked away.

He crouched down.

He spat.

Then he got up, took the penalty and ran twice as hard.

They called his name incessantly.

‘Wolfe. Watch Wolfe.’

They would send a few guys to take care of him every time, making sure to hurt him.

Each time Steve returned to his feet and kept going.
It made Sarah and me smile, as Steve sliced through them a few times and set up other people to score. By half-time, his team was well in front. It was late in the second half when the importance of the day occurred.

The sky was heavy grey and it was about to rain.

People were huddling now, in the cold.

A slippery wind was sliding across the air.

Kids kicked a ball and chased it behind us, with tomato sauce glued to the corner of their mouths, and scabs on their knees.

Steve was lining up a shot at goal from as far out on the field as you could get, right where the opposition supporters stood.

They mocked him.

Swore at him.

Told him he was useless.

As he moved in to kick the goal, a can of beer was thrown at his head. Beer flew out of it and the can slapped my brother on the side of his face.

He stopped.

Mid-step.

He froze.

In no rush, he bent down, picked up the can and studied it. He turned to the group where it came from, who were quiet almost immediately, and without looking at them again, he gently placed the can on the ground, out of the way, and lined the kick up again.

The crowd watched as Steve moved in and kicked the ball.

It rose up and soared through the posts, and Steve turned to face the people at his side. He stared at them for a few seconds, then returned to the game, leaving the beer can, half-full, half-empty and half-hearted as it lay abandoned next to the sideline.

As I watched the end of the incident, I couldn’t help but notice that Steve’s stare wasn’t angry in any way. If anything, it was amused. He could have done anything he wanted. He could have said anything. He could have spat at them or hurled the can right back at them.

But that was something they could have done just as easily.
There was no way they could have walked in again, taken the shot, put it straight through the middle and then stare as if to say, ‘Well? Have you got anything else for me?’

That was how he beat them.

That was how he won.

He did the only thing they weren’t capable of themselves.

When I realised that, I smiled. I even laughed, which made Sarah laugh, and we were the only people laughing at the whole ground. For everyone else, the game went on.

The game went on, the rain held off, and Steve’s team won by a country mile.

When it was over, he said his goodbyes and that maybe he’d go for a drink with the other players, though everyone knew he wouldn’t. They knew. He knew. I knew. We were going home.

There was more silence in the car than anything else, and I don’t know about Steve or Sarah, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the thrown beer can. I kept seeing the ball soar through the posts and the content stare on Steve’s face. Even when Sarah reached for the dashboard and sang with the radio, it was the memory of that stare which spoke loudest through my mind. His face was the same now as he drove, and in some strange way, I think Steve was also thinking about it. I was even expecting him to smile, but he never did.

Instead, we were all pretty quiet, until Steve dropped us home.

‘Thanks,’ Sarah said.

‘No worries. Thanks for coming.’

As I was about to get out of the car myself, Steve stopped me.

He stopped me with ‘Cam?’

‘Yeah?’

He looked into the mirror and I could see his eyes as he talked to me.

‘Just hang on a minute.’

This had never happened before so I was unsure of what to expect. Would he tell me what the stare had meant, or how it felt to make those people look so stupid? Would he give me a guide on how to be a winner?

Of course not.
Or, at least, not like that.

His eyes were soft and honest as he spoke and it was strange for me to be feeling this way about Steven Wolfe.

He said, ‘When I was your age, there were these four other blokes who beat me up. They took me round the back of a building and beat me up for some reason I’ll never know.’ He stopped a moment and he wasn’t emotional in any way. He wasn’t telling me some sob story about how other kids hated him and this was why he’d turned out the way he did. He was just telling me something. ‘When I was lyin’ there, all crumpled up, I vowed that each one of them was going to get his share of what they all did to me. I went over it in my mind and thought about what I wanted to do. Every morning, every night; and when I was ready, I went to them, one by one, and beat the absolute crap out of them. By the time I’d got to three of them, the last one tried to make peace.’ The eyes sharpened a little, remembering. ‘I bashed him too, even better than the other three.’

He stopped.

He stopped talking and I waited for more, until I realised that was it, and I nodded to my brother.

At the eyes in the mirror.

For a moment, I wondered, Why is he telling me this?

He didn’t look proud or happy. Maybe just that same expression of contentment as before. Or maybe he was just glad he’d told somebody, because it sure didn’t seem like he’d tell a whole load of people what he’d just told me. I couldn’t be sure. As usual.

Finally, when I got out of the car, I wondered if anyone knew my brother. I wondered if Sal knew him.

I just knew that Steve was talking to me that day and it felt okay.

No, it felt good.

When he left, I waved to him but he was already halfway up the street. In the house, Octavia was sitting in our kitchen.

Rube wasn’t.

They were as good as over.

She looked beautiful.
alley boys

There must be thousands of alleys in here, in this city of my mind.

Dark alleys everywhere.

In each one of them there are people fighting, cutting each other down and placing punches and kicks to bodies that have already fallen.

We go past each one, watching and learning that some people are beaten down for good, and that some get up and keep fighting . . .

Finally, we arrive in an alley that’s empty. It’s alone and uncaring, and a slight breeze wades across the floor of it. It whispers to the rubbish, then picks it all up and moves it along.

Just like I have been.

Right now.

By this dog.

He skulks away as a group of young men enter the alley.

Only their footsteps speak as they approach me and throw me immediately to the ground. They level their fists and feet at my face, and at my body.

My ribcage shatters.

My heart fights to stay in.

I look to the dog, pleading for help, but nothing arrives.

The help’s already here.

It’s in the hands, the feet, the breath-covered voices of my attackers, and when they leave, they step over me and walk back up the alley as if nothing has happened.

My blood runs.

The road is cold.

The dog shows up above me, looking down. He makes me think of all the other beaten down people in the alleys. All the winners. All the fighters. All the losers. And all the ones that refuse to lie down.

He waits.
He watches me.

It takes a while, but I get to my feet.

I look at him—a decision has to be made.

Desire reaches through me.

It fills me up.

Spills over.

It catches fire in my eyes and I look up through the alley. I start walking across the pain, deciding all the time. Choosing. Knowing.

Telling the dog that I’ll fight.

With desire written in my eyes.
THREE WORDS:

God damn Miffy.

I wasn’t really in the mood for walking him, especially when I had to wait around quite a while for Rube.

At first, I sat in the kitchen with Octavia.

She didn’t look too impressed with things, considering she and Rube were supposed to be going out that afternoon. It must have slipped Rube’s mind. At least, that was what I told her. Me though? I knew. Rube was away from her on purpose. I’d seen him do this before.

Come in late.

Argue.

Tell them he doesn’t need this garbage.

It was a pretty good technique for Rube. He didn’t mind being the villain.

There were leftovers on offer, but Octavia didn’t stay for them. I walked out with her and we remained on the front porch a while, talking, and even managing to laugh now and then.

I took off my jacket and offered it to her. She accepted it, and soon after she said, ‘It’s warm, Cam.’ She looked just past me. ‘It’s the warmest I’ve felt for a while . . .’

In a way, I hoped she wasn’t just talking about the jacket, but it was better not to think like that. When you think like that, you end up standing outside people’s houses, waiting for something that never comes.

Either which way, she gave it back when we walked down to the gate and I opened it for her.

The moon was stuck to the sky and Octavia said, ‘There’s no point coming back really, is there?’
‘Why?’ I replied.

‘Don’t why me Cameron.’ She looked away and glanced back. ‘It’s okay.’

Even when she leaned onto the gate with her hands and her voice became unsteady, Octavia looked great, and I don’t mean that in a dirty kind of way. I just mean that I liked her. I felt sorry for her, and for what Rube was doing to her. Her eyes smiled at me, for just a moment. One of those hurt smiles a person gives you, to let you know they’re okay, even though they’re far from it.

After that, she left.

When she was just past the gate, I asked, ‘Octavia?’

She turned around.

‘Y’ gonna come back?’

‘Maybe,’ she smiled. ‘One day.’

She walked along our street and it really did look like she was walking through a soul, and she was tough and lovely and okay. For a few seconds, I hated my brother Rube for what he was doing to her.

Also, watching her walk slowly up our street, I remembered what Rube had said about her and him following me one day when I walked over to Glebe and stood outside Stephanie’s house. I could clearly see the image of Octavia and Rube looking at me. Looking at me looking. She must have thought I was pathetic. A bit of a lonely bastard, as Rube put it. Maybe now, as she walked up the street, she knew how I felt.

Somehow though, I understood that it was thoughts of Rube that filled her. Not thoughts of me. Maybe she was thinking of his hands on her, touching her, taking her. Having her. Maybe it was laughter she remembered, or the words of a conversation. I would never know.

He came in late for dinner and the old man gave him a good serve for it, as well as for leaving Octavia out to dry. I made sure to keep out of it. All I did was walk out the door once Rube was finished eating, to get Miffy.

It was cold outside and I wasn’t in the mood.

Not after that.

The air was cold enough for us to wear our hoods indefinitely, and to watch the smoke pour from our mouths when we breathed.

Smoke came from Miffy’s mouth too, especially when he had a bit of a
coughing fit. That was when we quickened the pace for home.

Later, we watched TV.

I looked over at my brother. He could sense it.

‘What?’ he said.

I was on the couch and Rube was in the worn-through chair.

‘Is Octavia gone?’

He looked.

First away. Then back at me.

Yes.

That was the answer and Rube knew he didn’t have to say it. I knew he didn’t have to say it.

‘There a new one?’

Again, he didn’t have to answer.

‘What’s her name?’

He waited a while, then said it. ‘Julia . . . But relax, Cam—I haven’t done anything yet.’

I nodded.

I nodded and swallowed and I wished hard that it didn’t have to be this way, for Octavia. I couldn’t have cared less about Rube at this point. I thought only of the poor girl, and I thought of a time a few years ago when Sarah got dumped by this one particular guy. I remembered how shattered she was, especially when she found out that there was another girl.

Rube and I hated the guy who did that.

We wanted to kill him.

Rube especially.

Now that guy was Rube.

For a moment, I nearly mentioned it, but all I did was sit there stupidly and look at Rube’s face, side-on. There was no remorse in him. Almost no trace of thought about what he was doing.

Julia.

I could only wonder what she’d be like.
The only problem for Rube was that Octavia wanted to find out for sure, so she came over again during the week.

They went out to the yard, and after a few minutes, she came back through the house on her own. When she saw me, she said, ‘I’ll see you Cameron,’ and again, she gave me that courageous smile—the one I saw the other night. Only this time, her green eyes were soaked more definitely, the water rising higher, only just managing not to fall out. She gathered herself and we stood in the hall and she said one last time, ‘I’ll see you round.’

‘No you won’t,’ and I smiled back at her. We both knew that people didn’t see Cameron Wolfe—at least not unless they walked through the streets of the city a lot.

This time, when she left, she told me not to come out, but secretly, I stood on the front porch and watched her disappear.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered.

I figured that was the last time I’d ever see Rube’s girl Octavia.

I was wrong.
I’m cold now.

Jacketless.

Somehow, I left my jacket in a back alley, and now I wander around with this dog, shivering as we walk.

For the first time, I feel anger.

‘What is this?’ I bark, but no answer is given. Only the sound of his paws and claws on the road find my ears. And his breath. His smoky breath.

It feels like we’re going nowhere—just rambling through the streets in the dark.

My heart is bleeding.

With aloneness.

The blood lands on my feet and hits the ground.

Pain from the alley overcomes me and I stumble.

I fall.

Now I’m sprawled out, motionless on the cold city floor.

Bleeding.

Falling apart.

Soon the presence of the dog comes back to me. I feel him settle and lie down next to me. He rests his snout on my arm and I feel his breath on my skin.

I open my eyes and get a look at him from the edge of my vision. He’s asleep, but waiting.

He’s waiting for me to stand up and keep walking.
Julia was, of course, an absolute scrubber. There’s not a whole lot more I can say about her. A scrubber (in case you don’t know) is a girl that might be described as kind of slutty or festy, yet still without being a complete prostitute or anything like that. She chews gum a lot. She might drink excessively and smoke for show. She’ll call you a faggot, poofter or wanker with a lovely smirk on her face. She’ll wear painted-on jeans and good cleavage and she won’t care too much if her headlights are on. Jewellery: moderate to heavy, maybe with a nose ring or eyebrow ring for rebellious originality. Then there’s the make-up. At times it’s bucketed on, especially if there’s a bit of acne involved on her face, although more often than not, a scrubber isn’t too bad looking at all. She just has a tendency to make herself ugly, by what she says and what she does.

And Julia?

What can I say?

She was beautiful. She was blonde.

And she was a scrubber and a half.

“So this is Cameron,’ she said when she first saw me. She was chewing that low sugar gum that dentists highly recommend.

‘Hey,’ I said, and Rube winked at me. I knew what the wink meant. Something like, Not bad, huh? or You wouldn’t knock her back, would y’? or even simply, Pretty good handfuls, ay? The bastard.

As you can imagine, I got out of there pretty quick smart, because that girl annoyed the crap out of me very bloody fast. My only hope was that Rube wouldn’t take her to see me staring at that Stephanie girl’s house. Octavia, I could handle, because she at least had a bit of class about her. A bit of niceness. But not this one. She’d most likely call me a bit of a lonely bastard as well. Or maybe she’d say something like ‘Get a life’ or repeat something Rube had previously said, hoping his charisma would rub off on her. No way. I wouldn’t give her a chance. Not this one (even though Christ! I thought at
one stage. *Take a look at her.* She had an *Inside Sport* body if ever I’d seen one).

But no.

I’d made up my mind.

Rather than hang around them like a bad smell, I decided to go to the movies and hang around like a bad smell there instead.

On a cold, windy Saturday, when Dad didn’t need me, I saw three movies in one day before going over to Glebe a while, and then home. In the night, I went down to our basement and wrote for a few hours, feeling everything that was me shift and turn inside me.

I was in bed for quite a while when Rube came in and slumped down on his own bed across from me. He laughed for a while and I had to turn the light off, when he said, ‘Well Cam?’

‘Well what?’

‘What are your thoughts?’

‘On what?’

‘On Julia.’

‘Well,’ I began, but I didn’t want to congratulate him on her, and I didn’t want to interfere either. The injured darkness of the room swayed and stumbled and I said, ‘She’s okay, I guess.’

‘Okay!?’ He raised his voice, excitedly. ‘She’s pretty bloody brilliant if you ask me.’

‘But I didn’t ask you, did I?’ I stated. ‘You asked *me* and I told you the answer.’

‘Smartarse.’

I laughed.

‘Are you tryin’ to start somethin’?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Well you better bloody not . . .’

Rube’s voice trailed off and he fell asleep, letting the night throb around me, alone.

I lay there, not sleeping for hours—thinking about the cover model on the
magazine at the barber, then an exotic supermodel I saw on an ad at the movies. In my mind, I was with them. In them. Alone. For a while I even thought of Julia, but that was too much. I mean, there’s perversion and there’s perversion. Even for me.

In the morning, the previous night’s conversation between Rube and me was forgotten. He ate slabs of bacon in the kitchen before going out again, while I stayed in because I had work due in at school next day.

Of course, I knew Rube was with Julia, and the pattern continued.

About two weeks went by, and everything was normal. Normal routine.

Dad was working hard, plumbing.

Mrs Wolfe was the same, cleaning people’s houses and doing a few cleaning shifts at the hospital.

Sarah did some overtime.

Steve kept winning at football, working in his office job and living in his apartment with Sal.

Rube went out with Julia.

And I still wrote my words, sometimes in our bedroom, sometimes in the basement. I also went over to Glebe quite a few times, more out of habit now than anything else.

Then.

A day came that changed everything.

It . . . I don’t know how to explain it.

It all seemed so normal, but slightly off-centre at the same time.

I walked the city streets, as usual.

I made my way over to the suburb of Glebe, without even thinking about where I was walking.

I went there, sat there, stood there, waited there, even begged there for something, anything to happen.

It was a Thursday, and in the dying moments of day, when the last rays of light stood up to be killed in the sky, I could feel someone behind me, just to the side. I could feel a presence, a shadow, standing just obscured behind a tree.
I turned around.
I looked.
‘Rube?’ I asked. ‘That you Rube?’
But it wasn’t Rube.

I was sitting down against the small brick fence when I saw the person step into the last remnants of light, and walk slowly towards me. It was Octavia.

It was Octavia and she walked over and sat next to me.

‘Hi Cameron,’ she said.
‘Hi Octavia.’ I was shocked.

Silence bent down then, just for a moment, and whispered to each of us.

My heart threw itself to my throat.

Then, down.

Down.

She looked into the window I’d been staring at. Stephanie’s window.

‘Nothing?’ she asked, and I knew what she meant.

‘No, not tonight,’ I answered.

‘Any night?’
I couldn’t help it.

I promise you, I couldn’t . . .

A huge stupid tear rose up and fell out of my eye. It tripped down my face to my mouth and I could taste it. I could taste the saltiness of it, on my lips.

‘Cameron?’

I looked at her.

‘You okay?’ she asked.

And all I did from there was tell her the truth.

I said, ‘She’s not comin’ out tonight, or any other night, and there’s nothing I can do about it.’ I was even moved to quote Rube. ‘Y’ feel what y’ feel, and that girl doesn’t feel a thing for me. That’s all there is to it . . .’ I looked away, at the dying sky, attempting to pull myself together.

I began wondering exactly why I’d chosen this Glebe girl as the one I
wanted to please, to drown in.

‘Cam?’ asked Octavia.

‘Cam?’

Octavia kept asking me to look at her, but I still wasn’t ready. Instead, I stood up and stared into the house. The lights were on. The curtains were drawn, and the girl, as always, was nowhere to be seen.

Yet, there was a girl next to me, who’d stood up now as well, and we were both leaning against the brick fence. She looked at me and made me look back. She asked one more time.

‘Cam?’

Finally, I answered, quietly, timidly. ‘Yeah?’

And Octavia’s face cried out to me in the silent city night as she asked, ‘Would you come and stand outside my house instead?’
going home

I only know we’re searching for something.

We sit still—me against the wall and the dog next to me.

Come on, I see the dog thinking. What are you waiting for?

Yet, I still sit here.

I want an answer. I need to know where we’re going, and what we’re looking for.

The breeze begins to shout. It works itself into a howl—a howling wind that drags debris and dust and sand along the streets.

The dog’s eyes are on me.

They climb into mine.

And that’s when I know. That’s when I see the answer.

The dog’s taking me home—but not to any place I know. It’s a new home, and it’s a place I’ll have to fight to find.
She broke into me.

It was that simple.

Her words reached into me, grabbed my spirit by the heart and reefed it from my body.

It was the words and the voice, and Octavia and me. And my spirit, on the silent, shadow-stricken street. I could only watch her, as slowly, she collected my hand and placed it gently in hers.

I took all of her in.

It was cold and her smoky breath flowed from her mouth. She smiled and her hair kept falling over her face, so beautiful and true. She suddenly had the most human eyes I’d ever seen, and the slight movements of her mouth reached for me. I could feel her pulse in my hand, beating gently onto my skin. Her shoulders were slight, and she stood with me on the city street that was slowly flooding with darkness. Her hand was holding onto me. She was waiting.

Silent howls howled through me.

The streetlights flickered on.

I remained still. Completely still, looking at her. Looking at the truth of her, standing before me.

I wanted to pour myself out and let my words spill onto the footpath, but I said nothing. This girl had just asked me the most brilliant question in the world and I was completely speechless.

‘Yes,’ I wanted to say. I wanted to shout it and pick her up and hold her and say, ‘Yes. Yes. I’ll come and stand outside your house any time,’ but I didn’t say anything. My voice found its way into my mouth but it never made it out. It always stumbled somewhere, then became lost, or was swallowed again.

The moment was cut open. It fell in pieces all around me, and I had
absolutely no idea what would happen next, whether it would come from Octavia or me. I wanted to crouch down and pick up every piece of it and put it in my pockets. In a way, somewhere close to me, I could hear the voice of my spirit, telling me what to say, or what to do, but I couldn’t understand it. The silence around me was too strong. It overwhelmed me, until I noticed her fingers wrapping tighter in mine for just a moment.

Then gone.

Slowly, she let her hand come loose, and it was over.

My hand fell back and gently slapped my side from the impact of her letting go.

She looked.

Into me and then away.

Was she hurt? Did she expect me to speak? Did she want me to hold her hand again? Did she want me to pull her into me?

Questions barked at me, but still I didn’t get close enough to doing anything. I simply stood there like a hapless, hopeless fool, waiting for something to change.

In the end it was Octavia’s voice that stamped out the burning silence of the night.

A quiet, courageous voice.

She said, ‘Just . . .’ She hesitated. ‘Just think about it Cam,’ and after a moment of thought and a last glance into me, she turned and walked away.

I watched.

Her legs.

Her feet, walking.

Her hair, echoing down her back in the dark.

I also remembered her voice, and the question, and the feeling I felt rising up through me. It shouted in me and warmed me and chilled me and threw itself down inside me. Why didn’t I say anything?

*Why didn’t you say anything?* I abused myself.

I could hear her footsteps now.

They lifted and scratched just slightly as she walked away in the direction
of the train station.

She didn’t look back.

‘Cameron.’

A voice called to me.

‘Cameron.’

I remember clearly that my hands were in my pockets, and when I looked over to my right, I swear I could make out the figure of my spirit, also standing against the brick fence, also with its hands in its pockets. It looked at me. It stared. It said more words.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ it asked me.

‘What?’

‘What do you mean what? Aren’t you going after her?’

‘I can’t.’ I looked down, at my old shoes and the jaded bottom sleeves of my jeans. I just looked, and spoke. ‘It’s too late now anyway.’

My spirit came closer. ‘Bloody hell, boy!’ The words were brutal. They made me look up and stare, to find the face connected to the voice. ‘You stand and wait outside some girl’s place who couldn’t care less, and when something real arrives, you fall apart! What kind of person are you?’

It shut up then.

The voice ended abruptly.

What it wanted to say was said, and we resumed standing against the fence, with our hands in our pockets, and silence feeding on our mouths.

A minute passed.

Then another came and went, and another. Time scratched itself through my thoughts, like the sound of Octavia’s feet.

Finally, I moved.

It was after about fifteen minutes.

I took a final stare at the house, knowing it was probably the last time I would ever see it, and I began walking towards Redfern station, under the electric wires, and through the cold of the street. The leaded windows of houses glimmered when the streetlights rushed at them, and I could hear my feet lifting and then clawing down onto the road as I started running. Behind
me somewhere, I could hear the footsteps and breathing of my spirit. I wanted to beat it to the station. I had to.

I ran.

I let the cold air splash into my lungs as I thought the name Octavia, over and over. I ran till my arms ached as hard as my legs and my head throbbed with the blood rushing into it.

‘Octavia,’ I said.
To myself.
I kept running.
Past the university.
Past the abandoned shops.
Past a few guys who looked like they might try to rob me.

‘Come on,’ I told myself when I thought I was slowing down, and I looked hard into the distance to see the legs and footsteps of Octavia.

When I made it to the station there were hordes of people pouring through the gates and I managed to slip through between a guy with a suitcase and a woman holding flowers. I went to the Illawarra line and sprinted down the escalator, past all the suits, the briefcases and the different day-old perfumes and hair spray.

I made it to the bottom.
I nearly tripped.

*Look at this bloody crowd!* I thought, but slowly I edged my way along the platform. When the train arrived all the people crammed and crushed and shook their heads when I got in their way. There was even a pretty bad smell like someone’s underarm sweat. It licked me in the face, but still I looked and rushed through the crowd.

‘Get out of the way,’ someone snarled, and I was left with no other choice.
I got on the train.

I got on and stood in the packed middle compartment, right next to a guy with a moustache who was obviously the owner of the putrid underarm sweat. We both held onto the greasy metal pole until both the train and I got moving.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘Sorry,’ and I made my way through the carriage downstairs. I figured I’d do all the lower levels of the train first and come
back on the upper levels. This was the only train going to Hurstville. She had to be on it.

She wasn’t in the carriage I got in on, or the next.

I opened the doors between each carriage and went through, with the cold tunnel air shrieking around me before I entered the next carriage. Once I nearly slammed the door in my spirit’s face as it closed in on me.

‘There!’

I heard its voice point her out to me in the crowd of humans locked up in the suburban train.

I saw her just after the train rattled and burst out of the tunnel and into the paler charcoal colour of the night. She was standing, just like I’d been standing a few carriages back, but facing the other way. From the lower level of the train, I could see her legs.

Footstep.

Footstep.

I edged my way closer and made it to the stairs and started climbing them.

Soon I could see all of her.

She stood and looked out the smeared window of the train. I wondered what thoughts she was thinking.

I was close.

I could see her neck and the movement of her breathing. I saw her fingers holding the pole as the train stuttered and the lights flickered and blinked.

*Octavia,* I said inside.

My spirit shoved me forward.

‘Go on,’ it said, but it didn’t dare me, order me or demand anything. It was just telling me what was right, and what I needed to do.

‘Okay,’ I whispered.

I walked closer and stood behind her.

Her flannel shirt.

The skin of her neck.

The ruffled streams of hair landing on her back.
Her shoulder . . .
I reached out and touched her.
She turned around.
She turned around and I looked into her and a feeling lurched in me. God she looked beautiful. I heard my voice. It said, ‘I’ll stand outside your house, Octavia.’ I even smiled. ‘I’ll come and stand there tomorrow.’
That was when she breathed, closed her eyes for a moment and smiled back.
She smiled and said, ‘Okay.’ The voice was quiet.
I moved closer and grabbed hold of her shirt at her stomach and held onto her, relieved.
At the next stop, I told her I’d better get out.
‘See you tomorrow?’ she asked.
I nodded.
The train doors opened and I got out. When they closed I had no idea what station I was at, but as the train pulled and dragged itself along, I walked with it, still looking into her through the window.
When the train was gone I stood there, eventually realising how cold it was on the platform.
Something struck me.
My spirit.
It was gone.
I searched everywhere for it, until I realised.
It didn’t get off the train with me. It was still in the carriage, with Octavia.
tracks

I stand up and there’s urgency in the dog’s step now. He’s dying for me to go after him.

Feeling rushes at me.

It’s hot and heavy and sends itself through me.

I run for the dog and chase him across the streets and through the howling wind. At first, he looks back for me but soon realises I’m with him.

He takes me.

Sweeps me.

Until we’re running towards the train line, almost stripping the road as we go, and I see it. I see it in the distance when we hit the tracks. I see a train flickering and I lengthen my stride till we’re alongside it.

Running.

Bargaining with fatigue—telling it to have me later if I can only keep going now.

Keep going.

Keep going, and . . .

I see them.

I see him making his way through the train until he’s there, with his soul at his shoulder, whispering to him.

She turns and he holds her by the shirt.

The train goes faster.

It reaches beyond us until it’s gone and I slow to a stop and bend down, allowing my hands to fall to my knees.

The dog’s still with me and I look over as if to say, If there’s more of this on the way home, I like it.
‘Oi,’ Rube said to me when I made it in that night. ‘What the hell happened to you? You’re a bit late aren’t y’?”

‘I know,’ I nodded.

‘There’s soup in the pot,’ Mrs Wolfe cut in.

I lifted the lid off it, which is usually the worst thing you can ever do. It clears the kitchen though, which was pretty useful that night, considering. I wasn’t really in the mood to be answering questions, especially from Rube. What was I going to tell him? ‘Ah, you know mate. I was just out with your old girlfriend. You don’t mind do y’?” No way.

The soup took a few minutes and I sat and ate it alone.

As I ate, I started coming to terms with what had happened. I mean, it’s not every day something like that happens to you, and when it does, you can’t help but struggle to believe it.

Her voice kept arriving in me.

‘Cameron?’

‘Cameron?’

After hearing it a few times, I turned around to find Sarah talking to me as well.

‘You okay?’ she asked.

I smiled at her. ‘Of course,’ and we washed up.

Later, Rube and I went over and collected Miffy, walking him till he started wheezing again.

‘He sounds bloody terrible. Maybe he’s got the flu or somethin’,’ Rube suggested. ‘Or the clap.’

‘What’s the clap?’

‘I’m not sure. I think it’s some kind of sex disease.’
‘Well I don’t think he’s got that.’

When we took him back over to Keith he said Miffy got fur balls a lot, which made sense, since that dog seemed to be made up of ninety per cent fur; a couple per cent flesh; a few per cent bones; and one or two per cent barking, whingeing and carrying on. Mostly fur, though. Worse than a cat.

We gave him a last pat and left.

On our front porch I asked Rube how this Julia girl was going.

‘Scrubber,’ I imagined him announcing, but knew he wouldn’t.

‘Ah, not bad, y’ know,’ he replied. ‘She’s not the best but she’s not the worst either. No complaints really.’ It didn’t take long for a girl to go from brilliant to run-of-the-mill with Rube.

‘Fair enough.’

For a moment, I almost asked how Octavia rated, but I wasn’t interested in her the way Rube was, so there was no point. It wasn’t important. For me, it was the way that thoughts of her could reach deeper inside me that was important. I just couldn’t stop thinking about her, as I convinced myself about everything that had happened.

Her appearance on the street in Glebe.

Her question.

The train.

All of it.

We sat there a while on the worn-out couch Dad put out there a few summers ago and watched the traffic amble by.

‘What are youse starin’ at?’ a scrubberish sort of girl snapped at us as she idled past on the footpath.

‘Nothin’,’ Rube answered, and we could only laugh a while as she swore at us for no reason and continued walking.

My thoughts turned inward.

In each passing moment, Octavia found a way further inside me. Even when Rube started talking again, I was back on the train, pushing my way through the humans, the sweat and the suits.

‘Are we workin’ with Dad this Saturday?’ Rube stamped out my thoughts.
‘I’m pretty sure we are,’ I said, and Rube got up and went inside. I stayed on the porch a fair while longer. I thought about the next night, and standing outside Octavia’s house.

I didn’t sleep that night.

The sheets stuck to me and I turned and got tangled in them. At one point, I even got up and just sat in the kitchen. It was past two in the morning then, and when Mrs Wolfe got up to go to the toilet, she came to see who was there.

‘Hey,’ I whispered.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘I couldn’t sleep.’

‘Well go back to bed soon, all right?’

I sat there a small while longer, with the talkback radio show talking and arguing with itself at the kitchen table. Octavia filled me that whole night. It made me wonder if she was sitting in her own kitchen, thinking of me.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Either way, I was going there the next day, and the hours were disappearing slower than I thought possible.

I returned to bed and waited. When the sun came up, I got up with it, and gradually, the day passed me by. School was the usual concoction of jokes, complete bastards, shoves and a laugh here and there.

For a few anxious seconds in the afternoon, I wasn’t sure what Octavia’s last name was and feared I might not be able to look her up in the phone book. I was relieved when I remembered. It was Ash. Octavia Ash. When I got the address, I looked the street up on the map and found it to be about a ten minute walk from the station, as long as I didn’t get lost.

Before I went, I jumped the fence and gave Miffy a pat for a while. In a way, I was nervous. Nervous as hell. I thought of everything that might go wrong. Train derailment. Not being able to find the right house. Standing outside the wrong house. I covered all of it in my mind as I patted the ball of fluff that had rolled over and somehow smiled as I rubbed his stomach.

‘Wish me luck Miffy,’ I said softly as I got up to leave, but all he did was prop himself up and give me a look of Don’t you stop patting me you lazy bastard. I jumped the fence anyway though, went through the house and left. I
left a note saying I might go to Steve’s that night so no-one would worry too much. (The odds were that I might end up there in any case.)

I was wearing the sort of thing I always wear. Old jeans, my black spray jacket, a jersey and my old shoes.

Before I left, I went to the bathroom and tried to keep my hair from sticking up, but that’s like trying to defy gravity. That hair sticks up no matter what. Thick like dog’s fur, and always slightly messy. There’s just never a lot I can do about it. Besides, I thought, I should just try to be like I was yesterday. If I was good enough yesterday I should be good enough today.

It was settled. I was going.

I let the front door slam shut behind me and the fly screen rattle. It was as if each door was kicking me out of the old life I’d lived in that house. I was being thrown out into the world, new. The broken, leaning gate creaked open, let me out, and I gently placed it shut. I was gone, and from down the street, maybe fifty yards away, I looked back for a second at the house where I lived. It wasn’t the same any more. It never would be. I kept walking.

The traffic on the street waded past me, and at one point, when it all got blocked, a passenger from a cab spat out the window and it landed near my feet.

‘Christ,’ the guy said. ‘Sorry mate.’

All I did was smile and say, ‘No worries.’ I couldn’t afford to be distracted. Not today. I’d picked up the scent of a different life, and nothing was going to get me off it. I would hunt it down. I would find its place inside me. I would find it, taste it, devour it. The guy could have spat in my face and I would have wiped it off and kept walking.

There would be no distractions.

No regrets.

It was still afternoon when I made it down to Central Station, bought my ticket and headed for the underground. Platform Twenty-five.

Standing there, I waited at the back of the platform till I felt the cold wind of the train pushing through the tunnel. It surrounded my ears until the roar entered me and slowed to a dull, limping sigh.

It was an old train.

A scabby one.
In the last carriage, downstairs, there was an old man with a radio, listening to jazz music. He smiled at me (a very rare event on any form of public transport), and I knew that things would have to go right today. I felt like I’d earned it.

My thoughts veered with the train.

My heart held itself back.

When Hurstville came, I stood up and made my way out, and to my amazement, I found Octavia’s street without any problems. Usually when it comes to directions I’m an absolute shocker.

I walked.

I looked at each house, trying to guess which one was number thirteen Howell Street.

When I made it, I found the house to be nearly as small as where I lived, and red brick. It was getting dark, and I stood there, waiting and hoping, hands in pockets. There was a fence and a gate, and a close-cut lawn with a path. I began wondering if she’d come out.

People came from the station.

They walked past me.

Finally, when the same darkness as the previous day overcame the street, I turned away from the house and faced the road, half-sitting, half-leaning on the fence. A few minutes later, she came.

I could barely hear the front door open or her footsteps coming towards me, but there was no mistaking the feeling of her behind me when she stopped and stood within reaching distance. I could feel her and imagine her heartbeat . . .

I shiver even now as I remember the feeling of her cool hands on my neck, and the touch of her voice on my skin.

‘Hi Cameron,’ she said, and I turned around to face her. ‘Thanks for coming.’

‘It’s okay,’ I spoke. My voice was dry and cracked open.

I smiled then, I remember, and my heart swam in its own blood. There was no holding back any more. In my mind, I had gone over moments like this a thousand times, and now that I was truly in one, there was no way I could blow it. I wouldn’t allow myself.
I went along the fence and into the gate, and when I made it over to Octavia, I picked up her hand and held it in mine.

I raised her hand to my mouth and kissed it. I kissed her fingers and her wrist as gently as my clumsy lips could, and when I looked at her face, I could tell this had never happened to her before. I think she’d only been taken forcefully, and my gentleness must have surprised her.

Her eyes widened.

The expression on her face came that little bit closer.

Her mouth merged into a smile.

‘Come on,’ she said, leading me out the gate. ‘We don’t have long tonight,’ and, close to touching, we moved onto the path.

We walked down the street to an old park where I searched myself for things to say.

Nothing came.

All I could think of was utter crap like the weather and all that sort of thing, but I wasn’t going to reduce myself to that. She still smiled at me though, telling me silently that it was okay not to talk. It was okay not to win her over with stories or compliments or anything else I could say just to say something. She just walked and smiled, happier in silence.

In the park, we sat for a long time.

I offered her my jacket and helped her put it on, but after that, there was nothing.

No words.

No anything.

I don’t know what else I expected, because I had absolutely no idea how to confront this. I had no idea how to act around a girl, because to me, what she wanted was completely shrouded in mystery. I didn’t really have a clue. All I knew was that I wanted her. That was the simple part. But actually knowing what to do? How in the hell could I ever come close to coping with that? Can you tell me?

My problem came, I think, from being inside aloneness for so long. I always watched girls from afar, hardly getting close enough to smell them. Of course I wanted them, but even though I was miserable about not actually having them, it was also kind of a relief. There was no pressure. No
discomfort. In a way, it was easier just to imagine what it would be like, rather than confronting the reality of it. I could create ideal situations, and ways that I would act to win them over.

You can do anything when it’s not real.

When it *is* real, nothing breaks your fall. Nothing gets between you and the ground, and that night, in the park, I had never felt so real. I’d never felt so lacking in control. It seemed to be the way it was, and the way it always would be.

Before, life was about getting girls (or hoping to).

Not about getting to know them.

Now, it was much different.

Now, it was about *one* girl, and working out what to do.

I thought for a while, trying to climb through my mind to the elusive breakthrough of what to do. Thoughts pinned me down, leaving me there, to think about it. In the end, I tried convincing myself that everything would turn out all right. Nothing turns on its own, though.

*All right*, I told myself, trying to pull myself together. I even started listing the things I’d actually done right.

I’d chased her down on the train the day before.

I’d spoken to her and said I’d stand outside her house.

God, I’d even kissed her hand.

Now though, I had to talk, and I had nothing to say.

*Why don’t you have anything to say, you stupid bastard?* I asked myself.

I begged inside me.

Several times.

The disappointment in myself was bitter as I sat on a splinter-infested park bench with her, wondering what to do next.

At one point I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

In the end, I could only look at her and say, ‘I’m sorry Octavia. I’m sorry I’m so bloody useless.’

She shook her head, and I saw that she was disagreeing with me.

She said quietly, ‘You don’t have to talk at all Cameron.’ She looked into
me. ‘You’d never have to say a thing and I’d still know you’re big-hearted.’

That was when the night burst open and the sky fell down, in slabs, around
me.
silence

I’m standing in the dark.

Shivering.

The wind stops blowing.

It dies.

It falls on its hands and knees and slumps into silence. I stop.

The dog stops.

And.

All.

There is.

Is silence.

It sounds like failure, like a heart beginning to tear front the inside.

Inside, it stalks me.

It chains me up and watches me try to break free.

I’m half-expecting it to try and wash me.

I can bark and try to throw myself away from it, but it never lets go.

In a way, I hope these written words will speak. I hope they’ll burn and shout and cry out.

I hope they’ll cry out.

To break my silence . . .

I turn with the dog and we keep going.

Our footsteps.

Are silent.
SARAH KNEW.

She could tell by looking when I came in that night, she reckoned. She told me right away, when I tried to slip past her on my way down the hall to Rube’s and my room.

It was funny.

Unbelievable.

How could she be so sure—so sure that when I came in, she could stop me and shove her hand to my heart and say with a grin and a whisper, ‘Tell me Cameron. What’s the name of the girl who can make your heart beat this fast?’

I grinned back, shocked and shy, amazed.

‘No-one,’ I denied.

‘Huh,’ and a short laugh.

Huh.

That was all she said, as she took her hand off me and turned away, still smiling.

‘Good for you, Cameron.’ That was what she said as she walked away. She faced me, one last time. ‘You deserve it. You really do, I mean it.’

She left me to stand there, remembering what happened right after the slabs of sky fell down around me.

For a while, Octavia and I remained on the bench, as the air grew colder. Only when she started shivering did we stand up and start walking back to her house. At one point, her fingers touched mine, and she held on just faintly.

At her gate, I knew I wasn’t going inside. I could feel it.

Before she went in, she said, ‘I’ll be down the quay on Sunday, if you feel like coming. I’ll be there around noon.’
‘Okay,’ I replied, already imagining myself standing there, watching her play the harmonica with people throwing money onto her jacket. Bright blue sky. Climbing clouds. The hands of the sun, reaching down. I could see all of it.

‘And Cameron?’ she asked.

I returned from my vision.

‘I’ll wait for you.’ She let her eyes hit the ground and arrive again, in mine. ‘You know what I mean?’

I nodded, slowly.

She would wait for me, to talk, and to be with her the way I could be. I guess we could only hope it would just be a matter of time before it happened.

‘Thanks,’ I said, and rather than letting me watch her go inside, Octavia stayed at the gate and waved each time I turned around to allow myself one last glimpse of her. With every turn, I whispered, ‘Bye Octavia,’ until I was around the corner, on my own again.

Memories of the ride home are shaded by the haziness of a train ride at night. The clacking of the train rolling and turning over the tracks still rides through me. It gives me a vision of myself sitting there, travelling back to where I came from, but a place that would no longer be the same.

It was strange how Sarah could sense it immediately.

She could see the change in me straight away, in the way I existed in our house. Maybe I moved differently or spoke differently, I didn’t know. I was different though.

I had my words.

I had Octavia.

In a way, it seemed like I wasn’t pleading with myself any more. I wasn’t begging for those scraps of alrightness. I just told myself to be patient, because, finally, I was standing somewhere close to where I wanted to be. I’d fought for this, and now I was nearly there.

Much later in the night, Rube came home and slumped like always into bed.

Shoes still on.

Shirt half-undone.
There was a slight smell of beer, smoke, and his usual cheap cologne that he didn’t need because the girls fell over him anyway.

Loud breathing.

Smiling sleep.

It was typical Rube. Typical Friday night.

He also left the light on, so I had to get up and switch it off.

We both knew good and well that Dad would be waking us in the morning when it was still dark. I also knew that Rube would get up, and he’d look rough and tired and yet still pretty damn good. He had a way of doing that, my brother, which annoyed the absolute hell out of me.

As I lay there, across from him, I wondered what he would say when he found out about Octavia and me. I went through a whole list of possibilities in my mind, because Rube was likely to say anything, depending on what was happening at the time, what had previously happened, and what was going to happen next. Some of the things I thought of were:

He’d slap me hard across the back of the head and say, ‘What the hell are y’ thinkin’ Cam?’ Another slap. ‘Y’ don’t do that sort of thing with y’ brother’s old girlfriend!’ Another slap, and one more, just in case.

Then again, he might just shrug. Nothing. No words, no anger, no mood, no smile, no laugh.

Or he might pat me on the back and say, ‘Well Cam, it’s about time you pulled y’ finger out.’

Or maybe he’d be speechless.

No.

No chance.

Rube was never speechless.

If there was nothing he could think of saying, he’d most likely look at me and exclaim, ‘Octavia!? Really!?’

I’d nod.

‘Really!?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well that’s just bloody brilliant, that is!’
The situations merged through my mind as I fell down slowly into sleep. My dreams collected everything up until a hard hand shoved me awake at quarter past six the next morning.

The old man.

Clifford Wolfe.

‘Time to get up,’ said his voice, through the darkness. ‘Wake that lazy bastard too.’ He jerked his thumb over at Rube, but I could tell he was smiling. With Dad, Rube and me, calling each other bastards was a term of endearment.

The job was right on the coast, at Bronte.

Rube and I pretty much dug under the house all day, listening to the radio.

For lunch, we all walked down the beach and Dad got the obligatory fish ‘n’ chips. When we were done, Rube and I went down to the water to get the grease off our hands.

‘Friggin’ freezin’,’ Rube warned me about the water, but still he pooled it in his hands and threw it on his face and through his thick, sandy hair.

Along the shore, there were shells washed up.

I started shuffling through them and picking up the best ones to keep.

Rube looked over.

‘What are y’ doin’?’ he asked.

‘Just collectin’ a few shells.’

He looked at me in disbelief. ‘Are you a bloody poofter or somethin’?’

I glanced at the shells in my hands. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Christ!’ he laughed. ‘You are, aren’t y’!’

I only looked over and laughed back, then picked up a shell that was clean and smooth and had a gentle tiger pattern on it. In the centre there was a small hole, for looking through.

‘Look at this one,’ I said, holding it out to him.

‘Not bad,’ Rube admitted, and as we stared over the ocean, my brother said, ‘You’re okay Cameron.’

All I could do was stare a few seconds longer before we turned back. The old man had already given us an ‘Oi’ to get us back to work. We walked over
the sand and back up the street. Later that day, Rube told me some things.
About Octavia.

It started innocently enough, with me asking how many girlfriends he reckoned he’d had.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he answered me. ‘I never counted ’em. Maybe twelve, thirteen.’

For a while, there was only the sound of the digging, but I could tell my brother, like me, was going over the girls in his head, touching each girl with the fingers of his mind.

In the middle of it, I had to ask him.

I said, ‘Rube?’

‘Shut up—I’m tryin’ to concentrate.’

I ignored him and kept going. I’d started now and I wasn’t going to stop. I asked, ‘Why’d you get rid of Octavia?’

He stopped digging. The answer.

‘Simple,’ he began. ‘Because that girl’s probably the strangest person I’ve ever met. Even weirder than you, if you can believe that.’

‘Why?’ I focused all of my attention on Rube’s mouth, as he told me about Octavia Ash. I could even see his breath exit his mouth with the words.

‘Well, for starters,’ he began. ‘One day you could touch her all over and the next she wouldn’t let you near her.’ A moment’s thought passed his mind. ‘It’s impossible to get her clothes off her too.’ He grinned at me. ‘Trust me—I tried.’ Yet, I could still sense Rube was saving something. He said it. ‘But strangest of all, that girl never let me into her house. Not once. I wouldn’t even know what colour the front door was . . .’

‘That why you let go of her?’

My brother looked at me, thoughtfully, truthfully, then smiled. ‘Nah.’ He shook his head, slightly.

‘Then why?’

‘Well,’ he shrugged. ‘To tell you the truth, Cam. She broke up with me. That night when she came back I was expecting her to cry and carry on like some of the others.’ He shook his head now. ‘But I was wrong. She just came and really gave it to me. She said I wasn’t worth the effort.’
What confused me most was how he could be so calm about it. If it were me in his shoes, the agony of someone like Octavia breaking up with me would have left me in strips and pieces on the ground. It would have broken me.

But that was me.

For Rube, the next best thing came along so he took it, and I guess there was nothing wrong with that. The only problem for Rube now, it seemed, was that this Julia girl came with some excess baggage. She’d come at a price.

‘Apparently she was still with some other bloke when she started up with me,’ he stated matter-of-factly. ‘And apparently that guy’s after killin’ me for it. I don’t know why. It’s not like I did anything wrong. I can’t help it if the girl doesn’t tell me she’s already taken.’

‘Just be careful,’ I told him. I think he could tell by the tone of my voice that I wasn’t a big fan of this Julia girl. He asked me straight-out.

He said, ‘You don’t like her, do y’?

I shook my head.

‘Why not?’

*You hurt Octavia to get her,* I thought, but I said, ‘I don’t know. I’ve just got a bad feeling about this one, that’s all.’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ Rube responded. He looked over and gave me his usual grin—the one that always says everything will be all right. ‘I’ll survive.’

As it turned out, I kept just the one shell from the beach. It was the one with the tiger pattern. At home, I held it against the light from our bedroom window. I already knew what I’d do with it.

It was in my pocket the next day when I walked down to Central and caught the train over to Circular Quay. The harbour water was a rich blue, with the ferries trudging over it, cutting it, then allowing it to settle. On the docks, there were people everywhere, and plenty of buskers. The good, the brilliant and the hopeless. It took a while, but I finally saw her. I saw Octavia on the walkway to the Rocks, and I could see the people milling around her, drawn to the powerful voice of her mouth organ.

I arrived when she was just finishing a song and people were putting money into her old jacket which was spread out on the ground. She smiled at them and said thanks, and most of the people moved slowly on.
Without noticing I was there, she went straight into another song, and again, a crowd began to gather around her. This time it wasn’t quite as big. The sun surrounded her wavy hair and I watched intently as her lips slid across the instrument. I looked at her neck, her soft flannel shirt, and stole visions of her hips and her legs through gaps in the crowd. In the song, I could hear her words, ‘It’s okay Cameron, I can wait.’ I also heard her calling me big-hearted, and hesitantly at first, then without thinking, I moved to the crowd and made my way through it.

Breathing, stopping, and then crouching, I was the closest person in the world to Octavia Ash. She played her harmonica, and before her, I was kneeling down.

She saw me and I could see the smile overcome her lips.

My pulse quickened.

It burned in my throat, as slowly, I reached into my pocket, pulled out the tiger shell, and placed it gently onto the jacket where all the money was strewn.

I placed it there and the sun hit it, and just as I was about to turn around to make my way back through the crowd, the music stopped. In the middle of the song it was cut short.

The world was silent and I turned again to look up at a girl who stood completely still above me.

She crouched down, placed her harmonica amongst the money and picked up the shell.

She held it in her hand.

She pulled it to her lips.

She kissed it, softly.

Then, with her right hand, she pulled me towards her by my jacket and kissed me. Her breath went into me, and the softness, warmthness, wetness and openness of her mouth covered me, as a sound from outside us burst through my ears. For a moment, I wondered what it was, but fell completely into Octavia again as her spirit poured through me. We both kneeled, and my hands held onto her hips. Her mouth kept reaching for mine, touching me. Connecting. Her right hand was on my face now, holding me, keeping me close.

The roaring sound continued around us, forming walls to make this a
world within the rest of the world. Suddenly I knew what it was. The sound was clear and clean, and magnificent.

   It was the sound of humans clapping.
clapping hands

‘What is it about the sound of clapping hands?’ I ask.

The dog continues walking but I don’t care. I just keep talking.

‘Why does it seem like an ocean of sound, breaking like waves on top of you? Why does it make a tide turn in you?’

Now I just think about it.

Maybe it’s because it’s one of the most noble things humans do with their hands.

I mean, humans make fists with their hands. They use them to hurt each other and steal things.

When humans clap, it’s the one time they stand together and applaud other humans.

I think they’re there to keep things.

‘They hold moments together,’ I say quietly, ‘to remember.’

The dog isn’t too impressed, and the darkness crouches down.

I shut my mouth and keep walking.
'It's the best thing anyone's ever given me,' she said, holding it up and looking at me through the hole. She kissed me again, lightly on the mouth and once on my neck. She whispered in my ear. 'Thanks Cameron.' I loved her lips, especially when the sun hit them and she smiled at me. I’d never seen her smile like that when she was with Rube, and hoped it was a smile she’d never been able to give to anyone else alive. I couldn’t help it.

The people were gone now and we collected up the money from Octavia’s jacket. It was just over fifty-six dollars. In my left jacket pocket, I still held all my words, including what I’d just written when she’d returned to playing. My fingers held them tightly, guarding them.

‘Let’s go,’ she said, and we started walking along the water towards the bridge. Shadows of cloud lurked in the water, like holes the sun forgot about. The girl next to me still looked at the shell, and my heartbeat seemed to be climbing over my ribs. Even when it slowed down, there was still a force to it. I liked it.

Under the bridge, we sat down against the wall, Octavia with her legs outstretched, me with my knees held up to my throat. I glanced over at her and noticed the way the light touched her skin and handled the hair that fell into her face. It was the colour of honey. She had ocean-green eyes, like saltwater on an overcast day, and she had tanned skin and a straight-teeth smile that got crowded on the right side when she opened her mouth further. She had a smooth neck and the shins of her legs wore a few bruises. Nice knees and hips. I like girls’ hips, but I liked Octavia’s especially. I . . .

It was there again.

Between us.

The silence.

There was only the sound of water throwing itself against the walls of the harbour, until finally, I looked over at Octavia and said quietly, ‘I just wanted to . . .’
Pause.

A long pause.

She wanted to speak, I could sense it. I noticed it in the pleading of her eyes, and the slight movement of her lips. She was dying to say something but held back. I finished the sentence.

‘I just wanted to say . . .’ I cleared my throat, but it remained cracked. ‘Thanks.’

‘For what?’

‘For . . .’ I hesitated. ‘For wanting me.’

She looked over and placed her eyes in mine for just the briefest of seconds. Her fingers touched my wrist and made their way down to hold my own fingers in hers. She then said something very deliberately.

‘I’d want you even harder if you’d tell me more about who you are.’

The words opened me completely.

I could have pretended not to understand what Octavia was talking about, but I knew that all the waiting was done now. She would have waited. I knew that, but no-one can wait forever.

So I said, ‘What do you want to know?’

She smiled a moment and calmly said, ‘I like your hair Cameron. I like how it sticks up no matter how hard you try to keep it down. It’s the one thing you can’t hide.’ She swallowed. ‘But the rest of you is hidden. It’s hidden behind your measured walk, the crushed collar of your jacket and your awkward, nervous smile. God, I love that smile, you know that?’

I looked over.

‘Do you know that?’ she asked again, almost accusingly.

‘No.’

‘Well it’s true, but . . .’

‘What?’

‘Can’t you see?’ She squeezed my hand. ‘I want more than that.’ A tough kind of smile fought its way into her eyes. ‘I just want to know you Cameron.’

Again, I noticed the sound of the water.
Rising.
Bashing against the wall before diving back down.
Finally, I nodded.

‘Okay,’ I answered her. It was a whisper. Almost half a voice.

‘The only problem is,’ she mentioned after a while, ‘you’ve gotta tell me. You have to speak.’ She searched my face for what I was about to say, or for what I was going to do next.

I did it.

I stood up and walked to the water.

I turned around.

The bridge towered over me and I started talking as I crouched down maybe ten yards away and looked into her.

Words flew from my mouth.

‘My name’s Cameron. I’ve always said that I wanted to drown inside a girl, inside her spirit, but I’ve never even come close—I’ve barely even touched a girl. I don’t have friends. I live in the shadow of both my brothers—one for his single-minded focus on success, the other for his brilliance, rough smile and ability to make people like him. I hope my sister won’t just be another slab of flesh that some guy just picks up and throws a few dollars at to buy cheap lipstick but don’t forget the beer. I work with my father on weekends and my hands get dirty and blistered. I’ve hired movies that have sex scenes in them and I’ve touched myself thinking about girls from school, model girls, a female teacher or two, girls in ads, girls on calendars, girls on TV shows, girls in uniforms or corporate suits who sit on the train reading thick books with perfume smothered on their throats and perfect make-up. I walk around the city a lot and when I do, it feels like the soul of home. I love my brother Rube but I hate what he does to girls, especially when they’re real girls like you who should have known better than to go out with him in the first place. I idolise Mrs Wolfe because she keeps us together and works like hell. She works harder than she should ever have to and one day I want to do something brilliant for her like put her in first class on a plane to wherever she wants . . . ’ I remembered to breathe but forgot what I was saying next.

I stopped talking and stood up, because my legs were getting sore from the crouching down. Slowly, I walked towards Octavia Ash whose bruised shins were now held up by her folded arms.
Again, I stopped, as I walked to her and crouched down in front of her. I could feel the blood collect again in my legs.

‘What?’ she asked. ‘What is it?’

For a few seconds I wondered if I should do it or not, but before I allowed myself not to, I reached into the pocket of my old jeans and pulled out clumps of paper and held them out to her, as if I was offering her my soul. On the paper were the words.

‘These are mine,’ I said, placing them in her outstretched hand. ‘These are my words. Open them and read them. They’ll tell you who I am.’

She did as I asked, opening the small piece of writing that was my first. The only thing is, she only read the start of them. Then she handed the paper back to me and asked, ‘Would you read them to me Cameron?’

My thoughts kneeled down.

The breeze wandered between us and I sat next to her again and began reading the words I wrote back in Chapter One of this story.

‘Nothing comes easy to a human like me. It’s not a complaint. Just a truth . . .’ I read the page slow and true, exactly how it felt to me, as if it was oozing from me. I read the last part just a touch louder. ‘I know I’ve found the heart of me in a shadow-beaten alley, in a back street in the somewhere of this place. At the bottom, something waits. Two eyes glow. I swallow. My heart beats me. And now I walk on, to find what it is. Footstep. Heartbeat. Footstep . . .’

When I was finished, a final silence gripped us both and the sound of the paper folding up again sounded like something crashing. Or maybe it was the sound of the tear that tore down Octavia’s face.

She waited a while, before gently speaking. ‘You’ve never touched a girl before?’

‘No.’

‘Not till me? ‘No.’

‘Could you do me a favour?’ she asked.

I nodded, looking at her.

‘Could you hold my hand?’
Feeling every part of it, I took Octavia’s hand, and she came closer and rested her head on my shoulder. She put her leg over mine and hooked her foot under my ankle, linking us.

‘I never thought I’d show anyone my words,’ I said quietly.

‘They’re beautiful.’ She spoke softly in my ear.

‘They make me okay . . .’

Soon after, she moved in front of me, crossed her legs and faced me, making me read everything I’d written so far. When it was over, she moved my hands across her stomach to hold her on her hips.

She said, ‘You can drown inside me anytime Cameron,’ and she put her lips on mine again and let herself flow through the inside of my mouth. The pages were still in my hands, pressed against her as I held her hips, and I could feel her on top of me, breathing me in.
the bridge

‘I am not crossing that,’ I tell the dog.

He looks at me as if to say, Oh yes you bloody well are.

‘Look how rickety it is!’ I protest, but the dog just isn’t interested. He steps onto it and begins walking across. Gingerly, I step onto it as well.

It’s wooden.

It’s cracked, and my hands burn from gripping the rope so tightly.

I look down.

Down to what looks like an abyss.

Yet, gradually, I’m making my way across, sometimes getting down on all fours to make it.

It feels like spoken words, this bridge. I want it but fear it. God, I want so desperately to reach the other side—just like I want the words. I want my words to build bridges strong enough to walk on. I want them to tower over the world so I can stand up on them and walk to the other side.

Sometimes you crouch down to build a bridge.

It’s a start, I guess.
When I got home that Sunday night, Rube and I did the usual deed of walking Miffy. The hound was in even worse shape than usual. The coughing sounded deeper, like it was coming from his lungs.

When we got back I asked Keith if he was going to take him to the vet.

‘I don’t think this is fur balls,’ I said.

Keith’s reply was pretty short and simple. ‘Yeah, I think I’d better. He looks shockin’.’

‘Worse.’

‘Ah, he’s been like this before,’ he explained, more out of hope than anything else. ‘It’s never been anything too serious.’

‘Well let us know what happens, okay?’

‘Yeah, bye mate.’

I thought for a moment about the dog. Miffy. I guess no matter how much Rube and I complained about him, we knew we’d sort of miss him if something happened to him. It’s funny how there are things in this world that do nothing but annoy you, but you know you’d miss them when they’re gone. Miffy, the Pomeranian wonderdog, was one such thing.

Later, when I was sitting in the lounge room with Rube, I missed many opportunities to tell him about Octavia and me.

Now, I told myself. Now!

No words ever came out though, and we just sat there.

The next night I went up and paid Steve a visit. It had been a while since I’d been to see him, and in a way, I missed him. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly what it was, but I’d grown to like Steve’s company a lot, even though very little was ever said. Sure, we spoke more than we used to, but it still wasn’t much.

When I got there only Sal was home.
‘He should be here any minute though,’ she said, in a not too thrilled voice. ‘You want something to eat? Drink?’

‘Nah, I’ll be right.’

She didn’t make me feel too welcome that night, like she just wasn’t up to tolerating me this time around. Her expression seemed to throw words down to me. Words like:

Loser.

Dirty little bastard.

I’m sure that at some point, a while ago, before Steve and I gathered an understanding of each other, Steve probably told Sal what a couple of loserous bastards he was the brother of. He’d always looked down on Rube and me when we all lived together. We did stupid things, I admit it: stealing road signs, fighting, gambling at the dog track . . . It wasn’t quite Steve’s scene.

When he came in, about ten minutes later, he actually smiled and said, ‘Hey, I haven’t seen you for a while!’ For a moment, I smiled back and thought he was talking to me, then realised it was Sal he was talking to. She’d been doing a lot of interstate work lately. He walked over and kissed her. Then he noticed his brother sitting on the couch.

‘Hey Cam.’

‘Hey Steve.’

I could see they wanted to be alone so I waited a few seconds and stood up. The kitchen light poured over them as I stood up in the dimly lit lounge room.

‘Hey, I’ll come back some other time,’ I said too fast. I made sure to stand up quickly and get the hell out of there. Sal was giving me the best *piss off* look I’d ever seen.

‘No.’

I was just about out the door when the word booted itself into my back. I turned around and Steve was standing behind me. His face was serious as he spoke the rest of the words.

‘You don’t have to go, Cam.’

All I did was look at my brother and say, ‘Don’t worry,’ and I turned and left without worrying too much about it. I had other places to go now anyway.
It was still fairly early so I decided to run to the station and get a train down to Hurstville. In the train’s window I saw my reflection—my hair was getting longer again and standing up wild and rough. It was black. Pitch black in the window, and for the first time, I kind of liked it. Swaying with the train, I looked inside me.

Octavia’s street was wrapped in darkness. The lights from the houses were like torch lights. If I closed my eyes tight and opened them again, it looked like the houses were stumbling around in the dark, finding their way. At any moment I expected them to fade. Sometimes human shadows crossed through them, as I waited, just outside her front gate.

For a while, I imagined myself walking to the front door and knocking, but I remembered Rube’s words all too well. He’d never been inside. Never even got a close-up look at the front door. The last thing I wanted to do was overstep. I was still dying for her to come out, make no mistake about that. Yet I knew that if I had to leave again without even a glimpse of her, I would. If I could do it for a girl who cared nothing for me, I could do it for Octavia.

In that one stolen second, I considered the Glebe girl. She entered my mind like a burglar, then vanished again, taking nothing. It was like the humiliation of the past had been dragged instantly from my back and left somewhere on the ground. I wondered for a moment how I could stand outside her house so many times. I even laughed. At myself. She was erased completely a few minutes later when Octavia moved her kitchen’s curtain aside, and came outside to meet me.

The first thing I noticed, before any words hit the air, was the shell. It was tied to a piece of string and was hanging around her neck.

‘It looks good,’ I nodded, and I reached out and held it in my right hand.

‘It does,’ she agreed.

We went to the same park as the first night I came, but this time we didn’t sit on the splintered bench. This time we walked over the dewy grass and ended up stopping by an old tree.

‘Here,’ I said, and I gave Octavia the words I wrote the previous night in bed. ‘It’s yours.’

She read them and kissed the paper and then held onto me for quite a while. During that time, there were so many questions I wanted to ask her. I wanted to know what stories were in her house, what she did with Rube, why he never got inside, and whether she had brothers and sisters like me. Instead,
I asked nothing. There was a definite wall set up and although I knew I’d have to face it one day, I didn’t dare to do it so early.

I told her I loved the howling sound of her harmonica. That seemed to be the limit of my courage that night, and even those spoken words had to struggle their way out of my mouth. It’s all very well for words to build bridges, but sometimes I think it’s a matter of knowing when to do it. Knowing when the time’s right.

When we made it back to the gate, I said something to her almost by mistake. My voice just seemed to say it.

‘Maybe soon,’ I said, ‘you can tell me more about you.’ There was no hesitation in my voice. No feeling of doubt at all.

She looked at her house, into the blunt light spread across the window. ‘Okay.’ Her face was kind. Honest. ‘I s’pose, I can’t have it all my own way, can I? You can’t drown in a person unless they let you.’ She was right. ‘Will I see you Sunday?’

‘Of course.’

I kissed her hand soon after that and left.

At my place, when I returned, I was shocked to find Steve on our front porch, waiting for me.

‘I was wondering how long I’d have to sit here,’ he fired when I showed up. ‘I’ve been here an hour.’

I walked closer. ‘And? Why’d you come?’

‘Come on,’ he said, standing up. ‘Let’s go back up to my place.’

‘I’ll just go in and—’

‘I already told ’em.’

Steve’s car was parked further along the street, and after getting in, there were very few words spoken in the car. I turned the radio up but don’t remember the song.

‘So what’s this all about?’ I asked. I looked at him but Steve’s eyes were firmly on the road. For a while I was wondering if he’d even heard my question. He let his eyes examine me for a second or two, but he said nothing. He was still waiting.

When we got out of the car, he said, ‘I want you to meet someone.’ He slammed the door. ‘Or actually, I want her to meet you.’
We walked up the stairs and into his apartment. It was empty.

‘She’s still in the shower,’ he mentioned. He stood and made coffee and put a cup down in front of me. It still swirled, taking my reflection with it. Taking me down.

For a moment, I thought we were about to go through our usual routine of questions and answers about everyone back at home, but I could see him deciding not to do it. He’d been at our place earlier and found out for himself. It wasn’t in Steve’s nature to manufacture conversation.

I hadn’t been to watch him at football for a while, so I asked how it was going. He was in the middle of explaining it when Sal came out of the bathroom, still drying her hair.

‘Hey,’ she said to me.

I nodded, giving her half a smile.

That was when Steve stood up and looked at me, then at her. I knew right then that at some point, like I’d suspected, he did tell her about Rube and me. I’d imagined it on the park bench in Hurstville for some reason, and I could hear the quiet tone of Steve’s intense voice practically disowning his brothers. Now he was rewriting it, or at least trying to make it right.

‘Stand up,’ he told me.

I did.

He said, ‘Sal.’ She looked at me. I looked at her, as Steve kept talking. ‘This is my brother Cameron.’

We shook hands.

My boyish, rough hand.

Her smooth and clean hand which smelt of perfumed soap. Soap I imagined you’d get in hotel rooms I’d never get to visit.

She recognised me through the eyes and I was Cameron now, not just that loser brother of Steve.

On the way back home some time after that, Steve and I talked a while, but only about small things. In the middle of it, I cut him short. I said, with knife-like words, ‘When you first told Sal about Rube and me you said we were losers. You told her you were ashamed of us, didn’t you?’ My voice was still calm and not even the slightest bit accusing, though I was trying as hard as I could.
‘No.’ He denied it when the car came to a stop outside our house.

‘No?’ I could see the shame in his eyes, and for the first time ever, I could see it was shame he held for himself.

‘No,’ he confirmed, and he looked at me with something that resembled anger now, almost like he couldn’t stomach it. ‘Not you and Rube,’ he explained, and his face looked injured. ‘Just you.’

_God._

_God,_ I thought, and my mouth was open. It was as if Steve had reached into me and pulled out my pulse. My heart was in his hands, and he was staring down at it, as if he too, could see it.

Beating.

Thrusting itself down, then standing up again.

I said nothing about the truth Steve had just let loose.

All I did was undo my seatbelt, take my heart and I got out of that car as fast as I could.

Steve followed but it was too late. I heard his footsteps coming after me when I was walking onto our porch. Words fell down between his feet.

‘Cam!’ he called out. ‘Cameron!’ I was nearly inside when I heard his voice cry out. ‘I’m sorry. I was . . .’ He made his voice go louder. ‘Cam, I was wrong!’

I got behind the door and shut it, then turned to look back out.

Steve’s figure was shadowed onto the front window. It was silent and still, plastered to the light.

‘I was wrong.’

He said it again, though this time his voice was weaker.

A minute shuddered past.

I broke.

Walking slowly to the front door, I opened it and saw my brother on the other side of the flyscreen.

I waited, then, ‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

I was still hurt, but like I said, it didn’t matter. I’d been hurt before and I’d be hurt again. Steve must have wished he’d never tried to do me the favour of
showing Sal that I wasn’t the loser she thought I was. All he’d succeeded in doing was proving that not only had he once thought I was a lost cause, but that I was the only one.

Soon, though, I was stabbed.

A feeling shook through me and cut me loose. All my thoughts were off the chain, until one solitary sentence arrived and wouldn’t leave me.

*The words and Octavia.*

That was the sentence.

It wavered in me.

It saved me, and almost whispering, I said to Steve, ‘Don’t worry, brother. I don’t need you to tell Sal that I’m not a loser.’ We were still separated by the flyscreen. ‘I don’t need you to say it to me either. I know what I am. I know what I see. Maybe one day I’ll tell you a little more about me, but for now, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what happens. I’m nowhere near what I’m going to be, and . . .’ I could feel something in me. Something I’ve always felt. I paused and caught his eyes. I leapt into them through the door and held him down. ‘You ever hear a dog cry, Steve? You know, howling so loud it’s almost unbearable?’ He nodded. ‘I reckon they howl like that because they’re so hungry it hurts, and that’s what I feel in me every day of my life. I’m so hungry to be somethin’—to be *somebody.* You hear me?’ He did. ‘I’m not lyin’ down ever. Not for you. Not for anyone.’ I ended it. ‘I’m hungry, Steve.’

Sometimes I think they’re the best words I’ve ever said.

‘I’m hungry.’

And after that, I shut the door.

I didn’t slam it.

You don’t shoot a dog when it’s already dead.
when dogs cry

We’re in the deepest part of the city now, and when the dog stops and turns around to face me his eyes are hungrier than ever:

    Hungry proud.
    Hungry to keep his desire.
    If affects me, making my heart reach further inside me, beating harder, prouder, bigger.
    He’s chosen this moment to show me what I am.
    The wind starts to push through again and a storm stirs itself amongst the sky.
    Lightning roars and thunder cracks above us.
    And the dog begins.
    He reaches deep, and his fur stands on end, climbing ferociously to the sky. From his heart, from his spirit, from the everything in his instinct, he begins to howl.
    He howls over the top of howling thunder.
    He howls above the howling lightning, and beyond a howling wind.
    With his head claiming the endless sky, he howls hunger and I feel it rage through me.
    It’s my hunger.
    My pride.
    And I smile.
    I smile and feel it in my eyes, because hunger’s a powerful thing.
THE PHONE WAS RINGING. WEDNESDAY NIGHT. JUST PAST seven o’clock.

‘Hello.’

‘Ruben Wolfe?’

‘No, it’s Cameron here.’

‘Tell you what,’ the voice went on, laced with friendly malice. ‘Could you get him for me?’

‘Yeah, who’s callin’?’

‘No-one.’

‘No-one?’

‘Listen mate. Just get y’ brother on the phone or we’ll beat the crap out of you as well.’

I was taken aback. I pulled the phone away, then back to my ear. ‘I’ll get him. Hang on a minute.’

Rube was in our room with Julia the Scrubber. I knocked on the door and went in, saying, ‘Rube—someone on the phone.’

‘Who is it?’

‘They wouldn’t say.’

‘Go ask ’em.’

‘Do I look like y’ secretary? Just get up and get the phone.’

He looked strangely at me, got up and left, which left me in the room with Julia the Scrubber, alone.

Julia the Scrubber: ‘Hi Cam.’

Me: ‘Hi Julia.’

Julia the Scrubber, smiling and moving closer: ‘Rube’s been tellin’ me you’re not too much in love with me.’
Me, inching away: ‘Well I guess he can tell you whatever he wants.’

Julia the Scrubber, sensing my complete lack of interest: ‘Is it true?’

Me: ‘Well, I don’t know, to be honest. It isn’t really any of my business what Rube does . . . but I know for sure that whoever’s on that phone wants to kill him, and I’ve got some idea it’s because of you.’

Julia the Scrubber, laughing: ‘Rube’s a big boy. He can take care of himself.’

Me: ‘That’s true, but he’s also my brother, and there’s no way I’d let him bleed alone.’

Julia the Scrubber: ‘How very noble of you.’

Rube came back in, saying, ‘I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about Cam. There’s no-one on the phone.’

‘I’m telling you,’ I said on my way out. ‘There was a guy there Rube, and he sounded like he wanted to kill you. So when the phone rings again, get up and answer it.’

The phone did ring again and this time Rube came running out of the room and got it. Again, they hung up on him. By the third time, Rube barked into the phone. ‘How ‘bout you start talkin’. If you want Ruben Wolfe, you’ve got him. So talk!’

There was no response from the other end, and the phone didn’t ring again that night, but after Julia left, I could see that Rube was a little pensive. He was about as worried as Ruben Wolfe gets, because he knew without doubt now, like I did, that something was coming. In our room, he looked at me. In the exchanging of our eyes, he was telling me a fight was looming.

He sat on his bed.

‘I guess that bad feeling you had was right,’ he began. ‘About Julia.’ It wasn’t like Rube to be scared, because we both knew he could take care of himself. He was one of the most liked but most feared people in our neighbourhood. The only trouble now was that nothing was certain. It was a feeling, that’s all, and I could sense that Rube was feeling it now as well. I could smell it.

‘If somethin’ comes up,’ I said, ‘I’ll be there, okay?’

Rube nodded. ‘Thanks brother.’ He smiled.

The phone rang the next night as well, and the next.
On the third call of Friday night, Rube picked up the phone and shouted, ‘What!?’

He then grew quiet.

‘Yeah.’ A pause. ‘Yeah, sorry about that.’ He looked over at me and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’ll get him.’ He took the receiver away and covered the mouthpiece. ‘It’s for you.’ He held it out to me, thinking. What was he thinking?

‘Hello.’

‘It’s me,’ she said. Her voice reached through the phone and took me. ‘You working tomorrow?’

‘Till about four-thirty.’

She thought for a moment. ‘Maybe,’ she said, ‘we can do something when you get back. I’ll take you somewhere.’ Her words were soft but intense. ‘I’ll tell you things.’ The voice was excitement. The voice was shivers.

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. ‘For sure.’

‘Okay, I’ll come over just after four-thirty.’

‘Good, I’ll see you then.’

‘I have to go.’ She almost cut me off, and she didn’t say goodbye. She said, ‘I’m watching the clock,’ and she was gone.

When I hung up, Rube asked what I knew he would.

‘Who was that?’ He bit into an apple. ‘She sounded familiar.’

I moved closer and sat at the kitchen table and swallowed. I concentrated on breathing. This was it. This was it and I had to say it. I said, ‘Remember Octavia?’

There was nothing.

The tap dripped.

It exploded into the sink.

Rube was halfway through another bite when he realised what I was saying.

His head tilted. He swallowed the piece of apple and made the calculation, while I was thinking, *Oh no, what the hell’s about to happen here?*

Something happened.
It happened when Rube went and tightened the tap, turned back around and said, ‘Well Cam.’ He laughed.

Was that a good laugh or a bad one? Good laugh, bad laugh? Good laugh, bad laugh? I couldn’t decide. I waited.

‘What?’ I asked. I couldn’t stand it any more. ‘Tell me.’

Nervously, I started telling him about what happened. I told him about standing outside the house in Glebe. About Octavia showing up. About the train and going there, and the shell, and—

‘It’s all right,’ he said. His expression was almost proud. ‘. . . That Octavia,’ and he shook his head now. ‘She’s a great girl, y’ know? Slightly insane, of course, but,’ he continued, ‘she’s nice. You deserve her Cam, more than I ever did.’ He waited for me to look at him. It took a while. ‘Okay?’

I nodded, slowly, in agreement. ‘Okay.’

‘Good.’

‘You’re not angry?’

‘Now why in the hell should I be? A girl like that needs to be treated right, and you can do that. I can’t.’ Then he unloaded a truth much harsher than Steve could even dream of. Only, Rube did it to himself. ‘Me?’ he told himself. ‘I treated that girl like dirt, and now she’s got you. You’ll probably treat her like a goddess. Won’t y’ Cam?’

I smiled, but didn’t bare my teeth.

He repeated the question. ‘Won’t y’ Cam?’ because we both knew the answer.

This time, I couldn’t hide it. Rube and I laughed and stayed together a while in the kitchen.

‘What are you two so happy about?’ Sarah asked when she came in. ‘It looks like the end of a Scooby bloody Doo episode in here . . .’

Rube clapped his hands. ‘Wait till you hear this,’ he nearly shouted.

‘Remember Octavia?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, I’ll tell y’ what. You’ll be seein’ a bit more of her again, because—’

‘I knew it!’ Sarah went through him. She pointed at me. ‘I bloody knew there was a girl, you little bastard, and you wouldn’t tell me anything!’ I’d
never seen Sarah grin like this. ‘Wait!’ she said, and, maybe thirty seconds later, she came back out with her polaroid camera and took an instant shot of Rube and me, both leaning back against the sink, talking and laughing.

We crowded around it to watch the picture form, and soon I could make out the rough-gatherings of Rube’s hair and the smile of my own mouth. The apple was still balancing in Rube’s hand and we were standing there, leaning, laughing, both in old jeans, Rube in a flanno work shirt, me in my old spray jacket. Rube was looking at me, saying something, and my face was imprinted with laughter.

Sarah pulled the photo closer to her.

‘I love this picture,’ she said, without a moment’s thought. ‘It looks like brothers.’

*What brothers should be*, I thought, and we all continued looking at it, as the tap still dripped down, exploding more quietly now, into the sink.

Later on, I went to Sarah’s bedroom to take another look at the photo.

She said, ‘Octavia, huh?’ I couldn’t see her face but I could sense the thrill in her voice. ‘She’s beautiful, Cameron.’ So quiet now. So quiet I could barely hear her. ‘She’s beautiful.’

‘Like you,’ I wanted to say, but didn’t manage it. It had been a while for Sarah. A few bad experiences with men had left my sister alone for a while now, but when I looked at her, she wasn’t unhappy. She just repeated what she’d said in the hallway that night, which seemed like years ago now. ‘Good for you, Cam. Good for you.’

Work the next day was agonisingly slow, as I waited. It felt like the hours were on their hands and knees, being dragged forward against their will.

When we made it home, it was closer to five o’clock than four-thirty, so Octavia was already waiting in the kitchen. She and Rube spoke and there was no animosity. No awkwardness.

As for me, I was standing there in awe.

She wore no make-up, had nothing sprayed over her hair, and she wore normal clothes. No tight top. No tight jeans. No jewellery except the shell, dangling from around her neck.

But she was lovely.

She was so . . .
God, I can’t explain it right. Even now, I can’t.

‘Well?’ She entered my thoughts with her quiet voice and human eyes. ‘Are you going to kiss me Cameron?’

I was shocked.

By beauty.

By words.

Get over there, I told myself, and soon I held her hand in mine and kissed it, then her wrist, and her lips.

‘He found you,’ said Mrs Wolfe. ‘That’s good.’ My mother came in and looked at me and I remembered what she’d told me in this very room a while back, when winter was just starting. She told me about a brother that would rise up one day and to not be ashamed. Maybe she was remembering it, too. She said, ‘You better hurry up Cam. I think Octavia’s waited long enough.’

I went and had a shower, got dressed, and Octavia and I left the house soon after. There were no words of be back at a certain time or don’t come in too late. Nothing like that. Firstly, my family was used to me walking around the streets, and secondly, if I stayed out too late it would be said the next time I went out. In my family, you got one chance on your own, and how long it lasted was up to you. Sarah had been past that age now for years, and Rube was nearly there, too. For me though, I still had to be careful, and I’d make sure I was.

‘We going?’ Octavia asked, and I held the door open. We were gone.

We were a fair way along the street when I figured out that I had absolutely no idea where we were heading. I asked.

All Octavia did then was remain focused on where she was walking and said, ‘You’ll see. Nowhere special.’ She sounded content, like nothing but us seemed to matter. At least, not for tonight. Her hand found its way to mine and I held it. There were no words but it didn’t matter. The walk sign appeared at one of the streets and we crossed. I made sure not to trip up the gutter.

‘This way,’ she said later, diverting us from the larger crowds to a small movie theatre on a narrow, cluttered street. ‘Would you mind if we went in here?’ she asked. ‘I kind of like old movies and this place shows some every Saturday.’

‘Sounds good,’ I replied. I mean, let’s be truthful here. This girl could have
invited me to hell and I’d have gone with her. There was no way I was going to argue, so we went in.

We went in and the movie was good.

It was *Raging Bull* and the guy seemed to know Octavia and let us in, even though he said he shouldn’t. At times, I thought about other movies I’d seen where people our age go out on dates and they eat popcorn and look good and get a photo done in one of those supermarket passport booths.

One thing was for sure.

That wasn’t us.

It wasn’t because at one point, Octavia leaned over to me and I thought she was going to kiss me. She didn’t.

She slept.

I looked at her and stroked her hair as she slept through De Niro smacking people around and getting fatter and uglier and meaner. The movie was black and white, and I could feel a girl breathing onto my throat. I could feel her breast lightly touching my ribcage.

I was happy.

When the credits arrived on the screen, I let the back of my fingers stroke her face. Gently, I whispered, ‘Octavia.’ Again. ‘Octavia.’

She woke up, startled, afraid at the darkness, then realised. ‘Thank God,’ she whispered. ‘Cameron. It’s you.’ The credits were still rolling when she stirred slightly and said quietly, ‘Could you kiss me Cameron?’

Holding her, I leaned down.

I remember something about that moment, and it’s one of the best rememberings I own.

It was the exact moment when I got closer and she pulled me into her, and our teeth touched in the dark. Her mouth took me in, and somehow, our teeth collided and the sound of it echoed through me. I liked it. The accidental truth of it.

With the lights starting to dim themselves on, Octavia said quietly, ‘You know something Cameron? You’re the first person I’ve ever really wanted to kiss me. You’re the first person I ever asked.’

This came as a surprise.
‘You never asked Rube?’

‘He didn’t need to be asked.’

‘I s’pose,’ I reacted, I should’ve known that.’ If Rube wanted something, there was no waiting. With me, there was too much.

‘The thing is,’ she turned my head gently towards her. ‘I like that I get to ask you. It makes you unlike anyone I’ve ever met.’ She kissed me again. Soft. Slow. ‘That’s the sort of person I want to be with.’

Outside, she decided she’d better get home, so we walked back to Central Station and waited for the train in the underground. There was the usual spattering of party-goers, lunatics, cigarette thieves and winos, with each of their thoughts and conversations tumbling across the dirty platform. Octavia spoke to me about her harmonica and how it’s probably the only thing she’d ever loved or depended on. When her train pulled in, we both looked at it. We watched the carriages open, then sat and watched it pull away. That happened another three times.

‘I can’t believe I fell asleep.’ She was shaking her head when the wind of the fourth train smashed onto the platform. It threw the rubbish forward and sent waves of coldness through the air.

Again, when the train pulled in and the doors opened, Octavia didn’t move. I was glad. She got me to tell her what happened at the end of the movie, and in the eyes I spoke to, I could see how tired they were. I could see something hidden, or buried, but I still didn’t ask. I remembered her saying to me on the phone that she would tell me things, and I figured the harmonica was the start of that. She said she started with it when she was eight years old, and when she was fourteen, she thought she was good enough to do it for money. I asked her where she’d played, and almost with embarrassment, she listed about thirty or so places throughout the city. She told me the songs. The first, the last. The best, the worst. I’d seen her happy when she was with Rube. I’d seen her happy and content when she was with me. I had never seen her like this, though. This was pride, and in a way, I felt close to it, maybe because of the start of my words.

Then there were the odd things.

Her past addiction to Cheezels.

Her severe hatred of Celine Dion.

Her love of harmonicas, off-tune violins and saltwater.
Her favourite singer: ‘Lisa Germano, by far, by miles, by the wind blowing down these tunnels.’

Favourite movie: ‘Some French thing. I can’t remember the name of it but it was bloody good.’

Favourite song: ‘Small Heads, Lisa Germano.’ (Who in the hell is she, anyway?)

Favourite item of clothing: ‘Easy. The shell.’

Favourite human invention: ‘Bridges. It’s a mystery to me how they ever get the pylons drilled under the water.’

Worst moment in her life: ‘No comment.’

Best moment: ‘A close one. It’d have to be either asking Cameron Wolfe to stand outside my house, or kneeling down with him by the harbour, throwing away all self-doubt and putting my mouth on his.’

Favourite drink: ‘None.’

Favourite sound: ‘Teeth colliding in an empty cinema.’ (I was glad she recognised it too.)

Biggest disappointment: ‘I’ll tell you soon.’

When the next train came in, she said, ‘I’ve gotta get onto this one,’ and when she leaned out the door touching my sleeve for a last moment, she started to say something, but the doors shut.

‘This,’ she called through the window. ‘This is my biggest disappointment.’

It was mine, too, even though she’d told me before the movie that tomorrow she’d be at the same place as last week, playing that harmonica and making money . . .

When the train was gone, I waited a while, then walked for the escalator, Elizabeth Street, and home.

There were no questions when I got there, but everyone seemed to assume it went okay. Smiles kept escaping from my face. Escaping all the time.

Again, I couldn’t sleep.

The night was Octavia.

At times, thoughts of Steve awoke in my mind as well, and also the rest of the Wolfe family. Mainly Steve though. I wasn’t angry at him for what had
happened during the week, and I wanted to go up and see him the next day, before I went down the harbour.

In the morning, I ate and went up there. I didn’t have to ring the buzzer because he and Sal were out on the balcony. He didn’t call me up. Instead, he disappeared and came down to meet me. It was a gesture, I guess. He was coming to me.

He opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him.

‘Where you on at today?’ I asked.

Steve looked up at the balcony, but he didn’t answer my question. He said, ‘Thanks.’ It was a Thanks for not hating me.

He offered me breakfast but I didn’t accept. When I left, I moved out from under the balconies and called up to Sal, ‘I’ll see y’ later.’

‘I might come up tomorrow or Tuesday,’ I suggested to Steve. ‘Maybe we can go up to the oval.’

‘All right,’ he replied, and we went our own ways.

When I was nearly gone, I heard his voice call out one last time.

‘Hey Cam! Cam!’

He came towards me until he was about ten yards away. Talking distance. He said, ‘I didn’t expect you to come up here, at least not this soon.’

‘Well,’ I unzipped my jacket. ‘You beat four guys up, one by one. I guess I forgave my brother for calling me a lost cause. It doesn’t make that much difference really, does it?’

‘I would have hated you forever,’ he admitted.

I only shook my head. ‘It doesn’t matter Steve. I’ll see y’ soon.’

At the quay this time, I stepped off the train without trepidation. All my thoughts leaned towards the sight and sound of Octavia, and from the platform, I looked down into the distance to see the people surrounding her, watching, listening, and taking in the music that flowed from her.

When I saw her, I moved fast, but once I made it, I didn’t approach the crowd that was gathered around, or at least, not directly. I moved more to the side and just sat there, listening. The howling voice of her mouth organ reached me.

‘Poor show,’ she said, once she’d finished up and found me. She’d
crouched down and was holding me from behind. ‘Only forty-eight sixty,’ she explained. The words brushed past my ear. ‘Not too bad all the same though. Come on Cam, let’s go.’

I moved to go back down to the bridge, but she didn’t come. Not today. She said, ‘You feel like getting high?’

‘High?’ I asked.

‘Yeah.’ She smiled in a dangerous, self-mocking way, and I only began to understand why when we headed back towards the middle of the city, to the tower. Inside, I went to pay, but she wouldn’t let me.

‘It was my idea,’ she pointed out, pushing my money back to my pocket. ‘I brought you here. I’m taking you up . . . And besides. You paid for the movie last night.’

We entered the lift and it took us right to the top, with some American golf-pro looking types, and a family on a Sunday outing. One of the kids kept stepping on my foot.

‘Little bastard,’ I felt like saying. If I was with Rube I probably would have, but with Octavia, I only looked at her and implied it. She nodded back as if to say, ‘Exactly.’

Once up there, we walked around the whole floor and I couldn’t help but look for my own house, imagining what was happening there, and hoping, even praying, that everything was going okay. That extended to include everyone down there, as far as I could see, and as I always do when I pray to a God I wouldn’t have a clue about, I stood there, lightly beating at my heart, without even thinking.

Especially this girl though, I prayed. Let her be okay, God. All right? All right God?

That was when Octavia noticed my fist lightly touching my heart. There was no answer from God. There was a question from the girl.

She asked, ‘What are you doing?’ I could feel the curiosity of her eyes on my face. ‘Cameron?’

I stayed focused on the city sprawled out beneath us. ‘Just, sort of prayin’ y’know?’

‘For what?’

‘You.’ I stopped, continued. Almost laughed. ‘And I haven’t been in a church for nearly seven years . . .’
We stayed up there for over an hour, and Octavia told me some more about herself.

Very few friends.

Time spent on trains.

She told me about how one time her harmonica was stolen in school and she found it in the toilet.

She was just telling me who she was, and I guess, why she would come up to a place like this.

‘I come up here a fair bit,’ she told me. ‘I like it. I like the height.’ She even climbed to the carpeted step at the window and stood there, leaning forward onto the glass. ‘You comin’ up?’ she asked, and I’ll be honest—I tried, but no matter how much I wanted to lean forward onto that glass, I couldn’t. I kept feeling like I was going to fall through.

So I sat there.

Only for a few seconds.

Then she came back down and saw that I wasn’t doing too well.

‘I wanted to,’ I said.

‘It’s okay Cam.’

The thing was, I knew there was something I had to ask, and I did it. I even promised myself that this would be the last time I asked a question like this, even though I could never be sure I wouldn’t.

I said, ‘Octavia?’ I kept hearing her telling me that she came up here all the time. I heard it when I spoke the words, ‘Did you bring Rube up here too?’

Slowly, she nodded.

‘But he leaned on the glass,’ I answered my own next question. ‘Didn’t he?’

Again, she nodded. ‘Yeah.’

I don’t know why, but it seemed important. It was important. I felt like a failure because my older brother leaned on the glass and I couldn’t. It made me feel hopeless in some way. Like I wasn’t even half the guy he was.

All because he leaned on glass and I didn’t.

All because he had the neck and I didn’t.
All because . . .

‘That doesn’t mean anything.’ She shot down my thoughts. ‘Not to me.’ She thought for a moment and then faced me. ‘He leaned on the window, but he never made me feel like you do. Before you, I felt like I was only really alive when I played my harmonica. Now though, it’s like . . .’ She struggled not to explain it, but to actually say it. ‘When I’m with you, I feel like I’m outside myself.’ She finished me. ‘I don’t want Rube. I don’t want anyone else.’ Her eyes ate me, quietly. ‘I want you.’

I looked.

Down.

At my shoes, then back up, at Octavia Ash.

I went to say ‘Thanks,’ but she stopped me by pushing her fingers up to my mouth.

‘Always remember that,’ she spoke. ‘All right?’

I nodded.

‘Say it.’

‘All right,’ I said, and her cool hands touched me on my neck, my shoulder, my face.
broken glass

We arrive at a glass screen, high up in the darkness.

As we move towards it, I know what I have to do. The dog steps back and slowly, ominously, I lean forward onto the glass. Shaking.

For a while, I just look down, seeing for the first time a smooth haze below. It shimmers and ripples, growing brighter with each passing moment.

For a while, the glass is strong, but soon enough, the inevitable happens.

It cracks.

It comes apart and falls open.

Momentum pushes me out and I’m being dragged to earth at a speed beyond my imagination.

I see the width of the world.

The further I fall, the faster it turns, and around me, I see visions of everyone and everything I know. There’s Rube and Steve, Sal, Sarah, Dad and Mrs Wolfe, and Julia the Scrubber, looking seductive. Even the barber’s there, chopping hair that showers down around me.

I think only one thing.

Where’s Octavia?

As I get closer to the bottom, I notice that it’s water I’m falling into. It’s ocean green and smooth, until . . .

I’m driven through the surface and go deeper. I’m surrounded.

I’m drowning, I think. I’m drowning.

But I’m smiling too.
‘Are you gonna turn that light off some time tonight?’ Rube asked when I was still halfway through writing. It was just past eleven-thirty that Sunday night.

‘Soon,’ I said.

‘Hurry up.’

Right after I finished and went to bed, the rest of the afternoon wandered through my thoughts. As was often the case in bed, I could see my life painted across the ceiling.

After we went down from the tower, Octavia came back to our place. We played cards with Sarah, and even Dad and Mrs Wolfe sat in for a round. Dad won of course, but all in all, it was a good afternoon. I spotted that card again with the cornflake stuck on it. It was the Queen of Spades.

When Octavia was about to leave, Mrs Wolfe invited her to stay. ‘For dinner,’ she said.

Octavia didn’t though. Maybe it was because she’d heard about Mrs Wolfe’s food, but I think it was more the fact that she had to get home.

‘Thanks anyway,’ she said, and we went down to the station.

What I didn’t know was that when we went out the front door, Sarah managed to get another shot of us on her polaroid, through the flyscreen door. Earlier, she took a few shots while we were playing cards. None were posed. She just took them as we were, and she gave one to Octavia to take home. It was nothing too special. We were each just holding our cards, but our legs were joined at the knees, and looking closer, you could tell Octavia was about to say something. Personally, I didn’t look too good because my eyes were half-shut and my hair looked electric. Octavia liked it though, and Sarah made her take it.

When I made it home from the station, I walked Miffy, and once I’d come back again, I found that other photo on my pillow—the one Sarah took as we
were leaving. And this one was good. It was great.

Through the slightly torn flyscreen door, you could see both Octavia and me from behind. Our hands touched as we walked towards the sagging gate and the street. The light burst between us except for where the hands met, and when I found it in my room, I went straight back out to see Sarah.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and I didn’t hold the photo in my hand or even mention it. She knew.

I put it in my drawer in the same place I’d decided to put my writing, and before I went to bed, I kissed the girl all over, till I could see the print of my lips on the photo.

In bed, I realised that Octavia had told me many things that weekend, but the main things I’d been wondering about still remained a mystery.

The house.

Her family.

She never mentioned them once.

I had no idea if she had brothers or sisters, but then again, even a few months ago, when she was with Rube, I always assumed she didn’t have any. It was never mentioned or talked about. Now there was the harmonica, the height of the tower, and a lot of other things, but I still had no idea where she came from.

For a moment, I felt like waking Rube and asking a few questions, but having already complained about the light, I didn’t think he’d appreciate it if I started talking to him. Besides, I hadn’t forgotten that Rube was experiencing a few problems of his own. I was contemplating what the end result of all those phone calls would be. I only knew that something violent was ready to happen, and probably for the first time ever with Rube, I wasn’t sure what the outcome would be. In the past, I always knew my brother would be the one standing at the end. This time I wasn’t sure. I could only wait and see.

Eventually, my tiredness wore me down and I slept hard.

The next day the phone rang a lot, as it did all week. By Thursday, Rube was picking it up and slingling it back down the moment he had it in his hand.

We went up to Steve’s one night, but not much went on really. Just shots at goal, black coffee and conversation that revolved around football, family and a joke here and there.

On the way back, Rube stopped and we kind of sat together on the gutter.
It felt like we hadn’t talked for a while, and I waited for him to speak.

After maybe five minutes, he said, ‘Whoever this guy is, he’s really gunnin’ for me.’

‘Did you ask what’s-her-name about him?’

‘Julia?’

‘Yeah.’

‘She reckons he isn’t the brightest spark, and that he’s got way too much time and a lot of friends.’

‘Friends?’

‘Friends,’ he confirmed. ‘I’ve considered gettin’ after him but I’m not goin’ lookin’ for anyone. If I do that, I’ll only be worse off.’

‘But if you find him before he finds you, you can take him by surprise. You can finish it before it even starts.’

‘No.’

I thought about it. ‘Okay, but just remember Rube—if it gets bad, let me know. I know I’m not you, but it’ll still be harder against the two of us.’

Rube’s hand landed on my shoulder. That was all, and we walked home.

On Friday, Octavia came early in the afternoon, and from our porch, we watched as Rube carried a punching bag down the street. ‘Some extra practice,’ he smiled as we helped him through the door with it and down to the basement.

He hung it from the rafters and for close to an hour, we could hear him blasting it. In a way, I could only feel sorry for anyone who wanted to take Rube on. Even if there were more than one, at least a few of them would get hurt, because Rube had speed and strength and no hesitation.

When the phone rang, I answered it and asked the guy on the other end to hang on. ‘My brother wants to talk to you,’ I said. ‘I mean, this is getting ridiculous. You call three times a day. You say nothing. I’m starting to think you actually like my brother rather than want to kill him—otherwise you’d just beat him up and be done with it. So hang on. Just a minute.’

I went down to the basement.

‘What is it?’

Rube didn’t usually sweat much, but after a good hour on the bag, he was
drenched.

‘It’s him,’ I told him.

He walked up the cold cement steps and practically mauled the phone when he picked it up.

‘Now listen,’ he growled. ‘I’ll be waiting down near the old train yard at eight o’clock tomorrow night. You know where that is? . . . Yeah, that’s the one. If you want, come and get me. If not, stop ringin’ me—you’re a pain in the arse.’ There was a longer silence. Rube was listening. ‘Good,’ he spoke again. ‘Just you and me, alone.’ Again, he listened. ‘Okay, we can bring people but when it comes down to it, it’s you and me. No help, no tricks, and then it’s over. Goodbye.’ He slammed the phone down and I could see he was already fighting in his mind.

‘So it’s on?’ I asked.

‘Apparently so,’ and he went to shut the basement door. ‘Thank Christ for that.’

Then the phone rang. Again.

‘Don’t worry,’ Rube told me on his way past. ‘I’ll get it.’

He picked it up, and immediately, I could tell it was his mate again. Rube wasn’t happy.

‘What is it this time?’ He shot the words through the phone. ‘You can’t!?’ He was getting more irritated by the second. ‘Now listen mate—you’re the one who wants to kill me, so make up your mind about when you feel like doin’ it.’ He thought. ‘What about during the week? No? Well what about next Saturday? Could you check your calendar and make sure you’ve got nothing else on?’ He waited. ‘Y’ sure now? Positive? You won’t be ringin’ in a minute or two attempting to reschedule? No? So next Saturday night sounds like a good time to kill me? Good. Same place, same time. Next Saturday. Good.’

Again, he hung up, forcefully. He shook his head but laughed. ‘It’s an absolute circus with this bloke.’

He started eating some bread and got ready to go out with Julia—the cause of all this. I made a clear effort to dislike that girl and blame all of this completely on her, but really, I knew. It wasn’t her. It was my brother Rube. He’d brought it on himself because he’d finally stumbled onto the wrong girl, and for the first time, maybe he was going to pay. Sure, I also told myself that I’d been wrong in the past, because Rube had often escaped dangerous
situations for no other reason than the fact that he was Ruben Wolfe and Ruben Wolfe could handle anything.

With his fists.

With his wayward charm.

Any way he could.

This time though, I couldn’t be sure. It was different. I guess we’d discover the outcome in a week’s time . . .

Octavia and I stayed in that night, and in Rube’s and my room, she played her mouth organ and put music on. Sometimes, when the music was playing, she played along, but mostly, we talked. There were stories of days spent playing music for money, characters she met down at the harbour and other places around the city. I told her about school and how I sat on a wall there and felt stories and words move through me, and how sometimes people would come down and talk to me. Past friends and people I’d run into.

I told her no-one but her knew about the words.

It felt good.

Close.

She wore jeans but took her shoes and socks off, and I remember looking at her barefoot feet, as she sat cross-legged on my bed. I remember looking at her toes, and her ankles. I liked her ankles, and of course, when I looked back up, I liked the look on her face when she spoke and listened and thought. She laughed about things. About the beer ice blocks, and stories I told her about Rube and me and going to the dog track, just watching, laughing and gambling once in a while just for the hell of it.

Talking was good.

It sounds like an obvious thing to say, but it helped me know her, in the way she said things, and in the moments where she thought and then told me what it was. I guess when someone tells you something that they usually guard, you feel privileged, not because you know something no-one else knows, but because you feel chosen. You feel like that person wants her life to intersect with yours. I think that’s what felt best about it.

I was close, so close, to asking about her family, but still, I couldn’t. Somehow, I could sense it was something she’d have to start talking about on her own.

She came over again the next afternoon, and since Dad, Rube and I didn’t
get fish ‘n chips at lunch, I was sort of in the mood for that kind of thing. We went to a local shop and brought a whole lot of it back. Mrs Wolfe was grateful she didn’t have to heat up leftovers, and we all ate off the paper in the kitchen.

We’re not well off, my family.

We’re not a lot of things.

But I noticed when we were all eating the fish ‘n chips and Rube was abusing me for dropping a piece of fish and Dad was smacking him across the head for it, Octavia watched with a small glint in her eyes.

She liked it here, I could tell.

She like talking to Sarah, and my mother, and even now to my father, who filled her in on the complexities of installing, fixing and remodelling a toilet system. There was a roughness to it all, but it was real. Everything from dropped chips to collective insults and salt crammed at the edge of people’s mouths.

At one point, when Sarah was telling us about a girl she worked with who had the most shocking breath in the world, Octavia looked over at me. She smiled.

Things were right in this place.

Not perfect.

Right.

I remembered it the next day down in the usual spot at the quay, as Octavia played music and I sat away to the side, listening and writing a few things down.

When she was finished, I went over and helped her gather the money. She looked up, closing one eye to the sun, and said, ‘I’ve taken you to places Cam. Places I’ve wanted to go.’ She put the money in a small woven bag, ‘Why don’t you take me somewhere you want to go.’

The trouble was, I never really went anywhere.

Not consciously anyway.

All I’d ever done was walk around the streets of this city. Just wandering around, looking at the people, the buildings, and breathing in the smells and sounds of the place.

_The soul of the city_, I thought, but ‘I don’t really go anywhere,’ is what I
said.

She gave me a *Don’t give me that* kind of look, and I realised it was pointless trying to get away with that sort of comment. She already knew me too well. All I could do was say, ‘Well, usually I just walk around. It’s nothing much. I just—’

‘It sounds nice.’ She was standing now, waiting for me. Her presence was soft. Calm. She said, ‘Show me all the places you go,’ and slowly, wandering, we left.

We got the train to Central and walked through the city streets. I showed her the barber shop and told her about the old barber in there and the story of he and his wife. She remembered the small page I’d written about my hopes for my own grave and said, ‘That came from here?’

I nodded.

Next was the site at the bus stop where that couple abused me and I didn’t have enough money for the bus. Octavia laughed at all that. She said it was exactly the kind of thing she could only imagine happening to me.

‘I know.’ I even laughed now myself.

We walked on and without recognising it, soon we were in Glebe, approaching the house I used to stand outside of, waiting for that girl.

It felt good to stand there with Octavia. Like it was the right thing to do. Now I had to think of the right thing to say.

‘I used to come here,’ I began, ‘at least three or four times a week.’ I stopped. The words in me propped, because I understood that whenever I thought of this place now, it wasn’t about the agony of that any more. It was about Octavia. ‘But you know?’ I told her. ‘These days, when I think of this place, I think of how each time I came here, it wasn’t really about waiting for that other girl. It’s just . . .’ I wanted to say it right. ‘I guess it was you I was waiting for . . .’ I shook my head and looked to the ground, then back up. ‘I think that’s the best night I’ve ever had, you know?’

She let her eyes swing into me.

‘Yeah,’ she nodded. ‘I know,’ and we just stood there a while, remembering that night, and personally, I thought about how it was only a vision of that Stephanie girl I longed for. Just the idea of her. It wasn’t really her. The best thing about all this was that Octavia was real.

We went back past the station on the way home, talking about the train of
that night, and soon we went past other places that had stories buried into them. I told Octavia what each place meant. It was nice to think of places as stories that meant something.

There was an alley where I once saw Rube beat a guy up, purely because the other guy had a habit of pushing people he knew he could beat. Until Rube, of course. The guy wasn’t counting on Rube taking him on without even thinking about it. He left him there, saying, ‘Well are y’ happy now? You should be.’

We walked up streets where Rube and I had walked Miffy, hoods over our heads. There were bus stops where people had dropped out of the open doors as I walked by. I remembered one night when Sarah was one of those people and I could smell the alcohol on her but said nothing. She doesn’t do that much any more.

When we were nearly home, I asked if Octavia was tired, but she was happy to keep going.

We walked the extra distance to Steve’s place, and I told her about him and me. About the things he’d said to me and how I really did, in the end, appreciate the fact that he told me the truth. I even told her that I loved him. Maybe it was because brothers just do, even though they never say it or hardly show it. Or maybe it was more than that. I liked his strength, and the unspoken understanding we had. I told her about the night at the oval. She asked me to take her there.

We went.

It was nearly five o’clock by then and the place was empty. We went down to the goal posts and I showed her where I’d had all those shots from and the way Steve had reacted when I finally got it through.

We left there soon after and, finally, we were on the street that was home.

When we made it, we sat on the front porch and I spoke about some other things. I told Octavia about an afternoon last summer when I was sitting there and Mrs Wolfe came in from work a bit earlier than usual. She had a completely blank face and walked right past me. In the kitchen, she just sat in a chair, speaking near-silent words, over and over. Eventually, she looked up and said, ‘You know that house I clean at Bondi? That really rich guy, Mr Callahan?’

‘Of course,’ I answered.

‘Well I walked in there today, and . . .’ Her hands shook above the table
and her voice was broken up completely with shivers. ‘I went into the bedroom and saw his feet . . .’

The man had shot himself and my mother found him amongst the blood on the carpet. I told Octavia how she shivered in that kitchen a long time, attempting not to cry.

A few nights later, Mrs Wolfe had come into our bedroom, late. It was just past midnight, and when Rube and I woke up from the jagged light from the hall, our mother said something.

‘Make sure you live,’ she’d said. ‘As decent as you can. I know you’ll make mistakes, but sometimes you’re meant to, okay?’

And that was it.

She didn’t wait for us to reply or agree. She just wanted us to hear what she had to say.

The door shut again and the light from the hall disappeared.

‘What the hell was all that about?’ Rube said from across the room.

But he knew, just like I did. My brother Rube’s a lot of things but he isn’t stupid. He understands things sure enough, which can make him all the more frustrating.

Octavia and I sat there a while before heading next door to get Miffy. Instead of walking him, we just mucked around a bit in the backyard, and relented to his ferocious desire to be rubbed on his stomach. He seemed in good spirits that night, though he still wasn’t the pooch he once was. Maybe he was just getting old. Keith was giving him pills prescribed by the vet, but I don’t know. Miffy’s spark was still a bit paler than usual.

It was getting dark by the time we returned him next door and Octavia had to go.

Going to the station, we were halfway along the street when I stopped and looked back at the porch.

‘What is it?’ Octavia asked.

I said, ‘There’s one thing I didn’t mention.’ I came out with it. ‘I remember sitting back there on the porch, watching you walk away that night—the last time you were with Rube . . . The light from the sky dripped down onto you and I thought you must have felt like I always did over at Glebe.’

‘I’d say so,’ she said contently, ‘. . . but things are different now.’
‘They are,’ I replied, and we walked on.

Even later in the night, when I called her, I was told again how much things had changed. I called her up in our old empty kitchen, and when she answered, there were hardly any words. All Octavia said was, ‘Just hang on Cam. Wait.’

I could hear her put the receiver down and walk away.

‘Hello?’ I asked.

Nothing.

‘Hello?’

Then it arrived in my ear.

She was walking around the room at the other end, and when the music started, I pushed the phone harder to my face.

The harmonica howled like always. It moved through a song I hadn’t heard before, and it was one of the most brilliant things I’d ever heard in my life. It sang through the line and I imagined her playing in the dark. The song climbed up and fell down, taking me with it, and feeling opened me up . . .

Have you ever felt like falling to your knees in your kitchen?

That was how it felt to hear the music of that girl.
if her soul should leak

Dark streets.

The dog’s always waiting to lead me straight back into the dark streets.
In front of us, we see a girl, walking along the road.
I run, going ahead of the dog for the first time.
She turns a corner, but when I make it around she’s gone.
The dog arrives and we stand together at a wall.
‘I love that girl,’ I want to say, but don’t. I know the dog’s here to guide me and nothing else.

We stand there and I know that I know very little.
I don’t know how these streets will turn, or why.
I don’t know if I can last the fight of this night.
There’s only one thing I know.
It’s about the girl, and it’s this:
If her soul ever leaks, I want it to land on me.
I COULD HEAR IT AGAIN, DOWN IN THE BASEMENT. RUBE’S fists were launching into the bag. He was looking forward to the fight.

It was Tuesday night, and for a while, I went down and watched. He didn’t even notice me until he finished. His bare hands hammered the bag and his breathing was hot, like steam exiting his mouth. Looking at him in his jeans and his singlet, I understood why girls like him so much. He was athletic, and every muscle was well-defined. Not big or bulky. Just right. His sandy brown hair fell into his face, and his eyes weren’t so much a colour. They were eyes like stomped-out fire.

His hands were down on his knees when he noticed me watching. He was breathing heavily.

‘Lookin’ good,’ I said, walking down the cement-cold steps.

‘Thanks.’

He stood up and noticed some drops of blood on his fingers. It didn’t matter, because to Rube, it only meant that his hands were conditioned for the fight. They’d be used to the pain and the nakedness. Raw hand hitting raw face.

‘You want a hit?’ he offered, but I declined. ‘Why not? You can fight well on your day.’

‘Nah, I’ll be right.’

I was about to leave when Rube called out, ‘Hey Cam.’ He looked up at me from the basement floor. ‘I think I’m about done with that Julia girl, ay.’

I was surprised. ‘Really? Why?’

‘Look at me!’ He held his hands out in front of him, palms up. ‘There’s a bloke out there with a vendetta on me because of her.’ He looked at himself. At his chest, his stomach, his feet. I could tell he knew the irony of this situation. Still though, he stated, ‘She’s more bloody trouble than she’s worth.’
My feet took me back down to the floor. I had to ask him something.

‘So have you got someone else lined up?’

‘No.’

He shook his head, then sent his eyes towards the wall. ‘I think I might have learned my lesson this time,’ and together, we walked back up to the house.

‘You still comin’ this Saturday night?’ he asked a few hours later. ‘For the fight?’ We were in our room, the light already out.

The darkness of the room enveloped me as I answered. ‘Of course.’

‘Thanks.’ Rube was sounding sharp. Ready. ‘I don’t trust this bloke.’

‘You got anyone else showin’ up?’ I asked. ‘In case the other guy decides to use help?’

‘No.’ I could vaguely see Rube’s face in the dark. Splinters of light from the window gathered across his face. ‘I’ve never relied on other people before and I’m not starting now.’ He raised himself onto his elbow. ‘With you, it’s different. You’re my brother.’ That was enough said. He could have gone on to say something like, ‘And that’s what brothers do,’ or ‘I’d do the same if it was the other way round,’ but there was no need. The conversation was over. All there was now was the darkness.

I guess brothers is brothers.

That’s all.

On Thursday afternoon, I took a trip down to Octavia’s, waiting outside the house. That was usually the way it worked. We would always see each other on the weekend, and maybe once or twice during the week. It was rare for us to ring. Personally, I didn’t like talking on the phone. It made me nervous, uncomfortable. I didn’t know what Octavia’s reason was. Maybe she didn’t like the idea that talking endlessly on the phone was something girls her age were supposed to do. Octavia wasn’t a typical girl.

She came out after about fifteen minutes.

Like always, we went to the park, and we sat against the tree. She was waiting. For me.

Her legs were out straight when I got up and kneeled down, one knee either side of her. I kissed the skin of her cheek. I kissed her mouth and the side of her neck, gently biting her.
She whispered, ‘Don’t stop,’ and she tilted her head away to expose her neck fully, and I did it both sides and moved the collar of her school shirt away to put my mouth on the bridges leading to her shoulders. I ran my hands through her hair.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked, but all she did at first was pull me closer.

‘Just don’t stop,’ she said. ‘Kiss me again.’

The warmth of her breath showered through me. I took her in. She had me. My skin felt torn, as it all reached higher and her mouth kept breathing through mine. It was rough and warm and it shouted through my mouth. Always taking me. Always wanting more.

Wanting more.

That was the best part, I think. She didn’t push me away or turn away like I expected. The way she always wanted more of me was what staggered me the most. When her mouth took hold of my neck, my whole body shivered from the feeling of it. Her hand was under my shirt. Her fingers scattered over my ribs and finished at my stomach, stroking me as her lips kissed my neck and my face.

At the end she kissed my lips lightly, letting them slowly sink in.

She rested her head on my shoulder and I could tell she was comfortable. It felt good that I could make her feel that way.

There was quiet for a while and I could hear trains pulling in and out of the station. Limping in. Getting going again.

We talked about Rube’s upcoming confrontation.

‘You’re going with him,’ she asked, ‘aren’t you?’ Her head was still resting on my shoulder. Sometimes her nose touched my jaw-line, making me shiver again.

‘I have to,’ I admitted. ‘He’s my brother.’

She just stayed there then and the clouds were cracked across the sky. There was no point trying to talk me out of it. She knew that, so she didn’t try. All she did was say, ‘Try to make sure you don’t get hurt.’ I felt her eyes look up at my face. ‘Okay?’

I nodded. ‘I promise.’

She smiled, I could feel it, and she kissed my neck again, softly.
We walked back after quite a while, and when I left her at the gate, she stopped me from leaving.

‘Hey Cam?’ she said. The time had come. She was hesitating. ‘Do you think you might want to come inside sometime?’

‘In there?’ I asked, looking at the house.

‘Yeah . . .’

I remembered Rube’s words about how he’d never even got close to going in, and I wondered why it was such a big deal, and why it was so important to me. I mean, it was just a house, for Jesus’ sake.

But it was more than that. Octavia told me why.

She said, ‘Before you, Cam, and before Rube, I had this one guy who hurt me in there. He sort of hit me when I didn’t, you know . . .’ Her hands tightened on the gate. ‘And I promised my ma that I’d never bring anyone in the house that I didn’t love with every single piece inside me.’ She smiled, but she was hurting too. ‘So soon, okay?’

‘Okay,’ and I held her at the gate. I almost said how sorry I was for what had happened to her, and that I could never hurt her like that. Somehow, though, I knew. This was enough. Her and me, and the gate.

That night Rube was at it again in the basement, and this time I accepted his invitation to punch the bag.

It was part elation for how I felt about Octavia, part anger for what had happened to her, and part nerves for Saturday night.

The next day shifted past.

Work with Dad on Saturday was a giant pause, waiting, even though Rube was perfectly calm.

We got ready together in our room, when it was about seven-thirty. I put on my oldest jeans, my work flanno and my old spray jacket. I dispensed with my gymmies and put boots on. They were a pair I’d inherited from Rube and as I sat against the wall, doing them up tight, I looked over and Rube was staring into the mirror. He was telling himself what to do. Eyeing himself off.

I stood up. ‘Ready?’

He said nothing.

He only turned around, grabbed his jacket and nodded. It was the most serious he’d looked in months.
We walked out of the house, and since Rube had previously announced that we were going to a friend’s place, there were no problems. The front gate came and went quickly, and we hit the street hard. Rube was hyped up and his face was hardened. The cold night air seemed to get out of his way, and so did people walking in the opposite direction.

It was about five minutes to eight when we got there, and all we had to do now was wait. The yard was full of old wrecked train carriages, standing around in the dark. Their windows were smashed, and stolen words were written across them like scars. There was a tall wire fence that cordoned off the yard from the street, and we leaned against it, waiting.

Thoughts passed.

Minutes passed.

Some figures started loitering around the tops of an alley and they looked like they were coming our way.

‘Is that them?’ I asked.

Rube’s face hardened even more. ‘Let’s hope so.’

The shadows moved closer and adrenaline shot me down. This was it.
the tunnel

We arrive at a tunnel and enter. It goes down deep, to the core of everything we are. The floor is stained with humanness, and as we move across it, I begin to see the end.

A hole seems to be cut in the distance, and I know that’s where we’ll break through to the other side.

I feel my fists tighten.

My breath lunges out of my mouth, into the face of darkness that surrounds us.

I’m getting ready, even throwing a gentle punch to the air.

We approach the other side, and in the space just beyond the tunnel’s mouth, I see a shadow, leaning against a wire-woven fence. His fingers hold on to the wire, clenched tight.

Walk forward, I tell myself, and after meeting the dog’s burning eyes, I do.

I walk out and see the arms of the city spreading far and wide as the shadow remains still.

The night air slaps me.

It smells like brothers.
THE SHADOWS TURNED INTO HUMANS AND THERE WERE three of them, walking towards us. They wore scowls and jackets.

‘Which one of you’s Rube?’ the one in the middle, the biggest one, asked. His voice was clear and violent, and he spat down towards our feet, almost smiling at how close it came to hitting us.

Rube stepped forward. ‘Me.’

‘People say you fight as good as anyone, but you don’t look so bloody brilliant to me.’

‘Well, that’s a matter of opinion, isn’t it?’ Rube responded amiably. ‘And anyway, we haven’t done anything yet—you can decide when we’re finished.’

‘Fair enough.’

The other guy began to say something else then, but it was too late.

Rube had him by the throat and threw him against the wire fence, following it with a handful of fists that cut him up straight away. He tried to duck my brother’s hands, but Rube was too fast and each time he found the mark. Blood splashed to the ground and the two blokes who’d come along for moral support were getting jumpy. Even Rube noticed it, and in between the punches, he stated to them calmly, ‘Don’t even think about it.’

That was when he missed his first punch and the other bloke managed to slip away, dragging himself up the fence.

Rube could have gone after him but chose instead to stand a few feet away and ask a question or two. I’d seen him do this a hundred times before. The way he saw it, he was giving them a chance to get away before it all became too drastic. Some took it. Some didn’t.

‘So what’s your name, anyway?’ he asked.

‘Jarrod.’ The answer fell from his mouth along with the blood.

‘Well Jarrod, you look to be in a pretty bad state there. Have you had
enough?

Unfortunately for Jarrod, he hadn’t, and when he got up and moved in at Rube, it was almost frightening how fast my brother lashed his ribs and smashed his face again. The sound of Jarrod hitting the fence rattled while the broken trains seemed to watch forlornly from the other side.


The blood was still dripping slowly to the ground, only this time, Jarrod fell down with it. It was in his hair, his hands and on his clothes. At one point, I thought he might drown in it.

The only problem here, was this:

It wasn’t real.

It wasn’t real because Rube and I waited down by the old train yard and the guy didn’t show up. The shadows we saw in the alley turned into a different side street, leaving us stranded alone at the bottom of the street.

‘He’s late,’ were Rube’s first words at a few minutes past eight. By eight-thirty, he was annoyed, and by quarter to nine, he was about ready to put his fist through the fence.

That was when I saw the imaginary fight. It was a fairly typical scene where Rube was concerned. Admittedly, it was unusual for him to get in so early. On most occasions the other guy would try to surprise him, but Rube was always too fast. So this time, for variety, I imagined Rube being the one to start out. If that ever happened, it was over before it began. Rube was a killer in a fight for quite a few reasons. He didn’t hesitate, he wasn’t afraid to get hurt, he loved winning, and he had brilliant timing. Even if he didn’t hit someone hard, it hurt, because he timed it perfectly and hit them exactly where he intended to.

‘Maybe he got the time wrong,’ I suggested, but Rube shot me a look of You’re kiddin’ me aren’t y’?

‘We’ll wait till nine,’ he concluded. ‘If he doesn’t show up then, we’ll go home.’

We waited, even though we knew it was pointless. The guy wasn’t coming. Rube knew it. I knew it. Personally, I was annoyed because I could have been with Octavia. Instead, I was standing on a filthy-cold street, waiting for someone who was never going to show up.

Still, I wasn’t as angry as Rube.
He started prowling the fence line, repeating one word.

‘Bastard.’

He said it countless times, and by nine o’clock, he turned around and grabbed the fence by the woven wire. I expected him to intensify further, but to my surprise, he relaxed. He only stared for one last moment and then we began heading home. The last thing he did was lightly hit the fence. It still rattled.

‘What are y’ gonna do now?’ I asked, when we were nearly home.

‘About this bloke who wants to kill me or tonight?’

‘Both.’

‘Well, about the bloke—I’m just gonna forget him. And tonight, I think I might hit the bag in the basement. I’ll take the radio down, turn it up loud, and I’ll hit it till I can’t stand up any more.

That was exactly what he did, except for the not being able to stand up part. What happened was I called Octavia to tell her nothing happened, and I went down to the basement with Rube. When Sarah came down as well, she took a good shot of Rube hitting the bag. His face on that picture could only be described as intense, and you could see how the bag was flinching at the force of his hands.

‘Not bad,’ he decided when she showed him.

He didn’t ask to have it though, so Sarah took it up to her room, before returning with cards. For a long time after that we sat around in the basement, playing cards with the radio calling out around us.

A few hours later, Sarah was first to go to bed, leaving Rube and me in the basement.

On his way out, he gave the bag one last punch, unplugged the radio and took it back to our room.

I slept easily for a change and spent Sunday with Octavia down at the harbour.

It was like that on most Sundays. I did school work in the morning and caught the train to the quay. If I had time, I walked. Octavia still came on Saturday afternoons, and during the week she mainly came on Wednesdays. Sometimes, before she left, we walked Miffy. A lot of those Wednesday nights, it was me holding the leash, Octavia smiling next to me, and Rube checking that no-one we knew could see us. As always, Miffy pranced along,
sometimes coughing, sometimes licking his snout, and sometimes barking, if Rube was in the mood to stir him up.

Sometimes I’d go to Octavia’s place and we’d see a movie down there. I didn’t ask any more about inside the house. Sometimes I even forgot all about it. I was just grateful that I was with her and she was okay.

There were times we were together when I couldn’t help but smile.

‘What?’ she’d ask. ‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know,’ was the only reply I could come up with. There was no particular reason for it. I’d look at her and listen. That was enough.

Every Sunday she played her music down at the harbour, and on most Saturdays that was where she came from when she arrived in the afternoon. I could hear the change jangling in her jacket pocket.

A month passed by and one Saturday night I took Octavia to meet Steve. He liked her, and played her some old records that impressed her.

‘Some good stuff here,’ she said.

‘I know.’

On the way back home that night, she said, ‘He loves you too, you know.’

I tried to shrug it off.

‘No Cam.’ She pulled me to stop on the footpath. ‘He does.’ I realised then that, with this girl, there were no truths I could hide.

‘He looks like he’s sorry about the things he said to you,’ she continued as we kept walking.

‘But glad he said them.’

She agreed.

It was a cold Tuesday night at the start of August when Rube finally got another phone call. This time, though, it was Julia. She told him she’d gone back to the previous bloke—the Phonecaller, as Rube and I came to know him.

‘He’s still after you,’ she warned him.

‘Really?’ Rube was bored. ‘What the hell’d I do this time?’ He listened. ‘Well you just tell him to come on over some day and we’ll get it over with in the backyard.’
Julia hung up.

‘Scrubber’s gone for good?’ I asked.

‘Scrubber’s gone,’ he confirmed.

It all seemed to be over, and like he’d told me, Rube didn’t have another girl in the picture yet. All he did was work hard and hit the bag in the basement. The phone calls still came for him, but nowhere near as often. Sometimes he’d abuse friends because he thought it was the Phonecaller again.

‘Ah, Jeff,’ he’d laugh. ‘Sorry mate, I thought you were someone else.’

He came down to the harbour with Octavia and me a few times, but he always ended up leaving us alone and going his own way. He wasn’t unhappy or lonely. That wasn’t in Rube’s character. Something always happened when he was around. If it didn’t, he went looking for it.

‘No offence Octavia,’ he said one Sunday night, ‘but I’m off women.’ We were on the porch after walking Miffy.

‘Till the next one,’ Octavia countered.

‘Of course,’ and he flashed us his trademark smile and went inside.

Down in the underground that night, everything seemed in place. Octavia and I waited for the train and it was like the world I lived in had finally found the right direction.

A few days later, a tragedy unhinged itself and landed at our front door.
okayness

For the first time, a city crowd confronts me on this journey through night, street and darkness. There are swarms of people coming towards me, and each one, I notice, is faceless. A blankness shrouds their eyes and they have no expression at all.

We turned onto a street and there they were, flowing towards us.

The dog weaves his way through, and I follow him, picking my own gaps in the surge of people.

Occasionally, I see a face that’s kept its form.

At one point, I see Sarah finding her own way through, and at another, when I trip, a hand helps me up and it’s my father’s face that meets me when I look up.

I continue. I have no choice.

The thing is, I don’t mind.

I want the crowded world to turn the way it is—to make me find my own way through it, even if that’s a fight sometimes.

As I make my way through, I feel okayness reaching through me.

The funny thing is that okayness is not a real word. It’s not in the dictionary.

But it’s in me.
TORRENTIAL RAIN Poured ITSELF DOWN, BATTERING THE streets and rooftops of the city on a darkened Tuesday afternoon. Someone was smashing their fist into our front door.

‘Hang on!’ I yelled. I was eating toast in the lounge room.

I opened the door and there was a small balding man on his knees, completely drenched.

‘Keith?’ I asked.

He looked up at me. I dropped the toast. Rube was behind me now, asking, ‘What’s goin’ on?’

Keith’s face was covered in sorrow. Dribbles of rain drooled down his face as he slowly picked himself up. He fixed his eyes on our kitchen window and said it, with a crack running through his voice.

‘Miffy.’ He almost went to pieces again. ‘He’s dead. In the backyard.’

Rube and I looked at each other.

We ran out the back and clambered over the fence as the back door slammed behind us. Halfway over the fence, I saw it. There was a soggy ball of fluff lying motionless amongst the grass.

No, I thought, as I landed on the other side. Disbelief held me down inside my footsteps, making my body heavy but my heart wild.

Rube also hit the ground. His feet slapped down into the sodden grass, and where my footsteps ended, his began.

I kneeled down in the pouring rain.

The dog was dead.

I touched him.

The dog was dead.

I turned to Rube who was kneeling next to me.
The dog was dead.

We sat there a while, completely silent as the rain fell like needles onto our soaked bodies. The fluffy brown fur of Miffy the pain-in-the-arse Pomeranian was being dented by the rain, but it was still soft, and clammy. Both Rube and I stroked him. A few stray tears even sprang into my eyes as I recalled all the times we walked him at night with smoke climbing from our lungs and with laughter in our voices. I heard us complaining about him, ridiculing him, but deep down, caring for him. *Even loving him, I thought.*

Rube’s face was devastated.

‘Poor little bastard,’ he said. His voice struggled from his mouth.

I wanted to say something but was completely speechless. I’d always known this day would come, but I didn’t imagine it like this. Not pouring rain. Not a pathetic frozen lump of fur. Not a feeling as depressed as the one I felt at this exact moment.

Rube picked him up and carried him under the shelter of Keith’s back verandah.

The dog was dead.

Even once the rain stopped, the feeling inside me didn’t subside. We kept patting him. Rube even said sorry to him, probably for all the verbal abuse he’d levelled at him almost every time he saw him.

Keith arrived after a while, but it was mainly Rube and me who stayed. For about an hour or so, we sat with him.

‘He’s getting stiff,’ I pointed out at one stage.

‘I know,’ Rube replied, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say a smirk didn’t cross our faces. It was the situation, I guess. We were cold, soaking wet and hungry, and in a way, this was Miffy’s final revenge on us—guilt.

Here we were, just about frozen in our neighbour’s backyard, patting a dog that was getting stiffer and stiffer by the minute, all because we’d consistently insulted him and then had the audacity to love him.

‘Well forget this,’ Rube finally said. He gave Miffy a last pat and told the truth with a wavering voice. He said, ‘Miffy—you were undoubtedly a pathetic individual. I hated you, loved you, and wore a hood on my head so no-one saw me with you. It’s been a pleasure.’ He gave him a final pat, on the dog’s head. ‘Now, I’m leavin’,’ he pointed out. ‘Just because you had the nerve to die under your clothesline in the middle of what was practically a
hurricane, I’m not about to get pneumonia because of it. So goodbye—and let’s pray the next dog Keith and his wife decide to get is actually a dog and not a ferret, rat or rodent in disguise. Goodbye.’

He walked away, into the darkness of the backyard, but as he climbed the fence, he turned and gave Miffy one last look. One last goodbye. Then he was gone.

I hung around a little while longer, and when Keith’s wife came home from work she was quite distressed about what I was beginning to call ‘The Miffy Incident’. She kept repeating one thing. ‘We’ll get him cremated. We’ve gotta get that dog cremated.’ Apparently, Miffy was a gift from her dead mother who insisted that all corpses, including her own, had to be burned. ‘Gotta get that dog cremated,’ she went on, but rarely did she even look at him. Strangely enough, I had the feeling it was Rube and me who loved that dog the most—a dog whose ashes would most likely end up on top of the TV or video, or in the liquor cabinet for safe keeping.

Soon, I said my last goodbye, running my hand over the stiff body and silky fur, still a little shocked, by all of it.

I went home and told everyone the news of the cremation. Needless to say, everyone was amazed, especially Rube. Or maybe amazed isn’t quite the right word for my brother’s reaction. Appalled was more like it.

‘Cremate him!?’ he shouted. He couldn’t believe it. ‘Did you see that dog!? Did you see how bloody soggy he was!? They’ll have to dry him out first or else he’ll never even burn! He’ll just smoulder! They’ll have to get the blow-dryer out!’

I couldn’t help but laugh.

It was the blow-dryer, I think.

I kept imagining Keith standing over the poor mongrel with the blow-dryer on full speed and his wife calling out from the back door:

‘Is he dry yet, love? Can we chuck him in the fire?’

‘No, not yet darlin’!’ he’d reply. ‘I’ll need about another ten minutes I reckon. I just can’t get this damn tail dry!’ Miffy had one of the bushiest tails in the history of the world. Trust me.

Later, in the lounge room, Rube was still talking about it. He managed to laugh now, and we discussed when the funeral might be. Obviously if there was going to be a cremation, there’d be a funeral.
We found out the next day that there’d be a small ceremony on Saturday afternoon at four. The dog was being burned on Friday.

Naturally, as the walkers of Miffy, we were invited next door for the funeral. But it didn’t stop there. Keith also decided he wanted to scatter Miffy’s ashes in the backyard that was his domain. He asked if we’d like to be the ones who emptied them. ‘You know,’ he said. ‘Since you two were the ones who spent the most time with him.’

‘Really?’ I asked.

‘Well, to be honest,’ he shifted on the spot a little. ‘The wife wasn’t too keen on the idea, but I put my foot down. I said, No, those boys deserve it and that’s it, Norma.’ He laughed and said, ‘My wife referred to you as the two dirty bastards from next door.’

Old bitch, I thought.

‘Old bitch,’ Rube said, but luckily, Keith didn’t hear.

I must admit, Wednesday night was kind of vacant without Miffy. Octavia didn’t come over either, so I stayed in Rube’s and my room, reading a book. I could have watched TV, I s’pose, but I was sick of it. Reading was tougher, because you actually had to concentrate and not just sit there. The book I was reading was brilliant, about a guy who jumped from a sinking ship in a storm one night only to find out that it didn’t sink. He was so ashamed that he spent the rest of his life half-running from that incident and half-seeking out danger, to face it and test himself, to finally prove he wasn’t a coward after all. I had a bad feeling it would end in tragedy, and I thought it must be the worst thing to live with guilt and shame.

I made up my mind that I wouldn’t allow that to happen to me. I used to look at myself as an underdog and sometimes as a failure, but that was all starting to end this winter. This year I was standing up, and I wasn’t just saying it, attempting to convince myself.

This time, I believed it.

I said it to Octavia on Saturday afternoon and she held me and kissed me.

‘Me too,’ she answered.

Dad, Rube and I finished work at two so we could get home in time for the big funeral, and by four o’clock it was Rube, Sarah, Octavia and me who went next door. We all climbed the fence.

Keith brought Miffy out in a wooden box and the sun was shining, the
breeze was curling, and Keith’s wife was sneering at Rube and me.

*Old bitch,* I thought again, and you guessed it, Rube actually said it, as a whisper only he and I could hear. It made us both laugh, and I nearly said, ‘Now Rube, let’s put our differences aside—for Miffy’s sake,’ but I thought better of it. I don’t think the wife would have looked too favourably on any comment at this stage.

Keith held the box.

He gave a futile speech about how wonderful Miffy was. How loyal. How beautiful.

‘And how pitiful,’ Rube whispered to me again, to which I had to bite the inside of my mouth to keep from laughing. A small burst actually made it out and Keith’s wife wasn’t too impressed.

*Bloody Rube,* I thought.

The thing was though, it was fitting for it to be like this. There was no point us standing there claiming how much we loved the dog and all that kind of thing. That would only show how much we didn’t love him. We expressed love for this dog by:

1. Putting him down.
2. Deliberately provoking him.
3. Hurling verbal abuse at him.
4. Discussing whether or not we should throw him over the fence.
5. Giving him meat that was a borderline decision on whether or not he could adequately chew it.
6. Heckling him to make him bark.
7. Pretending we didn’t know him in public.
8. Making jokes at his funeral.
9. Comparing him to a rat, ferret and any other creature resembling a rodent.
10. Knowing without showing that we cared for him.

The problem with this funeral was that Keith was going on and on, and his wife kept insisting on attempting to cry. Eventually, when everyone was bored senseless and almost expecting a hymn to be sung, Keith asked a vital
question. In hindsight, I’m sure he wished like hell that he didn’t ask it at all.

He said, ‘Anyone else got something to say?’

Silence.

Pure silence.

Then Rube.

Keith was just about to hand me the wooden box that contained the last dregs of Miffy the dog when Rube said, ‘Actually, yes. I have something to say.’

_No Rube, I though desperately. Please. Don’t do it._

But he did.

As Keith handed me the box, Rube made his announcement. In a loud, clear voice, he said, ‘Miffy, we will always remember you.’ His head was held high. Proud. ‘You were strictly the most ridiculous animal on the face of the earth. But we loved you.’

He looked over at me and smiled.

Not for long though.

Definitely not for long, because before we even had time to think, Keith’s wife exploded. She came tearing across at us. She was onto me in a second and she started wrestling me for the bloody box!

‘Give us that y’ little bastard,’ she hissed.

‘What did _I_ do?’ I asked despairingly, and within an instant, there was a war going on with Miffy in the centre of it. Rube’s hands were on the box now as well, and with Miffy and me in the middle, he and Norma were going at it. Sarah, who was in love with that instant camera by now, took some great action shots of the two of them fighting.

‘Little bastard,’ Norma was spitting, but Rube didn’t give in. There was no way. They struggled on.

In the end, it was Keith who ended it.

He stepped into the middle of the fray and shouted, ‘Norma! Norma! Stop being stupid!’

She let go and so did Rube. The only person now with their hands on the box was me, and I couldn’t help but laugh at this ludicrous situation. To be honest, I think Norma was still upset about an incident I haven’t previously
mentioned. It was something that happened two years ago. It was the incident that got us walking Miffy to begin with, when Rube and I and a few other fellas were playing soccer in our yard. Old Miffy got all excited because of all the noise and the ball constantly hitting the fence. He barked until he had a mild heart attack, and to make up for it, Mrs Wolfe made us pay the vet’s bill and take him for walks at least twice a week.

That was the beginning of Miffy and us. The *true* beginning, and although we whinged and carried on about him, we did grow to love him.

In the backyard funeral scene, though, Norma wasn’t having any of it. She was still seething. She only calmed down a few minutes later, when we were ready to empty Miffy out into the breeze and the backyard.

‘Okay Cameron,’ Keith nodded. ‘It’s time.’

He made me stand up on an old lawn chair and I opened the box.

‘Goodbye Miffy,’ he said, and I turned the box upside down, expecting Miffy to come pouring out.

The only problem was, he didn’t. He was stuck in there.

‘Bloody hell!’ Rube exclaimed. ‘Trust Miffy to be all bloody sticky!’

I wanted to look over at him and agree, but I thought better of it, what with Keith’s wife and all. All I could do was start shaking the box, but still the ashes didn’t come out.

‘Put your finger in it and stir it round a bit,’ Octavia suggested.

Norma looked at her. ‘You’re not gettin’ smart now too are y’ girly?’

‘No way,’ Octavia replied honestly. Good idea. You wouldn’t want to upset this lady at this point in time. She looked about ready to strangle someone.

I turned the box back over and cringed before rummaging my hand through the ashes.

The next time I tried emptying it, there was success. Miffy was set free. As Sarah took the photo, the wind picked up the ashes and scattered them over the yard and into Keith’s other neighbour’s yard.

‘Oh no,’ Keith said, scratching his head. ‘I knew I should have told next door to take their washing off the line . . .’

His neighbours would be wearing Miffy on their clothes for at least the next couple of days.
the pause of death

I pause a moment and thoughts of death stumble into me. The dog allows me this rest, out of respect.

The crowd has cooled and I think of death and heaven and hell.

Or to be honest, I think of hell.

There’s nothing worse than thinking that that’s exactly where you’re going when eternity comes for you.

That’s where I usually think I’m going.

Sometimes I take comfort in the fact that most people I know are probably going to hell, too. I even tell myself that if all my family are going to hell I’d rather go with them than enter heaven. I mean, I’d feel sort of guilty. There they’d be, burning through eternity, while I’m eating peaches and most likely patting pitiful Pomeranians like Miffy up in heaven.

I don’t know.

I don’t.

Really.

I’m pretty much just hoping to live decent. I hope that’s enough.

After a last pause, I move on again.

Into the night.
The question now is, what the hell happened next? Every time I think about the whole death of Miffy debacle, the story gets obscured in my mind.

On Tuesday, I went up to Steve’s and he told me there was a pretty big game coming up that Sunday. The phone calls started up again for Rube and now you could hear Julia the Scrubber in the background as well.

Sarah bought an album for her photos, and when she was laying them out on the floor on Thursday night, arranging them, I went in and sat down to look at them with her. There were a lot of shots there I hadn’t seen before.

Dad getting out of his panel van after work.

Mrs Wolfe sleeping on the couch one night.

An anonymous person struggling down our street when we had all that rain.

Then of course, there was Octavia and me, Rube hitting the punching bag in the basement, and the death of Miffy sequence. Next came various photos of leftovers heating up in the kitchen, the lounge room wall which contained photos of all of us at different times, and there was even a picture of Steve on the street with his football bag, about to leave for a game.

I noticed that the only thing missing was Sarah herself, so quietly, I took the camera, focused it and took a photo of my sister arranging each of the pictures for her album. I cut off her left shoulder a bit, but the main thing was that you could see the peace on her face, and her hands touching the photos. She looked alive.

She examined it and gave it her approval. ‘Not bad.’

‘I know,’ and I left the room again, hoping that Sarah understood what had just happened. It was a small statement saying that I could see into her sometimes as well.

The following Saturday, Octavia took me home. Dad took the day off so I was free.
It was mid-afternoon when we walked down her street and through her front gate. I wondered why my pulse was racing as she opened the door and called out.

‘Ma? You there?’

A lady came from a back room. Octavia told me she didn’t have a father any more. He left, years ago, with someone else.

The lady looked at me and smiled. She had the same mouth as Octavia and the same ocean-green eyes. Just older.

‘It’s nice to meet you, Cameron,’ she said.

‘Nice to meet you, Mrs Ash.’

She was very friendly to me. She offered me coffee and talked. She asked me questions. About me. About the other Wolves. Somewhere between it all, I could tell she was thinking, So you’re the one. I was the one Octavia knew she loved. No better feeling had ever lived in me.

A bit later, we went back down to the old movie theatre and saw a movie called The Agony and the Ecstasy. It was, without doubt, the best movie I had ever seen in my life. It was about Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and how it had to be perfect and how he nearly destroyed himself in the process of doing it. I thought about how much suffering he went through, purely because he had to. I sat there in awe. That had never happened to me before in a movie.

Even when the credits were flashing through the screen, my hand gripped Octavia’s, and we sat completely still.

It was later though when the true importance of that day arrived.

Octavia and I were on the porch, just before we headed to the station, still talking about the movie. The city was covered in cloud and the pale shades of rain formed glowing blankets around the streetlights.

We were talking for nearly half an hour when she asked, ‘Is there anything you ever wanted to do perfectly?’

I concentrated on the rain, which started falling harder, and I knew now what I was going to say. It stretched through me, and I said it quietly.

I said, ‘Something I’d like to be perfect at?’ but now I couldn’t help but look away.

‘Loving you,’ I said. The words climbed from my mouth. ‘I’d want to be
perfect at loving you.’

I waited then, for a reaction.

It came.

‘Cam?’ she asked. ‘Cameron?’

She made me look at her and I could see the feeling rising in her. I pulled her hand up to my mouth and kissed it. ‘It’s true,’ I said, though I knew she believed it. It was in me, and all over me.

‘The only thing is,’ I went on, ‘I’m only human. I’ll just do the best I can, okay?’

Octavia nodded, and although we knew she had to go, we stayed on the porch for a fair while, using the rain as an excuse. The shell still dangled from her neck, but now it didn’t look as obvious as it did at first. Now it looked like it had always been there.

On Sunday afternoon we arrived home from the quay and everyone had already left for Steve’s game. I figured we could walk up there later.

It was Octavia, and me.

We waited.

We talked.

We waited a bit longer, and sooner than I thought, she took me by the hand and we went to Rube’s and my room. We shut the door. We shut the curtains.

In there, I sat on the bed and Octavia crouched down and took off her shoes. There were no words as she stood up and came over to me.

Looking at me, she unbuttoned her shirt. Her hands went around to her back and she undid herself. The underwear dropped to the floor, and next, I heard the button of her jeans come undone. Then the zip. She stepped away, bent down with them and stepped out, left foot first, some imbalance, then the right. The jeans stayed on the ground and I could only take in all of her loveliness.

She kneeled over me, taking my jacket off, then undoing my flanno shirt.

Her hands stroked down the nakedness of my stomach and went up to my arms as she took off my shirt. She let her fingernails run over the skin of my neck, and slowly, they made their way down my chest, my ribcage, back to my stomach.
She whispered, ‘It’s all right Cam,’ and when the shivers stretched out across my skin, she gently undid my pants and took them off me. The shoes went with them and then the socks. It was all in a ruffled pile next to us when Octavia laid me down on the floor. ‘It’s all right,’ she whispered again.

‘How can—’

‘Shhh . . .’

Her voice was soothing, but I had to finish what I was going to ask. ‘How can you do this with me when another bloke hit you and hurt you? How can you bare to be naked and have me touch you?’

Octavia stopped.

She spoke.

‘You’re you,’ she said.

She kissed me and touched me and held me. She covered me and ran her lips across my body and I had never felt a room spin and curl and turn to waves like the room did that day.
perfection

We move out to an open field where the sky becomes the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

We stand under it.

Perfection.

And I wonder how it would feel to touch it.

How would it feel to touch something that was done as perfectly as a human could ever hope to do? Where would you go from there? What would be left to see?

Would you be inspired?

Or would you be depressed in knowing that you could never hope to complete anything that came close?

We stand there and the darkness returns.

Then, for just a moment, the sky is made of Octavia Ash and me.

For a human second.

Then gone.

It makes me think that I’d like to love her perfectly.

To give all of myself.

Or at least, as best as a human like me can do.
IN A WAY, SOMETIMES I WISH THESE PAGES DIDN’T GO further than the final words of that last chapter, but winter wasn’t quite over yet.

It was the next Tuesday night when Rube and I went up to Steve’s and then on to the oval. We all had shots at goal now and even though I missed most of the time, it didn’t really matter. Steve was as accurate as always, and he was looking forward to the finals.

Before we went up there, Rube had another phone call. It was the first one in a while and I heard him speaking loudly, forcefully.

‘Yeah, that’s what you said last time, mate. You ain’t showin’ up. You’re wastin’ my time, and your ma’s phone bill by the sounds of it.’ He listened a moment. ‘Well just pay me the bloody courtesy of being there this time. Okay? Right. Good.’

I’d walked into the kitchen just as he was hanging up.

‘Again?’ I asked.

‘Yeah.’

That night, we spoke across the room. We hadn’t done that for a while, and it felt good. Eventually, we got onto the subject of Julia the Scrubber and the Phonecaller.

‘Eight o’clock Friday,’ was what Rube told me in the dark. ‘If he shows.’

‘He’ll show,’ I said.

‘How do y’ know?’

‘I don’t. It just sounds like he’s been tryin’ to make you sweat a long time, but sooner or later, he’ll come after you. This Friday might be it.’ I remembered that girl. Julia. I didn’t trust her. There was no way Rube would be left alone. They’d be coming for him for sure. ‘I think this time it’ll happen.’

‘Well, we’ll see.’
‘You need me there?’
‘If y’ want.’
‘I want.’
That was all there was to it.

We both fought the bag in the basement the next night and I got myself used to the idea it was going to happen.

When the Friday came, Rube’s knuckles were like concrete, and mine were hardened as well from hitting the bag. We left the house just like the previous time, at quarter to eight.

We arrived at the old train yard early.
We waited.

My heart wounded my ribs.

And again.

There was nothing.

By quarter past eight I decided to leave.

Halfway up the alley, I knew my footsteps were alone. Rube was waiting there and I don’t think he was leaving until the guy had shown up.

‘You’re not comin’?’ I turned around and asked him.

He shook his head. ‘Not this time.’

I stepped back towards him and said, ‘You want me to wait?’

He shook his head and waved me away. ‘Don’t worry about it Cam. I think you’ve been down here enough.’

I turned around, and I admit it, I wasn’t unhappy to be leaving. Sure, there was some guilt in me as well, but this was the end for me. At the top of the alley, just before I turned onto the street, I swivelled one last time to have a look at my brother. His shadow was leaning against the fence, still waiting. One of his feet was up against the wire and I could just make out his warm breath going smoky in the last night air of winter. For a moment, I nearly waved, but I turned and kept walking.

When I made it home, Sarah asked where Rube was. I told her he decided to stay out for a while. It wasn’t unusual so nothing more was said.

I tried to stay up and wait for him.
The book I was reading was good but I fell asleep on the couch anyway. When everyone else went to bed, they woke me and told me to go as well, but I tried reading again. I was too tired though, and I was determined to see Rube come walking in the front door.

I wanted to see his face.

Unmarked.

Unbruised.

I wanted to hear his voice tell me to get up as he laughed on his way past me.

But that night, my brother Rube didn’t come home.

It was just past midnight when I woke up with a silent start. My eyes opened and the yellow light from the lounge room sliced me through the eyes.

I was hit twice by a thought.

*Rube.*

*Rube.*

His name was repeated in me as I scissored off the couch and walked slowly into our room. I was hoping against hope that he would be in there, sprawled out across the bed. The darkness of the hall captured me. The creaking floorboards gave me away. Then, as the door crept open, I sent my eyes into the room, ahead of me. It was empty.

I turned the light on and shivered. It blinded me and I realised. I was going back out, to the night.

In the lounge room, I pulled my shoes on as quiet as possible, slipped my jacket back on and headed for the kitchen, towards the front door. A pale light from the moon was numb in the sky. I was out in the uncertain coldness of the street.

A bad feeling intensified in my stomach.

It made its way to my throat.

Soon, as I walked fast to the old train yard, I could feel it gathering on its way through me. There were drunk people who made me edge out onto the road. Cars sped towards me with the brightness of their lights, then passed and faded away.

My hands sweated inside my jacket pockets. My feet were cold inside the
warmth of my shoes.

‘Hey boy,’ a voice slung out to me. I avoided it. I pushed past the guy who said it and broke into a run and had the alley in sight.

When I made it there, I could feel my heartbeat ripping me open.

The alley.

Was empty.

It was empty and dark except for the widening light of the moon that seemed to spray down on each forgotten corner of the city. I could smell something. Fear.

I could taste it now.

It tasted like blood in my mouth, and I could feel it slide through me and open me up when I saw him . . .

There was a figure sitting down, crooked, against the fence.

Something told me Rube didn’t sit like that.

I called his name, but I could barely hear it. There was a giant pounding in my ears that kept everything else out.

Again, I called. ‘Rube!?’

The closer I got, the more I knew it was him. My brother was slumped against the fence and I could see the blood flooding his jacket, his jeans, and the front of his old football jersey.

His hands gripped the fence.

The look on his face was something I’d never seen on him before.

I knew what it was because I was feeling it myself.

It was the fear.

It was fear and Ruben Wolfe had never been afraid of anything or anyone in his life, until now. Now he was sitting alone in the city and I knew that one person alone couldn’t have done this to him. I imagined them holding him down and taking turns. His face almost made its way into a smile when he saw me, and like a breeze through the silence, he said to me blankly:

‘Hey Cam. Thanks for comin’.’

The pulse in my ears subsided and I crouched down to my brother.

I could tell he’d dragged himself to this position on the fence. There was a
small trail of blood smeared to a rusty colour on the cement. It looked like he’d climbed two yards when it was too much and he couldn’t go on. I had never seen Ruben Wolfe defeated.

‘Well,’ he shuddered, ‘I guess they got me good, huh?’

I had to get him home. He was shivering uncontrollably. ‘Can you get up?’

He smiled again. ‘Of course.’

Rube still had that smile perched on his lips when he staggered up the fence and collapsed. I caught him and held him up. He slipped through me and fell face down, holding onto the road.

The city was swollen. The sky was still numb.

Ruben Wolfe was face down on the road with his brother standing there, helpless and afraid, next to him.

‘You’ve gotta help me Cam,’ he said. ‘I can’t move.’ He pleaded with me. ‘I can’t move.’

I turned him over and saw the concussion that surrounded him. There wasn’t as much blood as I’d originally thought, but his face was brutalised by the night sky that fell on him and made him real.

I dragged him back to the fence, propped him up and lifted him. Again, he nearly collapsed, and when we started walking, I knew he wasn’t going to make it.

‘I’m sorry Cam,’ he whispered. ‘I’m so sorry.’

He was on the ground again and we’d only travelled about five metres.

I rested for a minute as my brother continued lying on his back . . .

As the moon was swallowed by a cloud, I slid my arms beneath his back and legs and picked him up. I was holding Rube in my arms and carried him up the alley and onto the wider world of the street.

My arms ached and I think Rube fell unconscious, but I couldn’t rest. I couldn’t put him down. I had to make it home.

People watched us.

Rube’s tough curly hair hung down towards the ground.

Some extra blood landed on the footpath. It dripped from Rube onto me and then onto the path.
It was Rube’s blood.
It was my blood.
Wolfes’ blood.

There was a hurt somewhere far down inside me, but I walked on. I had to. I knew that if I stopped carrying him it would be harder to keep going.

‘Is he all right?’ a young party-going sort of guy asked. I could only nod and continue walking. I wouldn’t stop until Rube was in his bed and I was standing over him, protecting him from the night, and from the dreams that would wake him in the trampling hours until morning.

The last turn onto our street finally came and I lifted him in one last effort.

He moaned.

‘Come on Rube,’ I said. ‘We’re gonna make it,’ and when I think about it now, I don’t understand how I made it that far. He was my brother. Yes, that was it. He was my brother.

At our gate, I used one of Rube’s feet to free the latch and walked up the porch steps.

‘The door,’ I said, louder than I’d wanted to, and after putting him down on the porch, I opened the flyscreen, got my key in, and turned back to face him. My brother. My brother Rube, I thought, and my eyes ached.

As I walked back towards him, my arms throbbed, and my spine climbed my back. When I picked him up again, we nearly fell together into the wall.

On the way through the house, I managed to jam one of Rube’s knees into a door frame, and by the time I got us into our room, Sarah was standing there, sleepy-eyed until terror strangled her face.

‘What the hell—’

‘Quiet,’ I said. ‘Just help me.’

She stripped the blanket off Rube’s bed and I placed him down on it. My arms were on fire as I took his jacket and jersey off, leaving him in his jeans and boots.

He was cut up and badly bruised. A few ribs looked broken and one of his eyes was pitch black. Even his knuckles were bleeding. He got a few good ones in, I thought, but all of that meant nothing now.

We stood there. Sarah looked from Rube to me, recognising his blood on
the arms of my jacket. She cried.

The light was off now but the hall light was on.

We could feel someone else arrive and I knew it was Mrs Wolfe. Without even looking, I could picture the hurt expression on her face.

‘He’ll be okay,’ I managed to say, but she didn’t leave. She came towards us as Rube’s voice fought its way next to me.

His hand came out from under the blanket and held on to mine.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘Thanks brother.’

The pale light hit me from the window. My heart howled.
the eyes have it

I crouch down, with tired arms and eyes and legs.

Silently, the dog pleads with me to come a little further. His head still hangs and his breath is visible in the last dark air before the dawn.

As we walk the street, the sky turns the pistol-grey of first light.

At the end of the road, someone waits, and I know who it is. He wears the same clothes as me and holds his hands inside his pockets, like me. He waits.

When the dog sits, I touch him for the first time—that rough, rusty fur, still reaching defiantly for the sky. I love the force of it on my fingers. Feeling the truth of it.

And then I think of the eyes.

I look into him and let the eyes ignite into mine.

The eyes of hunger.

The eyes of desire.

I want to stay but don’t, softly lifting my hand and turning away.

When I turn back, I speak to the eyes. I nod and say thank you, knowing I’ll be taking the rest of the road alone.

The human waits at the end of the road, but before I get there, I turn around one last time.

I half-expect the dog to leave, but he doesn’t. He’s paid for this moment. He’s brought me here, and now I owe it to him to carry on and finish it. He deserves to be fed, and I whisper.

‘It was hunger that guided me through the night.’ My voice wavers. ‘It was hunger. It was you . . .’

He’s heard what I said, and turns now to walk away.

Rough and raw and real, like the feeling in me.
I’LL GIVE IT TO HIM.

Rube actually got up the next morning and went to work with Dad and me. He was bruised and still prone to constant bleeding, but he still showed up and worked as hard as he could. I don’t think there are many people who could take a beating like that and get up the next day and work.

That was Rube.

There isn’t anything else I can say to explain it.

Everyone woke up in the morning when he and Dad argued, but once it was over, that was it. Mrs Wolfe asked, or actually, begged Rube to stay in at night more often, and there was no way he’d be arguing with that. He agreed completely and we filed out to the car and left.

It was mid-afternoon when Rube finally asked about some of the hazier details of the previous night.

‘So how far was it Cam?’ His words came and stood in front of me. They wanted the truth.

I stopped work. ‘How far what?’

‘You know.’ He caught himself in my eyes. ‘How far did you carry me last night?’

‘A fair way.’

‘All the way?’

I nodded.

I’m sorry,’ he went to say, but we both knew it wasn’t needed.

‘Forget about it,’ I said.

The rest of the afternoon passed by pretty quickly. I watched Rube work at times and knew that somehow he’d be okay. He was just that type. If he was alive, he’d be okay.
‘What are y’ lookin’ at?’ he asked me later, when he saw me watching him and wondering about it.

‘Nothin’.’

We even afforded a laugh, especially me, because I decided I had to stop being caught when I was watching people. Watching people isn’t really a bad habit in my opinion. It’s the getting caught I need to cut out.

When we made it home, Octavia was already there. When she saw Rube, her face was similar to that of Sarah’s the previous night.

‘Don’t ask,’ he said on his way past her.

When she saw me, she looked relieved that I didn’t look the same. She could only mouth the words, What happened?

‘I’ll tell y’ later,’ I answered.

On my desk in Rube’s and my room, there was a present waiting for me. It was an old grey typewriter with black keys. I stopped and looked at it from a few steps away.

‘You like it?’ came a voice from behind. ‘I saw it in a second-hand shop and had to buy it.’ She smiled and touched the back of my arm. ‘It’s yours, Cam.’

I walked to it and touched it. My fingers ran along the keys and I felt it under me.

‘Thank you.’ I turned around and faced her. ‘Thanks Octavia. It’s beautiful.’

‘Good.’

Sarah was on the phone for a while, talking to Steve. His semi-final was on the next day and Octavia and I decided to go. What I didn’t count on was Steve coming down to our place later that night.

Octavia and I were on the porch when his car pulled up and he walked towards us. He stood there.

‘Hi Octavia. Cam.’

‘Hey Steve.’

I stood up and we both watched each other. I remembered the last time we’d spoken down here. Tonight, though, Steve’s face was shattered, like it was at the oval, way back at the start of winter.
‘I heard what happened last night,’ he began. ‘Sarah told me on the phone.’

‘You came to see Rube?’ I asked. ‘He’s in bed, but I’d say he’s still awake.’ I went to open the door, but Steve didn’t go in.

He stayed in front of me and didn’t move.

‘What?’ I asked. ‘What?’

His voice was abrupt, but quiet. ‘I didn’t come here to see Rube—I came to see you.’

Octavia shifted in her seat and I remained focused on my brother Steve.

He said, ‘Sarah told me you carried him home from the old train yard last night . . .’

‘It wasn’t anything—’

‘No. Don’t lie Cam. It was something.’ He stood above me, but it was only a physical thing now. A matter of height. ‘It was something, all right?’

I agreed with him. ‘All right.’

We smiled at each other.

Steve stood there.

I stood there.

The silence collected at our feet, and we smiled at each other.

He went inside a bit later but didn’t stay long. Octavia left as well and I went in to write on the typewriter. In truth, it scared me, because I wanted to write perfectly on it. I was still staring at it just after ten o’clock.

Soon, I thought to myself. The words will come soon . . .

Octavia and I went down the harbour earlier the next day to make sure we didn’t miss Steve’s game.

I was near the water, listening to her distant song, when Rube arrived at my side. I was surprised to see him but noticed his face was already starting to heal a little.

‘Hey Cam,’ he said.

‘Hi Rube.’

He was nervous, I could tell.

‘What are y’ doin’ here?’ I asked.
His hands played with his pockets as he crouched down. We both stared at the water and I could tell Rube was falling apart, just slightly. He looked on and said, ‘I just had to come and tell y’ somethin’ . . . ’ He looked at me now. We were in each other’s eyes.

‘Rube?’ I asked.

The water of the harbour rose up and dived down.

‘See,’ he said. ‘All my life I sort of expected you to look up to me, y’ know?’ The expression on his face reached for me.

I nodded.

‘But now I know,’ he went on. ‘Now I know.’

I waited but nothing came. I asked. ‘Know what?’

He stared in me and his voice shook as he said, ‘That I look up to you . . . ’

His words circled me and went in. They got beneath my skin and I knew there was no way back out. They were in there for always, and so was this moment, between Ruben Wolfe and me.

We crouched there.

Thinking truth.

And when we finally stood up and turned to face the world, I could feel something climbing through me. I could feel it on its hands and knees inside me, rising up, rising up—and I smiled.

I smiled, thinking, The hunger; because I knew it all too well.

The hunger.

The desire.

Then, slowly, as we walked on, I felt the beauty of it, and I could taste it, like words inside my mouth.
the edges of words

I’m home.

I sit here on the back steps of my mind as the city stands up as always to the horizon.

Daylight is born as winter dies, and the hunger grows in me.

The typewriter waits . . .

I think now, of the edges of words, the loyalty of blood, the music of girls, the hands of brothers, and of hungry dogs that howl through the night.

There are so many moments to remember, and sometimes I think that maybe we’re not really people at all. Maybe moments are what we are.

Moments of weakness, of strength.

Moments of rescue, of everything.

I’ve wandered through the real world, and written myself through the darkness of the streets inside me.

I see people walking through the city and wonder where they’ve been, and what the moments of their lives have done to them. If they’re anything like me, their moments have held them up and shot them down.

Sometimes I just survive.

But sometimes I stand on the rooftop of my existence, arms stretched out, begging for more.

That’s when the stories show up in me.

They find me all the time.

They’re made of underdogs and fighters. They’re made of hunger and desire and trying to live decent.

The only trouble is, I don’t know which of those stories comes first.

Maybe they all just merge into one.

We’ll see, I guess.

I’ll let you know when I decide.