



# **THE** **TIN** PARROT

**Robert Bradley**  
edited, and with additions, by  
**Sam Lloyd**







For Dunno



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# Contents

FORWORD BY ROBERT BRADLEY

FORWORD BY SAM LLOYD

## BOOK I

- 1 BURLEY COLLEGE/DADLY BRADLEY 1
- 2 THE NEW RECRUIT/CLIFFORD SMITH 19
- 3 LA MARSEILLES/SOLOMON SMITH 37
- 4 HER MAJESTY/BETTY BRADLEY 59
- 5 THE MORATORIUM/BENJAMIN SMITH 73
- 6 JUDAS/HARMONY SMITH 93
- 7 THE ISLE DE FRANCE/REX CONNOR 115
- 8 THE ARTLAWS/WILLIAM 133

## BOOK II

- 9 THE BLUE CATERPILLAR/FOUR WISE MEN 151
- 10 EUTHYPHRO'S DILEMMA/JOHNATHON SMITH 177
- 11 THE DEATH OF SOCRATES/THE PRODIGAL 193
- 12 ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR/GOUGH WHITLAM 219
- 13 THE LAST DANCE/CHARLIE 235

## BOOK III

- 14 THE CORAL SEA/CORY CORRIGAN/THE ORACLE 247
- 15 ATTICA BASE/THE FAIR-HAIRED BOY 273
- 16 FULL CIRCLE/BROTHER SOKRATIS 287
- 17 THE PACKAGE 311

## **Forward by Robert Bradley**

Thank Christ for Sam! I may have ended up a journalist, but I am no writer, at least not this kind of writing. He took my simple story and made it into a work of art.

Socrates Smith was my friend. To the end I will defend him. Everything I want to say about him is contained in this book.

I want to say this about the other people in the book. While I was angry at the way Socrates was treated, I am not angry now. I hold no grudge against anyone. People who see themselves in this book should remember they are part of a story. A story isn't real life. No-one in this book should feel embarrassed or ashamed, any more than Socrates or I should. And my memory isn't so good. Everything in this book really happened - sort of - but maybe sometimes people say or do things they really didn't. If anyone feels hard done by I apologise. I certainly don't mean any harm to anyone. I love everyone - EVERYONE - in this book and I hope they will understand that this is a work of art and a work of love.

My friend Socrates once asked me to be his Plato. I have done my best. You know what? I think Australia could do with a few more Socrates Smiths. That would be AWESOME.

*R.B.*

## Forward by Sam Lloyd

When Robert approached me at a party in 2014, announcing that ‘he had a story to tell’, I felt like the doctor who wishes he hadn’t told anyone what he did for a living.

Luckily, it turned out he *did* have a story - and a good one. I encouraged him to publish it and offered to read a draft. It needed work, but I could see a potential beyond the simple tale of youthful friendship Robert had written; together we re-wrote and revised the manuscript.

The main additions for which I am responsible are the stories about Robert’s and Socrates’ parents and other identities. These contain information Robert could not have known at the time; I wrote them based on historical research and interviews with the people involved, where this was possible. My intention was to illuminate the origins of Socrates’ complex character and delineate a moment of absurd optimism and long-awaited change, in a location so remote that far-off events had a fantastic quality for the sensitive, troubled young man Socrates clearly was.

I did not know Socrates Smith; I hope that together, Robert and I have brought him to life.

S.L.



## BOOK I

*Damn you, Socrates! Go and die and expect me to remember all those darned dialogues and write them down . . . is this how you felt, Plato?*

*But bugger it, I promised.*

*So, where to start? My dad's health scare; the news we were moving to Attica; the drone of the little Austin on the long drive from Melbourne; those dusty brown towns with sleepy brown dogs and silent brown people and milky tea and stale cake in cafes with doilies over the milk jugs; the first sight of green vines laid out mile after mile, painted by an artist who didn't have the right colors, too vibrant and artificial; finally, the town of Attica itself: too neat, too clean, trees too well pruned, grass too well-watered and buildings washed and shining as if nothing bad ever happened . . .*

*So where will I begin? Perhaps here, where I first saw you all those years ago, on a day so like this one, every object and place exposed by the brilliant sun under a limitless, deep blue sky.*

*PS. I never did sacrifice that chicken to the God of Healing; but then, do we know if the real Plato did, either?*

## CHAPTER 1



# Burley College

“SMITH! SOLOMON . . . SMITH!”

The thermometer in Attica had hung around 105 for seven days straight, and outside the house the hot air hit you like you’d walked into a wall. I was struck too, that first day of February 1970, by the confusion, the noise, the runnings and yellings of the grey-shirted schoolyard, the white posts and red brick, all glaring in the sun or disappearing into shadow, all foreign for a new boy from the city: fair and freckled, hair neat from my mother’s combing, tie tightened, and the memory of a wet kiss on my clean pink cheek.

It was too hot for my mother to accompany me on the first day at my new school; she sweated in her kitchen while I lumped my lonely bag along Barton Avenue to the gates of Burley College. In twos and threes, chattering students with brown arms and white legs joined the stream, co-

alescing with familiarity into bigger groups, banking up around the school gates, a noisy hesitating mass unwilling to take the final plunge across the threshold.

A stick thrown unwillingly into a river, I entered the fenced-off world of the schoolyard, walking up the curving flower-bordered driveway to the ivy-covered brick building in which I had met the headmaster two days before.

The administration block of Burley College was two-storied, with a lower floor of stone-clad gothic arches forming a cloister. A drawing in the hallway outside the headmaster's office showed the original design: a grander building of three stories capped by an impressive tower. In ornate copperplate the title declared: Burley College of Agriculture, Attica.

"The depression", Mr. Dreadstone had explained, noticing my interest in the picture.

"Sorry?" (I thought he said: 'it's depressing')

"It was not completed due to the Great Depression. Work had been delayed due to the Great War, and when the depression came along . . . compromises had to be made."

In its diminished form the building reminded me of a corner store box of chocolates: a fancy exterior with a practical lid. Still, the cloistered base of real stone, tall multi-paned casement windows above, and a cloak of ivy gave it a hint of the authority and permanence of the fancy private schools I had seen in Melbourne. The school motto was in Latin.

"Smith! Solomon . . . Smith!

"He's for it!" said a small fair-haired boy standing next to me. We watched a teacher march along the cloister towards a figure half-hidden in the shadows.



“What’s going on?”

“It’s Snake; he’s got Socrates again.” The boy rubbed his nose and grinned at my puzzlement. A group of boys made a hissing sound: “ssss . . .”

“Who’s ‘Snake’?”

“Mr. Cutting. He’s got Socrates for not wearing school uniform again.”

There was laughter among the students. An older boy explained: “He’s nuts. He’s always doin’ this. He wears the school uniform for a few days, then he turns up in some weird stuff. Snake always catches him and sends him home.”

A gathering crowd of students watched as the teacher, smart brown suited, thirtyish, slim, with a beard trimmed to a neat point, confronted the boy who at this distance looked to be dressed in some kind of military uniform: I could see a khaki shirt and a flash of medals. We all strained to hear what was being said, but we were too far away, and after his first outburst the teacher was talking quietly and earnestly while the boy looked back at him with a blank stare. The longer he stood there, silent and staring, hands in his pockets, the more agitated the teacher became; his voice grew shrill and he grabbed at the boy’s shirt.

The students around me laughed. “Snake’s getting really mad. He’ll be off to Chrome Dome for the strap.” But instead of being hauled off for punishment, the little play abruptly ended; the boy turned his back on Mr. Cutting and walked nonchalantly in our direction. Behind him, the teacher stared at us, a small hard brown bundle of tense and futile energy framed by the arches of the cloister.

I examined this odd apparition. He was around my age, seventeen; average height, a little plump, and not athletic: his shoulders were too narrow for his waist. His face

was rounded and rather pale; either side of it a raft of curly dark brown hair cascaded down from a central part like two hairy mats. His eyebrows were dense and dark, and below them a pair of intense pale blue eyes flitted in our direction.

“What’s goin’ on, Socrates?” asked the little fair-haired boy.

The apparition stopped and looked vaguely around.

“What’s the temperature today?”

“Dunno; maybe one hundred and . . . fifty?” ventured the little boy.

“Idiot. One Fifty!” said another. They sniggered.

“It’s bloody hot”, said someone.

“Yes”, said the apparition. “It’s hot. So why are you all wearing buttoned up shirts and ties?”

It suddenly occurred to me that we were; like I hadn’t noticed what I had put on this morning, the neat knot my mother had tied around my neck.

“So, do you think it’s healthy to wear all these clothes in the heat?”

I caught myself thinking ‘no’. He continued. “Course not. But tell that Snake.”

“So, what happened?”

“Uh, I just have to go home and change.”

“At least you get to go home”, said the small boy.

The apparition smiled. He was wearing a khaki army shirt, to which had been added enormous bright blue velvet shoulder pieces like military epaulettes; each one was held on by a large silver button and had a massive silver fringe or tassel hanging down his arm. The shirt was hanging out and unbuttoned; below it I could see frayed blue denim flairs and a pair of ‘treads’: open toed sandals made from car tires. The front and back of his shirt were covered in badges and medals, with peace signs and hippy slogans: ‘PEACE’; ‘LOVE’; ‘I PROTEST AGAINST EVERYTHING!’ Through the gap in his shirt I could see a medal-

lion on a chain, a white, hairless chest and a fancy plaited leather belt.

“So, what the fuck do you do it for, you fuck?” said one of the bigger boys. “You know they’re going to send you home.” The apparition shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

As he mooched off I thought: ‘if you’re hot, do you have to walk around in all those medals and tassels and stuff?’ Still, when the big boy stooped to pick up a stone I found myself grabbing his arm.

“Friend of his?”

“Hardly.”

“He doesn’t have any friends”, said the fair-haired boy.

“Stupid fuck! Up yourself!” the bigger boy yelled, dropping the stone.

“What did you call him?” I asked my young friend.

“Socrates, Socrates Smith; he’s the school radical!” He ran off to join his mates chanting “Socrates! Socrates! Smelly-sock-rates!”

Beyond the ivy-clad administration building lay ‘the quad’, older and humbler, bordered by single story red brick classrooms, an encircling verandah of white wooden posts, and tin roofs on which wags hoisted garbage bins in end-of-year pranks. Further back again, a collection of aging wooden ‘portables’ surrounded by sad peppercorn trees. Beyond that? Just dirt and prickles and a thousand miles of red dust and not a town between Attica and Darwin.

I followed the other students into the quad. A loudspeaker crackled from a corner of the veranda. “Jeremy Tomtit, your mother is here with your lunch. If you are at school, please come to the office.” It hit me how distant my own mother was, far away on the other side of that low cyclone fence, in another universe of Laminex and scones.

“Titty Titmouse! Shitty Tithouse! Where are you? Have you lost your laundry?” A voice approached along the veranda of the quad, followed by a broad shouldered, stocky lad with a big square face, grinning lips, and a wide flat nose, framed by long hair that had once been some sort of basin cut. He did a kind of dance, approaching random students: “are you Tittly Tit Shit?” A group of serious-looking girls rolled their eyes and moved away. He giggled as he approached me. I noticed a hint of stubble on his chin. “Are you . . .” I shook my head.

“Chill, Dunno.” A tall, slim-waisted man-boy with a smiling, cheerful face framed by a well-combed head of blond hair reached out and attempted to put my interrogator into a headlock. “Chill out, my friend. Don’t annoy the new boys.” He grinned at me. “I apologize for Dunno.”

Dunno shook his hair and looked at me quizzically. “You’re new. What class are you in?”

“6B”.

“Hey, Tools! He’s in our class!”

“Uh huh.” The taller boy assessed me with intense green-blue eyes. I had never seen a more honest, open, handsome face. The speaker crackled again. “Will Jeremy Tomsit, that’s Tom-S-it, please come to the office?”

“I’m Dunno”, said the stocky boy with the big nose. “This is Tools. Guess we are in the same class.”

“Robert Bradley”, I said.

“Assembly!” someone called.

As we headed towards the admin. building, Dunno danced beside me, jerking as if he had too much energy and didn’t know what to do with the excess. We hadn’t far to walk: a straggly line of students confronted us, snaking out of the hall stairwell across the hot bitumen towards the ‘quad’.

“What’s going on?” It seemed this was going to a frequent question today.

“It’s the piano”, a girl said; “they can’t find the keys to the piano.”

“The piano? Why do they need a piano?”

“To play the school song”, someone said. “And ‘God Save the Queen’”, said someone else.

“Why do they lock the piano?”

“So no one can play it”, explained Dunno, with a broad grin.

“I don’t get it.”

“Stan diMaggio got up there once and full on played all this jazz music and Chrome Dome went mental; heard this ‘primitive thumping’, he called it, in his office down below, went running up the stairs, found Stan on the piano and Itch banging on a garbage bin. So now they lock the piano so no one can play it.”

“So why can’t we go up?”

“We can’t go up because we’re going up for assembly. You can’t have assembly without the song. You can’t have the song without the piano. So we can’t go up.”

“But it’s so hot!” I felt my tie and thought of the boy in the army shirt.

“Do you think Chrome Dome cares about that? We don’t get to go home unless its 105.”

“But it *is* 105!”

“Not in Chrome Dome’s office it’s not!”

Someone called out: “Kitty Wheatley’s fainted!” I saw a thin fair-haired girl stretched out on the black asphalt.

The teacher I had seen earlier with Socrates Smith sprinted past us on his way to the hall, a shiny metal object in his hand. As he passed a few of the boys hissed a long, low and distinct ‘sssssss’. He turned his head and gave us all a searching stare. The line started moving.

As we filed slowly towards the hall, Dunno jerked and spun beside me. “Tools can do anything. Tell him about your trip across the Nullabor with your cousin.” Tools grinned and shook his head. Dunno continued: “the chassis was so rooted the engine started to fall out. They had to hold it in with fencing wire. He’s a mechanical genius.

He can build a wicked amplifier with a couple of AX7s.”

I looked at him blankly.

“AX7s? Valves? Don’t you know anything about electronics?”

I didn’t.

“Don’t worry. We’ll teach you.”

In agitated bursts that matched his way of walking, Dunno told me that a group of my classmates had come to Burley College from South Attica Primary on the far end of town. “We were all mates there: me, Tools, Itch, Joy Boy, the cowboy. We’re all nuts; especially The Marshall – he’s genuinely certified. There he is now. Hey, watch it dude!”

Some bigger boys pushed past us; I caught a glimpse of a slim young man with a short conservative haircut and long sculpted sideburns. By this time, we were a chaotic mass jammed into the dark stairwell of the ivy-covered brick building and I couldn’t ask any more questions.

There was a Roneo-ed sheet of paper on my seat.

“What’s this?”

“School song.”

I picked up the paper and read some of the lines:

*Attica, home of the heroes,  
Whose likes we may yet see again;  
Jason, Pericles and ‘Memnon,  
In new lands your faces shall be seen;*

*Attica, pride of the Empire,  
In battle your sons shall be brave;  
Like scions of Eton and Harrow,  
Their King and country they shall serve;*

“Crap, isn’t it.” I stared uncomprehendingly at the paper. “Chrome Dome’s nuts about singing it. Hang on!”

## The Tin Parrot

The headmaster, a tall, gaunt man with a permanent arch to his back and a dark suit like an undertaker, strode to the microphone. "Good morning, students. We will commence with the singing of the National Anthem." Discordant sounds emerged from a battered piano at the side of the stage, and we stood to a slovenly attention.

*God save our gracious Queen  
Long live our noble Queen  
God save The Queen!  
Send her victorious  
Happy and glorious  
Long to reign over us  
God save The Queen!*

The big hall on the second floor of the administration building resounded with bad singing, the timber paneling and honor boards looked down on a crowd of restless students, and the blazing sunlight was temporarily dimmed by the tall thin windows and the hanging ivy, so that for a moment I forgot I was in a hot dusty town in the middle of Australia. The Queen, satisfied at our efforts, gazed down from her portrait between the Union Jack and the Australian flag.

I looked around the hall at a sea of ruddy pink and white faces. One face stood out: a single Asian face.

"Who's that?" I asked Dunno.

"That's Marty Wong."

"The most un-Chinese person in the school", added Tools.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's gotta be, hasn't he", explained Dunno. "He's a real cool dancer and he's got an awesome collection of bubblegum records."

"He spends all his time not being Chinese", added Tools.

"But he is, right?

"Of course he is", said Dunno; "he lives over the Golden Kingdom."

I noticed another unusual face: dark. "You've got an aborigine!"

"What? NO WAY. That's Raja Singh, the Indian exchange student!"

The headmaster returned to the microphone. He had a habit of whipping off his glasses and staring at us, before replacing them to read his notes. I whispered to Dunno. "I see why you call him 'Chrome Dome'." Dunno sniggered. The headmaster's gleaming, bald, head was truly a work of art. A semi-circular remnant of Brill Creamed hair only served to accentuate the glowing peak of his scalp.

"Good morning students (glasses off, stare) and welcome to the beginning of another year at Burley College. I want to say a few words to you today about responsibility." There was a groan from the students around me. "That's original" said someone. Responsibility was apparently a favorite theme of the undertaker. In a long and rambling address, he enthused about the 'gospel of work' and the 'gospel of responsibility'. He heaped praise on those who organized the school Fete, the sports teams, or raised money for charity. He was scathing about 'drop-outs' and 'wanderers': "pessimists who can see nothing hopeful for them or for society. We want none of these. We want people who will contribute, play the game, and support the team."

At the word 'drop-out', a military shirt leapt into my mind and for a moment I looked around the hall for that shock of frizzy brown hair. But of course: he had been sent home. "What about that Socrates guy?" I whispered to Dunno. "Socrates? Yeah, well he's different. He doesn't mind people knowing who *he* is."

"In a moment we will sing the school song", continued



Chrome Dome. "We have sung this song since it was written in 1924, by the school's then music master. Its words have filled this hall every week since that time, reminding us of our duty to the school, to our town, and our country. Some things never change because they don't need to. They are perfectly formed; they 'do the job' and our job is to tend and nurture and respect them."

"That's right", said Dunno. "Nothing ever changes around here. I can't wait to get out."

"Some of us already have", snorted Tools. I thought he meant himself, but he was looking at the clean-cut boy with the long sideburns, who was writing in a book and failed to notice when everyone around him stood up to sing.

Our wretched rendition of the song apparently pleased Chrome Dome, who with a beaming smile handed over to Mr. Cutting, the 'Snake' who I had seen in operation earlier in the day. If Chrome Dome was the school's philosopher, Snake was its storm trooper: a zealot determined to enforce a strict interpretation of the rules. He wasted no time in reading out a long list of misdemeanors that we must avoid. Smoking was high on his list, as was fraternization between the sexes in certain remote parts of the school ground. "Good on you, Snake!" whispered a boy near me "Now we know where to go!" A vision suddenly flashed through my mind of all of us here, clean and pure, dutifully belting out the school song, while down among the trees on the far side of the oval something perverted was occurring, a rustling in the deeper darker recesses of human behavior. And slithering across that oval was a huge brown snake.

"You know what?" asked Dunno as we walked to our classroom. "We're like those weeds that grow in the cracks in the footpath. They pull us out, but we keep coming back!"

For the rest of that day, the classrooms and corridors and halls remained stubbornly foreign. As I walked to the school gate I was glad to escape from this isolated society within whose artificial walls all sorts of oddities proliferated.

I thought of my father, finishing up for the day, tidying his desk in his little office at the Paradise Cooperative Packing Company, with its hint of art deco and socialism. He'd been there a couple of weeks now; I wondered if, like me, he felt that he had arrived at the ends of the earth and if the people he encountered were equally curious and obscure.

I longed to see him, and my mother cooking tea; I longed for the smells and sounds and touches of my family. I ran down the hot, baking, sun-reflecting concrete footpath towards home, my schoolbag slipping on my shoulders, the back of my shirt dripping with sweat. As I lay in bed that night, listening to the sound of cicadas in the lawn and beetles pinging against the fly-wire, I thought about the boy with the blue eyes, who wears military uniforms to school, and has no friends.

## Dadley Bradley

“TIME FOR A CHANGE?”

“Well I never!” said Derek Bradley, throwing the Attica Daily Cultivator down on the kitchen table. The rising sun sent slanting yellow beams through the trees at the edge of the garden and across the lawn. The golden light shone on the surface of the Laminex table, highlighting the curved chrome of the kitchen chairs. The heat of the day had not yet arrived. He read again the offending article:

“That time has come, according to well-known Attica lawyer Clifford Smith, the new candidate for Labor following a meeting of the local party branch held at the Imperial Hotel on Tuesday evening.

Mr. Smith will have the chance to test his claim in the forthcoming by-election for Mulga, after the surprise retirement of the sitting member, Mr. Winston Burstall. Mr. Burstall has held the seat of Mulga for the Country Party since 1946.

The by-election will be a crucial opportunity for Labor to consolidate its position for the 1972 election, given that they very nearly won the seat – and the national poll – in 1969.

Denouncing attacks on the ALP as being a tool of the unions, Mr. Smith told our reporter: “The party’s leader, Gough Whitlam, has acted strongly to reduce union influence. The Labor Party stands for equal educational opportunities for all, fair and affordable medical treatment, decent housing, a dignified retirement, better planning of our cities and towns, conservation of our national estate, and an end the bombing and burning and killing and maiming in Vietnam.”

Derek Bradley walked to the refrigerator and retrieved a rectangular plastic container with a thick red elastic band securing the lid. He took an apple from the fruit bowl on the table and placed it next to the lunchbox. He placed the lunchbox and the apple in a paper bag. Next, he took a thermos flask that had been draining next to the sink and filled it with hot tea from a large teapot. The tea made a gurgling sound. The gurgling sound of the tea usually gave him great satisfaction: it signified a satisfactory end to his morning preparations. Today he found no enjoyment in it; hurting from that annoying newspaper article, he upset the thermos and sprayed hot brown liquid across the sink and his pressed grey trousers.

‘Dadley Bradley! Mind not on the job!’ he mouthed as he mopped up the mess with a dishcloth.

Derek Bradley’s immaculately ironed trousers accompanied a pair of gleaming shoes shone to a mirror-like finish, tight elastic sided socks (always pulled up, leaving ribbed marks on his white legs), a tightened belt, a striped tie (always) around the crisp white collar of the shirt, a suit jacket (never without a jacket) and opal cufflinks. Add to this the shaved neck and short Brill Creamed hair, and every inch of Derek Bradley was shone, cut, tied or creased into a caricature of correctness. Some people might have been surprised, then, that this formal man rather liked the pet name his son Robert had given him: ‘Dadly’. For he was also a man of simple amusements, a sentimental man, and the silly rhyming of the name appealed to him. Even in his own thoughts, he found himself saying: ‘Well, Dadly Bradley, what will we do next?’ ‘Has it been a good day, Dadly Bradley?’ ‘Dadly Bradley: it’s time to go home!’

Derek Bradley picked up the bag and the thermos and walked to the door.

The hurt of the newspaper column followed him out to the car, it hopped into the passenger seat of his well-maintained but dated Austin ‘Cambridge’ and accompanied him as he drove down Barton Avenue. ‘What a fine, prosperous, safe place Attica is!’ thought Dadley as he proceeded down the manicured main street, turned right into 7th street and headed for the bridge that would take him to his destination: The Cooperative Packing Company on the outskirts of the little town of Paradise on the far side of the river. Crossing the bridge. Dadley turned on the car radio.

*“What we are witnessing today, in the whole of the Western world, is a massive attack on Christian values organized by*

*an alienated avant-garde."*

It was the whining but oddly comforting voice of B. A. Santamaria, a Catholic theologian and social commentator whose regular radio spot was syndicated around the country.

*"This disaffected group and their Communist fellow travelers control the tertiary institutions that train the leaders of thought and the professional classes. They educate those who dominate the media. This radical, alienated element detests and seeks to destroy every institution which our civilization has built up to protect the human being from the barbaric impulses of his own nature."*

Dadly was not a Catholic, but he liked this man Santamaria. Behind his strident, whining voice there was something fatherly, like Menzies, like . . . 'I don't know', thought Dadly, 'like the old Australia: the sheep's back, church on Sundays, the Empire. Certainties.' But there was urgency in that nasally voice; the world was changing, and Santamaria didn't like it. Dadly felt the hurt resurface. He turned off the radio.

The far side of the wide river was undeveloped compared to the vast vineyards and orchards of Attica. Much of his journey was through uncleared bushland until he reached the outskirts of Paradise, an irrigation settlement much smaller, and more recent, than its cross-river cousin.

Dadley parked the Cambridge outside the Paradise Cooperative Packing Company, whose art deco brick facade hid the cavernous tin shed of the packing operations. Dadley disliked going into the shed, where groups of swarthy men gathered, talking loudly in their languages, ignoring him when he needed to find someone or ask a question. He headed straight for his little wooden-partitioned office,

on the left side of the corridor that led from the curved brick entry on the street corner.

On the other side of the corridor, a mirror image of his, was the only other office in the building. This is where the manager usually worked, although to be honest, thought Dadly, 'usually' was not very often. Dave McIntosh, unlike Dadly, enjoyed the factory floor and disliked his desk. He could often be seen down at the loading area, yacking to the 'blockies' when they delivered their fruit. At lunchtime, when Dadly was opening his little lunchbox, manager Dave was not to be seen. He would drive the five miles to Willsworth, the nearest big town, and park his Ford Falcon outside the RSL Club, into whose carpeted interior he would disappear for the best part of the afternoon.

In his office, Dadly Bradley was safe among the smell of wood and leather and pencils. So, it was with some annoyance that he greeted a knock on his door at mid-morning.

"Accus'me, Mista Badly" said the small, dark man. "I am Tony. Mia moglie, my wife, she is vera sick."

Derek Bradley didn't think this had anything to do with him.

"Could possibly get a 'vance?"

Tony had a crooked nose, his hair was oiled and wavy, he smelt of garlic, and he kept looking around the room, avoiding Dadly's gaze. Dadly thought he looked like a man who might have a knife in his back pocket.

"I'm sorry", said Dadly, "I can't just hand out money like that. You'll have to talk to the manager."

He must have done so, because later in the morning Dave McIntosh poked his head into Dadly's office: "you can give that Tony a few bob against next week. His old lady's crook." In Dadly's view this was weakness, not compassion, but he complied and later that day was embarrassed

by the smelly little man who shook his hand with genuine gratitude and cried.

Dadly looked at his watch. It was twelve o'clock. He reached under his desk and retrieved the paper bag, the apple, and the thermos flask. 'Why do things have to change?' he wondered, sweeping the crumbs off the flattened paper bag. He thought back to that morning's Daily Cultivator. Why should anyone think that 'urban development' or 'the environment' needed radical improvement? Why did this man Smith, and behind him the ominous figure of Gough Whitlam, conspire to make grand gestures when only a few minor things needed reform? Australia had never been more prosperous: the share market was booming; Poseidon - in which he had a small parcel of shares - was going through the roof! Wages were up. Unemployment was miniscule. Even the Vietnam War no longer occupied the front pages. Health . . . yes, well there he did admit some changes were needed. His recent health scare had left the family well out of pocket.

It occurred to Dadly that today was Robert's first day at school. Was Burley College a *'hotbed of alienated radical youth'*? He smiled: hardly likely! But in the city, yes: The Melbourne Herald regularly carried stories about wild student protests, and pot-smoking draft-dodgers shuffling between safe houses. In a couple of years Robert could be called up, thought Dadly; perhaps the government is a bit slow . . .?

The afternoon wore on. There was not a lot for him to do some days; grape picking had only just begun, and it would be weeks before the lines of trucks began to arrive at the shed with their loads of newly dried sultanas and raisins.

Manager Dave appeared around three, red-faced and vague

from his visit to the club. Dadly could hear the races being called on his radio and the rustling of the newspaper as he checked his bets. Dadly suddenly felt very alone in his little office, hemmed in by the dark-covered ledgers, the trays of invoices and receipts, and the wooden filing cabinets.

“Dave, I would like to leave early today, if that’s OK”, he found himself saying over the sound of the 3:30 race from Marrackville.

Dave nodded and waved his hand, his attention focused on a small plastic transistor radio on top of the open paper on his desk.

Dadly Bradley walked out of the Paradise Cooperative Packing Company with his empty lunchbox and his jacket over his arm. He slumped into the hot vinyl seat of the ‘Cambridge’, momentarily wincing from the heat of the steering wheel, placed the lunchbox and jacket on the seat next to him, and adjusted the rear-view mirror. Then he drove out of the unmade bit of ground that served as a car park towards the main road.

Here he did something odd: perhaps it was the lingering annoyance of all that political talk; perhaps it was the strangeness of leaving work at 3:45, when the sun was still high; instead of turning towards Attica and home, he swung the wheel in the opposite direction.

“Damn!” said Dadly; “I’ve turned the wrong way: I’ve turned to the left!”



## CHAPTER 2



# The New Recruit

SOCRATES SMITH DIDN'T APPEAR for the rest of that first week of school. There were two Year Six classes and he was in the other; he was not to be seen at recess, and the one class that we shared, French, proceeded without him, one of the girls explaining to Miss Trigg that Solomon Smith had been 'detained at the pleasure of the headmaster', raising a murmur of giggles.

My mother came to school with me early one day, book list in hand. She was rather shy and didn't much like coming up to the school; she did it because we couldn't afford all the books new, and there was a second-hand stall. We spent ages looking at the used book table, checking the dog-eared and graffitied offerings. "Look Robert! Modern Maths 2 and it's got barely a mark on it!" I knew that for my mother a couple of dollars saved was extra food for that night's table; still, I was secretly glad each time she was forced to buy a new book. I loved their freshness. I

held the books to my nose and breathed in their smell of new ink and glue: I rifled their crisp, sharp-edged and shiny white pages.

Later that day, Dunno said to me, “you’d better come and meet the cowboy.” We were standing in the shade of the quadrangle veranda at recess. The youth with the short hair and sideburns was lounging against the wall near the lockers, writing in a small leather-bound notebook. I had learnt by now that his name was Trevor Koch. Dunno warned me that ‘no matter what he said, I must act normal’.

“Hey cowboy! Watcha doin’?” Dunno winked at me.

“That’s Mr. Chandler to you, boy.” Trevor spoke in a western drawl he must have learnt from episodes of ‘Gun-smoke’ and ‘Bonanza’. “As it happens I am toting up the winnings from our previous game in Tombstone.”

“Poker” confided Dunno.

“The game of kings”, drawled the cowboy, crossing out a line and frowning.

“Mr. Chandler, I’d like you to meet Mr. Bradley.”

He looked up at us questioningly. “Bradley, eh? No relation to Bad John Radley of Wyoming, I hope?” He searched my face with a practiced expression and a raised eyebrow. I caught a glimmer of a smile.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“That’s good; I don’t want any trouble in my town.” He returned to his calculations.

Apart from the sculpted sideburns, the most obvious signs of Trevor Koch’s alter ego were his studded leather belt and shiny brown leather shoes with Cuban heels. Dunno told me he had a U.S. Marshal’s badge; I looked but there was no sign of it today. Tucked discretely around his neck was a black bandana. The effect was subtle enough to pass off as a neat schoolboy and escape the observation of Snake Cutting.

Dunno and I were about to leave when he said: “I don’t

mean to be rude. Welcome to our little town.” He smiled and offered me his hand. “Nathaniel Chandler. You can call me Mr. Chandler. You look to me like rather a tenderfoot, Mr. Bradley. But I like the look of your leathers. Been writing something - other than poker scores. Maybe it’s about you.” He cleared his voice and read from the little book.

*“The lone rider.*

*I’m the lone rider, a stranger to this town.  
I got no time for the charms of the city;  
There’s a wide prairie out there: green grass and flowers.  
A new land: open, and wild, and purty.”*

He closed the book. The interview was over. As we walked way I said: “he’s a poet?”

“Ain’t it a wonder? He’s been like that since Grade Five. He’s another kind of genius. Our class is full of them.” Dunno looked at me shyly, as if telling a great secret.

“You know what?”

“What?”

His eyes were shining. “We’re all fuckin’ AWESOME!”

I wondered what Dunno’s ‘genius’ was.



The next day the moving truck arrived with our things from Melbourne. I raced home from school, eager to re-discover the treasures of my former life. My mum had already rolled out my floor rug with a scene from ‘The Flintstones’; I had it since I was small and was embarrassed to see it. Likewise, as I pulled my collection of plastic model planes, and a series of football posters out

of their boxes, I was surprised to find them childish and foreign.

“What’s the matter, Robert? Aren’t you going to put your things up?” my mum asked as I sat in the middle of my room, gazing at these relics of a past age.

“I don’t know; I’m not sure if I want them now.”

“You’d better keep some of them, Robert; your room will be so empty otherwise.”

Empty; yes. That is how I felt: empty and adrift. Like this timber and fibro box of a house that could blow away any moment in some fierce inland dust storm. I remembered our redbrick house back in the city: the density of a world where pavements and garden walls were solid and secure, and lawns soft and yielding. In Attica the patchy lawns gave no comfort; they were hard and full of prickles that insulted your bare feet, they dribbled out into weeds and red earth at every fringe. How I longed for the soft grass, the hazy skies, the enclosed yards of the city.

How could I, in my room, re-create that world with a few plastic figurines and a couple of photographs? On all sides I was threatened by the encroaching strangeness: the hard, blue light, the dry red soil, so close on the other side of the flimsy fibro walls. At the same time, curious as that landscape might be, and the people who inhabited it, both were beginning to get under my skin. Intense and slightly crazy, my new friends stood out in relief, just like the trees and flowers and buildings of Attica, illuminated by that great encompassing dome of sky.

Watering the garden that evening for my mother, I found something very odd: the fine red sand that underlay our lawn turned to liquid once you added the smallest amount of water; if I turned on the tap and inserted the garden hose into the lawn I could keep pushing it further and further into the ground; like a burrowing worm it eagerly followed its own head of gurgling water deeper and deep-

er into the earth. Where did it go? I kept pushing until all the hose was used up. Somewhere, deep under the dry red surface, the water was gurgling out, unseen, into dark pools. I imagined that world of the underground worm, dark, moist, mysterious: what strange creatures dwelt in that hidden world?



One night towards the end of that first week, I walked down the street from our house to The Centreway and up that short street to a tin hall, perched on timber stumps beside a small park. The little hall bore the sign: '9th Attica Scout Troop'. The sky was ablaze from horizon to horizon with orange and purple clouds; the lights shining from inside the hall looked promising and welcoming. Among the cars parked out front there was a big white Holden 'Statesman'.

I had been a Venturer scout in Melbourne and expected to be one here; it was a homecoming for me to enter the noisy hall, its clanging and screaming of running boys, their shouts and stampings ringing from the unlined walls.

"I'm afraid it's awards night", said the scoutmaster. "We've got rather a lot of people here." He waved his hand at the rows of parents seated along the sides of the hall. "Still, why not stay and watch the ceremonies, then we can talk about enrolling you into the Venturers after?"

The scoutmaster, Paul, found me a seat among the parents. Soon the running crowd were quieted and organized into lines. Some words were said, the flag was raised, and we stood for God Save the Queen. A little bored, my bottom numbed by the hard bench, I was drifting off to sleep by the time the scoutmaster started his talk.

“Good evening – ah - boys, parents, honored guests. I’m very glad you could come this evening. Ah - I welcome you all to 9th Attica Scouts’ awards ceremony this evening.”

Scoutmaster Paul was a forty-something Englishman, tall, thin and boyish, with sparse blonde hair. He was not comfortable with speaking in public, and as he struggled through his short speech I regretted even more coming on this particular night.

“Now we – ah – usually try to invite someone special to speak and give out the awards - ah – on these nights and tonight we certainly do have someone special to do this honor – ah – this evening – ah – we are honored - I am delighted to welcome - the Commissioner for Scouts for the Attica District, Mr. Clifford Smith.”

There was scattered applause from the small group of parents at the sides of the hall. Mercifully, at this point scoutmaster Paul reached into his top pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses and a tightly folded piece of paper, which he laboriously unwrapped.

“Clifford John Smith is a graduate of the University of Sydney, where he received a first-class degree in Law. He was admitted to the New South Wales bar in 1947 and has served as a Councilor on the Law Society of New South Wales and editor of its journal. Following a successful legal career in Sydney, Mr. Smith and his family moved to Attica six years ago. He is presently a partner in the law firm of Bates, Morrison, and Smith.

While in Sydney, Mr. Smith served for three years as a Councilor on the Gosford City Council. He is a member of the Australian Labor Party and has recently announced that he will be their candidate in the forthcoming by-election for the federal seat of Mulga.”

The scoutmaster turned to look at the man sitting behind him; the hall was dimly lit by a couple of overhead bulbs and my view of the hidden dignitary was limited to two large and knobbly white knees protruding from a

pair of khaki shorts. Paul wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

“Clifford Smith devotes his spare time – I don’t suppose – ah – there is much of that! (a guffaw from a couple of men at the back) – to numerous public causes. He is active in Rotary, is a member of the Methodist Church congregation, and serves on the committee of the Attica Base Hospital. Mr. Smith has a wife, Harmony, and two children: Benjamin and Solomon.”

I jerked upright. Smith? Solomon? Was this Socrates Smith’s dad? I looked at the man who now stepped forward: would I see the son mirrored in the father? Clifford Smith turned to thank scoutmaster Paul; they exchanged a few words and I was surprised to see the scoutmaster point in my direction.

Clifford Smith was overweight, like his son, but in a middle-aged way, when excess has become institutionalized and can no longer be excused as youthful laziness; a few too many beers and steak lunches had destroyed any physique this man had once had. His scout uniform – ridiculous on a middle-aged man – reminded me of Solomon’s caricature on the first day of school. But no mockery here: the geometrically perfect hat, the clean and carefully tied scarf, the rows of badges and medals on a spotless khaki shirt demanded respect. A strong brown belt held together the all-too-ample belly. The effect was impressive, but I felt somewhat uneasy at the sight of this figure, which so immediately brought to mind Socrates’ parody.

Smith senior had a well-proportioned face and exceptionally smooth skin: ‘like a child’s’, I thought. His grey eyes were also soft and boyish; the folds of a developing double chin were the only visible concession to age. From this handsome face came a voice that was engaging and confident. I had never heard a politician speak; when his eyes swept the room, I felt I was in his grasp; enveloped

by his charisma, I was obligated to like and believe him.

“My theme tonight is relationships” came the smooth and reassuring voice. “The scouting movement, as you know, is built on relationships. On the trust between scout leader and scout; on the bond we share as Baden Powell’s brothers. A family too is based on bonds of trust between family members: father and son, husband and wife. And a country is the same: a government must win the trust of the people, and in relationship with them govern wisely and implement good policies. So what kind of government does Australia need? What kind of policies? And how should the government relate to the people? These are important questions at this moment because Australia is at a turning point. It is 1970, the start of a new decade. It is also the anniversary of the landing of Captain Cook, the founding event of this great nation. At this anniversary, we should ask ourselves: are we really growing up? Are we any wiser? Are we clearer about what we want to do as a nation? Are we ready to take our part in the noble tasks of humanity?”

Clifford paused for emphasis and accepted a drink of water from a glass offered by scoutmaster Paul. I looked around to see the reaction of the audience. Most people looked either politely interested or bored. “What a waffler!” muttered a man to his mate. Clifford continued:

“Tonight, I have just been told, we have a new scout in the hall. This new recruit (Clifford waved his arm in my direction) likewise stands at a moment of opportunity, a point of decision. What does the future hold for him? Like our country, he is at a crossroads. What will he become? Will he seize its destiny and forge his own identity?”

My neighbor nudged me: “he means you!” My face turned red; I froze and stared at the floor. Ignoring my plight, Clifford continued with increased emotion:

“My friends, Australia stands on a moral precipice!



Will it continue to follow its misguided friend America in its foolish adventure in Vietnam? Will it continue to deny justice to its indigenous people at home? Will it continue to be a quarry for foreign mining companies? Or will it grasp its destiny in its hands, offering independent counsel to its international friends, land rights to its native people, an equal distribution of wealth and opportunity to its citizens? Will it do this, my friends, or will it fall at the first hurdle, timid and afraid of its own shadow? The time is ours to grasp. In grasping it we achieve greatness. Our destiny waits."

The hall was so quiet I could hear my own breathing. Someone coughed. "Well it's all very well", I heard a man say, "but we've got to have bread on the table, too." "Too political!" nodded his friend. I gathered the speech hadn't gone well. But another man with a red, excited face yelled 'hear, hear', and a group of sedate women smiled as if to say: 'what a handsome man! What nice words!' They nodded to the red-faced man and began clapping politely. Scattered applause, mixed with a murmur of discontent, echoed through the metal room. The two disgruntled men walked out.

After the awards had been handed out, Scoutmaster Paul came to talk to me. "I hope you didn't mind being picked out; it's Clifford's way."

"No; it was fine", I lied.

He looked at me with an excited look in his eyes. "It was a good speech." His mouth quivered slightly. He went off to find the forms for me to sign. I sat waiting in my chair at the side of the hall. Most of the boys had left. I noticed the portly figure of Mr. Clifford Smith moving in my direction.

"Well, the new recruit!" Without allowing me to reply, he continued: "It is a great moment, you know, in our lives when we embark on something new; it is the prom-

ise and right of youth to grasp new opportunities. You look to be an intelligent young man and have made the right decision to join the scouts, a fine organization, in which you may go far." I felt overwhelmed by the praise, the evocation of grandeur, yet a little nonplussed by his assumption that I was new to scouts. But I had no chance to correct him as he sat next to me, moving the chair closer so that he could talk earnestly and intimately. "A fine organization, and one that can give a boy direction in life. You know I have a son; a fine boy but he lacks direction. Scouts can give you that direction. Take this opportunity. A fine organization" He seemed about to continue, but aware perhaps that he was beginning to repeat himself, changed tack, smiled and, putting his hand on my arm, asked: "and what are your goals in life? Your personal goals?" I demurred that I was not sure and that I had just arrived from Melbourne. "Ah, a new boy in town! Well then, this is the place for you to make friends. True friends and companions who will stand by you, isn't that right, Paul?" He moved away to let the scoutmaster join our group and I was slightly relieved to escape from the soft fleshy hands, the smell of beer and after-shave, of the big man.

I signed the paperwork. I could come next week and try on a uniform. Mr. Clifford Smith looked at his big gold wristwatch, declared himself late for another meeting and excused himself. I was thinking: 'what an impressive man to have as a father!' But there was something about him that troubled me, and later it occurred to me: he hadn't asked my name.

Clifford Smith

CLIFFORD SMITH had a lot on his mind when he walked out of the 9th Attica scout hall that night. It wasn't just the mixed reaction to his speech; lying on the passenger's seat of his Statesman was the Daily Cultivator, the prominent placement of his campaign announcement courtesy a favor he owed the editor.

Normally the headline would have elated him, but there were two other news items in that edition that had caught his eye. The first announced the construction of a new monument in the park near his home, to honor Vietnam War dead. This was an initiative of a recently elected and enthusiastic city councilor, Eden Young. The other was a short item quoting a right-wing theologian, Mr. B. A. Santamaria, warning teachers from encouraging students to attend a forthcoming anti-war rally in Melbourne: "Teachers who manipulated the children of others for political reasons, such as the Vietnam Moratorium, should be dismissed, Mr. B. A. Santamaria said last night, speaking on his weekly television program 'Point of View'."

Mixed with the pleasure of seeing his candidacy announced, Clifford Smith now felt regretful at lifting those inflammatory lines about the Vietnam War from one of Gough Whitlam's speeches.

Driving down Barton Avenue to the Attica Club, he considered his position. It was Party policy to oppose the war, end Australia's involvement and bring the troops home. But Mulga was a conservative electorate; its large area included not just Attica city, but farming communities founded by returned soldiers from the past two world wars. To be seen to support radical anti-war protests, or worse, to snub the war memorial opening, would be the end of his candidacy. 'I must tread carefully', thought Clifford. He knew Eden Young slightly; although he was conservative he was unaligned to any party, independent minded and a maverick. At a practical level they had many points of agreement. He would contact Eden, offer

to help him with some mutual project, and ensure he was invited to the memorial opening. At the same time, he must distance himself from the Moratorium. How to do this while not appearing to contradict party policy? He walked into the Attica Club, strode up to the bar, and ordered a scotch, neat.

Clifford Smith was still pondering these matters next morning, sitting at the oak dining table in the dark timber-paneled dining room of his house, playing with his sardines on toast with his fork. The cutlery was old silver, with bone handles, passed down from his mother. He dropped the fork and sat back in his chair, his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. In another room a clock chimed. Otherwise the house was quiet.

Clifford enjoyed the stillness of these mornings. 'God knows', he thought, 'it's better when I'm alone in this house'; he was glad in the knowledge that his lazy son would not surface until he needed to go to school, and that he would not see his wife before he left for work. 'A fat lot of good they are to me', thought Clifford, his thoughts returning to his career. He walked over to the large black telephone on the sideboard. "Is that Bill Gordon? Oh, Bill, good morning; there are a few things in the paper . . . yes, I agree . . . look, I think we need to discuss how I am going to handle this Vietnam thing . . . yes, OK, tonight. Thanks Bill." Bill Gordon, who coincidentally was his son's English teacher, was secretary of the local branch of the Australian Labor Party. It would be good to get his advice, and that of other members, on how to deal with this potential minefield in his electoral path. He next rang Eden Young and arranged to meet him for lunch.

'The old Goanna will make a meal out of this if I'm not careful', thought Clifford, meaning the retiring member for Mulga, who until the Country Party selected its candidate, was still effectively his opponent for the job.

He walked out of the dining room, down the hall to his study. Its walls were lined with books; it had a secure, secluded atmosphere. Here, more than anywhere, he felt safe from the failures of the family that surrounded him: the ungrateful son sleeping down the hall; his incompetent sibling who had not amounted to much and lived a useless life in Adelaide; the wife . . . aaagh! What a disaster. A man needed support, comfort, stability; what little Clifford Smith felt he had was confined to the four walls of this book-lined room. He loaded his brief case with papers and walked out the door.

“Look, Eden, I know we don’t see eye to eye on every issue, but I have a great respect for your integrity. I also believe that you and I can be very useful to each other.”

Clifford Smith was playing his most charming and persuasive self in the dining room of the Imperial Hotel. In the back of his mind was the troubling thought that he needed Eden Young’s help a lot more than the young Councilor needed him.

“Eden, I am very impressed by your initiative on the new Vietnam memorial; and I want to make it clear that the Australian Labor Party, in opposing our involvement in the war, intends no disrespect for those who have served.” Clifford cleared his throat. “To make this position clear, I will tonight recommend to the Party branch that a sum of two hundred dollars be donated for the construction of the memorial.” Clifford was taking a punt here that the committee would agree, but he at least knew that there was about that amount of money sitting in the branch’s bank account.

Eden sat quietly and considered his lunch companion. What did he want? Well, he knew of course: to get elected. ‘That’s all he cares about’, thought Eden. “You know, Clifford”, he said, “This memorial is not some kind of game. These men went to war in our service. And we treat them like shit. They deserve our recognition. That’s what

I care about.”

Eden Young was barely thirty; young for a town Councillor, he had become interested in politics through the Young Farmer’s Federation, a social organization in which he had found both a mission and a wife. In common with many young people on the fringes of the Country Party, his bright patterned shirt and long side-burns showed a concern with being up-to-date. Although not a Party member, he was attracted to Doug Anthony, its progressive leader who was not afraid to talk about the ‘role of women’ and the ‘scourge of pollution’. Where he differed from Clifford and the ALP was more a matter of symbols than substance, means rather than ends.

“So, thanks, Clifford. I appreciate the offer; unfortunately, the project is already fully funded. It has been underway for some time now.”

Clifford shifted in his chair and looked out at the blue sky beyond the fronds of the palm trees along 7th Street. Why was everything he wanted as distant and unattainable as that blue sky? He sent out a desperate fishing line: “Well, perhaps there is some way that we can enhance the project, add some value to it . . .”

“Look, Clifford, let’s not beat about the bush. I know you’d like to be involved in this project, but it’s a bit late now. However, there is a way that you can help me. I don’t expect you to depart from your Party’s policy on Vietnam; however, I am concerned about this anti-war protest movement that’s going on down in Melbourne. I don’t want it to become an issue locally. Everyone knows the time has come to leave Vietnam. But it has to be done in the right way. These ratbags in Melbourne want to march and stir up trouble. They have a wider agenda. It would mean a lot to me if you came out and distanced yourself from the Moratorium.”

That was it? Clifford felt a sense of relief. It would cost him little to make such a statement; support for the

protest movement was not Party policy, even if there was some mutual sympathy among 'the left'. The 'old Goanna' would accuse him of hypocrisy, but others would see it as an example of his independence.

"I would be happy to do that, Eden", he said. "I will get something into the paper to that effect."

"Then I think you have your invitation to the opening", said Eden, stating for the first time what had been on Clifford's mind the whole morning.



The two grim faced Country Party men walked out of Winston Burstall's office in a shopfront on Peartree Avenue. 'So that's it', thought the old Goanna as he gazed after them; 'you're setting yourself up to be quite an anti-war campaigner, Mr. Smith.' He too had The Daily Cultivator open on his desk. 'Well, that's good for me, or rather, not for me, but for . . .?' Yes, who would succeed him as the member for Mulga? He drummed his fingers on his desk and looked again at the paper. He reached for the phone and barked down the line: "Eden? We need to talk!"



After Dadly Bradley made his wrong turn leaving the Paradise Cooperative Packing Company, the road continued on straight, a narrow ribbon of bitumen with trees close to each side so that stopping and turning back was impossible. Soon, even the bitumen ran out and Dadly found himself driving down a narrow dirt track, still with no opportunity to turn. 'Damn, Dadly, what have you done!' he thought. 'Mind not on the job!'

He didn't notice the faded sign among the trees declaring 'Paradise Aboriginal Mission' but he did start to notice that the bush on either side of the road was becoming littered with cans and bottles, bits of clothing, sheets of tin and children's toys. 'Must have hit the rubbish dump' thought Dadly, considering the danger to his car tires should he drive into the trees to turn around. While looking for a place to do so, a figure appeared on the track. Dadly slammed on the brakes, and although not going fast, he only just stopped short of a young aboriginal boy, about sixteen years old, completely naked, standing in the middle of the rutted, orange-brown track.

The boy stared at Dadly. Dadly stared at the boy. 'What the hell?' thought Dadly. He leaned out of the car window, calling "Hey, kid, watch out, you're in the middle the road!" The boy remained still, his mouth chewing on something. He was well built, with skin like dusty grey coal covering well-proportioned muscle and sinew. 'He's about the age of my son' thought Dadly. The boy continued staring vacantly towards, or through, Dadly's car as if it wasn't there. Dadly pressed the horn on the steering wheel, at the same time noticing, among the trees, a number of shacks built of corrugated iron, bits of wood, fibro and hessian bags. Around these were a litter of cast off household items, mattresses, chairs and the charred evidence of campfires. The boy did not move. Dadly Bradley opened the car door and stepped out. "Hey mate, could you get out of the way please?" Still the boy did not move. Dadly noticed that his polished shoes were sinking into the fine soft red dust; it was rising up and coating the shiny brown leather. In the distance, among the trees, dark figures were moving. He got back into the car, put the gears into reverse, backed to a place where there was a clearing, turned the car around, and headed towards the safety of the smooth, sealed main road, driving a little faster than strictly necessary.



## The Tin Parrot

When Derek Bradley got home that evening, he started to say to Mrs. Bradley: "a funny thing happened to me today". But he did not continue and Betty Bradley, standing with her back to him at the sink, did not ask him to continue his story. Actually, even if he was given the chance, Dadly Bradley thought he would never be able to explain what had happened to him that day.



## CHAPTER 3



# la Marsellais

SOLOMON SMITH APPEARED in the schoolyard as normal the following week. Every day he came to school looking like a careless version of everyone else: shaggy hair protruding from his school uniform, always alone. There was none of the showiness of the first time I saw him; he seemed like any other schoolboy in his light grey shirt and dark trousers – except for the extra attentiveness of teacher Cutting, who would appear around some corner, take him aside, and chat to him in a concerned manner: this and the looseness of the knot in his tie.

Mostly, however, ‘Snake’ Cutting was busy on other duties. One day I was standing near the South School boys, who had a thing for playing poker on the tables near the oval. I had started to hang out with this group but had yet to be invited to join their games; I was slow at cards, and these boys played fast, with a theatrical intensity that I could not match. On this day, Trevor Koch had brought

a cowboy hat to school in his bag – a black one, with curled up brim and silver piping, a Mississippi river boat gambler’s hat – and put it on when they played. Suddenly someone whispered: “Marshal, put away the hat”, which he immediately did in a swift, practiced movement, without looking up. “We got trouble?” he asked in his Western drawl. “Snake. He’s coming this way.”

Snake was indeed coming toward us, but poker was not the game he was after. He continued on, along the edge of the oval to a spot near the portable classrooms where he became lost in the shadows of the peppercorn trees. “Is he gone now? You boys can put away your guns”, drawled Chandler the gambler.

“What the hell! He’s got binoculars!” We all looked, even ‘Chandler’ gave a sideways glance. Secure in what he thought was impenetrable shade, Snake was peering through a pair of binoculars towards the far side of the oval, that forbidden place of smoking and sin. The glint of sun on glass was clear from our angle. “Good on you Snake!” someone declared. Everybody laughed. “Hey, Mr. Cutting, there’s someone lurking around the portables!” someone was brave enough to shout, but it did not reach the teacher, who continued his observations for some time before disappearing.



On Wednesday I had French; this was the one class I shared with Socrates Smith, although I had yet to see him there. But this week I anticipated his appearance; I got to class early and sat at the back, observing each student as they took their seat. They were a mixed group; some of them from 6B, but many were from the second sixth form class, so I did not know them. The more disruptive – or simply bored – boys always sat up the back; normally

I sat in the middle among the more attentive students, but today I wanted to get a close look at Socrates who I expected would sit at the rear of the room. Gradually the seats filled; you could judge the future of a student by their location: would-be teachers or doctors near the front, including the bookish girls; the future housewives in a group on one side, the mechanics and plumbers they would marry arranged on the other. And at the back: only me as I waited for Solomon to appear. Finally, he sauntered in, the last to arrive, hands in pockets, hair a curly mess, shirt out.

Miss Trigg gave him the evil eye. "Solomon Smith! So nice of you to join us! Perhaps you can tell us where you were last week."

"I went to the history class, Miss Trigg", replied Solomon, who as I expected had ambled to the back of the room.

"And why did you go to the history class, Solomon?"

Solomon turned to face the teacher. "To learn about history."

The girls on the side giggled.

"But you were meant to be learning French that day, Solomon, weren't you?"

"Well that's the thing, Miss Trigg; I did go to the history class to learn French, that is, to learn more about French history. I wanted to learn about the Marseillaise. That's a French song."

"Of course it's a French song! It's the French national anthem; we have sung it in class!"

"I know Miss Trigg, but it's really a revolutionary anthem; I wanted to know why they wrote it; the words are very powerful, like the bit about exterminating the tyrants and killing the kings."

Miss Trigg's head jerked to one side. "La Marseillaise has no words like that. Is that what they taught you in history class?"

"No Miss, Mr. Roberts told me to get out." Another gig-

gle ran through the room. "And Miss, the song is longer than you taught us. It has more words. I checked in an encyclopedia."

Wringing her hands, the teacher decided against arguing the lyrics of the French national anthem. "So why did you not then return to your class?"

"I went to the geography class, Miss." Outright laughter ensued this time, and Miss Trigg addressed the girls in mock amazement: "Oh, you went to the geography class! And why did you do that, Solomon? To learn more lyrics for the Marseillaise?" More laughter.

"No Miss Trigg, I wanted to find out why the streets of Paris were so narrow Miss, in the revolution, and now they are very wide."

Miss Trigg digested this curious statement. There was dead silence as Solomon continued: "You see, Miss, they sang the Marseillaise at the barricades, which they built across the narrow streets of Paris. But the streets of Paris now are very wide. I think it was done to stop people building barricades. I wondered if that is why Attica's streets are so wide . . . Miss."

Solomon stopped talking like an engine out of fuel; I could hear his breathing and for a moment I saw the shy, uncertain schoolboy below the intellectual mask.

"And did you find out anything in the geography class?" Miss Trigg sounded like a shard of ice.

"No Miss, Mr. Wright told me to leave too." More giggles.

"And still you did not come to my class?"

"By then it was over, Miss."

"By then it was over . . ." Miss Trigg muttered, strutting to the front of the class. "Solomon, you have wasted an entire lesson, during which we studied valuable material that will be essential for your Matriculation exams. You wasted the time of those other students and teachers, as you have just wasted the time of this class. Do you have anything else to say before I send you to Mr. Dreadstone?"

"I have already seen him, Miss."

"You have already seen him!"

"Yes Miss Trigg. I put a suggestion to him. I told him that all students should be able to attend any class they wish, whenever they need to know something. They will learn more that way. Learning things in separate subjects means you never get the full picture."

Miss Trigg stood at the front of the room like a quivering string. Would the string snap? There was a long silence as she deliberated: was there any point bothering the principal when Solomon had already wasted so much of his time? We waited. The string relaxed. "Very well. I am sure that Mr. Dreadstone has explained to you the importance of attending class. Take your seat. Everyone please open your books at Chapter Two."

A restless air persisted through that afternoon; my concentration began to fail, and the textbook developed into a blurry mess before my eyes. I found myself doodling along the margin. Occasionally I looked across at Solomon, who was deeply engrossed in something, although not the book the rest of us were studying. He appeared to be memorizing some words.

Now that I was close to him, I could see the little patch of stubble on his chin (had he begun to shave yet, I wondered?) and under the raft of curly hair I noticed bushy sideburns.

The teacher droned on. It was the middle of the week, the classroom was stuffy, and it was hot, as it is when Attica clings desperately to the last of summer. The schoolyard was an empty, silent wasteland. On the horizon, the clouds of a coming change were building. I started to dream about black snakes, slithering over the hot asphalt, gliding through the gaps between the buildings, hissing into dark corners. I thought of those other snakes: my hose-worms, slithering underground in their slimy wet subterranean world.

“Sol-o-mon Smith!”

I awoke from my daydreaming and looked across sleepily at Solomon’s desk, saw it was vacant, and beyond it his sweat-marked back, standing near the window, looking out at the schoolyard.

“Why have you left your desk?”

Solomon turned slowly, and I saw an intense expression as if his eyes were seeing something beyond the walls of the room. With extreme gentleness he said, to himself or to the teacher: “Son pleuvor.”

And so it was: big plops of rain were making dark sores on the bare red soil of the flower-beds; a scattering of black spots was advancing across the grey asphalt. It was a rare and welcome late summer shower. I knew that the warm sweet smell of wet bitumen would flood my nostrils when I left the classroom.

Solomon smiled as if expecting a friendly response for his clever use of French, or just for the refreshing rain.

“Solomon Smith! That’s it! Leaving your desk without permission! Report to the headmaster!”

Solomon turned slowly and faced the front of the room. He picked up the paper he had been studying, and in a strong, melodious voice started to sing:

*“Allons enfants de la patrie,  
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!  
Contre nous de la tyrannie  
L’etendard sanglant est levé!  
L’etendard sanglant est levé!”*

As he sang, he walked between the desks to the front of the room, past a gob smacked Miss Trigg and out the door. I can still hear “*L’etendard sanglant est levé!*” echoing down the hall, bouncing off the shiny linoleum floor of the corridor, the glass partitions, the bags hanging like damaged fruit along the wall.



My French is bad, and I had never taken any notice of the words of La Marseillaise. But there were twenty-eight school kids who now hurried to their books to search out the song; I don't think any lesson could have generated the interest in language that we all shared in that moment.

Someone cried out: "It does say 'tyranny'!"



The next weekend I decided to explore the town.

Attica, I discovered, was a large place to ride across on a creaky old Malvern Star bicycle, pedaling down that long straight spine of Barton Avenue on a warm Saturday afternoon. Lately I felt embarrassed riding my bike; some of the older students were already driving cars to school.

My house was in a side street off Barton Avenue, not far from Burley College on the corner of 14th Street, which pretty much marked the edge of the town in those days. It was more than a mile to the Post Office on the corner of 8th Street, crossing a succession of numbered cross streets on the American grid model, a legacy of the town's Californian founders.

Barton Avenue: over the next year I would get to know that street like the back of my hand, or more particularly, its concrete footpaths, patinaed to a faded yellow-brown by the dust and the sun, cracked by the tree roots silently navigating the dry red soil. We lived our whole lives along that one-mile stretch of bitumen from Burley College to the river: here were the houses we lived in, the town park where we played, the churches we sat in on Sundays, the clubs our parents attended and the offices in which they worked.

The orderliness and ambition of the town's plan was impressive. Beyond the high school, the Avenue stretched on for many miles, to something like 23rd Street, by which point the landscape had deteriorated into limestone and Mallee scrub. That end of town was sparsely developed, with a few motels, two drive-in theatres, and the Attica South Primary School. I headed in the other direction, into the green heart of the town, along the leafy, well-watered avenue with its wide central park.

Attica's terrain is perfectly flat; as I rode down the wide street I had the feeling that the town had been ironed out onto the desert sand rather than built upon it. First, I passed the Baptist church that my parents took me to on Sundays: a little gabled hall, not much more than a shed, with a changing sign declaring a weekly message from God. Further down the road there was a strip of shops that included the butchers where I bought meat for my mum. Opposite these was a park, deep, leafy and green, in which sat a granite war memorial. I stopped there for a breather and a swig from my pink plastic bottle of raspberry cordial. Down 13th Street, I could see the white, curved form of the hospital, at three stories one of the few buildings in town that rose above the house roofs and the horizontal canopy of trees.

On the corner opposite the park loomed a large house, its high grey corrugated iron roof gleaming among a little forest of palm trees. It had an encircling veranda with decorative timberwork; polished wood and glass gleamed from its shadowy recesses. Little else of the house could be seen through the screen of surrounding greenery. It had an air of mystery, and for good reason: I knew this to be the home of Solomon Smith and his aspiring politician father.

I stared at the house, half fearing to see that shaggy head appear above the hedge. Ever since the French class I had become obsessed with thoughts of Socrates; I had

half-decided that I wanted to get to know him. Yet if I met him, what would I say to him? I got back on my bike and hurried away.

Barton Avenue was strewn with reminders of Solomon's father. All along its length, I passed places associated with him. Apart from the house, and the hospital - I remembered from Scoutmaster Paul's talk that he was on the committee - there was the Methodist Church he attended on the corner of 10th Street, the Attica Club at 9th Street whose sign declared that it hosted the weekly Rotary Club meetings, and in the heart of town, next to the Dale Carnegie Library, a building with a classical portico and a small balcony above it that bore the sign 'Bates, Morrison, and Smith, Barristers and Solicitors'. I had a vision of Clifford Smith's ample figure on that balcony, gripping the cast iron railing and smiling down at an adoring crowd. I wondered what it would be like to have this man as your father, a man who seemed to be everywhere, who had the capacity to enter even your private thoughts and dreams with his clammy hands and his "and what are your goals?"

The buildings in this part of town were its oldest and most substantial: the doctor's surgeries and lawyer's rooms, the courthouse and library, the civic buildings and post office. They stood in a row, gleaming in cream and off-white, their classical columns and porticos reminding me of a postcard I had seen of some European city. In the avenue's central park there was a band rotunda surrounded by flowerbeds. It all seemed utterly neat, clean and civilized.

Being Saturday afternoon, the streets were deserted. The town drowsed in the late summer heat. There was little point in turning down 8th Street to the shopping centre on Peartree Avenue. Everything would be shut. I continued on down Barton Avenue to its end at 7th Street and the railway line that separates the town from the river.

Here I had a choice: I could either continue on down to the river, which was on a lower level than the town itself, or I could turn and ride along 7th Street to the old Burley mansion that now served as the art gallery and museum. I turned in that direction.

The Burley mansion was the only truly impressive house in town; it dwarfed even Solomon's substantial bungalow: two story, red brick, with encircling timber verandas in both levels, fancy gables and chimneys, a big fountain out front in a vast lawn. It seemed disconnected from the town that surrounded it, in the way that a King's palace might seem, foreign, among the houses of the peasantry.

The impressive house intimidated me, so instead of going in I inspected the welded iron sculptures, abstract and modern, that littered the lawn; there was a big exhibition of modern art on. I was transfixed by one enormous sculpture like a giant metal tree, with brightly colored leaves turning in the sun like little windmills. I watched its whizzing blades for ages, contrasted against the intense blue sky stronger than the strongest hue of a peacock's feather.

What was it about the Attica light that made everything stand out so clearly? The intense clear light somehow exposed the essence of things. I had a sudden, panicky thought: 'I'm me, and I'm alone'.

Across the road, towards the river, my eyes were drawn to another colorful form. As I rode up to it I saw it was a massive steam engine, restored and put on display, a relic of the early days of the settlement. Painted in vivid red and green, with silver railings, it was just like another modern sculpture.

The engine was so huge that steel ladders led up to platforms from which the engineers must have tended this smoking, puffing monster. Despite its enormity, there was something delicate about the valves, levers and rods that surrounded the central engine. I climbed up several

levels of stairs to the upper walkways from which there was a good view of the grey-green trees on the river flats, the silver line of the sun-streaked river, a few houseboats and the bush on the far side of the river extending to the distant horizon.

Walking back around the walkway, I noticed a figure on the ground below, peering into a camera, photographing the engine. It was one of those old cameras with a bellows that you looked into from above. It took me a second to realize who the figure was: Solomon Smith!

I had wanted a chance to talk to him, and here he was. Now the opportunity had arrived, my stomach churned with fear. Still, I hurried to the steel stair, climbing down a little too quickly, bruising my leg, fearful that he might be a mirage that would evaporate before I got to the bottom. But no, there he was, in jeans and a multi-colored T-shirt, hunched over a little black and silver contraption, fiddling with the shutter of the camera.

I stood looking at Socrates, uncertain what to say, so I said "Hello". Socrates looked up, grunted "Uh huh" and returned to his fiddling. There were several seconds of silence.

"That's an old camera", I said.

"Uh huh."

"Does it take good photos?"

"Uh huh."

This unproductive exchange seemed likely to continue, so I ventured some more useful information: "My dad has a Polaroid."

Socrates folded up the camera and put it in a leather case, then into an army satchel slung across his shoulders. He looked at me intently.

"Polaroid's are cool. You get the photo almost straight way", I rambled on.

He kept looking at me, hesitated, then asked: "Is that good?"

I was thrown by this unexpected question. "What do you mean?"

"To get things straight away?"

"Well, yes, I think so, I mean, yes, you see what you took immediately, you don't, you know, have to go to the chemist."

"So, it's good because you see it straight away, or because you don't have to go to the chemist?" I thought I detected a smile.

"Both, I guess."

"I'm still interested to know why seeing the photo straight away is better."

"Well, you can see what you took . . ."

"I know what I take. I just took this pumping engine."

I was starting to feel angry and frustrated by his annoying questions and a growing sense that I was a source of amusement to him. Surprising myself, I said with some heat: "Whatever."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Socrates started to get on his bike. I was in a panic, not wanting to lose this opportunity. "I don't know much about photography" I said desperately.

He looked at – or past – me with that meditative stare he had given Miss Trigg in the French class. "Photography's the question" I thought he said.

As if some unseen hand had grabbed his arm, he swung his handlebars and was off. I watched his dark curly hair disappear over the edge of the escarpment.

"Photography's *the* question or photography's *a* question" I kept asking myself, over and over, as I pedaled home down Barton Avenue. I decided on 'a question'; 'how can a photo be a question?' I asked myself: it would be many years before I discovered the answer to *that* question.

Passing the Smith's big house, I wondered what kind of world had created such a complicated and difficult per-

son, and just for a moment I thought I saw a big black snake slithering into the shadows of its tangled green garden.

## Solomon Smith

SOLOMON RODE HIS BIKE fast down the steep embankment to the river flats. It always exhilarated him, the rush of wind, the danger of falling, sliding, on the slippery red clay of the bank. Down, down to the river; down, down to the places that he knew, cool and dark, shady and hidden, places of safety, places of refuge.

Momentarily, he felt guilty for leaving that friendly boy who had said 'hello'.

At the base of the escarpment was a flat area that had been landfill. Desolate and dusty, its rulers were charcoal crows that screeched and cawed from the black-barked trees. Socrates liked this place for its abandonment, the odd things he would find poking out of the ground. He had a habit of walking about deep in concentration, staring at the ground, unaware of what was going on around him; this had earned him the unkind nickname: 'the absent-minded professor'. He heard those voices now, yelling at him, distorted, mocking faces: 'wake up Australia!'

Today he did not stop at the wasteland. He rode along the river, following the levee bank built for one of the great floods. The river was wide and green. On the far shore, he saw a pleasant-looking clearing, littered with leaves and bark. In the middle of the clearing lay the massive trunk of a fallen tree; beneath it he could see a dark hollow, and the flattened earth and leaves of the entrance to an animal's home.

He imagined himself that animal, lying in that cozy hollow. "If I could just walk those sand hills, softly disappear into some hollow, some cool dark place where there is no pain, softness encloses me, and I am unknown. Pain is gone, feelings are gone; I lie in the dark silent dark, like an animal: no one knows me, and no one brings me pain."

But between him and that unreachable land lay the river, with its dark snags and fishy grottoes, the weed entangled caverns of the fearsome obscure land below the surface.

Socrates sped along the riverbank. His bike tires raised little puffs of grey dust as he bucked and weaved along the bumpy dirt track. The levee path went higher, away from the river; there was a second track leading down. He turned his bike down the steep path to a little flat sandy beach and an enormous weeping willow tree, whose massive fibrous roots were half exposed and projected out into the river.

Socrates clambered out along the branches of the great tree, pushed aside a veil of drooping green leaves, and entered the green world at its heart. Here the numerous branches joined, creating soft mossy platforms and hollows on which one could lie and sit. He lay on one of these and looked up at the encompassing green shroud, the infinite space defying his attempts to focus his eyes. Water lapped around the base of the tree.

He started to daydream. He was in that leafy hollow in the forest, under that great log on the far side of the river. It was the headquarters, apparently, of a resistance movement fighting for Australia's independence from some invading army. He was the leader of this brave band of fighters. "It's time for our patrol", he said to the blackened faces clustered around him. Out along the fence line they crept, looking for the enemy. He gripped his gun tightly. "Enemy!" his trusted sergeant called from further



down the line. They dropped to the ground, squirming on their bellies up to the fence.

A group of mounted troopers approached, something from the nineteenth century, all blue uniforms and square hats. 'Big ugly fat-necked wombats', thought Socrates. He was a bushranger now, an ex-convict, unfairly transported for a crime he did not commit. "Jack Jones! Jack Jones! We know you are there! Surrender now in the Queen's name!"

"The Queen! We'll never bow down to her, will we lads!" "No! Never" shouted Socrates' band of outlaws, now mounted in fine stolen horses. As they rode off, pursued by the troopers, Socrates sang the old convict song:

*"By and bye I'll break my chains; into the bush I'll go,  
And join the brave bushrangers there, Jack Donohue & Co.  
And some dark night when everything is silent in the town  
I'll kill the tyrants one and all, I'll shoot the floggers down."*

"I'll shoot them down. I'll shoot them down", mumbled Socrates. A tide of anger gripped his belly: "I'll kill them all!"

Sleepily, Socrates reached under the branch to a hiding place where he kept a small tin box. In the box were scraps of paper and a pencil, a collection of badges, and half a bar of chocolate. He broke off a piece of chocolate and shoved the tin back into the hollow.

Lying back against the tree he drifted off again. Now he was in the backyard of his house in Attica. His parents were there, and his brother; it must have been years ago because Benjamin and he were small boys. The colors were like a faded old photograph. Socrates looked over the paling fence at the rear of the yard. As if he was a bird, he could see all the other backyards, extending one after the other to the horizon. "All the backyards are full of happy families", a voice said.

Just as he expected, right on time, a brilliant white

flash lit the horizon. At that instant, he felt a blast of heat across his face. The children in all the backyards kept playing. He alone knew what was going to happen; in a sudden panic he called to all the children to run, take cover, escape the coming calamity, but everyone laughed at Socrates, especially his father: "foolish boy" he cried. "You'll never be any good!" "I'll never be any good", repeated Benjamin, his brother, who seemed at that instant to have become his father as well. Socrates looked desperately for his mother, but she was nowhere to be seen.

A rolling red cloud, tinged with purple and yellow, advanced across Attica. Socrates saw distant houses, fences and trees flattened, as the shock wave advanced. He heard the rumbling of the coming destruction; he smelt ash, and burning embers started to fall; the ground began to shake. He heard screaming and felt a wicked wind. Fear and exhilaration mixed in him as he saw the great cloud reach the end of the street, the next-door house, their own backyard; the fences flattened; he felt himself lifted off the ground by the great wave of white-hot air, flying through the sky, projected towards the river and the Attica bridge. Near the bridge was a brick pump house. He saw himself flying towards that brick wall, closer and closer, till he could see the pattern of the bricks and the square lines of hard grey mortar.

Socrates awoke in a sea of green and gold, the late afternoon light filtering through the amber veil of the willow. A soft breeze fondled the leaves. The river gurgled. The music of the river became a lullaby, a softly worded song from long ago. He thought he heard a whispering, almost a voice, almost words, a woman's voice: yes; soft and gentle, like a lullaby from that distant past: "Sol . . . lo . . . mon. Sol . . . lo . . . mon."

Socrates was a little scared when he heard this voice. He sat stiller than an animal, barely breathing; he wondered why the voice came to him, walking in the waste-

land or here in his tree; sometimes he longed for it, sometimes he detested it for the way it made him feel even more different and alone.

“What do you want?”

“Ask me a question, Solomon.”

“Why does life hurt?”

“Solomon, life is pain.”

“Great, thanks.”

“And joy. Life is what is lived.”

Solomon squirmed against the roughness of the tree pressing into his back. “Sometimes I want to bury myself somewhere safe, like in a cave or that animal’s home. Is that wrong?”

“Well, it might be natural, as a reaction to danger. What are you scared of, Solomon?”

“Everything . . . nothing . . . everybody . . .”

“You know, Solomon, if fear is in the forest, go to the forest.”

“Face my fear?”

“Look into the forest, Solomon. What do you see?”

Solomon felt tears coming into his eyes. “My face. My fucking face.”

“And?”

Solomon saw the boy he had met at the pumps.

“Closeness can be frightening when you have been damaged, Solomon.”

“Am I damaged?”

But the voice had gone and in the whispering in the willow leaves or in the blur of unfocused yellow light he thought he heard or saw or felt an image, a sign, a feeling: ‘the gods love you’.

“How do I know what the fucking gods think?” Socrates mounted his bike and rode in wild anger and panic, as fast as he could along the bank path, fast down into the dips, fast up the hills with his bum rising in the air.



"I can't ignore her", Clifford Smith told Bill Gordon.

Fresh from solving his dilemma over the Vietnam War memorial, Clifford Smith found himself confronted by a new one: The Queen was to visit Attica as part of the 1970 Bicentennial Royal Tour. "Even though, really, our Party platform favors a republic - eventually. Gough has spoken at the very least about replacing 'God Save the Queen', and abolishing Knighthoods. And then there's the aboriginal issue; I mean, it's not quite right to be celebrating the arrival of Cook, when our policy is to redress the impacts of colonization through land rights."

"I think you're over-thinking this", said Bill Gordon. "There's no conflict I can see; we have to respect the system we've got, even if we want to change it. And we can celebrate the past while acknowledging that some things need to change. I don't know why it's worrying you so much."

They were sitting in the big room at the Attica Club. Bill Gordon didn't really like the place: it reeked of privilege and sat uncomfortably with his working-class upbringing. Clifford, however, enjoyed being there; for him it was a place powerful people went, and he wanted to be one of them.

Bill Gordon was a short man with a wide face and a whacking great ginger moustache like a massive red toothbrush attached to his top lip; his hair was a bit long for his headmaster's liking, just as his politics were a bit too 'left'.

"What's really eating you, Clifford?" he asked, but Clifford would not, or could not, say.

Clifford had another problem: he found it difficult to

express what was really on his mind. Frequently, what was driving his agenda was not what appeared on the surface. Now, too, he was being driven by a goal quite different to concern for Party policy or native rights.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry too much. You’re not likely to be required to do much during the visit. You can play it low key. Just turn up to things if you are invited. But knowing the Country Party mafia in this town you won’t be invited to much.”

Bill Gordon’s last remarks had Clifford even more worried. After he had left, Clifford sat back in his deep leather chair and looked around the room. What was eating him? His thoughts echoed around the white walls; the ceilings were high and the tall windows facing Barton Avenue reflected a luminescent sky. Overhead, rattan punkahs waved to and fro; a further tropical touch was added by numerous potted palms, and large French doors that led to a courtyard. On the end wall the compulsory portrait of the monarch gazed down.

Why did it trouble him tonight? Below it was a timber honor board with the names of past presidents of the club: The Burleys were there at the top: George Burley MBE; then a Robert someone, KCMG; an Edward who served a long tenure, OBE; Winston Burstall was there (bloody Burstall, thought Clifford) CBE. Then it hit him: MBE, OBE, CBE, KCMG, OM, CH: that’s what he wanted! That’s what he craved! To be on that board: to have a Queen’s honor!

The thought hit him with a shudder: sacrilege for a Labor politician! Then he thought, ‘Why? Others in the party accepted honors; it was no big deal.’ The big deal, Clifford’s real problem, was that he didn’t have one. The punkahs flip flopped over Clifford’s head.

So how did you get one? There was some kind of committee, he knew, that considered nominations in each part of the Empire (it didn’t trouble him to use *that* word) and

sent its recommendations to a head committee in London. It was hardly likely the London committee would question a nomination from a far-flung dominion like Australia, so obviously the key was to curry favor with the local committee.

He grabbed a nearby copy of *The Daily Cultivator*, in which he had read – with some jealousy – the list of locals invited to the official welcome for the royal party in Melbourne. Who was included? Ah, yes: Winston Burstall was there of course; also, Attica's conservative mayor and mayoress. These weren't much help to him, as they all represented the opposite side of politics. What did you get honors for? Community service perhaps. A name caught his eye: Bishop, Evelyn: Chairwoman of the Attica Base Hospital committee. Now there was a possibility: he was active on that committee and they got on well. He would speak to Evelyn Bishop at the end of next week's board meeting.

Evelyn Bishop was a little surprised when Clifford raised the issue over tea at her house following the meeting at the hospital.

"Yes, I am on the welcoming committee for the visit", she said. "I didn't think that would interest you so much, given your party's views."

Evelyn Bishop was a solidly constructed woman who wore conservative dark blue suits and practical glasses. Her hair was always up in a neat bun and she dyed-out grey patches as soon as they appeared. She looked every inch the director of a hospital, which she could have been except that those jobs always went to men. So instead she married one. As the director's wife, the fundraising and charitable work naturally fell to her. She was extraordinarily capable. She affected a look that combined society matron with businesswoman, both of which she was, but the extent of the affectation suggested that beneath it lay a different personality entirely. Indeed, at an early age

Evelyn Bishop had been radicalized by her unionist father, who worked for the railways in small towns in the Mallee. He had suffered for his views in the anti-communist fervor of the 1950s, losing his job when Menzies had tried to ban the Communist Party in 1951. Evelyn Bishop was no friend of the conservative classes.

Clifford felt aggrieved; was his party really seen as so anti-British? "Really Evelyn", he said trying to hide his annoyance. "People have the wrong idea. We are not opposed to our connection to Great Britain. We simply want to modernize the relationship."

Clifford had the ability to make any position seem moderate in order to secure support; if necessary he was not beyond painting a position to be the opposite of what it was. The more extreme republicans in his party did not simply want to abolish symbols like the flag, the anthem, or honors; they wanted to fundamentally change the basis of power away from inherited wealth and privilege and end Britain's favored status as a military and trading partner. But Clifford could make this sound like rearranging the lunch chairs.

"Well, Clifford, I'm going to surprise you", said Evelyn Bishop. "I may be on the welcoming committee, but I'm no monarchist. The sooner that institution is abolished the better as far as I'm concerned. I'm there because of my role at the hospital, not because of my political views."

Clifford stared at her, astonished.

"In fact, Clifford, the ALP position on the monarchy is, to me, pathetically weak. I will confide in you, as I don't with many, that my views are far to the left of that."

Clifford stared with open mouth.

"So no, there's nothing I can do to further your ambitions for a Queen's honor. If those honors meant anything, they'd be going to the hard-working nurses and orderlies on our wards, not to politicians and businessmen. But I will make sure you get a place on stage at the public welcome. You deserve that for your efforts."

She said the last with a condescending smile. Showing no reaction, Clifford thanked her. Shamelessly he added: “and a place on the stage for my wife please; and Solomon.”



## CHAPTER 4



# Her Majesty

THE SATURDAY AFTER the disaster at the steam engine, I was sitting at the breakfast table with my father. His head was buried in the big broadsheet pages of The Melbourne Herald.

“Betty!” came his muffled voice. “Did you know the Queen is coming?”

“Yes Dadly; everyone knows she is coming to Attica.”

“Well I didn’t!” said Dadly, looking over the paper. “They don’t talk about things like that at the packing house.”

“They told us at school”, I said. “We have to stand along the road and wave or something. Why is she coming?”

“It’s the Bicentenary”, said my mum, hands deep in soap suds at the sink. “She’s touring Australia for four weeks for the Bicentenary. Mrs. Bishop who I volunteer for is on the committee. Phillip’s coming too, and Anne and Charles.” It sounded like our cousins were coming to visit.

"Are they staying with us?" I asked.

"Robert! Don't be disrespectful."

"Not sure why they're coming", said my dad. "Is there much point to these royals anymore?"

"Dadly! And I thought you were a traditionalist!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Someone who thinks things should always stay the same."

"Well, I'm not one, not anymore."

"Still, we'll go, won't we?" asked my mum, smiling a little smile at Dadly.

A couple of weeks later, I stood with my classmates on the unmade footpath outside Burley College, held back from the road by a row of wooden stakes and a line of twine. It was late March, and no longer so very hot, on that kind of Attica autumn day when all things seem suspended in the clear light; the transparent air gave the skin the lightest caress, and in the morning I woke to the music of warbling magpies.

The plane was two hours late. By the time the line of cars finally reached us from the airport, several students had already 'nicked off'. Socrates had not even turned up, though all students had been required to attend school that Friday. We stood there clutching our little flags. Someone called out: "Kitty Wheatley's fainted again!" and I saw a pair of skinny white legs on the green Attica grass.

Finally, the cars arrived, and we waved our little plastic Union Jacks. The Queen drove past so fast I barely saw the gloved hand waving. We were let off early.

On Saturday, my dad looked like he was dressed for work. There was a reception for Her Majesty down on the Burley mansion lawns.

"I'm not wearing school uniform!" I protested.

"That's fine Robert, but look nice" said my mum, fixing

her hair.

By the time we got there half the town had beaten us to it. We had to walk ages from the street where my dad parked the Cambridge. My mum wasn't used to heels and complained. "Well that's the thing, isn't it", said Dadly. "We all have to go out of our way for these . . . royals!"

I looked across a sea of tidy little hats and veils, women in white and cream satin and crepe, men in dark suits, like a mass wedding. A wooden stage had been set up in front of the house; on that stage was a line of seats, and on those seats a row of people I didn't recognize, except for one: Clifford Smith. Beside Clifford sat a thin woman with dark glasses. There was an empty seat beside her; all the other seats were taken.

"Look, there's Mrs. Bishop!" said my mum. The woman my mother knew walked along the line of seats to Clifford Smith. He stood up, waving his hands in the air and looking around frantically as if searching for someone. The woman spoke earnestly to Clifford, whose red and angry face was visible even at this distance; then she walked back along the line of seated people. They all got up and shuffled along the row, closing the gap left by the empty seat. Mrs. Bishop grabbed the remaining chair and marched it off stage.

Having arrived late, and having no importance, we were standing at the back of the crowd near the old steam engine. "Look!" said my mum. "There she comes!" A brass band struck up 'Land of Hope and Glory' and we watched the slight figure of our monarch cross the lawn in a lemon-yellow dress followed by a tall man in a dark suit.

"Philip!" whispered my mum.

"The man takes the rear in that household", said Dadly.

"Shhhh!" said my mum.

I watched as Queen Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God Queen of this Realm and her other Realms and Territories' matching yellow satin shoes trod the red car-

pet laid across the grass so that the royal feet did not have to deal with the bare patches and prickles of an Australian lawn. 'How strange', I thought, 'this slight yellow-clad lady traipsing across that carpet, as removed from the prickles in the grass as we are from her.'

A little girl presented a bouquet of flowers. Someone began talking over the inadequate public address system. I couldn't understand a word. I left my parents and walked over to climb on the pumping engine.

"Pretty boring stuff, huh", said a voice, and I looked up to see Socrates Smith, seated on a platform higher up.

"Yes", I said, stunned.

"I was supposed to be there." He pointed at the stage. "My dad's great occasion." He climbed down.

"Why didn't you go?"

"Why?" He looked at me. "Because it's imperialist crap. Because the Queen means nothing to us. That's why. And to piss off my dad. He shouldn't even be here. I'm going to Lock Island. Want to come?"

I wondered why he was suddenly, after the last time, being so friendly. As if to answer me, he said cryptically: "I've been told I've gotta be your friend." I thought maybe his dad had spoken to him, after the scout hall thing.

"I've got to tell my parents."

"No you don't. Come on."

I felt guilty leaving. As we walked down the red earth of the riverbank, the sounds of the gathering faded. The silence worried me, and the panicky thought that I belonged back there on green lawn with my parents.

"Why shouldn't your father be here?"

"Because he shouldn't support the monarchy; and because of this Bicentennial thing. You know what that is?"

"When Captain Cook discovered Australia?"

"He didn't discover Australia; he captured it; took it for the British; took it away from the people who owned

it.”

“The aboriginals?”

“Yeah, the aboriginals. Seen a lot of them here today?”

“I’ve seen one.” There had been a black woman on the stage in a floral dress.

“Yeah, they dress up a few and bus them over from Paradise. I bet Queenie won’t be goin’ over there though.”

My dad worked in Paradise. He’d never mentioned the aboriginals.

By this time, we were walking through a little park towards Lock Island, a sandy artificial island created by a channel that enabled boats to bypass the nearby weir that maintained the river level for irrigation.

“You know this was all built by the Burleys, yeah?”

“I guess.”

“I mean Attica: it wouldn’t be here without them. Even that steam engine back there: there were no pumps in the world strong enough to lift the water up the cliffs, so the Burleys designed their own and had it made in England.”

“Is that why you photographed it?”

“Hah!” he laughed; “yeah, it’s kinda ‘the engine that made Attica’. It’s like you can see the . . . start of something big.”

As we crossed the narrow walkway across the lock gates, he added: “I like those pumps because . . . that was a real *moment*. Now *there’s* an anniversary to celebrate! When the Burleys came to Attica! Brought out from America by Barton.”

“When was that?”

“1901. And you know what else happened that year.”

“No.”

“Federation. We became ‘independent’. Barton was our first PM.” He laughed. “And look: there they are now, fawning over ‘Her Majesty’. What a joke.”

“You know a lot about history. I thought you didn’t like school.”

“I like learning. That’s *why* I don’t like school.”

Before I could challenge him we were on the island. I forgot my anxiety at leaving my parents; I took off my shoes and ran across the soft cool sand under the river gums, onto the warm beach, down to the river: the wide green-grey river; like a great, slow-moving lake, warm on the surface, cool beneath, hiding a million mysteries under its tranquil surface.

That day, a current drew me along as well, and little by little I started to feel at ease with Socrates who, quietly, and with none of his provocative statements and questions, led me around the island. He showed me how to locate witchetty-grubs in a tree by the bump on the bark (we tried unsuccessfully to get one out of its hole with a piece of bent wire). He took me to where giant-bodied pelicans waited patiently to catch fish trapped by the weir. We searched for the koalas that were supposed to live on this island, imagining we saw them in the lumpy dark shapes at the top of the gum trees.

At one point I asked Socrates about his nickname. We were seated on the sand, sharing his vegemite sandwiches and chocolate cake, and my raspberry cordial. “Oh, that was Mr. Gordon.”

“The English teacher?”

“Yes. He called me that because of the questions I ask. One day we had a class debate, and I demolished the other side by asking a whole lot of questions they couldn’t answer, so it made their arguments look stupid, and Mr. Gordon said, ‘that’s just like Socrates.’ So, after that everyone started calling me ‘Socrates.’”

After a pause, he said: “Now I’m on the school debating team. It’s the one thing I’m good at, apparently.”

“I’m sure you’re good at lots of things” I said, surprised by his lack of confidence.

“I mean”, he corrected himself, “the only thing I can do that the school thinks is important.” He went quiet again.

“So who was Socrates? Someone from ancient Greece, right?”

“Yeah. He was a philosopher. He is the one who said that if you don’t ask questions, it’s not worth being alive. He questioned everybody he met to see if they were as clever as they thought they were. He always proved them wrong, and then he would try to find out what was really wise, or true, by asking more questions. Mostly he didn’t find the answer, but at least he knew what he *didn’t* know; that’s what made him special. He was the most honest guy ever. Of course, the Athenians hated him for it and in the end, they killed him.”

“How do you know all that? From his books?”

“Well, he didn’t write any, actually. But he had a friend called Plato who wrote down everything he said.”

We walked back across the island. It was late afternoon now, and the low sun sent slanting shafts through the trees, making their trunks glow like golden pillars, stretching ribbons of light across the sand, the crackling bark under our feet, the patches of wild grass. Socrates seemed on the point of continuing our conversation but hesitated. I was happy just walking in the golden light. Suddenly he said: “Do you believe in God?”

Automatically, I answered: “Of course I do”, adding as proof: “I go to church.”

“Yes, but do you ever talk to God? Does he talk to you?”

“We pray and that, that’s talking to God, I guess.”

“Yes”, he persisted, “but does he ever talk back?”

“I don’t know, no I suppose not, not if you mean like a voice or something.”

We walked on.

“I left the church.” He sounded like a de-frocked priest.

“What do you mean?”

“I refused to be confirmed – that’s when you say that you believe in all the teachings. My minister was furious.”

“Why? I mean, why did you refuse? Don’t you believe

in God?"

"No, that's the point; it was because I *do*."

Before I had a chance to question yet another curious statement, Socrates continued: "In ancient Greece there were lots of gods, but Socrates had a voice that spoke to him, like it was his own god. The voice told him what he should do. I think that's what God should be like, someone who speaks to us, like he's inside us, our own god, not one in a church."

I protested: "You can't have your own god, that would be wrong. Everybody has to believe in the one god; otherwise they would just go off and do whatever they liked. It would be bad."

"That's what they said to Socrates" he replied, and I suddenly felt that I had said something to hurt him; he became silent as if he had retreated into a deep dark cave.

Walking back towards the escarpment we crossed an area of wasteland. Crows were picking at rubbish that lay half exposed, poking through the surface of the red soil. I noticed Socrates staring at the ground, occasionally stooping to pick up a nail or a button. "Do you think the people who wore this button or hammered this nail were happy or sad?" he asked me.

"How would I know?"

"Doesn't the ground talk to you?" he replied, sounding puzzled.

Back up at the mansion everyone had gone. A few Councilmen were walking around picking up rubbish. "I'll give you a dink home", said Socrates. We rode silently back through the empty town. As we passed his father's office I said: "Socrates, your dad came to my scout group." It was the first time I used his nickname.

"Uh huh." This seemed of no interest to him, and we lapsed again into awkward silence. But then he said: "I don't get on with my dad. I'd rather not talk about him. Sorry."



We reached his house near the park and I said I would walk from there. I knew my parents would be mad at me. Standing on the outside of the front gate as Socrates took his bike inside, I said: "I like you Socrates, but you get into trouble a lot. Do you think you should be doing those things?"

He looked at me surprised. "So, Robert, do you think it's better to do what everyone else does, without ever thinking about it, or is it better to do what you think is right?"

"What you think is right, I guess."

"And is it better to do what you think will bring you success, or money, or popularity, or what God tells you is right?"

"So long as I knew what God really wanted, the same answer, what is right, I guess."

"Then I think we could be friends", he said, as if this was a proposition still under review; then he turned and wheeled his bike down the path towards his house, disappearing into the greenery and the darkness of the veranda.

My parents were very mad.

## Betty Bradley

BETTY BRADLEY WORE FLORAL DRESSES like the wrapping around a piece of ripe fruit. She had a curvaceous body that remained firm, even in middle age; as a younger man Dadly Bradley had been attracted by these curves and they attracted him still. Her quietness also had not changed, and this suited him equally well. As for Betty, she was glad to have a partner who appreciated both her lack of words and her ample bosom; harmony therefore was a general condition of the Bradley household.

Mrs. Bradley may have been reserved in speech, but she was expressive in her actions. The bright floral dresses were one thing; her cooking was another, especially many kinds of cookies, slices and desserts (her meals in contrast tended to be unsophisticated, although she had an eye for anything new and exotic in a packet on the grocery store shelves). She was an enthusiast for new cooking fads, fashion accessories, kitchen gadgets, home crafts; in her pebble mosaic phase she damn near mosaicked the entire house. But her love of color, her physicality, her delight in creation and love of the bright and the new reached its culmination, its purest and boldest form, in her garden.

Dadly had marked out the flower beds for her, helped dig out the compost heap, and arranged for the delivery of stones for her rockery, but it was Betty's vision and effort that created the garden. At first, the dryness and the fine red sand had defeated her capacity to envisage a garden in this arid place; but then she had seen how, with a little water, hibiscus and palm, banana and cactus, fruit trees, tropical plants and cacti bloomed in the gardens around the town and she became inspired to create, on our dry little block, her own Garden of Eden.

Now, after several months of work, the garden was taking shape and Betty felt able to step back and admire her creation. Along the front fence she had revived, by careful pruning, a row of old roses; beside the path to the front door there was now a display of grape hyacinths, iris, and snapdragons; the back lawn was bordered by a rockery of local limestone, containing succulent plants and cacti; she had planted a banana tree, a 'rubber tree', hibiscus, and other plants from hot and tropical places.

As she stood admiring her garden a sly thought occurred to her; she saw in her mind's eye her husband, jok-

ing about Queen Elizabeth and her subservient consort, and she laughed at the thought that here, in her garden, she was Queen, and a damn more useful one than some monarch traipsing around the colonies of a long dead empire.

Betty had been secretly pleased by Dadly's dismissive comments about the royal visit. Her English-born mother, who idolized all things British, had tried to inculcate in her the belief that Queen, Empire, and subject were the natural order of the world. Somewhere, in a box, she still had the embroidery her mother had labored over and presented to her when the young Elizabeth visited Melbourne in 1954. But she had little enthusiasm for these things, which she felt were anachronistic. Yes: as Dadly suggested, the husband walking a few paces behind was about the only positive thing about her. Otherwise, she was hardly a realistic role model for a modern woman. The world of Empire - of privilege, of power - was passing, had passed, or should. There were more important matters for women now: like abortion rights. The newspapers were full of news about a mounting scandal over police protection rackets for backyard abortionists. What did a Queen in a pretty yellow dress care about that? Women dying on shabby tables, policemen and politicians collecting paybacks?

Given these thoughts, it had been a stroke of good fortune that Betty had recently found a mentor in Evelyn Bishop. Her garden complete, in need of a 'project', she had gone to the hospital to see if there was volunteer work.

"This Wainer is going to blow the whole thing wide open: and about time!" she heard a voice bellow through the open door as she sat in the little waiting room outside the administration office. A large woman with a generous face and a huge piled bun of hair dashed out and stared at Betty. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were there. I

thought you were June.” She laughed at her mistake and invited a confused Betty into her office.

“Of course we can find something for you to do.” Evelyn Bishop settled behind her big desk with an expansive smile. Betty liked her immediately. “Did you know about this?” Evelyn shoved a newspaper across the desk and Betty saw with surprise it was ‘The Truth’: a notorious scandal sheet whose lurid pages her parents had refused to let in to the house. In two-inch letters the headline declared:

WAINER EXPOSES CORRUPT POLICE! ABORTION RACKET REVEALED! BIGGS LINK!

“Well yes”, said Betty, “I . . .”

“Oh, I know it’s ‘The Truth’ so it’s hardly likely to be, is it!” Evelyn chuckled. “But in my experience the truth is found in the strangest places. According to this Melbourne doctor, Wainer, the police have been running a protection racket, protecting back yard abortionists from prosecution, while the government refuses to provide facilities for safe terminations. Women die in filthy back rooms while police pocket the money. It’s disgusting. And it turns out they’re protecting Biggs as well!”

“Ronald Biggs? The Great Train Robber?”

“On the run in Australia for months, apparently. And no one knew except the police: the wrong ones, the ones protecting him!” Evelyn threw back her head and laughed. “This country! Oh my god, what a joke!” She became serious. “And yet, not really. There is a conspiracy of silence in this country, things you mustn’t pry into, things you mustn’t say. Don’t you think?”

Betty didn’t know what to say.

“You know”, continued Evelyn, pointing at ‘The Truth’, “if no one investigated, if no one asked questions, if no one was brave enough to say something, where would we be? In an eternal silence of denial, that’s where. And I am

## The Tin Parrot

afraid, Betty, that silence is exactly what this country has in abundance.”

As she walked out the door, Betty felt that her world had been turned upside down. Troubled but exhilarated, she wondered: ‘if things needed to be exposed and brought into the light, what could I investigate? What hidden truth could I reveal?’



## CHAPTER 5



# The Moratorium

I ARRIVED AT SCHOOL the following Monday to find a scrawled note shoved into my locker door:

*WE CAN HANG OUT IF YOU LIKE. S.S.*

‘Hanging out’ with Socrates Smith was an odd experience; since he occupied a universe of one, in joining it I doubled his social circle but ran the risk of losing my own. I had been tentatively inducted into the South School group; would they accept Socrates as well?

It occurred to me that, unlike most of the students, who either ignored him or were downright mean to him, these kids didn’t seem to mind Socrates. I suspected that Dunno even had a secret respect for him; perhaps they were just crazy enough to get along. I had to find a way to bring Socrates into the group and avoid the problem of split friendships. It wasn’t going to be easy.

After getting our things from our lockers at the end of school one day, the two of us were passing our homeroom. The classrooms opened directly onto the quadrangle veranda and I could see Dunno, Tools, Itch, Nat Chandler and Itch's best mate, Joy Boy. Itch, the co-conspirator in the locked piano fiasco, was a tall gawky lad with a hook-nose and raised eyebrows over eyes screwed into slits by the sun. He reminded me of a long necked ostrich. Joy Boy, or just 'J', was a cheeky character with short fair hair and a raffish grin, half his sardonic friend's height. I wandered in. Socrates followed.

"What you guys doin'?"

"Just hangin'."

"You know Socrates, yeah?"

"Yeah, hey Soc."

There was silence. Dunno said helpfully: "So what'ya into, Socrates?"

More silence.

"Must be somethin'; we're all into something."

Yet more silence.

"Like me and Tools, we're into high gain amplification. Ain't we Tools?"

"I like chairs", said Socrates abruptly.

"Chairs?"

"I think they're beautiful."

'Beautiful' was a word we never used.

"He's into philosophy", I explained.

"He's a thinker!" said Tools.

"And photography."

"An artist!" said Dunno.

"Interesting!" said Joyboy.

"Dangerous!" said Itch.

"No, really", said Socrates. "Like that one over there."

We all looked. It was an ordinary old wooden classroom chair. "Isn't it beautiful, just there, being a chair: four strong legs, seat, back. Yet how strange if you look at it, what an odd leggy thing, like an alien you've seen for



the first time.”

“An alien!” snorted Joy Boy.

“Yes, well, only in the sense that it seems foreign to us. When you see something as if it’s for the first time. It’s called *jamais vu*.”

“Jammy what?” spurted Joy Boy.

“Marmalade?” suggested Itch.

Socrates was undeterred. “There’s a hidden quality that makes a chair a chair. It’s the chair-ness of the chair.”

Dunno snorted: “the chair-ness of a chair!” But I could see he was interested.

“Yeah; something that makes it a chair and not something else. Everything has that something inside - and everyone. Something that makes them special.” Dunno scratched his stubble.

“Somewhere” continued Socrates, “there’s a perfect chair, a kind of super chair.”

“Super-chair! Yeah, flying through the air! Is it a bird, is it a plane?”

“Shut up, Joy Boy”, said Dunno

Tools looked thoughtfully at the chair.

“You’re all nuts”, said Nat Chandler.

At that moment, Miss Belvoir walked in. This is why they were hanging around, I thought. Miss Belvoir was worth ‘hanging around’ for: one of that year’s crop of new teachers, barely out of school herself; blond and bosomy and fond of wearing tight short skirts. Of course the boys ‘hung around’. Miss Belvoir needed a bulb changed.

“That’s OK, Miss Belvoir. I’ll do it”, said Tools. With quick and easy movements, he grabbed the chair, swung it on top of the table, and leapt from floor to table to chair like a gazelle. He stretched his long frame and deftly unscrewed the faulty bulb. “New bulb!” he called, like a surgeon at an operating table. Miss Belvoir hastily grabbed the bulb packet and held one up to Tools like an offering. As Tools gracefully reached down, perfectly balanced, it

was like a scene from some old painting in our history books: a maiden in a flowing dress offering fruit to the Gods.

Tools screwed in the bulb, Miss Belvoir threw the switch and there was light. I hadn't noticed the night had come on. As Miss Belvoir thanked him, we all looked at Tools with intense jealousy. Socrates seemed to have become invisible in the glare.

"See", said Itch. "That's what you do with a chair!"



A few days later, for some reason Socrates was put in our English class for a day. Maybe there was a teacher's strike; everyone knew that Mr. Gordon, was a 'lefty', whatever that meant. So, classes were combined, and instead of Mr. Gordon we had Mr. Roberts, who was usually my history teacher. Socrates did not do history, although Mr. Roberts no doubt remembered him from his excursion into his class to research 'La Marseillaise'.

Mr. Roberts had no idea what to teach us, so he took the easy way out. "Today you are going to write an essay in class. Five hundred words: the topic." He wrote in big letters on the board:

THE MOMENT IN WORLD HISTORY THAT HAS MOST  
AFFECTED MODERN LIFE.

We all groaned. I said to Socrates: "this is crap. This is just another history class. Five hundred words!"

"I don't know", said Socrates. "It could be interesting. I don't do history."

It occurred to me that apart from French, Socrates did not do any of the 'soft' subjects, like history, geography,

or social studies. He didn't even do art.

"No one's doing it", Socrates had explained. "You can't do art at this school. I tried to, but Mr. Dreadstone said: 'this is an academic school. If you want to do practical subjects you should transfer to the Tech.'" But my dad won't let me go to the technical school. He says that won't get me into one of 'the professions'. So nobody's doing it, except Jenny Ramrod who has to do it by correspondence."

While I and most of the students doodled and scratched our way through the tedious ninety minutes that followed, Socrates I saw was totally engaged, with a determined expression and a busy pen. Ten minutes before the end of class, when I was still trying to think up a conclusion to my epic on 'The invention of the light bulb' (inspired by the episode with Miss Belvoir), Socrates strode to the front of the classroom and handed a wad of paper to Mr. Roberts.

The teacher cast his eyes suspiciously down the pages, covered in Socrates' scrawling, spiderlike script. The red pen quickly came out, and equally swiftly he was marking section after section. A few minutes later he announced the end of the class and we all trooped up to hand in our work. "I'll look at these and give them to Mr. Gordon to give back to you next lesson", he said. "Except for this one." He handed Socrates' papers back to my friend.

Outside the classroom Socrates showed me his essay. It was entitled: 'The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the Allies in 1945'. Every second line had crossing-outs and corrections, sometimes pointing out minor grammatical or spelling errors, frequently challenging and disputing the content with statements like: 'where is your evidence for this?' 'This is too emotive'; 'very few people would accept this proposition.' The concluding paragraph was emphatically encircled in red with the comment:

“Too much personal opinion and emotion; try to be more objective and stick to the facts.” A large red ‘F’ followed. I read the last paragraph.

*The crime of Hiroshima reverberates throughout the entire world this very day, in every atomic missile kept by America and other nations, in every military exercise or installation that our country shares with those nuclear powers, in every defense treaty we enter into that reinforces those militaries that rely, ultimately, on weapons of horror. Our silence as a nation, our acquiescence to powers that committed one of history's most heinous crimes, powers that are unapologetic for a crime they would willingly commit again, speaks the depth of our cowardice and shame.*

Socrates was visibly upset. “He doesn’t understand. All those innocent people really did die; and our side did it!”

It struck me that of our class of twenty-eight students he was the only one who had written something he actually cared about. I felt angry with the teacher. Weren’t we supposed to express our opinions, to use our emotions? “What a prick! This is really good, Socrates!” A few other classmates gathered round. A few were sympathetic, although Itch Humperdink expressed a common view when he said, “Why do you always take things so damn serious, Socrates?”

“Yeah, what’s ya problem, Socrates?” called out Vinnie Thompson, the boy who had bent down to throw a stone at him on that first day of school: a tall, wiry lad with pale skin and freckles. “Y’r such a serious cunt. Y’re up y’rself, aren’t ya!”

“Why do you care about it so much, Socrates?” I asked later.

“Because power destroys everything; because we used power wrongly, and we don’t admit that we did, so we do it again. I feel it always, here!” He stabbed his chest with

his fingers.

“But that was a long time ago!”

“So you only have feelings about things that happen right now?”

“I guess so.”

“OK, so, what do you feel about Mi Lai, or Biafra?”

I said this was unfair. I had never heard of those things – whatever they were.

“You know: it’s on the TV every night, Sergeant Calley on trial for what he did in Vietnam, the starving kids in Africa. Don’t things like that affect you?”

“No, not really.”

Socrates looked at me with those gentle eyes. “Maybe my skin is different to other people’s. It doesn’t protect me. It lets feelings and ideas pass right through.”

“He is too serious”, said Dunno later. “But good on him.”



On Friday afternoons a group of us played soccer. The sports teacher, exasperated by our lack of interest and fitness, had agreed that we could play that ‘girly’ game on the hockey oval while everyone else played Aussie Rules or cricket, depending on the season. Stan DiMaggio, the piano-player from day one, an Italian-American with glasses and a wild shock of unruly dark hair who lived above his uncle’s milk bar on Sunnyside Avenue, had enough Italian in him to explain the rules. We divided into two teams and played disorganized and shambolic games involving a lot of running, bumping, yelling, and disregard for the offside rule.

Socrates actively avoided sport. He was so frequently given detention as a result of wagging it that he had ended up having ‘detention’ listed as his sport. This suited

him; he was much happier reading a book in the classroom than running around the oval.

One day, I persuaded Socrates to join us for soccer. "You'll like it", I said. "It's different to footy. You don't have to be any good. We just have fun. We make up the rules as we go."

The idea of 'no rules' interested Socrates a lot.

The captain of our 'side' that day was David, the son of the pastor at the Baptist Church - my church. For some reason his younger brother Mark was also playing. The two brothers, Socrates, I, and a couple of other guys made up one team; on the other side, Itch Humperdinck, Joy Boy, Dunno, Stanley DiMaggio and Tools Tralore. Why the athletic Tools joined us for soccer I was never sure; perhaps he lacked the aggression for footy; perhaps his movements were too graceful, too refined; maybe, like the rest of us, he just didn't belong on that field of coordinated anger. Physical activity was certainly beneath the dignity of Nat Chandler, who agreed to sit on the sidelines keeping the score - or writing poems - in his little brown book.

We ran madly around the field trading insults and badly placed balls. Socrates proved to be hopeless at soccer, failing to receive passes and never getting his ball near the goal. When he had possession, he enjoyed running with the ball; the moment he was threatened by a physical encounter, he gave it up. He didn't seem to care if we scored.

On this day Itch was a regular Pele on the field, his big hands waving around, all flailing arms and enthusiasm. But one of those wayward arms gave Mark a nasty whack and sent him off with a blood-nose. There was a bit of a scene as the normally placid David came to his brother's defense, fronting up to Itch, who was a good head tall-

er than him although not at all muscular. With his usual raised eyebrows and ready grin, Itch just laughed off David's taunts to the effect that he would 'get him' for hurting his brother.

I didn't think much about it, but the incident was working in David's mind throughout the game. Again, and again, he found opportunities to confront Itch on the field. Every time, his gangly opponent avoided him, laughing, weaving away on his long nimble legs. When our side gathered at half time, David put a plan to us.

"Are you blokes going to help me 'get' Humperdinck?" His red, eager face spat out the words. To my surprise, a number of guys agreed to be 'in it'; Itch, who earlier in the day had been our mate, was now an 'arsehole': he 'had it coming', look at poor Mark sitting over there with his blood nose, let's 'get' the skinny bastard. As the language grew nastier, I withdrew from the conversation.

"I don't like this" I said to Socrates, who was standing by the side of the oval looking up at the sky.

"What?"

I explained.

"Why does he want to 'get' Itch?"

"I don't know; some kind of revenge."

"That's what happens in mobs."

We watched as David and the others walked over to the other team resting on the ground. Some words were spoken, and they got up. There was pushing and shoving as David fronted up to Itch. It was a fight. Suddenly I noticed Socrates had gone. I looked around and saw him walking towards David and Itch. I ran after him.

"Stay out of this, Socrates, you do-gooder."

"Not exactly a Christian thing to do, is it David. What did Jesus say? 'Turn the other cheek'?"

"Fuck off, Socrates. What would you know?"

"This much: you gotta do what's right, not what your anger tells you. That's what you learn at church, yeah?"

David turned on Socrates: "You little fuckwit. If you don't want to play with us, piss off."

Socrates stared at David calmly; his mates started to mumble: "Maybe leave it David. Come on."

"No; we're gonna have it out, aren't we Itch?"

It looked pretty funny: pudgy Socrates, standing between the tall but terrified Itch and the hunched and aggressive David. Panting like an angry dog, David glared at Socrates as if he was going to break his nose. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" David span around to his mates with a mocking laugh. "Look at this! Socrates the hero!" He turned back and said: "You're a loony, Smith!" He gave Socrates a hard shove on the shoulder. At that, Dunno, Tools, Stan diMaggio and Joy Boy moved forward and, as David saw his own supporters backing off, he spat on the ground. "Oh well, we don't want to hurt any of yous." He ran off with an unconvincing hollow laugh.

"Hey Socrates: good one!" said Joyboy.

"I coulda got him!" said a relieved Itch.

"It's just like the generals", said Socrates, as we walked off the field.

"The what?" Dunno was hanging on every word.

"In ancient Athens, there were these generals who won a great sea battle. But some of the soldiers got drowned in a storm and the generals didn't do enough to rescue them, so the people wanted to lynch these guys; they got all mad and revengeful. But Socrates refused to go along with the mob; he stood up to them. It's one of the reasons people hated him. But you've gotta do what's right."

"I think you've got something", said Dunno. "I like this Greek shit!"





The May school holidays came and went. The weather had turned to that season when the light lingers at the end of the long autumn days, streaking the sky with bands of pink and pale blue. As the sun sets, the clouds turn to grey and the last sickly yellow glow lights the horizon as the blue refuses to die, to darken to purple and the approaching night.

On the first day back, Socrates came to school glowing with a dangerous energy. His face was flushed, and he was bursting to talk.

“Did you hear about the Moratorium?” he was finally able to ask me, at recess.

“No”, I said innocently. “What’s that?”

“On the weekend. There was stuff about it on TV. My brother sent me some pictures.”

“Yeah, but what was it?”

“The Moratorium: the biggest protest against the Vietnam War ever; and other stuff: aboriginal rights, the environment. A hundred thousand people marched in Melbourne! They sat in the street and totally blocked the city!”

We sat down near the oval and he reached into his bag for a big brown envelope. “It looked so cool. Look.” Apparently, his brother in Adelaide ‘sent him stuff’. He pulled out a wad of dirty crumpled paper and unfolded it. It was a magazine, black and white on poor quality paper, with the title: ‘The Red Flag’. I had never seen radical literature before. There were grainy photos of people with frizzy hair, lots of denim, jewelry and beards. Inside the magazine were a couple of loose color photographs. “Benjamin went to the Adelaide march”, he said. A man of about 30, overweight, with a bushy brown beard, was standing in front of a flag I didn’t recognize: red and blue with a yellow star in the middle.

“What’s that?”

"The Viet Cong flag."

"Aren't they our enemy or something?"

"No! They're just fighting for their country. It's us that are wrong."

The Moratorium . . . I tried to remember if there had been anything on tellie or in the paper. Not much. I remembered my parents talking about it.

"Yeah, they play it all down. Like they always do. If you read the papers, you wouldn't even know we were fighting a war. It's censorship, I think. Even my dad tried to ignore it. But he's a hypocrite."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's the policy of his party to end the war; Labor politicians even spoke at the rally. The demonstrators want the same things Labor is standing for. But my dad, in the local paper and on the TV, said the Moratorium was the wrong way to make changes, people shouldn't block the streets and be violent. And it was all crap: there was no violence, his own party supported it, he should have too."

"So why did he say that?"

"So he can get elected. He's scared of what he calls 'the rural vote', you know, all the farmers who hate hippies." He laughed and pointed an imaginary shotgun at me. "Get off my land, long hair!"

At lunchtime he returned to the topic: "Robert, wouldn't it be great if there was something in Attica, or at this school, that would bring people together, to protest against? It would have to be something that affects them directly, not a faraway war. Something that is wrong, that they are made to do, that they are not supposed to question."

I answered unconvincingly that I thought that would be great. I didn't understand what he meant; the whole thing didn't mean much to me. But the brain of Socrates Smith was now working overtime trying to solve the problem he

had set himself. I looked at his thoughtful face, the pale blue eyes gazing into the distance, framed by the dark curly spirals of his uncombed hair. What was going on in that mind? Where would those thoughts lead us?

## Benjamin Smith

BENJAMIN SMITH sat at the table in the kitchen of his flat in Barnaby Street, West Adelaide, and read for the third time his letter to his brother Solomon.

*Dear Sollie.*

*Thought you might be interested in this magazine. Went to the Adelaide rally, it was very impressive, and I took some photos. (Enc.) Have located some of those books you wanted. The 'Little Red Books'. I thought you meant Mao's; these ones are different. I expect they will suit your purposes. Let me know how many you want. I will tell you how much and you can post me a money order.*

Benjamin picked up his pen and added a few more lines in his unattractive, laborious scrawl:

*It is cold in Adelaide. Sometimes I wish I was back in Sydney. Do you miss Sydney? Then again maybe not; too many bad memories. You should come to Adelaide again. I will take you to some concerts. I won't be home anytime soon.*

Considering his words, he added:

*You should get out of there too.  
Your brother,  
Benjamin*

He folded the letter and inserted it, with some other papers, into a large manila envelope. He licked the flap of the envelope and sealed it. On the table was another envelope, business size with a typed address. Benjamin took out a folded sheet of thick cream textured paper with an embossed letterhead: Bates, Morrison, and Smith: Barristers and Solicitors. He read:

*Dear Benjamin. I hope you are well.*

*There is a matter that is troubling me. It is regarding your brother. As we have discussed many times, (immediately, in Benjamin's mind, arose an image of those interminable talks in his father's study) I have high hopes for Solomon, as indeed I did for you. However, you chose to disappoint me. You made no efforts academically and wasted the opportunities I placed before you.*

*You left school early against my wishes. That was your choice. However, I hope that the years have given you greater insight, and that you may assist me in preventing Solomon pursuing a similar path. He is increasingly in trouble at school as a result of his rebellious attitudes. It is causing great distress to his mother. (Benjamin smirked; as if that was high on his father's mind!) She showed me a troubling letter from you to Solomon containing inappropriate and radical material. I ask you not to send such materials to Solomon who is too young to understand their implications. I ask you also to consider my position - I cannot afford to have my family associated with such views.*

*The weather here has been inclement lately. How is your job going? Dad*

Benjamin had indeed been a disappointment - to himself as much as anyone. He had struggled at school right from the start, bright at some things, especially numbers, but

missing verbal and emotional clues, he found language impenetrable and everyday communication all but impossible. His teachers put his difficulties down to laziness and lack of motivation. They began to punish him for his moodiness and refusal to communicate, causing him to withdraw further.

His school years became miserable and lonely; frequently bullied he played truant and never passed any tests. He was handed up through the system like a medicine ball until he reached the eligible age to leave school at fourteen and did so, to his father's disgust and his mother's dismay. After a couple of year's menial work with the local Council, organized by his father, he went traveling, taking laboring jobs where he could. Eventually he ended up in the mines in South Australia. When that work dried up - prior to the mining boom - he drifted to Adelaide where he found work, cleaning offices.

There, a fellow worker suggested he come with him to night classes and get his Matric. With his high school certificate, he was eligible for a basic clerical position in the public service. At thirty he found himself in a steady job in the Lands Department on North Terrace.

Chubby, with a round, appealing face and troubled eyes, Benjamin had no friends and returned each night to his flat in the suburbs where he cultivated Bonsai and his love of Gustav Mahler. He was devoted to his younger brother and wished to protect him from the negative influences of his family, from which, he felt with some justification, he had succeeded in escaping. Simple as his life was, he was independent; his elderly neighbors in the low rent block of flats considered him 'a lovely man'. When he buttoned up his beige suit and set out for work in the morning, despite all the difficulty, despite all the failure, Benjamin Smith could feel he was 'doing OK'. He folded up his father's letter into an obsessively neat ball and tossed it in the bin.



It is a sweet warm day in summer at the end of 1955. The little local park is drowsy with bees and there is a smell of pine needles. Harmony Smith walks through this little forest each day to the small group of shops that line the High Street of a town on the northern outskirts of Sydney: the butchers, the newsagent, the general store.

Today she has stopped to sit on a timber bench among the pines; you might think she is enjoying the sunshine, but it would be truer to say she is experiencing a temporary absence of pain, a moment of forgetfulness. She rummages in her bag for a small bottle of cooking brandy, unscrews the lid and enjoys the sweet sharp taste of the liquor.

A little way off she has parked the stroller. The boy is restless; he squirms in the vinyl seat, trying to get out. "Mummy" he calls. "Mummy: want to do pooh." Harmony is dozing on the bench. "Mummy!" The boy struggles out of the stroller and on uncertain young legs walks up to his mother and tugs at her. Harmony is far away, at a ball: she is wearing a blue satin dress and dancing with a man, not exactly young but still handsome. They swirl and swirl . . . "Mummy!" They swirl and swirl . . . the music is bright and gay . . . a man croons: "moonlight becomes you . . . it shines in your hair . . ."

The boy looks around. He sees the building his mother takes him to when he needs to use the toilet. He likes mummy to help him in the toilet; without her help he gets wee and pooh everywhere and then he is in trouble. But she won't see him this time; no one will see him. He runs into the toilet. It is dark and surprisingly cool. It is smelly; there are many corners and turns; he finds a green painted door, pushes it, and behind it sees the

white porcelain basin of the toilet. It is too high to sit on. He pulls down his pants and shits on the concrete floor.

Little Solomon Smith stands up and looks for the toilet paper. It is a kind of paper he hasn't seen before, it is not a roll; he pulls on the protruding end of the paper and a cascade of folded sheets come out like a concertina. The paper keeps coming; it confuses and fascinates him; he tries to grab it and it keeps coming; he laughs; he shoves some under his bottom into the pooh, which then becomes smeared all over his hands. It is sticky and smelly. He knows it is wrong to be smeared in brown sticky pooh, but it amuses him; he plays with the mounting pile of concertina-like paper, sticking it and pulling it apart with brown smelly glue.

Suddenly, roughly, he is grabbed by a strong pair of hands. "Jesus Christ!" A man's deep voice, swearing softly; he smells sweaty arms, wiping his bottom, picking up the paper, shoving the pooh-smeared paper in the toilet, cleaning up the floor. He pulls Solomon's trousers back on. Solomon is crying. The voice is reassuring: "You're all right, little fella."

A second voice: "You all right in there, Ken?"

"Yeah, all good, just a little kid. Bloody disgrace, leaving him in here like this. Can you get his mother? That must be her outside."

"Don't worry, I know who she is. I'll call her husband."

That evening there is a furious scene in the Smith household. "What the hell do you think you were doing? I get a call at my office from a friend of mine, telling me my son is lost in the local park, shitting his trousers. And where were you?"

"He wasn't lost. I was there" Harmony defends herself.

"Yes, you were there: half pissed. You're not fit to be a mother."

The two of them stand in the kitchen; only a small space separates them.

“And you’re no father; I wish you weren’t their father!”

“I’m probably not, you whore!” Harmony slaps his face and cries as Clifford grabs her arm; at that moment little Solomon, tearfully watching them from the kitchen door, runs towards his mother in a rush of anger and confusion; he pushes in between his parent’s enormous legs. Clifford releases Harmony; for a moment his anger towards the mother is redirected at the son, still barely three years old. Clifford strikes Solomon, who falls back onto the hard linoleum floor, bruised and crying. Harmony screams. Clifford leaves the room and the house. Benjamin Smith, twelve years older than Solomon, enters the kitchen, picks him up and takes him to his bedroom.

“I’m little and my daddy shouldn’t make me cry, I’m good; I’m good, I’m not a bad boy”, cries Solomon in his brother’s bedroom. His weeping becomes incoherent, inconsolable: “I want to live in another house, I don’t like my house, it’s a bad house, I’m sad I want to cry; I’m sad I’m a bad house, I’m a sad house, my sad, my sad, my cry, my my sad dead – dead – dead – dead, want dead not sad.” So Solomon cries and blubs, and as much as he tries, Benjamin cannot make him stop.

“I love you, Solly. I wish I could protect you.” But he can’t. He can’t even protect himself. And around him and Solomon the brown house slumbers and his mother never comes down the hall.



It is one year later. Socrates is now four years old. They are still living in the old house at Gosford, a simple timber bungalow in the days before his father moved up into better jobs and bigger houses. Benjamin, sixteen and on a rare visit home, has brought a girlfriend.



## The Tin Parrot

She is all curves and ample flesh, her clothes are tight fitting and revealing, and she smells of some sweet and foreign land. Little Solomon is hopelessly in love as she accommodates him on her lap on the big sofa, laughing and playing with him, jollying him with her bosom and her thighs.

The little black and white television is flickering in the corner of the lounge room. The three of them are watching a movie about a man and a woman, some kind of explorers, lost in the jungle, on a raft heading down a river into a dark and mysterious ravine. His mother makes noises in the kitchen and pokes her head in sometimes. His father is out.

Water swirls around the boat as it enters the chasm, swallowed up by the enveloping mist; the music swells . . . all of a sudden it occurs to Solomon - like an icy blade in his spine - the boat is not coming back: the darkness is the end, and everyone on that raft will enter that eternal blackness and never return.

‘La la la - la la la’ echoes the sad song from the tinny speakers of the television set, ‘la la laaaaa’ to a sad tune: “Brahms’ lullaby” Benjamin says, who knows about music. The girl nods and clutches Solomon tighter, while Solomon, overcome with terror and sadness, cries and cries and cries in uncontrollable sobbing. “What’s the matter, Solly?” the girl asks but Solomon cannot reply, choked with tears, his throat aching with the pain. She tries to comfort him by singing the lullaby: la-la-la; la-la-la. ‘Solomon’ it sounded like, that soft sweet voice, “sol-lomon”.

How can Solomon explain what he has discovered? He has looked into the future and seen the ultimate fate of everyone in that room.



## CHAPTER 6



# Judas

WE WERE STANDING around the wooden tables alongside the oval: Tools Tralore, Dunno, Itch Humperdinck, Nat Chandler, a few other boys, Socrates and me. It was lunchtime on a Friday; the weekly assembly had been held that morning and, as usual, a Roneoed copy of the school song had been placed on each chair to ensure a faithful rendition.

Socrates had kept one of these word sheets and was reading it carefully. “Have you ever read these words?” he asked us. “How about this: ‘Jason, Pericles and ‘Memnon, in new lands your faces shall be seen’. This is talking about ancient Greece, Athens: that was the city that invented democracy, and philosophy, and science.”

“Uh huh” came the disinterested response from those standing near him. Nat Chandler was shuffling cards.

“So, the words are there to inspire us; they’re saying that we should be like that great civilization. But where in this school do we see those values? Where do we have

any kind of democracy - like a say in how we are taught, or the rules we have to follow? Are we encouraged to ask questions, or investigate the world around us? It's all about accepting what the teachers tell us. That's not what ancient Greece was about."

"What the fuck do we care about ancient Greece?" said Itch and Joy Boy in unison.

"You have to care", said Socrates, despairingly. "You have to care what things mean, you can't just do things without thinking."

"Not much of a problem for me!" said Dunno.

"Knucklehead!" Tools grabbed his friend and gave him a playful punch to the head.

Socrates turned to me. "And how about this bit: 'Attica, pride of the Empire, like scions of Eton and Harrow'. This is all about England; Harrow and Eton are privileged schools that only the rich can go to. Is that what this school wants to be? And do we really believe any more in a 'British Empire'? Should we even praise something that was really about conquering other countries and taking their wealth?"

"It's just a song", said Itch.

"Yes, but it's a stupid song" proposed Dunno.

"That's right", said Socrates. "It is basically stupid; it says things we can't possibly believe. So why do we sing it?"

"'Cause we have to?" said a little blond haired boy who was always hanging around Socrates. I remembered him from my first day at school.

"Because we have to. That's right. What kind of reason is that? Is that even in the spirit of ancient Greece? I don't think so."

"The real Socrates did say that we should obey our rulers like we obey our parents" I said, remembering something that my friend had read to me from one of Plato's books.

"I know", said Socrates thoughtfully; "that's the thing

that I find really difficult about Socrates.”

“What are you guys going on about?” broke in Nat Chandler, dealing out the cards.

“Well, the question is, should you always obey your rulers – or your parents, teachers, whatever – regardless of whether what they want you to do makes any sense?” explained Socrates.

“If we don’t, Snake will whack us with his ruler!” ventured the little blond boy.

“Apart from that” clarified Socrates kindly.

There was silence; then Dunno said, with brilliant clarity: “I don’t do what people make me; I do what I want to do.”

“Exactly!” said Socrates.

“Yes, but if we all did that then the world would be mad, crazy, out of control. That wouldn’t work”, I protested.

“Works for me” said Dunno.

“Dunno’s right”, enthused Socrates. “We are always told that if we just ‘do what we want’, that will lead to chaos, right? But what if that’s just something leaders say to make their followers do what they are told? They don’t want us to find out we don’t need them.”

“But what about Socrates?” I said; “In the end, he did what he was told – and he killed himself.”

“Socrates, Socrates”, said Itch and Joy Boy.

“I’m not so sure about that”, responded Socrates. “In the ‘Last Days of Socrates’ (groans from Tools and Dunno) he says that all his life he’s followed a voice that tells him what’s right and wrong, a divine voice; at his trial, the voice told him it was right for him to die; that’s the voice he followed when he accepted the verdict: his inner conviction, not the orders of the court. What he’s really telling us is, that it’s up to each of us to decide what’s right, and to do what our heart, or our inner voice, tells us. Looked at like that, who thinks they would sing the school song willingly, if they really followed their heart?”

“Nobody. It’s crap”, said Dunno decisively.

“Then that’s our protest; that’s our Moratorium!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The school song: it’s a perfect example of something that makes no sense, that we are made to do, that we are not supposed to question. It’s something that we can object to by having a Moratorium: by refusing to do it.”

“But if we don’t sing the song we will get into trouble”, I said.

“Not if *everyone* refuses”, replied Socrates with a smile.

“You’re all crazy”, muttered Nat Chandler.

The others rapidly lost interest in anything that sounded like work, so it was left to Socrates and me to nut out the details. I’ve got to admit I was skeptical about the whole idea; I thought the school song was a pretty minor issue to hold a moratorium about. And I was worried about getting into trouble. But Socrates convinced me that it was a good idea: questioning the song, he argued, would open up discussion on all the other aspects of school life that should be examined. We would be respected, not punished.

“It will show that we need to be consulted on the subjects we learn, what classes we attend, and what clothes we wear to school. It will mean we can discuss these issues and agree on them as a school, rather than the students simply accepting everything from above. Snake won’t any longer be able to prowl round the schoolyard, catching people who break rules, unless we all agree what those rules are.”

Socrates had already tried to talk about some of these issues with the head teachers. Each time he wore provocative clothes to school, went to classes that weren’t on his schedule, or refused to participate in purposeless activities, he would use the resulting visits to the headmaster’s office to talk about the absurdity of accepted practices

– which Chrome Dome would then vigorously defend. True, the headmaster had briefly - and foolishly - allowed Socrates to edit the student newspaper, but he had become so annoyed by the continual raising of uncomfortable topics that he had refused to allow his articles to be printed, leading to the publication of an edition consisting entirely of blank spaces and the words ‘CENSORED!’

I have to admit that I was never entirely comfortable with Socrates’ trouble-making; he seemed to enjoy provoking his enemies, who he saw in extremely black and white terms. Personally, I never had a problem with the school or the teachers; even Chrome Dome, on occasion, was kind and helpful to me. Yet I had come to like Socrates for who he was: not the radical, or the theatrical performer, but the thoughtful and determined person beneath.

Our friendship had made me aware how lonely he was. Uninterested in sports and games, or popular music, or TV shows, he seldom got invited to other kids houses after school or to parties on the weekends. When he did, he had little idea of how to interact with other people. He would end up alone reading a book or wandering about the garden while the other kids hung out. Most Saturdays would find him down at the Dale Carnegie Library, curled up in a chair with a book from the seldom visited and never borrowed shelf of books of ‘Ancient and Modern Philosophy’.

If his house was out of bounds, disconnected and secretive, my life was also closeted and dull - for different reasons. My conservative parents kept to themselves, and rarely had friends around. They enjoyed each other’s company and quiet nights in, watching the ABC tellie on the couch. In our desire for something more satisfying than our home lives, Socrates and I were therefore well matched.

Persuaded by his rhetoric, I overcame my misgivings about the protest, a little excited to work with him on one of his political performances. First, we had to work out how to get the students, as a body, to refuse to sing the song without alerting the authorities beforehand. Socrates wanted it to be a guerilla attack: a surprise that would confound them with student power. I suggested we print a leaflet to give all the students before assembly, telling them about the protest. He thought this was risky; it would expose us, and also removed the element of surprise, so I suggested we post the leaflets into student's lockers the night before the assembly. That decided, the next step was to design the leaflet, which we did on my mum's typewriter at my house after school.

The leaflet looked like this:

MORATORIUM - PROTEST!

AT ASSEMBLY TODAY,  
DON'T SING THE SCHOOL SONG!!!

Do you understand the words of the school song?  
Do you believe in the words and agree with them?  
Do you think we should have to sing this song  
if we like it or not?

IF NOT, DO NOT SING THE SONG TODAY!

-STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING-  
*THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!*

Socrates had read about the SDS in one of Benjamin's magazines, so although we knew nothing about them we added their name to the bottom to make the effect more impressive.



My father's office had a Gestetner duplicating machine. I told him that we I had a class assignment that required us to print off multiple copies of a report. So, the next Saturday, while Dadly read the paper in the Cambridge and listened to the radio, Socrates and I ran off hundreds of copies of the leaflet, on yellow and pink and blue fools-cap, four to a page, and cut up the seditious papers with scissors.

I asked Socrates about the motto, 'the struggle continues'.

"It's what the protesters put on their posters in Paris in May '68."

"What was that?"

"Big protests in France, bigger than we have here. The whole country erupted: students took over the streets and factories."

"Why?"

"Because they wanted things to be different. There's a lot wrong in the world - don't you know that, Robert?"

"I guess . . . I don't know. Anyway, what can we do about it?"

"This!" He waved our pink and yellow leaflets in the air. I laughed. "By stopping a school song? How can that change anything?"

"Because it is a change Robert; it's like . . . if you poke a stick in your bike wheel while you're riding; the stick is small, right? But the effect is huge."

I had visions of a great crash as a bicycle careered off the road and became a mangled heap and my misgivings about the whole enterprise came back.

The following Thursday night at 9 o'clock, we met outside the school gates. It was cold and crisp and dark, with no moon: a perfect night for espionage. We crept through the deserted schoolyard, avoiding the pools of light created by the infrequent electric globes. The lockers stood

in rows along the veranda of the quadrangle, open to the night.

Quietly we worked our way around the quadrangle, posting our little colored notes into the vent in each locker door. The girl's lockers were on the far side of the quad. It felt strange and guilty to enter that forbidden territory. Once I kicked a metal trash can in the dark; it rolled and rattled down the concrete floor of the veranda and we froze with terror. No one came; this was in the days before security patrols, a trusting time when people slept easily in a world whose quiet certainty, nothing could disrupt.



As I climbed the stairs to assembly next morning a mixture of excitement and fear churned in my belly. Earlier, there had been murmuring and laughing around the lockers, as students discovered our brightly colored leaflets. Some students threw them away, but others gathered in groups, talking and arguing. There were flashes of pink and yellow and blue everywhere as notes changed hands.

We filed into the hall; the atmosphere was expectant and lively. No one knew what was going to happen, least of all the unwitting Chrome Dome and Snake. Socrates and I avoided each other's eyes and tried to look as innocent as everyone else.

Chrome Dome stood on the stage looking down at us, a tall gaunt figure in a black suit. On a row of chairs beside him sat the senior teachers, including Mr. Cutting in his trim brown suit. Miss Trigg, who taught music as well as French, was her usual stiff self at the piano.

Chrome Dome walked to the lectern, stretching his long bony fingers on its surface as he prepared to speak. To my

surprise, he did not mention the protest leaflets. Instead, he gave his usual "Good morning, students" followed by a few words of welcome. Then the fateful words: "We will now sing the school song."

There was a moment of hesitation as some students began to rise, while others remained in their seats. Some of those who had stood up looked at their mates and sat down again.

Oblivious of this, Miss Trigg began the opening chords of the song. As she reached the first verse, there was the odd sensation that the notes from the piano were dangling in mid-air without any support. Lacking vocal accompaniment, you could almost hear the notes falling and tinkling on the dark wooden floor of the too-quiet hall.

Miss Trigg stopped playing. Chrome Dome stared at us from his lectern. His fingers tapped the dark wood. "Students, please will you stand and sing the school song. Again there was hesitation. A few more students stood, but most remained seated. Miss Trigg swiveled on her chair and gave the headmaster a questioning stare. He nodded, and she commenced playing. When she reached the first verse, a few faint voices cut through the air then, embarrassed, petered out. Again she stopped. I snuck a look at Socrates, sitting further down the aisle. He was staring in front of him with a fixed expression.

The teachers muttered amongst themselves and one of them spoke to Mr. Cutting, who walked over and whispered in the ear of the headmaster. Chrome Dome looked incredulously at Mr. Cutting. He turned and faced the hall. "Am I to understand that this is some kind of protest?" His face had gone bright red as he gazed around the hall in confusion. Mr. Cutting seized control. Striding to the front of the stage he declared: "All students will now stand for the singing of the school song."

The sight of the school's enforcer persuaded a few more students to stand, but enough remained seated for the effect to be unconvincing. Miss Trigg again struck the

opening chords, but Snake, sensing another fiasco, waved his hands at her to stop.

Miss Trigg's head jerked around like a confused owl; Chrome Dome gasped for air like a beached fish, and the teachers chattered like a row of agitated monkeys. Our protest had worked! We had befuddled and incapacitated the entire leadership of the school! My body shivered with exhilaration and fear.

Snake gave us all a withering glare. "Someone must think they are very clever orchestrating this debacle but let me tell you: they will be exposed, interrogated, and appropriately dealt with. In the meantime, assembly is dismissed. Pleases proceed to your classes."

Snake's ominous words sent a violent shudder through my intestines; as we crowded into the stairwell, a seething, excited mass, I thought I was going to vomit.



On the way to class there was a lot of chatting and whispering about what had happened, and endless questioning as to: 'Who did it?' 'Do you know?' I was in a state of suspended emotions; on the one hand I felt excited by the success of our 'Moratorium', on the other I had a creeping dread that we had aroused forces we did not fully appreciate.

Around eleven a.m. there was a call across the loudspeakers for Trevor Koch to report to the headmaster's office. Everyone looked at The Marshal as he left the classroom: 'Did he do it?' 'Was it him?' went the whispers. Only I knew the answer to that, but I didn't say anything. Quiet little Robert Bradley was the last person anyone suspect-

ed. Perhaps the headmaster suspected Trevor because he stood out as an oddball character that might do such a stunt. As it turned out, he had a different role to play in this little drama. He returned to the class, and went quietly to his desk, refusing to look in my direction. A moment later, the loudspeaker blared again: "would Solomon Smith and Robert Bradley please report to the headmaster's office". I glared angrily at the top of Trevor's head as I left the classroom, leaving behind me another trail of twittering, whispering voices.

That walk across the quadrangle was the longest journey I had ever made.

Socrates beat me to Chrome Dome's office on the ground floor of the administration block and by the time I got there the headmaster was in full flight. I heard "bite the hand that feeds you" and "your father will be furious and has a perfect right to be". I half expected to hear him repeat his warnings about 'drop outs' and 'wanderers'. I sat on a chair in the corridor outside the office and listened as Socrates was interrogated.

"So will you please explain your involvement with this organization, the Students for a Democratic Schooling?"

"I don't have any involvement with it", replied Solomon in a quiet but shaking voice.

"Then why does this leaflet have the name of a political organization printed on it?"

"Because it represents a point of view that I agree with", replied Socrates.

"So you are not a member of this organization, there is no such group at this school?"

"No."

So this was Chrome Dome's worry: that we were the vanguard of a subversive organization infiltrating his school from that festering bed of protest and disorder, Mel-

bourne. For the first time the magnitude of what we had done hit me: we were striking at the heart of the authority of the school; we had attacked Chrome Dome.

Gaining in confidence, the headmaster then made two mistakes. He belittled Socrates, and he gave him an opportunity to speak.

“So this is just a prank Solomon; immature and childish behavior. I can’t see any other explanation, if there is no political motive. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Socrates answered with a question. His voice was shaking but controlled. “What is your opinion of the words of the school song?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, Solomon. The song is the song. We sing it. Full stop.”

“So the words of the song don’t mean anything? They are just nonsense?”

“Of course not, you stupid boy. They express the school’s values.”

“But you just said the words don’t matter. Both things can’t be true. Either the words matter or they don’t.”

“The words? The words? It’s about the song, not the words. Don’t try and confuse the issue, Solomon.”

“Corrupting the young, eh Socrates? You know where that leads.” It was Snake, entering the room from his adjoining office. I could imagine that little smile that hovered on his lips when he spoke quietly and earnestly with Socrates in the schoolyard. He was smarter than Chrome Dome and I suspect he secretly enjoyed those bouts with a clever and charismatic adversary.

“The point the headmaster is trying to make - if you don’t mind, Mr. Dreadstone - is that regardless of your attitude to the song, the school has rules, and these must be obeyed. It’s very simple, Solomon.”

Snake’s voice as always was smooth and measured, like the marks on a ruler, the kind that could in one instant

give instruction and in the next a stinging pain on the back of the hand.

"Mr. Cutting is correct Solomon. Rules must be followed; however, it is also the case that the song serves a purpose. It is a rallying point, a symbol of the school's social and educative aims." It seemed that Dreadstone and Cutting were engaged in a dialogue of their own.

"So the words are important, Mr. Dreadstone," pressed Socrates, sounding more confident, "and yet they don't matter at all, Mr. Cutting?"

"Look Solomon", said the headmaster with exasperation, "the school is a society. And like all societies, to run smoothly there needs to be a sense of unity."

"And rules", cut in Cutting.

"Yes. But whether it's the rules or the values the purpose is the same: to ensure a smoothly running society. On this Mr. Cutting and I are as one."

"As one."

"Is a 'smooth' society a 'good' society?" Socrates spoke politely; his voice was no longer shaking.

"Ah well, here we get back to the values." Chrome Dome sounded more relaxed.

"The ones that don't matter?"

"No, Solomon, the ones that do: the song expresses timeless values on which our society, or in this case our school, is based."

"So the words do matter! Perhaps I don't understand them properly."

"Or perhaps you could just sing them because that's the rule!" Cutting's voice was gaining its shrill tone.

"But if I understood the words I would find it easier to obey the rules."

"I don't think that follows", said Snake tersely.

"No, no; the boy has a point Mr. Cutting. Look Solomon, you are an intelligent boy. Don't ruin your future by becoming an enemy of society."

"I don't want to, Mr. Dreadstone. But you haven't ex-

plained the words.”

“What are you talking about, Solomon?”

“So I can obey the rules.”

“Those are important”, said Cutting.

“Yes, yes; the words. Look, Solomon, I think we have discussed this enough. The words are important, because they express the school’s values, which are the basis for the society of the school; we sing the song because that act celebrates those values and creates the sense of harmony essential to the smooth running of that society.”

“Smooth”, repeated Socrates.

“Rules”, added Cutting.

“So it would seem, if I have it correct”, said Socrates, “that this harmonious society, in which everyone shares a set of values, is in fact one in which that harmony is achieved by someone at the top dictating mindless rules! The Greeks had a word for that: tyranny!” His voice was shaking again.

At this, Chrome Dome finally cracked it; all pretense of amiability gone, his voice became hard and brittle. “Let’s get something very clear, young Smith. You think you’re smart. I know you are. But I’ll tell you one thing, one thing you’re not doing: taking away my authority, the power vested in me to run this school as I see fit. *I* decide when you come to school and when you go home; *I* decide what you learn, and what you wear, and *I* decide if you pass or fail. You think you know better, but there are authorities higher than you: your father, your school, and your country. Think about that sitting at home in the fine house your father provides you! You are suspended from school for the next week while the School Council considers expulsion. You too, Bradley”, he said, noticing me sitting in the hall.

“I think that went pretty well!” I heard Chrome Dome say as we passed his window on the way to get our things from our lockers.



“A pair of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed big bellied magpie legged narrow-hipped splay-footed sons of Irish Bailiffs!” panted Socrates, staring ahead, and walking a little too fast, as we headed out the school gates.

“Socrates! Slow down!”

He stopped and smiled at me. “Ned Kelly. ‘Jerilderie Letter’.”

“He’s like a fish on a rock”, mused Socrates as we walked down Barton Avenue.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s exposed: he has no values that he can express logically, he just has a position of power. To him the song is a way to wield that power. But of the song is nonsense where does that leave him? That’s why we have to be punished: we’ve exposed him.”

“You know what”, I said, “I don’t think either Snake or Chrome Dome even know the words to the song!”

Socrates laughed. “You’re right! But that’s the thing: people just do things without thinking; they don’t ask questions. And other people take advantage of that; people in power. They may not know the words of the song, but Chrome Dome and Snake damn well know what they *mean!*”

After a while I said: “Socrates, do you reckon we’ll be expelled?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

But when I left him at the corner of The Centreway, my mind was in disarray: would my parents find out what had happened? Would they be angry? Was that my last day at Burley College?

## Harmony Smith

AFTER SHE HEARD about her son's misdemeanor at school, Betty Bradley's first thought was for the other mother. 'I should get to know the mother of this trouble making Solomon Smith!' thought Betty Bradley.

She thought for a while about the approach to take. Finally, she knew: she would exercise her two great passions. First, she cooked a tray of vanilla slices (she loved the color and texture and sweetness of the fluffy yellow filling); next she potted some striking purple petunias. Carrying these gifts, she proceeded on foot down Barton Avenue one crisp sunny afternoon in June in the direction of Harmony Smith's house - Betty Bradley had never driven a car.

She had always admired the Smith house, with its dense and exotic garden; she imagined Harmony Smith dwelling in that garden like a forest spirit, waiting for a visitation from the outside world.

As Betty walked down the path towards the house she noticed, with concern rather than disapproval, the weeds in the garden beds, the un-pruned creepers and the over-long grass. She stood beside the front door for a long time, pressing the bell and waiting. Perhaps Mrs. Smith was out. But just as she was about to leave, she heard noises inside the house and, suddenly, the door creaked open several inches. The dark leaked out the gap like a fluid.

"Yes, what is it?" said a croaky voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry Mrs. Smith. I didn't mean to disturb you. It's Betty Bradley, Robert's mother, your son Solomon's friend."

There was silence as Harmony Smith took in this information. Betty could see very little of her, but she looked

to be wearing her dressing gown.

“Well you’d better come in” she said and then, in a rush of social awareness, hurriedly added: “but just give me a moment, I’m not quite ready” and closed the door.

Betty stood looking at the closed door. She waited for a very long time. The tray of slices and the petunia pot were heavy. She looked for a place to put them and found a wooden seat a little further along the veranda which she dusted and put her gifts, and herself, down to wait. Betty Bradley was not a person to be put out by strange behavior. She took in the view from the veranda and played a game of naming each of the plants she could see.

Harmony Smith stumbled out of the front door, dressed now in pink slacks and a very bright, fluffy and expensive multicolored cashmere jumper; her hair and makeup were more-or-less done, she wore very dark glasses, and she carried two tall glasses of lemonade. “Oh” she said as she saw the tray of vanilla slices and disappeared again into the house, leaving Betty abandoned once more. She returned with two small white plates.

It was an odd encounter, sitting on the veranda, on the wooden seat, balancing plates of vanilla slice on their knees and licking their fingers for want of either a spoon or a serviette. Harmony’s social incompetence turned their meeting into a schoolgirls’ tryst; Betty felt that she was the host, not Harmony. It was she who showed the owner around her own garden, pointing out the various plants and making gentle suggestions. Harmony, for her part, was continually apologizing for the state of the garden and making promises like, “Yes, I will be getting onto that soon” or “I have been meaning to do that”. Her promises sounded like memories of some other life, the life of someone else, choked up inside her, thought Betty Bradley. She knew she would be back.

And so, Betty Bradley became a regular visitor to the home of the shadowy Mrs. Smith, who in turn gradually opened up her house and, little by little, the recesses of her heart. As time went on, Betty began to write down her conversations with Harmony on pieces of brown kitchen wrapping paper; she made lists of the main events in her friend's life, hard won in awkward conversations.

One day, standing next to the kitchen table after dinner, she said to Dadly, "that's what happens to a woman who is neglected: like a garden that is un-watered, and uncared for, the healthy plants die and the weeds and pests move in. That's what happened to Harmony Smith: the weeds and pests have moved in, both the ones that grow within and those that take advantage from the outside."

Dadly said he didn't understand: he was a literal man; these floral metaphors were beyond him.

"Well, look here." Betty showed him her brown paper lists as if they were plans for a new garden bed. "This is when she was a young girl, maybe sixteen; she fell in love with a man, an important man too, a parliamentarian no less, who turned out to be a cad. He took advantage of her; he was married, he had no intention of leaving his wife; he abused Harmony and broke her heart."

Dadly nodded. This was concrete enough for him. "But how did she ever meet a parliamentarian?"

"Well, see here." Betty's finger moved down the page. "After finishing school, she gets a job in a florists in Martin Place. She told me how grand it was, and how important men would come in buying flowers for their wives - and mistresses. Ah poor Harmony! She was such an innocent. Then next, look here." Her fingers moved down the neat lines of words. "Along comes Clifford Smith. Harmony's mother sees a chance to offload the damaged goods. It doesn't matter to her that Clifford is a no-good of another kind, an abusive man who just wants a woman as a showy pearl in his cufflink. Anyway, Harmony resigns herself to

a loveless marriage . . . many women do that."

Dadly gave her a startled expression.

"Not us, Dadly", she said reassuringly.

"You were starting to sound like that Germaine Greer woman!" said Dadly accusingly.

"Shall I keep going or is this boring you, Dadly?" Betty put her arms around his shoulders. Dadly was surprised by his wife's verbosity that evening.

"No, not all darling" he humored her.

Betty resumed: "but Harmony is no decorative pearl; Clifford discovers that she is in a state of nervous depression that makes all social contact a terror for her; and worse he starts to hear stories circulating behind his back about her being the ex-mistress of his very own political mentor in the Labor Party. So he comes to despise her, feeling he has been tricked into marrying her by the conniving mother, seduced by the feminine charms of a fallen woman: all to no avail as she turns out to be unsociable in the ballroom and cold in the bed!"

"What a situation", murmured Dadly, unsure if it was Clifford or Harmony who deserved more sympathy.

"But there's something else that distorted the growth of this little vine", continued Betty. "See here: shortly after her marriage, her only brother - Charles - dies in the war against Germany; then three months later her father follows him, dead of a broken heart. Her mother takes up with another man. Harmony's family is destroyed; her world falls apart. And at this point" - her finger continued down the page - "she has a child and within two years she has another . . . two young children are hard work for a mother." She added the last point for Dadly, who had wanted a larger family himself but had to be satisfied with the one God had provided. "I think it was all too much for her. She descended into a deep melancholy. And that has led to the withdrawal, the suicidal tendencies, to the drink and the sleeping pills."

Satisfied with her performance, Betty Bradley laid down the sheet of brown paper. "So she is a sad broken drunk." Dadly had not intended his words to be as unfeeling as they sounded. "What a situation for Solomon to grow up in."

"Yes, but remember it's not all her own fault; her husband is not blameless. She has been misused and beset by bad circumstances as well. She desperately needs guidance and good company." Betty Bradley, amateur sleuth and reformer, felt that with her detective work on the brown wrapping paper she had not simply explained the mystery of Harmony Smith: she had established a role for herself as a mentor and guide to a lost soul.

"But Betty", Dadly said thoughtfully, "you said that Harmony's two children were born together shortly after their marriage; that would be during the War. Yet Solomon is only – what – seventeen? He must have been born later than that. Is there a third child?"

"I'm not sure", replied Betty, puzzled.

"I don't think you should believe everything you hear from Harmony Smith."



"What were you thinking, Robert?"

It was the night Robert came home with the news of his suspension from school. For once, his mother did the talking. Dadly was quiet. He had a tortured expression on his face; Robert assumed he was too angry to speak. They were seated at the dining room table, somewhere they never sat unless someone died or else came to dinner.

"Are you sure this Solomon is a good friend for you?" Betty continued. Robert's father said nothing. "Why don't you say something, Derek?" Dadly raised his hands im-

tently. "And Robert, your studies . . ." continued Betty with a concerned look on her face.

"I don't regret what we did", Robert said, defiantly. "And I respect Socrates and won't give him up as a friend. And, my studies are going fine." It was true: he was well on track to get the grades he needed to follow his father into accountancy.

After an awkward dinner, Dadly Bradley walked out of the house, into the carport where the Austin 'Cambridge' sat waiting. 'What's going on, Dadly?' he mused to himself.

What was going on? Ever since that encounter at the Paradise Aboriginal Mission something had been growing in him; he wasn't yet sure what it was, but it evidenced itself in an increasing willingness to take risks, a delight in the unknown, a pleasure in the new and unexpected. Perhaps this was why, after hearing about his son's misdemeanor, Dadly Bradley was strangely elated. What was it that made such irresponsibility, even rebellion, no longer threatening to him - even a little attractive? Last year, it had seemed nothing would ever change. Then there had been the heart attack, the move to Attica . . . but those events, Dadly thought, were mere parts of something greater. Yes, there was something about the time itself, about 1970, which made anything seem possible. His wife was working for a communist! He smiled at the thought.

Dadly turned the knob on the car radio idly across the stations. Attica only had one, Rex Coburn's 3SUN; usually Dadly ignored this in favor of the only other choice, the ABC station networked from Melbourne. But today for some reason he played with the dial, enjoying the drizzle of static that separated the bands as if this represented places where some new and wonderful sounds might arise. The radio locked in station 3SUN. 'Darned pop music', thought Dadly; it was a Bob Dylan song he had heard before. It would have annoyed him once; today

he let its words drift and sit in the ether: ‘come gather round people, wherever you are . . .’ Dadly found these sentiments strangely satisfying. ‘Is the world changing?’ he thought, reaching to loosen his tie.

Dadly found himself sidling the Cambridge up to the Imperial Hotel bottle shop. The attendant recognized him, even though he was an infrequent customer. The Bradleys never drank wine with dinner; in fact, Dadly and his wife never touched alcohol except at social functions. Dadly did however have a cabinet in the dining room, containing a bottle of sherry that he would take out for visitors.

“Another bottle of dry sherry, Mr. Bradley?” asked the attendant.

“No. It’s time for something different. I want to try one of those - what are they? - wine boxes.”

“You mean a wine cask?”

“Yes, and make it something nice and sweet.”

When he got home, Dadly knocked on Robert’s bedroom door. “You know”, said Dadly, his eyes gleaming a little with excitement or tears, “I’ve been listening to that Bob Dylan fellow on the radio; I think he’s right: times are changing, and maybe it’s time they did. You know, Robert, I’m not supposed to say it, but I think the school was a bit harsh on you and Solomon; you did something . . . worthwhile.”

“Dadly”, Robert suddenly asked, “Are there aboriginals in Paradise?”



## CHAPTER 7



# The Isle de France

THE PROTEST OVER THE SCHOOL SONG had several surprising results. For one thing, we were not expelled. I am pretty sure this was because of Socrates' dad: that inveterate joiner of committees was a member of the School Council as well. Next, we became minor celebrities; I even saw girls take an interest in Socrates: a pretty girl nodded and smiled at him as we passed on the way home from school; another time one of them called out: "Hey Socrates, you're cool!" Socrates was incredibly awkward with girls; he made nothing of these opportunities, just smiling shyly and hurrying on.

And, ever so subtly and quietly, there were changes at school. The most surprising: the school song was never sung at assembly again.

Socrates continued his revolutionary activities, becoming for a while the local distributor for 'The Little Red School

Book', a Danish teenager's guide to sex and politics that the Australian government had tried unsuccessfully to ban. Socrates obtained copies from his brother Benjamin in Adelaide and sold them on to his eager student customers.

There was another win: the school began to relax the dress code. For example, it was decided that senior students were no longer required to wear a tie in summer. Socrates had long argued that this restriction on the neck was unhealthy, especially in the hot summer months. It was another example of a senseless rule designed to make people conform, he said. He organized a petition to have tie wearing abolished. The petition also requested a two-hour siesta during summer and more drinking fountains. "We should be adapting to our climate", said Socrates, "not pretending we are in England. It's the school song thing over again."

When it was announced at assembly that tie wearing would be optional after September 21st each year. Socrates was annoyed because of the arbitrary date; he had been hoping tie wearing would be abolished entirely. His reaction was characteristically perverse.

I was sitting in my classroom on the quadrangle. Socrates was late as usual, and I saw him enter the courtyard, wearing normal school uniform - but with a huge wide brilliant white tie! I don't know if it was his lateness, or the sight of the tie, but in no time Mr. Cutting had dashed out of a neighboring classroom to confront Socrates.

At that very moment the headmaster entered the quadrangle from the other end. He rapidly approached Socrates and got to him before Cutting. Those of us close to the windows waited in anticipation for a juicy scene of double-trouble for Socrates, but the expected confrontation was not to be; instead we heard Chrome Dome call out: "Good to see you keeping up the spirit of good dress

at this school, Solomon.”

Did he not notice the hideous white monster around Socrates neck? Would any tie meet his standards? I thought back to the ‘interview’ in his office; yes, that’s it: it’s the symbol that matters to him, not the content. True to form, Mr. Cutting was intent on enforcing ‘the rules’. A split second later he arrived, confused, his anger thwarted by the intervention of the headmaster. There was little he could do; Socrates was, after all, wearing a tie, and the headmaster had accepted it.

Mr. Dreadstone walked away, leaving Mr. Cutting to deal with Socrates. “You always have to make a statement, don’t you Solomon? Everything is a performance.” Momentarily, I saw that little smile flicker across the stony face of Snake Cutting.

“It’s all about choices”, said Socrates later. “It’s not that I think we should not wear ties, it’s that we should wear ties if we want to, if there is a reason to do it; otherwise it’s blind coercion. There is no respect for people’s ability to make choices.”



For the rest of July, and through August, a bitter inland winter set in. Some days it would be grey and cold with streaks of pale blue splitting the mercury-silver clouds. Rain would spray a surprising splatter on the window-panes. But mostly the days were crisp and clear. I was continually surprised by how cold it could get in this place that had been a furnace when I arrived in January.

I was most surprised by the frosty nights. I would wake early and, wrapped in my dressing gown, venture out in the icy pale blue morning air to examine the birdbath in the middle of the lawn. I wanted to see if it had frozen

over: some mornings it had, a quarter inch thick of crazed, mottled ice that, if I was careful, I could lift out in one great circular slab. I had never seen anything like that in my temperate Melbourne suburb. It brought back to me the strangeness of this place; I thought: 'how mysterious the world is'; I remembered Socrates and his *jamais vu*.

Socrates himself made increasingly frequent visits to my home. He never invited me back to his place, and it was getting too cold to play in the park. So, after school he would stay at my house, occasionally lingering until tea-time when, after a phone call between my mother and Harmony, he would be invited to stay for dinner.

The visits of my mother to the Smith house also continued through the middle months of that year. Socrates told me of times he would arrive home to find our mothers, seated in the kitchen, sharing a cup of tea. He told me that on one occasion he even heard his mother laugh - clearly an astonishingly rare sound in the Smith residence.

There were changes in our household, too: ever since the 'song' incident my father had become more vocal about political issues and more open to new points of view. Thinking back, I wonder if one person's actions can be a catalyst for change in the minds of others, and if this was something that Socrates intended in his provocative performances. Anyway, my father, the bookkeeper, began to utter economically nonsensical things: he began to talk about inequality, the environment, and women's rights. He even made approving statements about Gough Whitlam, the Labor leader, describing him as a 'man of ideas'. My mother quietly agreed with him when he talked this way, as we all sat around the dinner table, a secure and happy circle. Politically far in advance of my father, she was happy to silently observe this growth in him as a gardener might watch a flower struggling to bloom.

The biggest change in my father? He sometimes went to work without a tie.



One afternoon, Socrates and I were sitting on the granite steps of the war memorial in the park opposite his house.

“What are you going to do when you leave school?” It was on all our minds in the lead up to our final exams for Matric. “Photography?”

“Yeah; photography; some kind of art, anyway.” Socrates had that faraway look in his eyes.

“I remember that camera you had, down at the art gallery.”

“I’ve got it here”, he said, reaching into his school bag. He showed me again the ancient apparatus, drawing it out of its leather case and handing it to me carefully. It was a mysterious thing I cradled in my hands; it did not reveal its secrets easily. You had to search for the right button; a click of that button and the lens popped out with its black concertinaed bellows, silver dials to control time and exposure and a tiny viewfinder like a small square crystal. It was nothing like the plastic boxes that I was used to; it had more in common with the Burley Brother’s steam engine down near the river.

“It’s old”, I said.

“It’s German. It has a Schneider lens.” Seeing me search for the viewfinder, he assisted: “You look down here, into this little glass box.”

I peered into the tiny cube: its mirror reflected a minute and remote image of the world up to my eyes.

“It’s very small”, I said.

“You can see all the world in there. The world comes in here (he pointed to the lens) and inside . . . magic hap-

pens.” He smiled.

I stood up and pointed the camera at the granite war memorial; its grey castellated form fitted within the little silver cube of the viewfinder, in miniature, as if captured there, the actual thing, in the glass.

“It’s a kind of transformation” he said.

“Transformation? What does that mean?”

“Well, what comes out is not the same as what went in”, he said cryptically. “It’s changed.”

“Well of course”, I said, “it’s a photo, not the real thing.”

“Yes, but the funny thing is: the real world gets changed as well.”

I looked blankly at him, awaiting an explanation.

“It’s like there’s the reality we see, but there’s something else; maybe we don’t actually see reality. Have you heard of Christo?”

“You mean Jesus Christ?”

“No, Christo the artist. He wraps things up. Last year he came to Sydney and wrapped up a whole lot of the coastline in a big cloth.”

“What for?”

“To make us see it better, I think.”

“He wrapped something up, so we can see it? I don’t get it.”

“I’ll tell you a story”, he said. “It’s one of Socrates’, that Plato wrote down. Socrates says: imagine there’s a cave, and some guys have been chained up in there all their lives. Behind these guys is a fire, casting shadows on the wall of the things happening behind them, the things they can’t see, in the outside world. So, all they see are shadows. To them, that’s reality. They don’t question it. Socrates says we are like that: we don’t see reality; we see a shadow, a projection.”

“We don’t really see reality? How does a camera do it then?”

“Well maybe it’s because the camera just records what

it sees, it doesn't look at things like we do, with a lot of assumptions and conventions about what things are."

We sat on the cold granite looking out at the sweep of lawn, now streaked with late afternoon shadows.

"You know what I hate most in the world, Robert: conventions", said Socrates. "Unthinking practices, rote assumptions, organized religion, patriotism, and the progressive barn dance!" He stood up. "I'm after the real thing, it's deeper, it requires thought and we have to be brave and open to it: that's why I want to be an artist, not like my dad, a fake in a fancy suit . . . Maybe . . . you know what, Robert? We could 'Christo' this war memorial!" He turned and spread his hands wide, imagining the steps, the pillars, the engraved stone plaques, all wrapped in white fabric. "It would be so pure, so elegant. It's exciting Robert; we'll form like an art group, we'll be art rebels, outlaws. I even thought of a name: 'The Artlaws'!"

The memorial consisted of a stepped granite wall with a tall obelisk in the middle. In front was a large platform for ceremonies, two steps higher than the surrounding park. Socrates now ran up these steps and stood on the raised platform.

"This could be our bema!"

"Our what?"

"In Athens: in the agora they had a stone called the bema; anyone who stood on it had the right to speak. We could have debates and speeches, we could make this our agora!" Socrates threw his arms out wide. "Oh Attica! Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments of our empire! Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now!"

"What's that?"

"Pericles. 'The Funeral Oration' . . ."

Socrates, who had been pacing the granite platform of the memorial in mock dramatic speech, stopped and stared over my shoulder. I turned and followed his gaze.

"What the fuck's that?" The sky had turned a sickly red. It was as if someone had placed a giant red glass bowl over Attica.

"It's a dust storm."

"Is that bad? Maybe I should go home."

We walked across the park to Barton Avenue. Looking down the street we could see a great rolling plume of dust advancing on Attica, billowing in the air like an atomic mushroom cloud. Socrates stood still, staring at the cloud, fascinated.

"I better go, Socrates."

"But it's so amazing", he said. "Do you think it will destroy the town?" It sounded like he wanted it to happen. "C'mon, you better come to my place."

My surprise at this invitation was outweighed by my fear of the dust, rising now in a red wall that had reached Fourteenth Street. As we wheeled our bikes across the road, Socrates observed: "If an atomic bomb hit Attica, the mushroom cloud would be very red . . ."

Drops of red rain were falling and flashes of lightning ripped the sky as we reached his front gate. I followed him down the long path through the greenery and onto the timber veranda of the big house. We only just made it as the first stinging grains of red sand began to beat on our unprotected skin. As we moved from the veranda into the house, I left Attica behind, a hazy vision obscured by the trees, the creepers on the veranda, the stained glass of the windows. The light became diffused and dark. Ornaments gleamed and sparkled from distant shelves and cabinets. Outside the wind was howling, worrying the trees, knocking their branches against the weatherboard walls.



Socrates hurried me down the hall to his bedroom. Off to the side I saw a sitting room with plush looking chairs, a dining room with a shiny oak table, a kitchen that had a large enamel cooking range. I also noticed dirty pots on the stove, liquor bottles on the table, and a pile of unwashed dishes in the sink. We passed a door on the other side that was closed, with a sign saying 'private'. "Dad's office", confided Socrates.

Once in Socrates' room he closed the door and switched on a lamp beside his bed. The room was small and crammed with stuff: there was a guitar and a music stand with sheet music on it; a pair of speakers connected to a hi-fi amplifier, and a turntable with records piled beside it. There were masses of clothes on chairs and covering the floor. Posters plastered all the walls: rock singers, political figures (Che Guevara, I remember), hippy typefaces and political slogans. One of these I recognized: "MAY '68: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!" on a poster with a stenciled image of a factory with a red flag flying from its chimney.

On a table by the bed, a Buddha statue served as an incense stand and Socrates lit a stick of it, filling the room with a sweet sickly smell that was entirely new to me. And there were books: dozens of them.

I picked up one of the books: Plato's 'Republic'. "You like reading, don't you?" For me, reading was a chore, a necessary evil inflicted by teachers and preachers. "I don't much."

"Yes, but these are interesting. Not like the stuff we have to read for school. I'm reading about bushrangers at the moment." From the chaotic pile he pulled out a large, illustrated book entitled 'A Pictorial History of the Wild Colonial Boys' and flipped through the pages for me. There was not a lot of text; instead, photographs and engravings of dramatic scenes dominated the pages: wild looking men on horseback in rugged landscapes; gangs 'holding up' stagecoaches full of terrified passengers;

grainy photos of gruesome death masks and hangings.

"Who were these guys?" I asked him.

"Outlaws. They lived when Australia was new, and being discovered, and the British ruled everything. A lot of people were poor and badly treated, so they started to rob the rich people to survive. They learnt how to live in the bush like the natives. They were real Australians; they rebelled against authority and hated the British."

"But that doesn't make sense", I said. The British is 'us', right? So, these guys were fighting against us, and the police. They were criminals, weren't they?"

Socrates turned the pages to a photo of a handsome looking young man. "See this guy: Ben Hall. The police ran him off his farm; they took away his wife and child. The police in those days weren't honest; they were mostly criminals anyway. So, he became a bushranger. No one could catch him. He took over a whole town once. Everybody loved him. He was betrayed, and they shot him in the end; but you know, there are songs about him and when those songs are sung in that area today, the women still cry."

I looked at Socrates sensitive face and wondered if he might be about to do so himself. I thought, 'how silly, to be moved by some old story.'

"They all had some reason for what they did, something in their past that made them who they are. They were brave and willing to die for what they believed. Like this guy", Socrates continued, turning to another page.

"Oh, I know him: that's Ned Kelly. My dad says that he was a police killer." The picture was a dramatic engraving of Kelly in his trademark steel armor, revolver defiantly raised over his head.

"He did kill police, that's true. But it was a kind of a war; he wanted to create a republic, a new country, in northern Victoria. See this?" He pointed to an image of a handwritten letter. "That's the Jerilderie Letter; in it he

wrote down all the things that the government and the police had done to his family. He gives reasons for what he is doing. He was very smart and brave; when they put him on trial and the judge sentenced him to death, he said to the judge: “‘and I will see you there!’ The judge died two weeks later.”

Socrates told more stories of the bushrangers. They reminded me of the bible stories we were taught in Sunday school: in the case of Ben Hall’s betrayal, Judas came to mind. Then I thought of Jesus turning out the moneychangers from the temple. That was a kind of rebellion. My respect for these bushranger characters increased. Outside the wind was screaming, but his little room was filled with the secure scent of ideas.

“You play the guitar?”

“Yes” he said, “want to have a go?”

“No, I’d like to hear you. I know you can sing the *Marseillaise*!”

“Ha!” he said. “I know, I’ll sing you a different song about France.” He placed a book of music on the music stand: ‘Australian Folk Songs’. “This one’s called the *Isle de France*. It’s about a convict who gets shipwrecked on an island in the middle of the ocean. It’s a good song for today - it’s about a storm.”

*“Oh, the sky was dark and the night advanced  
When a convict came to the Isle de France;  
And round his leg was a ring and chain  
And his country was of the Shamrock Green.”*

Just as I remembered from that day in French class, his voice was sweet and pure. And there was something else: a melancholy sadness. Perhaps it was in the way he played the guitar, emphasizing the minor chords, lingering on the long, low notes. His rendition was slow and soulful, unlike the folk singing on cheesy TV shows. This was no

‘Click go the shears, boys!’ I looked down at the pile of records and saw Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen. That’s where this music belongs, I thought.

Socrates was about to begin the second verse when I heard the banging of a door and muffled voices from the other end of the hall. Socrates made no sign that he heard the sounds.

*“‘I am a Shamrock’, this convict cried,  
‘That has been tossed on the ocean wide.’”*

The voices became louder and more distinct. I could hear a man’s voice: “the fuck you have! Look at this place! It’s disgusting . . .”

Socrates continued singing as if he could not hear; if anything, his voice became more distinct, determined perhaps to defy the intruding voices.

*“For being unruly, I do declare,  
I was doomed to transport these seven long years.”*

There was a clattering of dishes and a woman’s voice: “this horrible place with no friends and nothing to do . . .”  
“Yeah? And whose fault is that, you just sit there . . .”

*“When the winds did blow and the seas did roar  
They cast me here on this foreign shore.”*

“Never any use to me . . . why the fuck did I marry you . . .”

*“So then the coastguard he played a part  
And with some brandy he cheered the convict’s heart:”*

“... ever have children with you . . . on the booze again .

. . . that's a laugh . . ."

*"Although the night is far advanced  
You shall find a friend on the Isle de France."*

". . . you whore!"

There was a high-pitched squeal, the breaking of a plate on the floor, a moment's silence, and a slamming door.

Socrates quietly put down the guitar and closed the music book. Beyond the closed door I could hear faint sounds from the kitchen: broken pieces of plate being picked up, dishes washed. We sat in silence. After a while, a door slammed, and I heard a car start up and drive off.

"I think the storm's over", said Socrates.

As he led me back through the house, I peered into the kitchen, horrified yet fascinated by what I might see. It was all tidy now: the stove was clean; the table shone, and washed white dishes drained on a rack beside the sink. The house smelt of cleaning liquid and as I walked down the path I thought, 'yes, that's how it is; that's how we like the world to be: clean, normal, ordinary. But is that how the world really is?'

The rain had stopped, and the wind had dropped to a low breeze. I walked along the veranda, held and fascinated by the place, unable to leave. Sure enough, the big white Statesman was gone. I turned and walked up the drive to the gate. I was halfway there when Clifford's car barreled into the drive, headlights on, spitting gravel, lurching to a stop two inches in front of my beating chest.

## Rex Connor

“THE BY-ELECTION is set for November 21.”

Bill Gordon and Clifford Smith were sitting in comfortable chairs in the dark cool of the Attica Club. “Gorton’s not popular within his own party. If his man gets thrashed at this by-election, his days are numbered, and with him the government!”

“It’s not the Prime Minister I’m worried about; it’s Eden Young now that the old Goanna’s anointed him. There’s nothing I can beat him on. Vietnam’s been flogged to death: no one cares about it anymore; everyone knows we’re getting out no matter which side is in power. Anyway, Eden’s got the march on me, with his memorial and his mates in the RSL.” Clifford Smith was in one of those despairing moods that Bill Gordon knew well.

“What about health or education?” suggested Gordon.

Clifford raised his hands. “Can’t we be a bit more original, Bill?”

“Aborigines?”

“Leave it out; there’s no votes in that! No, I need something bigger; something that will inspire people. I was thinking: ‘national development’.

“That’s big”, said Gordon. “Maybe a bit too big; may not resonate locally.”

“Yes, but think about it Bill; why is Attica here: because a government thought big. Barton, bringing those Burley guys here from America, it was a vision: those blokes had ideas. Develop the interior; make the most of our resources, that’s the message.”

“Yes, but Attica’s already developed. People care more about having a cancer ward at the hospital or a school gymnasium.”

The mention of schools and hospitals raised a slight feeling of unease in Clifford, one because of his failed attempt to woo Evelyn Bishop, the other because of that annoying business he had to sort out about Solomon.

"Maybe that's so; but look here. What about this?" He shoved a newspaper across at Gordon. It was a report of a speech by Rex Connor, energy spokesman in the Labor shadow cabinet. "See? This bloke Connor is onto something: Australian resources for Australians. Develop the north. Build a big pipeline to bring the gas south. That's the kind of thing I mean. Local angle? What about promising to bring his big gas pipeline down through Attica: heaps of jobs in that!"

"You can't promise that!" protested Gordon. "You don't know where it has to run. There could be technical difficulties."

"Difficulties! Don't bore me Bill. We just need to promise; we don't have to deliver!" Bill Gordon pursed his lips. Clifford continued undeterred. "I rather like the sound of this Connor bloke. Listen to this; there's a poem he likes to quote:

*Give me men to match my mountains,  
Give me men to match my plains,  
Men with freedom in their visions  
And creation in their veins.*

Clifford sat back with a dreamy look in his eyes.

"Connor is regarded as a bit of a maverick", warned Gordon. "He may be in Whitlam's good books at the moment, but a lot of the members regard him as dangerous. You know he once felled a bloke who complained about the price of a car in his car yard?"

"Did he now!" Clifford was impressed. "Then he's got some go. Get onto him for me. See if he can put his pipeline through Attica."

When Gordon had left, Clifford ordered another scotch and settled back in his chair, a vision before him of a great ceremony, crowds of people, flags and music, all crowded around a great well head, a metal pipe of colossal proportions, a monstrous beast, a great snake, rising from the red earth of Attica, a pipe drawing all of the energy and power of the continent here to this place, to him; and he, uniquely, the one with the power to turn the great wheel, the tap allowing this abundance to flow. To a rousing cheer, he saw himself turning the tap; the gas flowed, prosperity reigned, and the crowd thanked him, Clifford Smith, for bringing it to them. He was still dreaming like this when, hours later, a waiter came to tell him he was wanted on the phone.

“Hello Bill? Kalgoorlie! What the friggin’ use is the pipeline if it has to go through Kalgoorlie? I know it’s in Western Australia! What? Yes, I guess so. It’ll have to be health then. I’ll go and chat with that commie sheila. Must be something needs fixing at the hospital.”

“Maybe a tap?” suggested Bill Gordon helpfully.



Dadly Bradley drove slowly down the rutted dirt track that led to the Paradise Aboriginal Mission. He honestly wasn’t sure why he had come, even though the neat pile of clothes on the seat beside him offered an obvious explanation. There was a suit he no longer liked, some trousers and shirts with plenty of ‘wear’ left in them, and a few of Robert’s clothes including a perfectly good pair of tennis shoes he had never worn. (Dadly secretly harbored an image of that aboriginal boy that he had seen naked and barefoot wearing those shoes). He put aside the thought: ‘what are you thinking, Dadly? What’s that boy to me?’



Yet the image persisted.

He had left work early again that day; Dave McIntosh had failed to appear at all after lunch, and the packing line rattled on satisfactorily without him, or for that matter Dadly. In fact, Dadly was the least useful, knowing little about the mechanics of packing, although he did now occasionally go down into the shed and watch the long clattering line of conveyors and rollers that snaked through the cavernous space, tended by careful women who guided the boxes and checked for bad fruit. 'The foreman on the packing line knows what he is doing' thought Dadly. And so, with purpose in mind, he left the packing shed one afternoon in early August and drove deliberately in the direction of the mission.

At about the place where he had seen the boy, amongst the glistening-leafed gum trees, he stopped the car; it represented a point beyond which he was not inclined to go, even though the track continued on, no less passable. Leaving the engine running, he got out of the car. As before, he could see the humpies through the trees and the figures of people. But it was colder now, and the moving shapes were accompanied by drifts of smoke from several campfires. Dadly hesitated, then went around to the passenger door, opened it, and took out the pile of clothes. As he stood up he became aware of a presence, turned, and found himself facing the young aboriginal lad, clothed this time, at least below the waist, in a pair of dusty brown trousers.

"Hello" said Dadly; "I've brought some clothes", holding the pile hopefully in the young man's direction. As on the previous occasion the boy stood still and silent, observing Dadly. "Well", said Dadly, "I thought perhaps they would be of some use." He put the clothes down carefully on a patch of grass beside the track. He picked up the tennis shoes. "These might fit you; they belonged to my son. He's about your age. They've hardly been worn; he never liked tennis." It occurred to Dadly that it was odd to be

talking to a stranger about his son. It felt like a transgression: he had entered, alone, into a foreign land while those he loved were now on a distant shore. "Well anyway, I hope they fit." Dadly shivered, slightly disappointed at the aloof strangeness of the young man, who however suddenly stretched out a long black arm and grabbed the shoes, turned, and walked away. Dadly smiled, as if the kindest words of gratitude had just been uttered. He hopped back in the car and, rather than turning back immediately as before, proceeded on a hundred yards or so to a clearing where there was a substantial building - a hall or community centre perhaps - and a couple of 'fibro' houses. All shared an air of desolation: open doors, broken windows, and rubbish strewn around.

As he backed the car and turned towards home, he became aware that the sky had changed; the pale afternoon blue had changed to a sickly yellow and a wind was now shaking the bustles of leaves in the gum trees. 'A storm is coming', thought Dadly. At that moment, a flash of lighting lit the horizon and the wind grew stronger, whipping up the red sand around his car and propelling pieces of paper and rubbish in cartwheels along the ground towards him. Dadly felt under attack, despite the security of the steel and glass bubble of the car. He drove around the little clearing in front of the community house, looking for the track out. The air was now red with dust and full of flying debris; everywhere looked the same; there was no track. He found himself facing the building again. 'Shit, Dadly! Where is that bloody track?' The wind was howling now; the lighting, followed by a low booming thunder, flashed closer and closer.

'Why did I come to this god-forsaken place anyway?' wondered Dadly. He drove around again, looking for the track out of the Paradise Aboriginal Mission, thinking: 'what have you done, Dadly? You've come to a place where you don't belong!'

## CHAPTER 8



# The Artlaws

“WE’LL BE ART REVOLUTIONARIES!”

“What the fuck are you on about, Socrates?”

“He wants to start an art group, Dunno”, I explained.

“Life drawing?” Itch suggested, hopefully.

We were sitting around one of the timber tables near the oval at recess. The inaugural meeting of The Artlaws was not going well.

“You’re all mad” growled Nat Chandler, polishing the spurs he hid in his schoolbag.

“Listen, haven’t you guys heard of Christo?” Socrates rose to his feet and I felt an oration coming on.

Apart from me, no one had heard of Christo.

“No, not Jesus Christ” said Socrates through gritted teeth. “He’s an artist. His main thing is wrapping things up.”

“Like a present?” suggested Dunno.

“Like a present. Only bigger. He wraps big things.”

“A garden fork” I said, thinking of the largest present my dad had ever wrapped for my mum.

“A car?” asked Dunno.

“A car? Whose gunna wrap a car?” said Tools.

“Around a tree”, proposed Itch.

“Good one”, said Joy Boy.

“No, even bigger. Like buildings and places. He wrapped a whole coastline near Sydney.”

“Oh, that guy”, Dunno said. “It was on the news.”

“Waste of good rope”, grunted The Marshall.

I knew now what Socrates must be thinking. “So what are we going to wrap?”

“Well . . .” he put his hands through his hair and his eyes sparkled. “I’ve got an idea”.

On the walk home after school, I protested: “The Carnegie library!? It’s too big. And they’d never let us!”

“Robert, that’s the point. We have to do things no one would normally permit. That way we expand people’s consciousness. The library is perfect. It’s the symbol of learning and culture, but no one cares about it. No one goes there. If we wrap it, they’ll notice it. And Mr. Spincks likes me. I’m the only person who borrows books from the ‘Philosophy’ section.” The Dale Carnegie Library was a substantial neo-classical building next to Socrates’ father’s law office. It had high gable roofs and a tall clocktower. It was true that most Saturday afternoons, Socrates could be found there: the only person who could be found there.

“Look: talk to your mum. Ask her how many old sheets she has. I’ll have a hunt around my place. My mother hardly ever washes sheets; she just buys new ones. We’ll have hundreds.”

“Two”, I reported next morning.

“Two?”

“So how many did your mum have.”

“Not so many.”

“Meaning?”

“The pile of washing in the laundry out back got so big my father gave it to the Salvos. My mother is a ‘useless woman’, apparently.”

“So, we have precisely two sheets. Not enough to wrap the Carnegie Library.”

“That’s OK”, said Socrates brightly. “I have another idea.”

By the end of the week, Socrates had managed to find more sheets: four. Brand new, Egyptian cotton, in boxes. From his mum. ‘Do your art thing’, she told him. That made six.

“It’ll be plenty” he assured me.

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

“Socrates, why does Christo wrap things?”

“I don’t know really. But I think it’s so we can see them better. Also, the wrapping is beautiful. And it protects those things that are wrapped . . . from attacks. It makes the world seem delicate and beautiful and hard to know and in need of protection.”

We sewed the sheets together at my place after school .

Friday night was Youth Club night at my church. Youth Club generally finished up around 10:30. After that we would hang out at Hudak’s bakery till they threw us out at 12 - except for nights when Stan Dimaggio was around, who, being a year older, could buy cans of beer and UDL to take down to the lawns near the river. At five past twelve it was cold and dark as Socrates, Dunno, Tools, Itch, Joy Boy and I sneaked along Barton Avenue. There weren’t many street lights in those days.

“It’ll be an anti-war protest as well as an artwork”, explained Socrates as we neared our target: the returned

soldier statue in front of the Workingman's Club. It was a typical war memorial statue with a marble soldier on a high plinth with all the names of the soldiers who fought.

"How will we get up there?"

Socrates pointed at Tools, loping along the footpath ahead of us. I remembered: Mr. Lightbulb! Leaping like a gazelle onto a table to replace a lamp for Miss Belvoir!

"Leave that to us!" Dunno, beside Tools, turned and I saw the adventure of it, the chance for physical action, excited him. "Ready Tools?"

The statue was better lit than I would have liked. Dunno crouched down in the shadow side away from the street. Taking a long run up, Tools planted his foot on Dunno's back and leapt high enough to grab the top of the plinth and haul himself up next to the statue. I was struck by the image of Tools' athletic arm grasped around the marble gaiters of this symbol of youthful courage.

"Give me the sheets!"

Socrates and I fed the long, joined mass of cloth out of a bag to Dunno, who passed the end up to Tools.

"Get it over the head" Socrates instructed. "Then let it drape down."

"Duh. I'll have to throw it over." Still hanging on to the statue with one hand, Tools gathered up a clump of the cloth and thrust it up and over the statue in a streaming curve that gleamed in the streetlight.

"Shit! Everyone can see that!" I whispered.

"Yeah, aint it great!" said Dunno.

"You got a bigger problem", said a voice from above. At that moment I heard a tearing sound.

"Bugger! The sword!"

"It's not a sword, it's a bayonet."

Whatever it was, Socrates had not noticed that the statue was holding a gun - with something pointy at its end that was now piercing the sheets and starting a tear that ran,

with terrifying speed and a loud ripping noise, from end to end through the Egyptian cotton. We were so focused on this disaster, we didn't hear the police car.

"What are you boys up to?" Behind the bobbing torch came Sergeant Miller of the Attica police. We tried to look nonchalant, leaning in a line against the brick wall of the Workingman's Club.

"Nuthin, Mr. Miller".

"Willy, is that you? Willy Nuttingham?"

"Yes Mr. Miller" Dunno mumbled. So that was his name!

"Who's that with you?" He came closer. "You're Clifford Smith's boy, aren't you?"

Socrates looked coldly at the police officer then turned his face away. "I'm no-one's 'boy'", he answered.

Fearing a reaction, I butted in: "yes, that's Solomon and I'm his friend Robert. Robert Bradley."

"Hello, Robert. What are you boys doing here this time of night?"

"Just sorta hangin' round" said Dunno, suppressing a giggle. I could see Tools' shoes on the edge of the plinth, right above Sergeant Miller's head.

"I see."

"Just shootin' the breeze" added Joy Boy, looking everywhere but the statue.

Behind the unknowing policeman's head, the white sheets flapped mysteriously and silently.

"Well, all you boys should be getting home before your parents get into a flap."

Dunno had to turn his head to the wall.

"So true, so true . . ." murmured Itch.

"Of course, officer, we will" I said, dragging on Socrates arm. He refused to budge.

Next day, The Daily Cultivator wondered which drunken wag had put a skirt around the statue outside the Workingman's Club.



That was pretty much the end of The Artlaws, although Socrates did make one final attempt to engage the citizens of Attica with their library.

“What this town needs is an agora: a place where the people can meet and debate and argue and express all kinds of ideas”, he told me breathlessly a couple of weeks after the Christo fiasco. “We have to get people away from the shops and pubs, and into the places of learning and culture: the library, the art gallery.”

I wasn’t so sure the people of Attica wanted to engage with culture and learning; still, Socrates persuaded me to accompany him one fine Saturday morning down Barton Avenue to the library. He had wrapped another of his mother’s white sheets around his customary multi-coloured T-shirt and jeans as kind of toga; it seems Harmony Smith had an endless supply of Egyptian cotton.

The library had a small porch with fine classical arches; it was here Socrates determined to make his stand. He had already arranged for Dunno to pass by and engage him in a Socratic dialogue.

“A Sarcastic Diagram? What’s that, some kind of maths. puzzle?” Dunno had asked.

“A triangle with a sense of humour”, Itch suggested.

Anyway, Dunno was well primed. He came sauntering down the street in a footy jumper, shorts and carrying a Sherrin.

“My friend” shouted Socrates. “I see you would rather play football today than enter this library. Is that correct?”

“Sure is” replied Dunno, stopping in front of the porch, bouncing the ball and spitting on the ground. A few pass-



ers-by stared.

“And why is that? I don’t know much about football and would like to learn more about the benefits of this interesting game.”

“Uh?”

“Why do you like football?”

“Oh; yeah, well it’s healthy and keeps me fit.”

“I see: so, you play this sport for exercise?”

“No, I just go and watch.”

“It doesn’t seem that football does much to improve your fitness, young man. What do you eat when you watch this . . . game?”

“Oh, you know, pies, sauce, chips, that sort of thing.”

“And are they healthy, these chips and pies?” Socrates spread his arms wide and addressed the few people that had stopped to watch.

“Bloody oath!” called someone.

Turning in their direction, Socrates cried: “Well, I suppose we would have to define ‘healthy’. How would we best do that? By looking up a book on nutrition or attending the footy?”

When no one took up the challenge I called out: “look up a book!”

“So, to understand what is healthy, we would be better to attend a footy game, or go to the library?”

“Go to the library!” answered Dunno to a smattering of applause from the small gathering of onlookers.

So far, Socrates’ agora seemed to be working well. The previous night’s practice had paid off:

“But I never go to the football”, Dunno had protested. “It’s boring.”

“It doesn’t matter; you’re playing the part of a football ‘yobbo’.”

“Yobbo’s right” said Tools, smiling.

“Hey, I can read!”

“Yeah – Batman!”

Pleased with how things were going, Socrates launched into a new topic. "Very well then. That leads to my next subject: education." This was my cue; however, as I walked up to Socrates for my 'dialogue', the pointy head and bony frame of principal Edmund Dreadstone parted the crowd like a manic Moses.

"What are you up to, Smith? Another of your 'protests'?"

Calmly, Socrates responded: "I'm teaching, Mr. Dreadstone."

"There's a time and a place, Solomon. The time is Monday to Friday, and the place is the school!"

"I know so little about education", responded Socrates sweetly. "Perhaps you can help me. So, we can only learn things on weekdays?"

"No Solomon, of course you can learn things anytime, but the important things you learn at school!"

"I'm very interested in what's important", continued Socrates. "So, if I learn something on a Saturday, it's not important. But let's say I read in Saturday's paper that the school has burnt down, would that be important?"

A man at the back of the crowd guffawed: "Good one!"

Refusing to take the bait, Chrome Dome persisted: "get down from there, Solomon; you're embarrassing yourself."

"Hey, the kid's got a point" yelled the voice from the crowd.

"He hasn't got any point!" retorted the exasperated headmaster. "He's a time-waster, a drop-out, and a . . . pessimist!"

"Watch who you're calling a pederast!" said the heckler, a stocky middle-aged man with an angry red face and an angry red beard, who had clearly enjoyed his time as a student at Attica Agricultural High School. He pushed his way to the front.

"Really! I'm just trying to restore order!"

"I know about your kind of order!"

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

The two men faced off while the circle of the crowd tightened like the audience for a schoolyard fight.

“What a hoot!” said Dunno, frozen, with football firmly grasped.

A thin wavering voice cut through the tense air. “I’ll tell you who’s ridiculous!”

“Mum?”

Harmony Smith, in a zebra-striped pantsuit and high heels, staggered slightly as she tottered down the steps of Bates, Morrison, and Smith, Barristers and Solicitors. “All of you! Picking on a boy who’s trying to do something grand, something special!” Reaching the footpath, she swayed and lost balance, plonking herself down on the bottom step. “Schools and rules; all ridiculous” she soliloquized to the crowd, who now had to divide its attention between two performances: the arguing men outside the library and the pathetic figure of Harmony Smith sitting on the law office steps.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Smith, I’m just getting things under control” called the headmaster whose head was at that moment in a headlock from his opponent.

“No he’s not! He’s shutting down free speech!” cried his adversary as Chrome Dome secured his release with a knee to the stomach.

“Come inside, Harmony!” This, a loud whisper, emanated from a gap in the doors of Bates, Morrison, and Smith, Barristers and Solicitors.

“Having trouble laying down the law to the missus, Clifford?”

Clifford Smith’s portly frame appeared in the doorway. “Mind your own business, Burstall” he cried to his political adversary, the sitting member for Mulga, who just then happened to be passing with his wife. “Come on Harmony” Clifford persisted. “No need to make a spectacle of yourself!”

“Spectacle! Ha! I thought you liked to be the centre of attention!” Mrs. Smith rose unsteadily to her feet and bowed to the crowd. “My husband calls, and I must obey! Sollie – Sa Majeste!”

“And this man wishes to be your next parliamentary representative!” the Old Goanna stirred. “I hope he’s been taking debating lessons from his son!”

“There’s nothing wrong with my debating skills” cried Clifford, rolling up his sleeves and jumping down the steps past Harmony.

“Oh yeah?” The Country Party member unlinked arms with Mrs. Burstall and rolled up his own sleeves.

“See what your little project has led to?” said Chrome Dome to Socrates, who had retreated behind the porch columns, looking as white as his toga sheet.

“Leave the boy alone, Dome Head!”

“What did you call me?”

“I remember the strap you used to give me!”

Just as the headmaster and his grateful former student were about to re-engage, a tall, elderly man with sparse grey hair emerged from the library’s entrance doors. “Will everyone please remove themselves from the porch of the library”, implored Mr. Spincks. “No one has been able to get in all morning!”

“Saturday mornings are usually my busy time”, the librarian ruminated ruefully as the crowd dispersed and the various combatants went their way. Socrates was nowhere to be seen.

## William

SOMETHING HEAVY smashed into the side of Dadly's car, held hostage by the screaming wind at the Paradise Aboriginal Mission.

Unable to see any way out of the car park, Dadly stopped the engine. Massive objects were being lifted into the air: sheets of corrugated iron, shards of wood and metal. Dadly considered whether to stay in the car or make a dash for the nearby building, only twenty yards away yet barely visible. He looked again to see if he could locate the track. All he could see was a blur of red sand and the vague outlines of tortured trees. Debris was flying out of the bush, and among it he saw something moving, a small figure, a child, crouched over, trying not to be lifted by the wind. A sheet of metal flew past the child's head.

"Shit" said Dadly. He grabbed at the car door handle and with a great effort pushed the door open against the force of the howling storm. He had to squeeze out of the gap, the heavy hard door pressing against his rib cage as he dragged himself out into the tempest. He ran across to the child, holding his hands in front of his face as puny protection against the flying sand, fearing the sharp impact of metal or wood. It was a small boy, around five years old. Dadly bent to pick him up and the wind forced the boy into his arms.

'The car or the house?' thought Dadly but then, remembering the difficulty with the car door, he made for the outline of the building across the screaming howling car park.

In the porch of the building Dadly encountered the young man he had met earlier. He was holding the door open for Dadly and closed it as soon as he and the boy were inside.

It was blessedly dust-free inside the house and completely dark. Dadly looked for somewhere to sit, still holding the boy. The room was tiny, and had only one small window onto the veranda, the glass in which was unbroken. 'That must be why they chose this room' thought Dadly. He coughed and retched, shaking the sand from his clothes and hair, collapsing onto the floor, his back against a wall.

"You OK?" It was the first time Dadly had heard the young man speak; the fact that he could do so surprised him.

"He OK!" said another, older voice from the other side of the room. The little light coming into the room was a surreal, purple color. Dadly's eyes, adjusting to the gloom, sought out the other occupant: a man with a dark, creased face that seemed to merge with the purple light. 'An old man' thought Dadly, although he could have been any age between forty and seventy.

"He GOOD! He out of the STORM!" The man chuckled; Dadly wasn't sure why he found the situation amusing.

The old man came closer to Dadly, shuffling along the floor without standing. "That's little Toby you got. You all right Toby?" The little boy sniffled and mumbled, the first sounds that Dadly had heard him make. In fact, up till then he could have been carrying a bundle of rags, except for the body heat and one little hand gripping his arm.

'It's a human child' was the odd thought that entered Dadly's mind. "Toby?" he said. "That's all right Toby, you're all right now."

"My name's William. This here's Nathan" said the old man.

"Derek. Derek Bradley" returned Dadly.

"What you doin' here, Derek?" asked William, as if genuinely fascinated to know the reason.

Before he could answer Nathan said, "Shoes. He brought me some shoes. And other stuff." He showed William the

sandshoes which, without socks, were now on his feet.

“Nice ones, EH!” said William, apparently satisfied with the shoes as sufficient reason for Dadly’s presence.

They sat in silence for some time. The tin roof of the building drummed and creaked. Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up the room.

“The power, we shut ‘em down”, explained William. “Bring the lightning so we shut ‘em down.” Dadly nodded, not wishing to dispute this odd logic. There was an especially loud clap of thunder. Toby began to cry. “Hey Toby”, said William. “You want to hear a story? I tell you about that LIGHTNING.”

Nathan joined them to form a tight little circle.

“That lightning, that is two RAINBOW SNAKES. They are traveling all under the ground, all under the COUNTRY, from their home that is a big waterhole deep inside the ground. Now, those rainbow snakes, they are husband and wife and they very NAUGHTY. They like to grab people and take them back to their waterhole. So, every now and then up they poke their heads, to see if there are any people around that they can GRAB. That’s when the lightning happens – when that old man and lady poke their heads up out of the ground. So you watch out! They gonna grab YOU!” At this, William reached out playfully to grab young Toby, who squirmed with fear; Dadly thought William had gone a little too far with his story.

Toby cried for a while longer, then became quiet and Dadly felt his body relax into sleep. William and Nathan took the boy from Dadly and laid him on a blanket on the floor.

William continued to look at Dadly with fascination. ‘Perhaps he’s never sat for so long in the same room as a white man’, wondered Dadly, who had never spent this long with a black person. After a while, William spoke: “This year, you got ANNIVERSARY, eh? That fella COOK,

you celebratin' him comin' in that ENDEAVOUR, landin' there on Bot'ny BAY. This year you got, what you call it, BI-CEN-TEEN-RY". He spelled out the syllables as if speaking a foreign language: 'which I suppose he is' it occurred to Dadly.

Dadly had to agree; it was yet another milestone of that remarkable year 1970, that it was the bicentenary of Cook's discovery of eastern Australia, an event directly linked to European settlement of Australia.

"That was the founding of your NATION", continued William in a rising, enthusiastic voice, as if the idea excited him. Dadly noticed that he had a way of emphasizing key words in his sentences, fondling the word, gently holding it and caressing it, as if it was a small warm animal he was holding in his hands. "But my people they got a different idea about that man COOK. Maybe he was a scientist, maybe he was a GOOD MAN, but he caused a whole lot of TROUBLE for my people. It's a GEN-O-CIDE, you call it, what happened, not by Cook but all the white people who came after."

He was silent for a while. "You know that Hiroshima? Dadly nodded. "Whole lot of people killed by a big BOMB. That bomb had a fuse - a TRIGGER. That Cook he was the trigger of another bomb. How many people got killed by that bomb, EH?" William chuckled and once again Dadly was puzzled by the man's apparent amusement at something terrible.

Dadly said nothing. They sat in the gloom of the big house. It was quiet now. The wind had died down.

After a while William said: "that storm, he's gone." He stood up and walked to the door. He had to push hard to open it against the drifts of sand. Nathan joined him in pushing against the door. Toby stirred on his blanket on the floor and opened his eyes.

"The storm's over", said Dadly. A golden glow lingered



## The Tin Parrot

in the sky but the stinging flying dust was gone.

“That snake, he gone TOO!” said William, winking at Toby.

It was towards 10 o'clock when Dadly finally got home that night. Betty waited patiently at the kitchen table for his return.

“I stayed back in the packing shed till the storm had gone”, he lied. But there was something glittering and magical in his eyes that night, a quality that did not wash from him like the dust did, and the leaves and the grass, swirling around the base of the hot, steaming shower.



## BOOK II



## CHAPTER 9



# The Blue Caterpillar

THE ENGINE OF CLIFFORD SMITH'S big white Holden 'Statesman' hummed. I could smell the hot petrol and oil. Clifford's concerned face appeared out of the driver's window.

"Are you all right? I nearly hit you!"

"It's all right. I'm ok."

"You're Solomon's friend, aren't you? The new scout! Where do you live? I'll drive you home."

I looked around but there was no escape. Clifford reached over and pushed the passenger door open; it seemed I had no choice; the next thing I knew I was sliding onto the red vinyl seat, enveloped in air freshener and after-shave. Clifford was a little too eager, his smile a little too ready, as he slapped his hand on my thigh: "We'll have you home in no time!"

I pushed the door open and hopped out. "Sorry, I forgot, I've got my bike. I'll ride home. Thanks."

As I pedalled home, I held in my mind an image of Socrates, alone in that room, surrounded by the books and stories and songs in which he immersed himself to keep at bay the angry voices, the threats, the curses and the breaking plates; a shipwrecked sailor, whose room was an island in a sea of angry words, while the house was the ship, wrecked and broken.

I kept looking back over my shoulder, thinking Clifford's big white car was following me. It became a great slithering white snake, chasing me, wishing to devour me as perhaps it had Socrates; I felt its breath, its scaly body; I imagined myself swallowed by that greedy mouth and entombed forever in its slimy dark interior. I rode home with that cold wind of fear at my back, anxious for the warm glow of the porch light and the welcome smell of a waiting dinner.



Socrates and I never talked about that day. But all these years later I recall a conversation from around that time, that means a lot now that I look back. We were in my mother's kitchen after school, scavenging for something to eat in the cupboards.

"Do you ever read the labels on things?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, all the cans of soup and packets of flour and sugar, all the household stuff?"

"I suppose."

"And a lot of it's made in Australia, yeah?"

"I guess so."

"I thought so too; I used to be so proud of all the things Australia makes. I would look through the cupboards making lists of all the things that are Australian."

"You're weird."

"I know, right! Then one day I saw on the news that most of those companies are owned overseas. Some company in America bought a company in England that I thought was Australian."

"Arnott's Biscuits?"

"Exactly. Even the parrot logo was ripped off from an American biscuit company. That's when I realized that's what Australia is: a noisy parrot squawking from the lid of a tin owned by someone else."

I didn't understand.

"It's like this: Australia is a place that other people take things out of. It's empty; it's hollow. We live in a country we don't really own, living by rules we never made. That's why we are always sending soldiers to overseas wars: we have to prove we belong in the outside world, because we don't have a world inside us."

I thought of his family, how it kept up appearances in that big house. There was an emptiness in its heart, too. I pictured him, perched like a screeching cockatoo on the tin roof of the Smith mansion.

"That's why it's so important my dad gets elected. Labor's got to win so that we can make all those minerals and resources ours. Australia's going to be a great country, but it's just not there yet. Everything's going to change when my dad gets in, when Whitlam gets in: everything. Australia will be . . . Australian. And that's why my dad has got to win: to make sure Labor does."



On scout night, Scoutmaster Paul had some news for us. He handed out a roneo-ed sheet of typewritten instructions, headed: 'HIKE 1970'.

The yearly 'Hike' was an event where all the scout troops in the district came together for three days of camping, hiking and bush-craft. It took place during the September school holidays and in a remote spot: this year's campsite was a property seventy miles from Attica on the edge of Lake Regina, a shallow body of water that formed a seasonal overflow to the river. As leader of the Venturer troop I had a lot to do, helping scoutmaster Paul make an inventory of the tents and other equipment, deciding what needed repair, and what should be replaced.

Over the next few weeks, we wrote up lists of the things each boy should bring, and organized meetings for the parents to hear about an event that would take their children away from them, to a remote and wild place, for several days. I felt proud and happy at the additional responsibilities given to me, and the scoutmaster began to talk of me as a future scout leader.

Several weeks later, scoutmaster Paul, Pugh Holloway and I left early in his station wagon to set up the mess tent, and our own, before the main body of scouts arrived around midday. At the turn off from the highway, where a gravel road led the final ten miles to the lake, I nailed a cardboard sign to a fencepost: 'HIKE 1970 THIS WAY'

The Hike 1970 campsite was an elevated plateau a hundred yards from the waterline of Lake Regina. It was a weird landscape: the lake, an immense, shallow expanse of water, in which sat hundreds of dead trees, a drowned forest, legacy of too many years when the natural cycle of intermittent flooding had been disrupted. Then there was the surrounding country: a maze of canyons rutted and gouged into the low clay hills by the rare but fierce rains, pouring cascades of grey sludge into the lake. The place chosen for pitching the tents was a flat area between these ravines and the lake, and I wondered at the



wisdom of choosing a spot so close to two potential hazards. I needn't have worried; the dangers at that camp would be human, not natural.

It was an exciting event for me, this camp. I could not explain my enthusiasm to Socrates, who had no interest in camping and regarded the Scouts as a paramilitary organization.

Our first job was to lay out the campsite according to a plan agreed by the scoutmasters. We paced out the site, using ropes and a long measuring tape, hammering in wooden pegs to mark the areas designated for each troop. Next, we erected two large tents: old-fashioned straight sided affairs with timber poles. One of these would serve as the sleeping tent for the scoutmasters, and for meetings and map readings. The other would be the kitchen and mess tent, although it had no hope of accommodating the hundred or so scouts expected at the camp.

"Will all the scoutmasters sleep in this tent?" I asked scoutmaster Paul as we struggled to put up the first one.

"Some of them will I suppose. I will, just to keep an eye on the compasses, and the other expensive gear. And then there's the visitors like Clifford."

"Mr. Smith? He's coming?"

"Yes, tomorrow I think." I felt uneasy about Socrates' father coming to the camp; I recalled his angry voice carrying down the hall of the Smith's dark house.

As we finished putting up the second tent, carloads of scouts began to arrive. One group had brought portable steel barbecues powered by gas bottles. Before long, there were sizzling sausages and rissoles and sliced onions in the big tent. Packets of white bread were brought out and placed on wooden trestle tables along with bottles of tomato sauce. While this was going on, scouts continued to arrive, and Pugh Holloway and I directed them to their campsites, on which they began to erect small two

and four-man tents. Pale-legged boys in khaki uniforms swarmed everywhere, leaders barked orders, and a happy energy took over the site. By the time scouts were lining up for their rissoles and bread a small town of brown tents had arisen on the grey silty clay embankment overlooking the lake.

That afternoon was free time. Pugh and I took the Attica 9th scouts on a hike along the lakeshore for five miles or so. At one point we came upon large dunes of fine red sand, rising from the grey clay plain, dotted with brilliant green bushes. We let the scouts climb the dunes and watched them hoot and holler as they slid, fell and tumbled down the steep, uncertain walls of red sand.

At the base of one of the sand hills, on a 'blow' - a patch of bare ground swept clean by the wind - one of the boys found a stone arrow head. It was a beautifully shaped, elongated triangle of chipped stone, finely worked, of transparent thinness. We looked for others and found several chipped stones, evidence of 'knapping' - the process of creating sharp edges by breaking off small chips of stone. It was a stone tool factory. I wondered how long these things had lain abandoned in the sand dunes, centuries perhaps; these ancient arrowheads made our flimsy row of tents up on the ridge seem so temporary. 'What other mysteries lie buried under our feet', I wondered and thought of Socrates.

That night we lit campfires, sang scouting sings, and told stories. Noel Hamilton, the son of the local jewelry store owner, told us terrifying tales of the Yarama-ghoulies, tiny beings with great red heads, slobbering mouths and suckers on their hands and feet, who dropped from the trees around the lake and absorbed the bodies of their victims. The young scouts squirmed, scared and excited to be so far away from our homes. Time and space separated us from the civilized world.

A slight wind unsettled the camp; it ruffled the canvas of the tents and sent the campfire smoke unpredictably into our eyes. But we felt happy and secure in the little halo of flickering yellow firelight, drawn in by the warmth and the timeless sound of the human voice.

Walking over to the mess tent next morning, Pugh and I noticed large groups of scouts standing around, staring hungrily at their empty plates.

“What’s going on? Why hasn’t breakfast been cooked?”

“It has”, answered the scout leader on breakfast duty. He pointed over to trays bulging with cooked sausages, eggs, onions, bacon and tomatoes. There were also piles and piles of sliced bread.

“So? What’s everyone waiting for?”

“The butter!” It was Scoutmaster Paul, beaming his sly British smile. It turned out the scoutmasters, discovering the butter had run out, had decided that breakfast could not start if the bread could not be buttered.

“What?”

“Shhh!” said Pugh, moving us away from scoutmaster Paul and several other scout masters, all standing in a row with an air of authority that looked like they didn’t want to be messed with.

“But it’s crazy!”

“I know.”

Someone had been sent off to a roadhouse thirty miles back along the highway towards Attica to purchase butter, while one hundred hungry scouts milled around in sight and smell of perfectly adequate eggs and bacon, cooked and ready to eat. This uncomfortable farce continued for the hour it took the car to reach the roadhouse, buy it out of all the butter it had, and return to the camp. As we tucked into our cold eggs and bacon I knew what Socrates would have thought.

That day was the main event of Hike 1970: a mass hike across country to an old woolshed, a return journey of twenty miles. The scouts had to carry their own food and water for this daylong expedition. Pugh Holloway and I, however, had something else to do.

Pugh was an attractive boy, slender and pale, with brilliant blonde hair and clear, lightly tanned skin. He was a much better scout than me and had an impressive collection of badges - the awards given in scouting as recognition for mastering new skills. On this camp he was going for his map-reading badge: he had to find specific locations using map and compass. I was to accompany him.

After our delayed breakfast, we met with scoutmaster Paul who gave Pugh his instructions, a map and a compass. Then we set off towards the first point of destination. All went well, and we easily found the marker - a flag on a fence post placed the previous day by the scoutmaster, driving around the course in his car. However, the distances were greater than we imagined and it was afternoon before we found the second flag. At that point we were getting tired and we could not agree on the correct reading of the map for the third point. Pugh insisted that his interpretation of symbols was correct and we headed off in what he thought was the right direction, but the track petered out and we found ourselves struggling through saltbush that grabbed at our skin and tore our clothes.

After two hours we had found nothing; it was apparent we had made a mistake. Pugh became upset as time was running out to complete the course that day; it would take too long to retrace our steps to the second point and try another direction. Sadly, we headed back to the campsite, which we reckoned was only an hour away if we took a direct line.

Back at the camp, everything was quiet. The other scouts had not yet returned from their big hike. Pugh went off to scoutmaster Paul to complain that I had confused him and caused him to misread his map.

“Never mind”, said the scoutmaster and called me over. “It’s good you’re back early. I’ve got a special job for you.” Puzzled, we followed him outside. “I have a tent for you to put up.”

We followed him around the side of the tent to where a man stood with his back to us, taking something out of the boot of a car. He turned, carrying a bright blue-colored bag and smiled when he saw us: it was Clifford Smith.

“You won’t have seen a tent like this before, Paul” said Clifford. It was true. As we laid the parts out on the ground it was nothing like the tents I was used to. Ours were simple fly tents: a rectangular canvas sheet, held up by a timber pole at each end, with guy ropes running between the poles and staked out into the ground for stability. Some scouts had slightly more elaborate tents of similar design, but with vertical sidewalls. No one had a tent like Clifford Smith’s.

It was a new product from America, Clifford explained, as he talked, and we laboured. Instead of heavy canvas, the fabric was nylon. Instead of timber posts, there were aluminium rods that socketed together to form a curving frame. There was an inner tent with a floor and a door with a zipper. Over this went a waterproof fly, also of bright blue nylon. When we had finished, we stood back and looked at the blue, curving structure we had created.

“Tested in one hundred mile per hour winds in the Rocky Mountains” boasted Clifford. “Come inside for a look!”

It was the second time I had found myself in close quarters with this expansive, engaging man. He clearly took a liking to Pugh and showed him the details of the design.

It was close and hot in a tent made for two people; scout-master Paul and Pugh were sufficiently fascinated by its remarkable technology to enjoy the experience. Hearing voices, I made an excuse, got up and stepped outside, relieved by the fresh air and the sight and sounds of the returning scouts.



“Snake! Snake!”

Pugh and I scrambled out of our tent where we had been resting after our big day.

“Where?” Some boys were huddled around a nearby tent.

“It was in our tent! It went under there!”

Pugh and I checked the ground around the tent and looked under the ground sheet. Something moved under the canvas and I said: “careful Pugh. You don’t want to get bitten.” He grinned and lifted up the corner of the ground cover. A stumpy tailed lizard stared up at us.

“A harmless little bugger!” said Pugh. It was an unusual one, whose iridescent scales gleamed with rainbow hues of purple, green and oily brown.

Just for a moment, the brightly colored lizard grew in my mind into a mighty serpent, slithering around the campsite looking for prey. I shivered. “Come on”, I said, “I’m going back to the tent.”

That night, as we sat around the campfire, we could hear loud talking and laughing from the leader’s tent. Clifford Smith was not the only new arrival that day and he and some of the other newcomers seemed to be having a good time. I was a little naïve and it didn’t even occur to me that our scout leaders might be drinking alcohol; one of

the more knowing boys said he had seen one of the men carrying bottles of beer into the tent.

A little later, when the fire had burnt low and most of the boys had gone to bed tired after the big hike, I wandered down to relieve myself in the canvas-walled latrine at the far end of the campsite. It was a dark night and the only light came from campfires and flickering kerosene lanterns. I made my way between the rows of little dark peaked tents like a line of man-made hills. 'Inside each tent', I thought, 'there is safety and warmth'; but outside, walking through the camp, I felt alone and insecure under that big, dark sky. 'What a thin fabric separates comfort from fear', I thought and remembered the lizard.

Hearing voices, I noticed that Pugh Holloway was talking to someone in the shadows of the leader's tent. On my way back, he was nowhere to be seen but as I walked past the tent, Clifford Smith suddenly appeared, as if expecting me.

"Ah, my tent-erecting friend! Come and have another look at your handiwork - it's a thing of beauty that you have put up!"

"It's a great tent", I said politely, showing no interest in inspecting it again.

"It is indeed", said Clifford Smith, standing close to me, his arm suddenly around my shoulders. I could smell beer on his hot breath, as his face came close to mine, his mouth close to my ear. It was like some animal, breathing on me, and that body too close to mine; I could feel its heat.

"I have to go", I said.

"No, don't go. Come to my tent. I want you to look at some maps for me."

"No thanks" I said; for a long moment his hand continued to grip my shoulders and I felt he was going to physically compel me into his tent. Suddenly he relaxed and

stepped away.

“Well, what a lovely night it is! Such beautiful stars are out. Good night.” He turned and walked back into the leader’s tent.

I walked quickly back to the tent that I shared with Pugh.

I said, “Was that Mr. Smith talking to you before?”

“Yeah. He asked me into his tent and I told him to piss off.”

“What’s going on? Is he some kind of creep?”

“I don’t know. Don’t worry about it.” Pugh rolled over, instantly asleep.

I did worry about it, and unlike Pugh I couldn’t sleep. As the night wore on I continued to lay there, my mind going back over the conversation with Socrates’ dad.

My mind burdened, I walked again down to the latrine; it was quiet and dark throughout the camp now. My eyes were drawn in horrible fascination towards the blue dome of Clifford Smith’s tent. The nature of the fabric made it more transparent than our heavy canvas ones, so I could see it clearly, glowing like a brilliant blue caterpillar in the dark from the light of the lamp inside. I could even see the bulky shape of Mr. Smith moving around inside the tent. Then I noticed a second shape: there were two figures in the tent. One was unmistakably the generous form of Clifford Smith. The second figure was smaller, certainly not a man: one of the younger scouts. The two shadows lay down, as if getting into their sleeping bags.

Unsure what to do I ran back to my tent. “Pugh! Pugh!” I shook my friend awake and persuaded him, half asleep and in his pyjamas, to accompany me back to Clifford Smith’s tent. When we got there, it was no longer illuminated.

“I saw someone in the tent with him”, I assured my friend.

“Well, so what, they were probably helping him with



his maps. Anyway, they've gone now. Forget it. I'm going back to sleep."

The next morning, I awoke tired and troubled by the events of the night before. I said to Pugh: "We should tell someone about Mr. Smith."

"No, that's definitely what we should not do." Pugh sounded so certain that I wondered he was speaking from prior experience.

Later on, I saw him and scoutmaster Paul helping Clifford Smith pack away his tent. Afraid Paul would ask me to help I ran to the far end of the camp to organize the inter-troop sports planned for that final morning.

After the sports were over, and a final assembly of the scouts had been held, I busied myself taking down tents, cleaning up the campsite and packing the gear into scoutmaster Paul's car. I considered saying something to him about Mr. Smith, but there was too much to do. It was dark by the time I got home from unpacking the gear at the scout hall.

As I walked in the door my mother called out, saying: "hello Robert, how was the camp?"

"Yeah, it was fine" I replied. I was not used to lying to my mother. I went straight to bed.

For several days after that I avoided my parent's questions about the camp. I felt increasingly uncomfortable with the guilty secret I carried. Finally, on the third night, sitting at the kitchen table for dinner, I had to say something: "something happened at the camp."

"I thought so", said my mother. "You've been so quiet about it, hasn't he Dadly?" She sat down at the table between my father and me. "What happened, Robert? Was someone mean to you?"

Dadly gave me a questioning look.

“No, not really, but . . .” And then I explained all that I had experienced and seen that night at Clifford Smith’s tent.

“So Robert, we need to be really clear about this”, said my father when I had finished. “Did Clifford Smith ever touch you in a wrong way, or suggest anything bad to you?”

“No, but I didn’t like the way he stood so close to me and put his arms on my shoulder.”

“Yes, but that’s not exactly a crime. And the boy in the tent: did you see him do anything to the boy?”

“No, I was too far away. But I guess a scout leader shouldn’t have one of the scouts in his tent, right?”

“Well I’m not sure, is there a rule about that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course it’s not right, what are you thinking, Dadly?” my mother burst in.

“Well, we may think it’s not right but is there a rule against it? Perhaps they do share tents on camps, I don’t know how scouts operate.”

“Are you trying to defend him?” cried my mother. This was developing into an argument between my parents.

“No I’m not; I’m certainly not happy with the way Mr. Smith acted towards Robert; there’s definitely something strange about his behavior. But at the same time, there is nothing to say he actually did anything wrong. We shouldn’t leap to conclusions.”

“Anyway, I think it should be reported”, said my mother after a pause.

“Who to?” asked Dadly.

“To the scouts. At the very least they should keep an eye on this man Smith.”

“Who are you going to report it to?” My dad was surprised at my mother’s tenacity. “He’s some kind of important person in scouts, isn’t he Robbie?”

“He’s the district commissioner. I suppose we could talk to my scoutmaster?”

"Yes Robert, that's what we'll do", said my mother. "At least we will have done something, and he may know how we can make a complaint. There's nothing worse than keeping secrets bottled up inside."

My dad looked at her and I wondered if he was thinking of my mother's friendship with Mrs. Smith, that other keeper of dark secrets. "I hope you're not being too influenced by your friendship with Mrs. Smith", said Dadly.



The night of the next scout meeting my mother came to the hall at the end of the evening to talk to scoutmaster Paul. Once the other boys had gone, and we were alone in the small office off the end of the hall, my mother came straight to the point.

"We're here because Robert has told me that he saw another scout visiting, and possibly sleeping, in one of the scout leader's tents at the recent camp. My husband and I feel that you should have this information. The same person also invited Robert and another boy to visit his tent late at night."

Scoutmaster Paul sat looking at my mother with his usual fixed grin, so like a mask. Behind the desk I could see him nervously wringing his hands; along with a slight whiteness of his skin, this was the only visible sign of emotion.

"Someone asked you to visit his tent. I don't quite understand . . ."

"We think it was an improper suggestion."

"Oh." The scoutmaster spread his white bony hands on the desk and leaned towards me. "And who was it, Robert, who made this . . . suggestion?"

"Mr. Smith . . . Mr. Clifford Smith."

Scoutmaster Paul was silent for a long time. "Right" he

said, finally. "Can I ask you who else you saw in the - ah - tent, Robert?"

My mother answered for me: "we don't know the boy; but the man was Mr. Smith. It was his tent that Robert saw the boy in."

The scoutmaster sucked at his tongue and pursed his lips. "Right", he said again. His eyes blinked; he seemed to be thinking hard. "Well, no one has - ah - made any complaint about any behavior towards one of the boys . . ."

"It may not be someone from your group", suggested my mother.

"Ah yes. Robert - what did Mr. Smith say to you?"

"He asked me to help him read some maps."

"Ah" said scoutmaster Paul, sounding more relaxed, "well that may be it; that may be - ah - what they were doing."

"Would he need to do it in his tent at midnight?" asked my mother tersely. I knew that sound in my mother's voice.

"Well, he had - ah - a rather special tent. He may have been showing it to the boy"

"Yes, we've heard about Mr. Smith's amazing tent", replied my mother coldly; "that may be a flame to attract the little moths."

"Really, Mrs. Bradley, we - ah - have to be careful not to jump to conclusions; there is probably a very reasonable explanation for all this, perhaps you - ah - are taking the situation a little too seriously."

Scoutmaster Paul was clearly not going to be moved. Annoyed, my mother lobbed in another charge: "we also heard there was drinking by the scout leaders. Do you take that seriously?"

"Ah, well I don't know anything about that." I knew this to be a lie since he had shared the tent where the drinking went on. I started to see shiftiness in my scout

leader that I had not noticed before.

"Regardless of your excuses, we wish to lodge a complaint", said my mother firmly.

"Well." Scoutmaster Paul was now quite tense and lacking his earlier good humor. "You may wish to do that, but what am I meant to do with it? I am only - ah - a scoutmaster; the boy involved - if there is one - is not known to me, and the complaint is what: that Robert saw a boy in Mr. ah - Smith's' tent. I can record it, but really it doesn't amount to much, does it?"

"There are clear signs of inappropriate behavior. You should advise your organization so that an eye can be kept on this fellow Smith. He should not be around young boys. I daresay he should not be in scouts."

The scoutmaster was at a loss to know what to do in the face of my mother's intransigence. He pulled out a hard-covered notebook and began to write slowly and laboriously. "I am making - ah - a note of what you have told me, Mrs. Bradley. I will raise your complaint at the next meeting of scout leaders. You can be reassured that if Mr. Smith has done something wrong then he will be - ah - spoken to very strongly."

My mother was not reassured. She was not impressed with scoutmaster Paul at all. She made this quite clear on the walk home. She called him evasive, shifty, and spineless. She made it equally clear that she wanted me to have nothing more to do with scouts. Oddly enough, this didn't really concern me. I had lost respect for my scoutmaster that night, and in a funny way that was worse than the incident with Mr. Smith. I didn't want to see either of them again. Anyway, I had a lot of study to do leading up to the matriculation exams.

So, in the space of a week, my scouting career experienced its climax and its conclusion.



Two weeks after the meeting with scoutmaster Paul, Socrates and I were sitting at the kitchen table having a snack. Socrates noticed my mother carry a pile of my old scout uniforms from my bedroom and put them in a bag beside the front door.

“Don’t you go to scouts anymore?”

“No; I gave it up.”

“Why? I thought you liked scouts.”

“Yeah but I have too much schoolwork now. Anyway, I decided to give it up.”

Socrates looked at me skeptically: “I thought you wanted to be, like a scout leader or something.”

“Yes well, I don’t want to do that anymore.” I was getting annoyed and tried to change the subject.

“You’ve been weird ever since you went on that big camp. Something happened to put you off scouts, I bet.”

My mother, who had been listening at the doorway, came into the room. “Solomon, there is something we need to tell you.”

## Four Wise Men

IN HIS MIND, Socrates was trying to reconcile two conflicting images of a man: one was associated with words like nice, kind, generous, gentlemanly; the other with self-centered, hypocritical, greedy, and vain. His father, he knew, could be seen to be both or either of these. That was because of the different points of view from which people viewed him, as well as the fact that his surface appearance was carefully crafted to conceal the inner

man. The thought that his father might also be bestial, depraved, indecent, or predatory, did not distress him; rather, it fascinated him that his father could have additional dimensions.

A memory came to him of a phrase, 'rock spider', that Benjamin used to describe his father in the late-night chats he and Harmony would have, when Clifford was out, with little Solomon listening in.

"That old rock spider", Benjamin would say, and Solomon would ask what it meant, and Benjamin would look at his mother who would shake her head and say: "You're too young, Sollie" and Solomon would go to bed aggrieved and puzzled. Later, at school, someone told him: "rock spider? That's a guy who plays with little kids." He still didn't understand; that didn't sound bad. "Roots them up the arse!" said another boy. Then he understood.

What was he to think? Was his father - so well liked, so respected - also a child molester? What did it mean to 'molest'? Was a liking for young people's company natural or unnatural? How close was too close?

One thing Solomon was sure of: his father had not molested *him*. Yet, yet, there was something, something not right, not 'quite right', in the needy hand on the bedroom door, late at night after some meeting; the boozy breath, the slobbery attempted kiss. Needy. That was the word. His dad was needy. The Sundays he would take him for drives, build a fire down by the river, act matey. Needy. Away from his mother. Always away from her. Was this perversion? The young Rotary boys and girls he liked to take on trips. The scout camps. Was this perversion? Or a kindly, generous man? Yet needy, so needy.

At what point did a need for the comfort of human flesh, for human touch, for a sympathetic ear, for the warmth of another body, stop being normal and become something wicked? Where was the line? Had his father crossed it? Socrates was innately skeptical about bound-

aries: he detested the hundred and one social conventions that surrounded him and seemed to him arbitrary and stupid. But he knew that ultimately, limits there had to be: to prevent harm to the vulnerable and weak. Socrates was vulnerable and weak; he felt abused, not sexually, but in other ways he could not express: denial of affection, perhaps; unreasonable demands for affection; emotional manipulation certainly.

Thoughts like these running through his head, Solomon tossed and turned in his sleep night after night and each morning he did not wake: rather, he entered the day a ghost of the night before.

As his confusion grew, one thing became clear to Solomon: the only way to know the truth was by the light of enquiry, asking questions and exposing his father to scrutiny. Good or bad, his father's actions needed to be investigated. His biggest worry was that he might be guilty of taking pleasure in the fall of his father. If he did, then his view of his father was just as biased as anyone else's. And what Solomon Smith valued above all else was the truth.

He recalled the opening scene of Plato's 'The Last Days of Socrates' in which a man called Euthyphro tells Socrates that he is about to accuse his father of murder. 'Do you really know enough about justice', Socrates asks Euthyphro, 'to accuse your own father of murder?' This troubled Solomon. Did he have the insight or wisdom to accuse his father of a hideous crime? He decided to resolve his internal debate the way that his historic namesake would have done: by questioning the wise.

Solomon first went to see the only teacher with whom he felt any rapport: Mr. Gordon, the English teacher who had bestowed his nickname. He knew that Mr. Gordon was interested in ethical questions. Mr. Gordon listened carefully to Socrates' story. He was an honest and thoughtful person. He was also a friend of Socrates' father - although



the son did not realize this - being secretary of the Labor Party branch. As he listened to Socrates, Mr. Gordon was torn between rectitude and self-interest.

"Look Solomon", he said finally, "while you may have heard these stories, you didn't see any of this; you don't really know what happened. You won't even tell me where you got this information. I don't see there is anything more I can do, or that either you or I should do."

"But Mr. Gordon, I know something happened; my friend did see what he saw. And I also know" - here he hesitated - "more about my father, like why we had to leave Sydney."

"Ok, Solomon", said Mr. Gordon, rising up his hands. "That's enough. I can't listen to more hearsay and stories. As I said, there is nothing for you or I to do."

Socrates was surprised by his teacher's reaction. "But these things might be true" he said, verging on tears. "The truth is important isn't it? That's what you taught us in class."

"Yes Solomon, but we also have to be very careful about declaring we know the truth; what if we are wrong? False accusations can be very hurtful and damaging."

Mr. Gordon knew that his views were impacted by his need to protect Clifford the politician; the suggestion that problems in the candidate's past might be dredged up by this incident frankly scared him: Labor victory was just too important.

'I'm going to have to play this carefully', thought Bill Gordon. 'If this story gets out it could stuff everything up.' Aloud, he said: "I tell you what, Solomon; leave it with me. I'll have a think about what's the best thing to do. In the meantime, don't breathe a word of this to anybody."

Dissatisfied with the ethical stance of his schoolteacher, Socrates turned to the Church. He went to see Reverend

Burncott, the Methodist minister he had offended two years earlier by refusing confirmation into his flock. Reverend Burncott also listened carefully. Like Mr. Gordon, he too was a personal friend of Socrates' father, who gave generously, in person and cash, to church projects. Unlike the teacher, his response did not focus on the lack of knowledge of the facts so much as Socrates' motives in bringing the accusation. Frankly, he suspected that Socrates was a person with a stained and polluted heart who could not be believed.

"Solomon, why are you saying these things about your father? You know they cannot be true. Therefore, you must look into your own heart for the origin of these troubling thoughts and images. Solomon, you are at an age where sexual matters start to become important. How are your relationships with girls, for example?"

Socrates was surprised but also troubled by these questions. On the one hand, he saw them as unjust; on the other they pierced directly to one of his key vulnerabilities: his extreme sense of difference and social incompetence. He began to doubt if he was seeing the issue objectively.

"But it's not about me", he said finally. "I may have problems, but this is about my father. It's about *his* behavior."

"Well, Solomon, I think that you should at this point be focused on your own behavior. As Christ said, take first the plank from your own eye, before you condemn another for the speck of dust in theirs."

After Socrates had left the vestry at the rear of the Methodist Church, Reverend Burncott made additions to a long list in his journal, which began with the entry '*Having difficulty with the miracles*' and ended '*Refuses to be confirmed*' and included lines such as '*Ned Kelly 'Christ-like'?????*' and '*Burning bush 'environmental hazard'!!!!*'. To these he added:

- + *Utters blasphemies.*
- + *Disrespects his elders.*
- + *Makes false accusations.*
- + *Does not believe in God.*

These ethical discussions having done nothing but diminish his self-confidence, Socrates next decided to talk to those who could have his father's conduct investigated: he went to the police station. The Duty Sergeant recognized him, he also being a friend of his father's, who he often encountered at the Law Court.

Sergeant Miller was surprised to see Socrates at the police station, and even more surprised by what he had to say. He told Socrates that he could not act on second hand information; that if a crime had been committed, then the victim or a witness had to come forward. Socrates was neither. Sergeant Miller did not believe or disbelieve Socrates; he just could not fit him into a useful category for the purposes of an investigation and there was nothing to prompt him to launch into a difficult and thankless task.

There was another reason for both Ed Miller's surprise at Socrates' appearance at the station, and his inaction. He had spent that very morning discussing young Solomon with the Area Commander, who had information - from a 'reliable source' - that this young man was selling a pornographic publication at the local high school, entitled 'The Little Red Schoolbook'.

"Check this Smith kid out and see if there's anything in it", said the Area Commander, handing Miller a brown paper bag. "I've got this from a very high source, and there could be political ramifications."

Miller put that accusation to Socrates: "While you're here, Solomon, I need to ask you about something else." Miller

produced a small, red covered book from a paper bag in his top drawer. "Have you seen this publication before?"

"Sure, yes, I mean I have."

"Are you selling this book at the high school, Solomon?"

"Not selling, no; I get copies for people, that's all. It's not illegal is it?"

"No, actually it's not", said Ed Miller who had checked by telephone with CID in Melbourne. The book was printed in Australia, not an import, and so even though the Federal Government had wanted to ban it, they had no power to do so.

"Still, be careful, Solomon. There are people who might try to cause trouble for your father over this, so keep it out of sight. The same for those accusations about your dad - unless you have something more concrete."

'I wonder' thought Sergeant Ed Miller, after Solomon had gone and he slid the little book back into the bag and placed it securely in his locker; 'I wonder.'

Socrates was running out of 'wise men' to consult. The only other person he could think of was Rex Coburn, the editor of The Daily Cultivator. The press, Socrates knew, had a special role: to tell the truth and hold the powerful to account.

Rex Coburn was not one to bullshit. He said to Socrates: "You've been in a bit of trouble in the past, haven't you Solomon. I recall you were suspended from school at one stage. I would be very careful in what you say about your father. The honest truth is, you won't be believed. Trust me, in my position as a newspaperman I know this: you can't spread stories that you cannot substantiate."

Coburn knew what he was talking about. He had gotten into strife over an article about Eden Smith, the City Councilor, when he was president of the Young Farmer's League. In that organization some money had gone miss-

ing, and Rex had written an article over which Eden Young threatened to sue - he had a good case. It was due to this that Coburn owed a debt to Socrates' dad. With Clifford's help the matter had been resolved out of court with a contrite apology and some positive press for Eden's campaign for Council. Rex Coburn therefore acknowledged both the dangers of unsubstantiated journalism and the value of Clifford Smith's friendship, when he flatly refused to have anything to do with Socrates' allegations.

Confused by these conversations, Socrates sat under his willow tree down by the river and wondered what to do next. It was not in his nature to confide in friends. He had to work out the answer himself. He rummaged under the branches for his little tin box. He munched on some chocolate, gazed up at the green canopy of the tree and pondered.

There it came to him: if no one would help him, if they were too self-interested or stupid, he would do what he had always done when confronted by blind authority or ignorance: he would convert anger into performance. He would provoke the community to investigate his father through a dramatic act. But what kind of act?



## CHAPTER 10



# Euthyphro's Dilemma

“NO ONE’S GOING TO DO ANYTHING, are they?”

We were sitting at the same table where, two weeks before, the dreaded conversation had taken place.

Since that night Socrates had become even quieter and more withdrawn than usual. His face developed a grey and drawn look; his bad posture became more pronounced; he began to stoop. My mother commented on this and said she was worried about him.

Once he said to me: “you know, right at the start of ‘The Last Days of Socrates’, Socrates meets a man who is about to prosecute his own father for murder. Socrates questions him to see if he really knows enough about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to be able to do that. He seems to be saying: ‘don’t be so sure you know right from wrong! Mightn’t it also be wrong to accuse your own father?’ But

he never provides the answer . . .”

Another time he said: “we know the crime is wrong, don’t we? I’m not being a judge, I’m not accusing him out of malice or spite; I just want the truth to be known.” As was typical with Socrates, the external circumstances had become internalized; a great inner struggle was taking place. There was very little I could do except repeat my parent’s advice to ‘take it easy’ and ‘look after himself’. That was never going to be an option for Socrates.

This afternoon he seemed brighter than usual. ‘Something must have become resolved in his mind’, I thought, ‘or else he has simply stopped thinking about his dad.’

It turned out to be something different altogether: it had been announced that the final of the inter-school debates was to be televised ‘live’ on SUN-TV. These were the debates that had begun back in July. Since then Socrates’ verbal skills had demolished several teams; only White Cliffs High stood between Burley College and the Attica School District Debating Cup.

The topic could have been deliberately chosen to provoke Socrates: ‘A citizen should always obey the laws of the land, no matter how much he disagrees with them’. Our team was to argue the affirmative case. In a year in which a hundred thousand protesters had sat in a Melbourne street, draft dodgers were moving from house to house to avoid arrest, and a small town radical had inspired his schoolmates to challenge an Imperial relic, this topic captured the spirit of the times: and Socrates had to defend the laws! I wondered how he would deal with this difficult task, not realizing that the topic suited his purposes very well.

Night after night, at our kitchen table, I watched Socrates prepare his arguments; he talked little as he labored through piles of books from the library on law and phi-



losophy. His serious application surprised me; he usually relied on his wits. I supposed that since this was the final debate, and being televised, his attention was more focused than usual. On the day of the debate I did not see him; it was a Saturday and he went straight to the studio from home.



I was invited to be in the studio audience. Mr. Gordon made the selection; there were only a dozen of us: the studios of SUN Television were small and there had to be room for the other team's supporters, teachers and the adjudicators.

We sat in small hard folding chairs in a room that was not at all the glamorous place I had imagined: beige curtains hung down around the walls and apart from the studio lighting in the ceiling and two large mobile cameras, we could have been in the parlor of a funeral home. At the end of the room an angled bench had been set up, with seats for the teams of three debaters on either side. In the middle sat the chairman, a chatty looking bloke with short curly hair. A banner emblazoned with the school motto - 'Floreant Attica' - hung down over our team's side of the bench. There was a lectern in front at which the speakers would stand.

The producer ordered us to be quiet, as the opposing teams filed in from the dressing room where hair had been tidied and a bit of makeup applied. Socrates looked especially incongruous and uncomfortable in a tight green Burley College jacket with gold piping, out of which protruded his white face and dark curly hair.

Airtime approached, and the studio lighting came up. We sat quietly, watching with nervous excitement. I felt

proud of my friend, so inept at everyday conversation yet able to speak before a crowd and illuminated now on a spot lit stage.

The debate commenced, and the speakers ran through their arguments. As leader of the affirmative, Socrates would outline our case in the opening address and give the final summing up. Succinctly, he explained the key arguments Burley would make: that our laws have developed over a long period of time, and therefore contain accumulated wisdom that should not be lightly disputed, and secondly that to do so would invite social chaos. The opposing team outlined its arguments: that all social institutions must evolve, and this could only happen if they are questioned (a point Socrates would have liked to make, I thought), and that if we did not sometimes challenge the laws, society would become static and stale.

I wondered how Socrates would sum up our case and looked forward to one of his rousing and amusing speeches, full of sarcasm and mimicry. When Socrates rose for the final speech he looked serious and preoccupied.

Quietly and methodically, without any of his usual theatrics, Socrates read the speech he had prepared at our kitchen table.

“The final speaker in a debate usually sums up the team’s arguments. Today I’m going to do something different. Today I’m going to tell you a story. The ‘Last Days of Socrates’ is an account of the trial and death of the Greek philosopher, written by his disciple Plato. It offers many useful insights into tonight’s topic.”

There was a soft groan from Itch, Joyboy and Dunno, sitting behind me.

“At the start of Plato’s account, Socrates arrives at court for his trial and meets a man called Euthyphro who is there to bring an action against his father for murder. Socrates, pretending to need help in defending his own case, asks Euthyphro to define ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, since

he so clearly believes that he is correct in making such a serious accusation. Euthyphro tries to do so, but time and time again, Socrates puts holes in his arguments, so that in the end a dismayed Euthyphro makes an excuse and runs away, to avoid admitting that really he doesn't know 'right' from 'wrong' at all."

The audience shuffled their feet, wondering when Socrates would begin his spirited verbal attack.

"Now, we do not have to face the dilemma that confronted Euthyphro; since his time, the law has been codified so that everyone knows what is right and wrong; we use terms like 'legal' and 'illegal' which were not in Plato's vocabulary, because a systematic legal structure had not yet been developed."

I looked across at Mr. Gordon, who sat at a side table with the adjudicators - although he was not one of them, just an observer. He had a puzzled look on his face. He was making notes on a little white pad. The adjudicators, two teachers from another school, fiddled with their pens and looked bored.

Socrates continued. "But we do face one problem that existed in Plato's day: even such laws as there were, were not diligently and honestly applied. For what happens to Socrates, in the trial that follows, is that he is convicted not on any evidence or legal argument, but because his fellow townspeople - especially the privileged and powerful - do not like him very much."

"Now, it's not very nice to be unpopular; but it's one thing to be disliked, and another altogether not to be listened to when you are talking sense. Socrates fell victim to this: the human weakness to follow self-interest, or social conventions, rather than the truth. Those who should have listened to him failed him." He turned and looked directly at Mr. Gordon.

To my surprise Mr. Gordon half rose from his seat, his face glowing flushed and red.

"For who here can truly say they know right from

wrong? Yet we do have laws. Laws designed, for example, to protect the young.” He was speaking directly at Mr. Gordon, it seemed to me. “For example, laws that prohibit sexual acts between adults and children.”

Just then the curly haired chairman rang a small bell to tell Socrates he had thirty seconds to complete his speech. Mr. Gordon sat back in his chair, looking troubled, tapping his pencil repeatedly on his paper pad.

“So let us return to Euthyphro”, said Socrates; “what should we say to him? Euthyphro wants to accuse his father of a crime. Should we say: ‘no, you can’t do that because he’s your father’? Of course not: a crime is a crime. If we tell someone in authority about this crime, is it right for him or her to say: ‘don’t trouble me with this; I’m too busy and your father is an important man’? What would we think of that? I think we might say: ‘wrong’ and ‘cowardly’. And what if we told someone - again someone important, a church minister, say - and he turned the accusation back on us, on Euthyphro, saying: ‘you’re a bad person, you have done wrong things in your own life, so don’t accuse your father!’ What would we think of that? That the holy man was a fool or worse.”

There was emotion in Socrates’ voice now. The chairman rang the bell a second time, the signal for him to stop speaking.

“No, my friends: no one is above the law, and no one should escape investigation if reasonably suspected of a crime. My father, Clifford Smith, stands accused of pedophilia and the truth of this allegation should be investigated . . . “

At these words Mr. Gordon leapt to his feet and jumped in front of the nearest camera; however, as there were two of them to capture different angles, and the other was focused on Socrates, his attempt failed. “Stop the broadcast!” yelled Gordon, grabbing the second camera

so that it turned wildly, transmitting spinning images of the studio ceiling. In confusion the control booth operator switched to the first camera; blurred images of Mr. Gordon wrestling with the cameraman filled the screen as Socrates continued: "just like Socrates we must search for the truth behind every appearance and investigate my father!"

Finally, the producer whacked on the SUN-TV logo with the words 'normal service will resume shortly' and Burt Bacharach oozed out of the speakers.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" yelled a disheveled Mr. Gordon at Socrates as Rex Coburn ran in from another part of the building demanding to know why Mr. Gordon was attacking his employees. The adjudicators sat like stunned fish; a girl on the other team was balling her eyes out; the White Cliffs teachers rushed up to comfort their students. Socrates stood transfixed at the podium, staring at the studio floor.

"Hey Socrates!" It was Itch Humperdinck. "I didn't think debating could be so entertaining!"

"Awesome!" said Dunno, his huge big animal grin almost scraping the studio floor.

That woke Socrates from his stupor. He smiled his distant smile, turned, did a neat little pirouette and crumpled to the floor. More pandemonium ensued. Mr. Gordon abandoned Coburn and ran over to check on Socrates, the girl started bawling again, and the entire Burley College crew rushed up to surround Socrates. "Everybody out!" commanded Rex Coburn as someone brought in the first aid kit.

"Jesus! What a go!" said Joy Boy excitedly as we all filed out.

"There's going to be trouble", observed Itch.

But, strangely enough, there wasn't. Unlike Socrates' victory over the school song, something very curious happened: nothing. Nothing happened because Rex Coburn owned both SUN-TV and The Daily Cultivator and had no interest in spreading the story. Nothing happened because no-one was watching a high school debate on a Saturday afternoon when the other channel was showing the footy finals from Barrier Creek. Nothing happened because Ed Miller, who was watching - his daughter was in the audience - still had nothing to go on to launch an investigation. And, above all, nothing happened because, deep down, pretty much everyone who encountered Clifford Smith considered him a 'good bloke'.

Later that night I was surprised to find Socrates knocking on my bedroom window. It was around ten, and my mother and father were already in bed. "I can't go home tonight. I've been walking around. Can I stay here?" Without waking my mum and dad I led him into my bedroom. He slept on the floor in my old scout sleeping bag. 'What will my parents think in the morning?' I wondered while I looked down at that troubled, frizzy head, lit by the moonlight from the window.

For three nights after the debate, Socrates refused to leave our house. Only after the second night did Harmony Smith contact my mother, who spoke to Socrates. He refused to go home. On the third night, at around nine o'clock, the doorbell rang.

## Jonathon Smith

ONE PERSON who didn't consider Clifford Smith a 'good bloke' was Winston Burstall, CBE.

"We've got the little bastard by the short and curlies!"

"I'm not so sure", replied Eden Young, now the endorsed Country Party candidate for the seat of Mulga. "I don't like muck raking politics, you know that".

"Well know this, my son: this is a winner. This can bring that Smith fellow down. Don't go soft on me Eden; this is a tough game."

The two men were sitting in the comfortable sunroom that extended from the north side of Burstall's large weatherboard house. Set in large gardens on a grape property some miles from town and filled with palms and tropical plants, it had a whiff of the American South, it occurred to Eden, as they sat on plantation style chairs sipping Bourbon on ice.

Win Burstall was a compressed nugget of a man with a hard face, brown and creased from so many summers on the block, a crushing handshake, and a shock of white hair partly hidden by a broad brimmed Akubra.

"It's not just what his kid said on that broadcast, Eden. No one was listening to that twaddle. No, I've heard other things about our friend Clifford Smith."

Eden said nothing, so he continued. "And again, I know that boy of his told his story to other people around town. That suggests there is something in it, but even if not, there's a good chance rumors will start to spread; especially if we give them a little help!" He chuckled.

Eden again protested that he didn't like that kind of politics.

"Play the game or get out, Eden!" said the old Goanna, not unkindly. "Anyone would think you had a soft spot for this Smith. But think about this: what if he is a pervert?"

Eden tinkled the ice in his glass.

Burstall continued: "The rumors are already circulating. All we've got to do is give them a little push!"



“I have another son, you know.”

Harmony Smith was sitting, as always, in the shadows of her kitchen, away from the window. Betty Bradley was pouring the tea.

“Yes, I know; Benjamin, isn’t it?”

“No, I mean my other son, Benjamin’s brother. His name is Jonathon.”

Betty watched Harmony take a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her eyes. “Would you like to tell me about him?”

When Harmony spoke again it was in the third person, as if she could not bear to talk personally about her own family. To Betty it sounded as if she was reading a hospital report.

“There was a third sibling, named Jonathon. He was born about eighteen months after Benjamin and it was evident at birth that he had a serious defect: he had Downs Syndrome; the physical signs were immediately apparent. Clifford promptly refused to acknowledge the child. He insisted he be sent away to an institution, not even allowing him to come home. In those days that kind of result was all too common. No one saw it as unusual for a father to reject a malformed son.”

“Oh dear, poor Harmony” said Betty, softly. “That must have been very hard for you.”

Still speaking as if about someone else, Harmony continued: “But Harmony never forgave her husband for his actions, taken without her consent, while she was still recovering from the birth. It was another wedge between them. ‘I couldn’t have another useless son’ Clifford would sometimes say in moments of anger, and in moments of real cruelty, he would say to Benjamin: ‘you’re just as useless as that other boy. I had two dumb sons.’”

The two women sat silently, bonded by the secret they



now shared. Harmony bent her head and cried into her hands. Betty Bradley stood up and walked around the table to put her hands on Harmony's bony, shaking shoulders.

"I hate him!" she whispered. When she had composed herself, she added: "I know, I have turned the boys against him, but what else could I do? So, he hates me as well, I suppose."

"Did you ever try to leave?" asked Betty.

"How can she ever do that, Betty?" she asked, slipping again into the third person, "How can she ever? You know what that means: Harmony would lose her boys. But I did leave once; I went back to Sydney and got work as a cleaner. But it's too hard for a woman by herself, and I missed my boys. So, back I came. Clifford met me at the station. He said: 'when we get home, I want you to kiss me in front of the children. I want them to see we are happily married.' He looked at me like a crocodile, like I was his tasty meat. But I did it; I kissed him. It made me feel sick, like I had poisoned myself. But I did it for the boys. But they saw through it. They know their father. Yes, they know their father."

"Where is Jonathon now, Harmony? Do you know?" asked Betty.

"He lives in Sydney, in a very nice home. Benjamin tracked him down a few years ago. You know Benjamin is quite a bit older than Solomon." Betty nodded. "He managed to find him. We never told Clifford. Benjamin says he is a delightful man, a happy person with no idea that he has been abandoned. He even has a woman he calls his mother." Harmony began to cry. "We thought it was better to leave him like that. I never went to see him."

He could be the happiest and luckiest of all the Smiths, Betty thought to herself, looking fondly at her friend.



Now that the weather was a little warmer, Dadly had taken to having his lunches in the little park in the town of Paradise.

There were, in fact, three Paradises for Derek Bradley: the Paradise of the packing shed, a mile or so out of the town on the highway; the Paradise of the Aboriginal Mission hidden in the bush several miles in another direction, and the town itself, created in the 1920s by soldier settlers who had established fruit farms in a newly opened irrigation area.

The town of Paradise was a settlement of a few hundred people; it had a neat little brick Post Office built about the same time as the packinghouse and half a dozen streets lined with small white fibro houses. In the centre of town, bisected by the highway, a pair of open spaces served as the town park. In one of these sat a tall, round, steel water tower. Dadly would sit under a tree near this tower, on a wooden bench, eating the sandwiches made for him by Betty. Sometimes there would be men sitting under other trees, further back into the little park, groups of black men. Dadly could see they were drinking. They rarely took any notice of Dadly; only occasionally a noisy one would walk past him and make a comment, not unfriendly, but incomprehensible. Dadly found that he had lost his distaste for black skin after sharing that little room in the dust storm with William, Nathan and Toby.

So it was with true pleasure that one day he heard William's cheerful voice calling to him from back in the park:

"Hey, shoe man! It's SHOE MAN! What are you doin' here, eh, Derek?" And there was William, hobbling to-

wards him with a smiling face. Dadly realized that that William had an injury or deformity that gave him a lop-sided, shuffling gait. "It's the SHOE MAN!" he said one more time, seating himself next to Dadly.

"How've you been, William?" asked Derek.

"I been good, Derek! Real GOOD!" As always, William emphasized his adjectives, as if feelings needed not only to be expressed, but acted as well. "And how about you? How's that son of yours?"

Dadly wondered how William knew he had a son but supposed they had talked about it during the sandstorm; probably it was the shoes. "He's fine, William. How are Nathan and Toby?"

"They good, Derek; they at school today. They learnin' somethin' eh? That's GOOD!"

They were quiet for a while, then William said: "I don't want our young people to end up like this, EH." He indicated a group of inebriated men in the background. One of them called out to William. He answered in a language Dadly could not understand. Dadly felt totally out of his depth. Sensing Dadly's discomfort, William leant over: "We in two diff'rent worlds, aren't we shoe man! But we gotta lot in COMMON; we want the best for our KIDS!"

Dadly agreed. He felt moved to confide in William. Dadly had few men friends who he could talk to openly. "Actually, my son - his name is Robert - has a problem, or rather, he has a friend with a problem that is affecting him too."

"Is that so, Derek?" asked William with his usual expression of extreme interest. "What happened to this friend?"

Dadly explained what Robert had seen at the camp and how Solomon had reacted. William pondered what he had heard. "That's bad, Derek. That's BAD when men don't treat children right way; don't act according to the LAW."

"Well that seems to be the point", said Dadly. "How

do we get the law involved in this situation, even if we should at all?"

William laughed. "Oh, you mean white fella law? No, I'm talking about LAW: black fella Law. White fella law, that no help for your son and his friend."

Dadly asked William to explain.

"Your law, that's about what you own, eh? Its gonna protect your, 'PROPERTY RIGHTS'?" Dadly nodded. "It's not about people; it's not about how people treat each other!"

After another pause he continued: "If something like this happened among my people - I'm talking long time ago, Derek - then first all the women would gather, they would talk about that man, what he DID. Then all the men would do the SAME. Then the women and the men would agree on how to deal with that fella, that Clifford. After that, the men have to take that Clifford and EDUCATE him - punish him, sure, maybe spear 'im in the leg, something like that - but more important, teach him the right way to BEHAVE. Your man Clifford, he has to be educated in the right way, in the LAW."

Dadly agreed this made sense.

"So what will white man law do? Maybe lock up this man Clifford; maybe do nothing because he is a rich man! White fella law just PUNISH, that's all."

"Hey!" said William after a long pause during which he swatted flies and Derek finished his sandwiches. "Your Queen, she came to Attica, EH! She came for the BI-CENTENE-RY!"

"Yes, we all went to see her."

"Who she then, eh? She your HEAD OF STATE; your tribal LEADER; she gave you your law. Your law come from a place long way AWAY!"

Derek nodded.

"I tell you about our Law: our Law was given by Cre-

ator Spirit; it comes from the Dreaming; our Law is sacred Law. You white fellas with your King or your Queen: you more primitive tribe than us BLACK FELLAS!" William gave his characteristic chuckle.

"The dreaming: you mean from the dreamtime - that is when the world was created by your gods?" asked Dadly.

"No, Derek, not some time long ago. Those gods, you call them, they here right now. And that dreaming, he here right NOW!" He chuckled. "It'll be here tomorrow too!" he added mischievously. "At Christian school they tell us about angels, yeah? We got them too; they right here now, if you know where to LOOK!" He waved his hands around the park.

Dadly felt he had to bring the conversation back to safer ground. "What about today, William? How do you handle people who do bad in your community, if you say you have lost your Law?"

"Yes, we got violence in our communities; and we got men who do bad things, even to little kids. You gotta ask: 'WHY? Where that anger come from, eh? Where that violence BEGIN?' You look at some whitefella, like that Clifford you were telling me about. Where his violence come from, eh? He got PAIN in him, pain in his belly like bad stomach ache (he chuckled). Blackfella got pain too. A lot like that fella. All the blackfellas in prison because of that PAIN. But is your Clifford going to gaol? I don't think so. Your law very good at gaoling blackfellas; it no good at healing the PAIN."

"I tell you another thing about our Law. Our Law is not like whitefella's law. We do not carry it around in a book. It is in the LAND. That's why we need our land, to be strong. Maybe that Gough Whitlam, he will give back our LAND. We get back our land we will be STRONG. Then we get back our Law."

After all this talk both men fell silent. William was right;

they lived in different worlds, thought Derek. He envied William his certainty; he understood the happy chuckle now: it was the sound of a man totally at peace with himself and his world, someone for whom everything that he observed was a revelation, never a threat.

“Yes, Derek”, said William, as if reading his thoughts. “We live in two worlds, EH! You know, my mother called me William, that’s a white name; she wasn’t allowed to give me a black name, that wasn’t allowed on the mission. So she called me William. But my mother was CLEVER; when she called me William she had in mind the man Barak, a great leader of my PEOPLE. He was also given the name William: William Barak. So I got two names: a white name, William, and a black name, a hidden name, Barak. Which one the real name, eh, Derek?” He chuckled.

It occurred to Dadly that Robert’s friend Solomon also had another name. He explained this to William.

“That Socrates, he was also a great man, like William Barak. So that boy’s just like me; he got a hidden name too: that’s GOOD, eh! But I tell you something, Derek - and maybe you should tell that boy”. William looked serious. “Two names can pull you apart, make you WEAK. Which one you are? People say to me: ‘oh, you just old William’ and I forget my other name. So that boy gotta remember his hidden name. He gotta stay one person, stay STRONG; don’t let his self be split in two.”

After a pause, William continued: “And you tell that Socrates, watch out: that father of his, he gonna try to take away his NAME!”

## CHAPTER 11



# The Death of Socrates

“SERGEANT ED MILLER of the Attica Police.”

“Hello officer”, I heard my father say.

“What’s the matter?” It was my mother, following Dadly up the hall. Both were wearing their dressing gowns.

“It’s Mr. Bradley, is it? Sorry to trouble you like this, but I understand you have a young boy staying with you, Solomon Smith?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, the thing is, Mr. Bradley, Solomon’s parents have contacted Attica Police because they are concerned about their son. They have asked us to ensure that he is returned home safely.”

“I can assure you that Solomon is perfectly well and is here of his own free will”, explained Dadly.

“And he is not a young boy”, added my mother a little hotly. My mother had developed an increased contempt for the authorities after her frustrating interview with my scoutmaster. “And I must say I am a little surprised

that Mr. Smith has to use the police to communicate with his son."

Sergeant Miller turned to my mother. "As I understand it, Mrs. Bradley, Solomon is under age, that is, under eighteen, and the parents have a right to request that he be taken home. Is Solomon there please?"

"Solomon is here, and here under our care", said my father firmly. "And as I understand it, he is eighteen and quite able to make his own decisions about where he stays."

I held my breath at this patent lie by my father; he knew that Socrates was still seventeen.

My dad's ruse threw the policeman off balance: "Well Mr. Bradley, that is not the information that I have."

"Do you carry evidence of the boy's age with you, officer?" lobbed in my mother.

"No, not exactly", murmured the sergeant, "however I assume his parents know the age of their son."

"I would not assume anything where the Smiths are concerned", said my mother under her breath.

"I think", said Dadly, "that this is a decision for Solomon himself." He turned and called to me, standing in the hall beside my bedroom door. "Robbie, can you ask Solomon to come out?" Socrates poked his head out the door. "Solomon, do you wish to remain in this house or return to your parents?"

"I wish to remain here", said Socrates clearly.

"Well, Sergeant Miller, I think you have your answer", said Dadly.

Sergeant Miller stood in a pool of light on our porch, unsure how to proceed. He had not anticipated this scene. "Am I to take it that you refuse to allow me to return Solomon to his home?"

"No", said my father; "You are to accept that the young man is capable of deciding for himself, and that he has decided to stay here. I suggest you relay that information to the Smiths."



“If they wish to see their son they are welcome to come here and talk to him”, added my mother.

Defeated, Sergeant Miller walked back to his car

“The nerve of them – or rather, of that Clifford!” said my mother.



A couple of days after the visit from Sergeant Miller, Socrates and I were sitting at the kitchen table as we usually did after school. It was not the habit in my household to turn on the TV as soon as we came home; as a result, Socrates and I were always the last to know about the latest American series that formed the topic of schoolyard conversation.

Since the debate, and his failure to incite an investigation into his father, Socrates had slipped back into a quiet and sullen mood. He took the failure personally: he had risked his mind and body in a bold, dramatic act, and he had been defeated. I noticed a return to the behavior that had concerned me before the debate: the silence: the withdrawal, the slouched posture.

We were preparing for a practice exam the next day, and as I read through my textbook I noticed that Socrates had stopped reading and was staring out the window. “Are you ok, Socrates?” I asked.

“Do you think it’s worth it, all these tests and exams, all this memorizing a lot of facts, just to get a piece of paper?”

“It is for me. I want to get into Uni. to do accounting.”

“Oh yeah”, he said, with uncharacteristic cynicism, “you want to be just like your dad”.

“No, I do really want to be an accountant”, I said, real-

izing as I said the words that I possibly did not believe them; “you want to be a photographer, don’t you? That’s what you told me.”

It was rare for Socrates and I to argue; yet at that moment I felt a rift opening between us. “Yes well”, he said, “I don’t give a stuff about photography or exams or the whole damn shit of school and university and jobs and all the fucking career advice they give us at the moment.”

I looked with surprise at his angry, contorted face. It was not that I didn’t think Socrates could get angry; I had seen how a deep anger fueled his classroom dramatics. But this anger was self-directed, an inner rage, congealing in him like blood on a wound. I guessed that the pressure of the end of sixth form, with its endless assessments, careers nights, and university entrance tests must have been getting to him. “Don’t worry”, I said, “it’ll soon be all over”.

He looked at me with his sad blue eyes and said: “Robert, I think it’s over now.”

I was digesting the implications of that remark when the doorbell rang. I heard my mother answer it and a conversation between her and whoever had rung the bell. A moment later Harmony Smith stood in the kitchen doorway.

I had not had much opportunity to examine Socrates’ mother. She was tall and thin - too thin - with pale skin drawn around her prominent cheekbones. Her eyes were hidden by large tinted glasses, which she had not removed even indoors. She wore an expensive looking pants suit with colorful top and pink slacks. I could smell her perfume from the other side of the room. She stood, grasping the door frame and swaying slightly, as if a breeze could sweep her away, and for a moment that unkind description of fashion models as ‘clothes horses’ came into my mind: she really looked like an assemblage of bones on which clothes had been hung.

“Hello Solomon”, she said in a croaky voice; “a kiss for your mother?”

“Hello mum” said Socrates, willingly rising out of his chair and giving his mother the desired attention.

“We’ll leave you two alone”, said my mum. “Come on Robbie.”

My mother and I went into the lounge room. Through the open door we could hear snatches of the conversation between Harmony Smith and her son. “You have to come home, Solomon”, we heard her say. “Your father is angry and he’s taking it all out on me. I’m alone in that house with him. I can’t stand it.”

“I don’t want to come home” we heard Socrates say. “You know I hate it there too.” He was crying.

“But think what it’s like for me” she insisted; “at least with you there he has to behave. We can stand up to him together.”

“I have to go home, for my mum’s sake”, said Socrates later as he packed his things in my room.

“But what about you, Socrates? You have to look after yourself as well.”

Socrates looked at my mother as if she did not know what she was saying. “Me? Oh, I’ll be ok; it’s my mother I have to look after.”



I saw little of Socrates for the next few weeks. He stayed away from me at school and went home quickly at the end of each day. There were a lot of practice tests for the Matric. exams, and I found myself spending time alone, studying at the table where we used to sit together.

Tools Tralore had a car now, and on Friday nights a group of us would go to the Drive-In down the end of Barton Avenue, near the Attica South Primary, and watch 'Planet of the Apes', 'Virgin Soldiers' or George Lazenby in 'Her Majesty's Secret Service'. It got a little awkward when Tools and his girlfriend wanted the back seat. Occasionally, on Ranch Night, we would bump into The Marshall, buying a choc top at interval to the sound of The Tijuana Brass.

One night, after being dropped off at my place after 'The Pink Panther', I was surprised to hear a tapping on my window. It was Dunno.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came back. I'm worried."

"About what?"

"Socrates. We gotta do something."

I came out and we walked down Barton Avenue towards Socrates' house. We gazed with apprehension at its white shape, half hidden by trees.

"Well, who's gonna do it?"

"I will", said Dunno. "Which one's his bedroom?"

"I think it's that one: around the side a bit."

Dunno opened the front gate. It squeaked. "Shit!" We dropped down behind the hedge. The house remained silent and still. I thought I saw a curtain move.

"There's someone there", I said. "Maybe it's his mum."

"You never see his mum. She's a ghost", said Dunno. "I'm goin' in."

Dunno crept towards the house and disappeared around a corner. I waited for ages. When he came back a little breathless he explained:

"I found his room easy. It had all these posters on the window."

"So what happened?"

"He won't come out!"

“What did he say?”

“He just kept sayin’, again and again: ‘the struggle’s over, Dunno’, ‘the struggle’s over’. What does that mean?” Dunno looked worried. “He’s given up, right?”

I stared at Dunno. Tears were in his eyes. “I love that stupid bastard”, he said. “He’s . . . you know.”

“Yeah, I know, I said. We all are.” He gave me a sweet little knowing smile. “Is he gonna do something stupid?”

“I dunno, Dunno”, I said. “I dunno.”

I didn’t know; and I also didn’t know what to do about it. When your friend cuts you off, what do you do? Next day I asked my mum.

“Harmony says Solomon has gone very quiet, Robbie. She thinks he may be depressed. But she also says he is determined to support her. I know it seems strange, but he seems to have made a decision: to sacrifice himself.”



A couple of days later, my mother made an announcement at the dinner table.

“Harmony called in today. She invited us all to the Rotary Club on Thursday night. She said it’s an important night for Solomon.”

“Socrates hates the Rotary Club!” I said, remembering an incident a couple of months earlier when that organisation had tried to hold a ‘rock concert’ at the Attica Showground. Only a handful of teenagers had turned up.

“They don’t get it”, Socrates had said. “They stand for everything young people are against.”

“The Rotary Club!” said my father; “what an honor!” I caught just a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “But according to The Cultivator, it’s his father who’s being installed as the new club president; what’s that got to do with

Socrates?”

I had noticed that these days my dad always used the name Socrates, not Solomon.

“I wonder what Clifford’s up to”, mused my mother. “I think we’d better go along.”

I had never been inside the Attica Club. As we walked in through the wide swinging doors I saw palm trees and white walls and the high ceilings of the biggest room I’d ever been in; we joined a line of men in shiny brown and beige suits, accompanied by women with fake fur stoles and rarely seen jewelry.

Up ahead I spied Harmony, without Clifford or Solomon, looking lost. A small man in a purple suit, with waxed hair and a generous moustache sidled up to her. I recognized him as Mr. Anastasiades, a teacher at my school. Mr. A was notorious for being punched by Vinnie Thompson in front of the class and doing nothing about it, while Vinnie and his mates jumped out of the classroom window and ran under the jacaranda trees onto Fourteenth Street.

As we stood behind them I heard snatches of their conversation: “I’m sure you’re very creative, Mrs. Smith.” “Oh no, I’m not really.” I saw her blush. “I bet that’s not true. I bet you have lots of talents.” Mr. A put his arm around Harmony and steered her bony waist towards a nearby table; my mother grabbed Dadly and we headed in the same direction.

Mr. Anastasiades sat next to Harmony, with my mother next to her on the other side, then my dad and me, and a couple of people we didn’t know. Far in the distance, I could see Socrates at a table with his father; he was staring at his food and seemed oblivious of the people around him.

I looked around the room. Among the sea of combed and coiffured heads there were several faces I recognized: the

minister of the Methodist church, Reverend Burncott; Sergeant Miller, the policeman; Rex Coburn from the TV station; even my English teacher, Mr. Gordon was there.

A man stood up at the table where Clifford and Solomon were seated and asked for everyone's attention. He proposed a toast to the Queen whose portrait stared down at us from the end wall. He then introduced another man who informed us that this was his last function as president of the club; tonight, a new president would be installed: Clifford Smith. At Clifford's name, hoots and cheers erupted from several tables around the room. It seemed this was a popular choice. The man went on to introduce Attica's mayor and other dignitaries that were present that night; thankfully we were not among them.

Mr. A moved closer to Harmony Smith and poured her another glass of wine.

"No, I don't have many friends" I heard her say.

"I can't believe that! You're such good company" he flattered.

"I avoid people", she continued. "I've been hurt, you see." Her knuckles were white around her wine glass and her voice was dry and hard.

As the main course arrived, the departing president took the floor again and commenced a highly detailed account of the past year's spreadsheet. My father looked at me and gave a grim smile. He was playing with his food and I could see his thoughts were elsewhere. My mother looked brightly around the room, investigating from afar a multitude of potential intrigues.

"I have a problem with men who are not kind. There are a lot of men who have not been kind to me." Harmony was in deep conversation with Mr. Anastasiades.

"Perhaps they were just doing what men do. Rape and

plunder. A lot of women seem attracted to men like that.”

“Don’t they! But not me.”

“Hasn’t anyone been kind to you?”

“The ones I loved most were the unkindest. They abandoned me.”

At that moment a big man with a loud voice came bursting through the gap between the tables carrying a moneybox. “Fines! Fines! John Anastasiades: Ten dollars for spending too much time with the most beautiful woman in the room!” Apparently this was another Rotary ritual. Similar embarrassing allegations were thrown at various people around the room, resulting in fines collected by this ‘Sergeant at Arms’.

I was by now utterly bored by the entire event. I wondered why we were there. I wondered why Socrates was there. Surely this was exactly the kind of thing he hated: meaningless formalities, hypocritical speeches . . . I looked for any sign of protest on his part, but he remained drawn and distant. Opposite me, Harmony was putting away more drinks with the assistance of her waxy haired friend.

A drunken man at a table near us stood up next. I recognized him as Mr. Trent of Trent’s Automotive, known to my friends as ‘Bent Trent’ on account of the quality of the cars he sold. “THE FOUR WAY TEST!” he boomed. Clearly suffering from too many beers he read with difficulty from a card: “The Four Way Test is a non, a non . . . a non-partisan . . . oh bugger it! You blokes all know what it is!”

The men at the next table cracked up laughing.

“No, come on” continued Trent, “The Four Way Test; say it with me: Is it the truth?”

“IS IT THE TRUTH?” bellowed out the Rotary men; I noticed Rex Coburn was particularly enthusiastic.

“Is it fair?” - “IS IT FAIR?” next echoed around the room, followed by “WILL IT BUILD GOODWILL?” and “WILL IT BE BENEFICIAL TO ALL CONCERNED?”



There was something menacing about these rousing cheers to 'truth' and 'fairness', all this male energy bounding around the walls of the Attica Club, and as I looked at the small, white, passive figure of Socrates I realized with a shock what it was: all of this emotion was directed at *him*. That was his role tonight; that explained his damn passivity: he was the condemned man, the sacrificial victim to the club's self-righteous declarations. Truth! Fairness! 'Stand up, Socrates! Do something!' Inside I seethed; I looked round at the grinning faces of Coburn, Burncott, Miller, Mr. Gordon; I remembered the story of the Athenian mob, how they lynched those generals for doing what they thought was right, how they killed Socrates rather than admit their ignorance. Suddenly, I was frightened: frightened for Socrates.

The out-going president called for attention. "Now Clifford Smith, as we all know, is a scholar and a gentleman (hear, hear!), a learned and upright man: a caring man; a family man. And in that vein, Clifford, as I pass the reins of this club to you, I have one last duty to perform on the club's behalf, something you have worked for and which is dear to your heart. For this I need your son who is here at the table with you tonight. Solomon, can I ask you to stand please."

Socrates stood up slowly, his head bowed. The man asked Socrates what his future plans were. I expected him to say something about his dream to be an artist. The words seemed to stick in his mouth.

"I, well I", he stammered; "I . . . next year I . . ."

"Well I'll tell you what you'll be doing!" said the red-faced beery man. "You'll be going to Sydney University to study law, with a generous Rotary scholarship paying your fees, and a wonderful career ahead of you. A fine compliment you'll be to this club and your father. What do you think of that?" He waved an envelope around that clearly contained a fat check. He could have been offering

a fish to an aquarium dolphin.

The dolphin took the fish. A crashing wave of clapping and applause burst over him as I saw my friend drowning, just as others saw a hero riding a wave. I felt sick and wanted to leave. But there was one more humiliation: "Everyone please stand for the National Anthem", said the Sergeant at Arms and I watched as Socrates mechanically sang "God Save the Queen". I hated him then for his inaction and passivity and I concluded that my friend was a coward.

I couldn't wait to escape that room with its air of concealed menace, those loud drunken men, their overdressed silent wives, Harmony clinging to the arm of Mr. Anastasiades, Socrates alone and pale, pierced thought the heart like white-bait on a hook. As I looked back I saw Clifford, surrounded by congratulatory arms, trying on the president's robes.

As Mr. Anastasiades helped Harmony up from her chair I heard her mumble: "thank you Charlie. You're a darling."



Later that week, I was lying on the floor of our lounge room with my head between the loudspeakers of our brand new 'Thorn' hi-fi, testing out the stereo effect. I heard a knock at the door and my mother padding down the hall to answer it. Among the muffled voices I recognized scoutmaster Paul's.

I got up and crept to the window; parting the venetians I saw my mother, the scoutmaster, and a small boy dressed in scout uniform. I had forgotten this used to be scout night.

The boy was small and slight with a pathetic pale face

and a nose that required constant scratching. He looked familiar.

"Tell Mrs. Bradley that you were the boy in Mr. Smith's tent, Ross."

"Yes", said the boy.

"You were reading maps, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And nothing bad happened to you, did it, Ross?"

"Yes". The boy seemed only capable of saying yes.

"He meant 'no'", explained Paul.

My mother looked skeptical. "Ross, don't be scared. You can tell us what really happened. What happened in the tent?"

"I don't think this is the correct time to interrogate the boy", interposed Paul.

"No, I suppose you've 'interrogated' him enough!" said my mum.

"Yes", said the boy.

"Well, Mrs. Bradley, you can see we have investigated the incident and there is nothing more to report".

"Yes", said my mother, as sweet as arsenic.

## The Prodigal

"IT LOOKS LIKE you've been thrown a lifeline!"

Bill Gordon and Clifford Smith were seated in comfortable leather chairs in Clifford's spacious office on the first floor of his chambers in Barton Avenue. The sunshine from a clear spring day streamed in through the windows.

"There was never anything in it, you know that."

"Of course, Clifford; still, it's good to have such a clear vindication. That scout coming forward takes all the steam out of any mileage Burstall could have made of this."

"Scotch?" Clifford poured two glasses from a special bottle he kept in a side cabinet.

"I've got to tell you Clifford, it floored me when Solomon came and told me his story. Because I know you, and I know you would not do the things he was describing. And then when I questioned him, I realized there was an easy explanation: the story was second hand. It could have been fabricated or he might have misconstrued what this person told him."

Clifford nodded; he had been worried when Bill had rung him, arranging this meeting.

"I put this to him. He wouldn't tell me who told him the story. So I asked him, is the person reliable? 'Yes', he said. But I said to him, if you won't tell me who this person is, why should I believe you? Because I don't want to believe bad things about you Clifford, that can't be substantiated. I know that falsehoods can stick, and we don't need these kinds of rumors in the middle of an election campaign."

Again Clifford nodded. Where was this heading?

"Anyway, he still refused to tell me. He claimed he didn't want to get this person into trouble, that he wanted an investigation where witnesses were protected. I think he's seen too many cop shows! Anyway, then he said his intention was to reveal the truth about you. He said some quite ugly and unkind things; unfair things, spoken in anger. I concluded that what I was looking at was an angry, disaffected son. Do you think that's it, Clifford? Does Solomon have a reason to be angry towards you? I ask this because . . . I suspect that Solomon may not abandon his crusade just because the boy has come forward. That's my worry. I need to know if we can get Solomon on side."

Clifford turned his glass, his eyes unfocused. So that was it. No question of right or wrong. Just: 'get Solomon on side'. As if that was going to be easy! Feelings of self-pity welled up inside Clifford Smith; in his mind a movie-

reel showed a lifetime of failed attempts to achieve some kind of vindication, to realize his promise . . . and always someone in the way.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I should have explained all this to you before. It's true that . . . my family is not all it seems."

He put his face in his hands and Bill Gordon half expected to see him cry. He looked up at Bill as if he carried a great and guilty secret. His handsome face was white and strained. "Bill, I'm sorry to have to tell you all this. My personal life has not been a success. As far as my family goes, I am a failure."

"None of our lives are perfect, Clifford. What do I need to know?"

Clifford Smith adjusted his ample frame and settled back into his chair. He would now do what he did best: he would tell a story.

"It was after my marriage. I discovered that my wife had a problem. She has a clinical weakness, a nervous hysteria. Of course, I arranged for the best doctors and psychiatrists, but Harmony was stubborn. No amount of assistance or medication could shake her from her melancholy. It was, the doctors and I concluded, willful behavior, a choice, to remove herself from the happiness and affection that I, and others, tried to offer her. It was a difficult and frustrating time, Bill. It distracted me from my career."

Bill Gordon sat silently; the outlines of this story were familiar to him.

"You know, I would ask her: 'what do you want from life?' And she would answer: 'to be happy'. Bill, what kind of answer is that? We all want happiness, but we have to work for it too! So increasingly we grew apart and I threw myself into my life at the bar. There I found purpose, companionship, energy lacking in my relationship with my wife. But at home, hard as I tried to support Harmony, things just got worse. She turned to drinking, and pills.

Several times I had to arrange, through my psychiatrist friends, for her admission to various clinics and facilities. Still to no avail! Meanwhile our boy Benjamin was affected; influenced by his mother he too began to show symptoms of withdrawal and lassitude. I sent him to the best schools. It was no help.

“Then Solomon came along. I have to admit it was not planned. It came at a difficult point in my career, as I was about to enter local politics. It put me off balance. Between you and me Bill, I believe my wife planned that pregnancy to thwart my ambitions. But Solomon was a pleasant surprise: bright, alert, and academically gifted. I determined to devote more time to this son, to nurture his talents and remove him from his mother’s influence. Alas, I was only partly successful. I would take him on trips, just the two of us, but he would pine for his mother. I would take him to my work, to show him the life of a lawyer, of interesting people and discussions, but he preferred to play alone and never made friends with the sons of my colleagues as I had hoped.

“Eventually, it became clear that he had a set against me. I entered him in a scholarship examination for a prestigious private school. He refused to sit the exam! Some nonsense about ‘inequality’ and the need to support state education! My son, giving me a lecture at thirteen!”

Bill Gordon smiled inwardly; he could imagine Socrates in that moment.

“Then, just last year; do you remember, Bill, how I offered to send him to Malaysia, for three months, on the Rotary Young Leader’s program? He even sat the interview. As much as told the committee they were a bunch of overweight old men who didn’t know what leadership was! Quoted Pericles at them! Completely blew his chances - deliberately, of course - to embarrass me. Then he goes off and spends money given to him by his mother to do some photography course in the school holidays instead!

“Well it’s all very interesting, that creative stuff, I suppose, but it won’t lead you to a profession and a stable career. And now, this latest attack, to embarrass me because he despises my role in the scouts - another activity that would have been good for him if he’d stuck at it. He said it’s too militaristic! After all I have done for him, for his mother. Bill, it defeats me.”

Bill Gordon shifted in his chair. The broad outlines of Clifford’s speech he knew from previous conversations; Clifford was not one to hold back in talking about himself. What he had now heard put detail to the outline; it had a ring of honesty about it that suggested Clifford had let down his guard and revealed his inner fears. Bill felt the need to respond in kind.

“Clifford, the main problem as I see it, is that it’s a great benefit for a politician to have a supportive family - and for that family to be visible during the campaign. Even given what you have said - which I entirely believe and understand - it leaves us the problem that Harmony and your sons appear unable to support you, is that what I am hearing?”

Bill Gordon had two great weaknesses. One was his liking for Clifford Smith, in whom he had found a clever and sensitive conversation partner. The other was his single-minded devotion to the Labor cause. Bill was a true believer. As a boy during the Great Depression, he had seen his father reduced to begging; as a young man he had been inspired by the great Labor heroes: John Curtin, Ben Chifley, and Doc Evatt, only to see the rise of Menzies and twenty years of stifling conservative governments. And now, after all those years, after all that suffering, hope at last: under the inspiring leadership of Gough Whitlam, the return of a Labor government was tantalizingly close. The unexpected by-election for Mulga, only a year after Labor had almost grasped victory at the 1969 federal poll,

was a gift that could propel the party towards the next election, with only a small swing amongst the rural vote required. Now, as he looked across at Clifford's attractive face, Bill Gordon only fear was: was there anything that would stop Clifford Smith being elected?

When he replied, Clifford's voice was hoarse with emotion.

"You have to understand that Solomon and I have a . . . difficult relationship. He has been turned against me by the mother (he made Harmony Smith seem like an item of furniture: the settee; the mother). It has been very difficult, Bill; my life has been a struggle because of that woman.

"I could have been a leading figure at the Sydney bar, I was in line to be mayor of Gosford; and then . . . higher things, the Party: did I tell you that Doc Evatt himself anointed me? (He had, many times, thought Bill). Doc Evatt! Took me into his office in Macquarie Street, one day around 1952, and said to me: 'we need men like you in the Party, Clifford. Your star is going to rise!'"

Clifford's eyes glazed over as he paused for effect. "Well, all this became impossible because of the woman I married. That's why we moved to the country: I hoped it would give her a new start, but she has not taken any advantage of the opportunities I have given her. And neither has Solomon."

"Clifford, it's going to be necessary to persuade Solomon to abandon this crusade against you, even better if he could bring himself to publicly support you. There is nothing like seeing the family, on stage with the candidate, at the launch: is that possible?"

"Leave it with me, Bill. It won't be a problem, let me assure you. I know how to handle my son."

The campaign launch was only two weeks away. After Bill Gordon had left, Clifford Smith remained seated in his



deep, soft leather chair. Its generous softness, and the gleaming oak desk in front of him, gave him the most comfort he knew in the world. His was a world of things. Solomon was also a thing, a chess piece to be moved to the most advantageous position.



“Ho!” Said Clifford Smith. “The prodigal returns!”

Socrates’ father had decided that the best strategy for dealing with his son was to embrace him, to make him feel welcome, while asserting his particular definition of the family, which was patriarchal and biblical. Clifford, as always, hid his power beneath a deceptive dash of humor, which was really a device to ensure compliance. Who could disobey such charming invitations as those given by Clifford Smith?

Later that evening, Clifford asked his son to join him in his study. Again, he was amiable. “How old are you now, Solomon? Nearly eighteen! I remember that age. I had my rebellious streak too.”

Solomon sat on the edge of his chair in remembrance of all the previous times he had been trapped in this study, or ones like it, listening to his father’s self-serving stories which had certain repeating themes: his disadvantaged childhood; the struggles he had gone through to establish himself; the difficulties for his career caused by his incompetent wife. Tonight, however, he avoided the usual narrative.

“Perhaps I haven’t realized how much you have grown up. I think you and I could have a little drink.” He gave Solomon a mischievous look and walked to the liquor cabinet. “What would you like to try?”

"I don't drink, dad", said Solomon.

"Of course you don't! I've heard stories about those school trips! Don't be embarrassed, Solomon; you're not in trouble with me. Try this." He handed Solomon a small glass. Solomon took a sip; a shiver ran through his body and he coughed violently. "Whisky a bit strong? I know", said Clifford, delving into his cabinet like a pharmacist searching his shelves for the correct medicine. "How about Port? That's sweeter."

He exchanged Solomon's glass for a big tumbler of red port wine. This at least, Solomon found, was pleasant to drink, although as the alcohol seeped into his system it occurred to him that the port was the whisky in disguise, just as the jovial father sitting opposite him was a disguised form of the true man. He now felt even more trapped, now that he owed his father his attention and time in return for the wine.

"I had a curious conversation the other day."

"Oh, who with?" asked Solomon, immediately on guard.

"That doesn't matter. The important thing is that it disturbed me. I don't like being disturbed, Solomon. I have important work to do; you realize that, don't you?"

Solomon nodded as he had become accustomed to do during these conversations with his father.

"It's not that you slander me, Solomon, much as that upsets me; it cuts me to the quick. No. I know you are angry, that you have a chip on your shoulder. Maybe it's your age. The real problem is the impact your attitude could have. We're on a knife-edge. Any slip and it's disaster; the whole project; Labor to power in '72: gone. A better Australia: gone. That's why we have to be careful and why my image is important. So it's not the slander, no. It's you. It's your radicalism, the trouble you cause.

"You are a nuisance to me, to my campaign, Solomon. Your antics could cost Australia the chance of a new order, a rebirth as a great nation. Consider that! That's the responsibility you bear! Radicalism? Idealism? We all

have that, of course we do. We all carry the flame. But we have to be careful too. Or we lose the treasure."

After topping up Solomon's glass, Clifford continued in a gentler tone.

"You see, Solomon, the greatest danger to my campaign is distractions. There are a lot of things that could be distracting. Take this Burchett business, for example."

"The journalist the government won't let into Australia? He wants to attend his brother's funeral and the government won't let him in. They say he's a communist. It's so unfair. He was the first reporter into Hiroshima. He's the only one reporting the truth about Vietnam. He's a hero!"

"And there's your problem, Solomon. Your feelings, your emotions tell you it's unfair. But look at the bigger picture: letting Wilfred Burchett in would break our treasure. Our treasure is the trust we have developed in the electorate, a trust that we can be trusted, that we are not wild radicals but reasonable men who can manage economies and negotiate treaties. You see how your behavior paints a different picture, of wildness and risk. We can't have that, I can't have it; I can't afford to break the treasure."

"It's your behavior, not mine, that's the problem" said Solomon, quietly. His voice was shaking.

A month's worth of weather swept across Clifford's face as he tried to control his emotions. Socrates feared the steel beneath the soft flesh, but Clifford controlled himself, relaxed and sat back in his chair, the charming smile returning to his face.

"Have I told you what Doc. Evatt said to me, Solomon; to *me*? 'Clifford, the Labor Party has a sacred trust; it alone carries the flame; it alone will lead Australia to the Promised Land'. No, Solomon, what you have to consider is this: do you also believe in the light on the hill? Do you

also want no more Vietnam War; free universities; good city planning; social welfare? If I get elected next month, that brings the government's majority down to four seats in the House; it sets us up for certain victory in '72. You know what that means, Solomon? A new Australia, and you and I will be part of it! All that could be ruined, Solomon, all that could be lost, if my enemies make up stories they can use against me. Do you want to see Burstall, or one of his cronies, win this seat?"

Socrates shook his head.

"I am not going to say any more about the stories you have been spreading. We will leave all that behind us. What I need is to ensure is that you will support me in what I do; that you are part of this family. Can I have that assurance?"

The mention of 'family' disturbed Solomon. In a funny way he did respect his father; or at least, he held an image of a father he could respect, a perfect father, one whom this corrupted and damaged article did occasionally resemble. Bad as his family was, he couldn't entirely deny that it meant something to him. Sensing his confusion, Clifford added:

"In many ways, Solomon, my family has been a . . . disappointment to me. But you, Solomon, you are special. You always have been my Prince. Live up to your promise!" He raised his glass and took another swig of whiskey.

Solomon said nothing; either the wine, or his love for his mother, or both, had silenced his tongue. Then, as if he was continuing the politest and lightest of conversations, in sweet words Clifford told his son what would happen if he disobeyed his father: "Make the right decision, Solomon, and you will be part of a bright future. Make the wrong one, and you abandon that future" Socrates felt a chill around his ankles as his father added: "That future, and your family. You will be a person without a fami-

ly, Solomon, without a home; your mother won't see you anymore and you will be alone."

Solomon went back to his room. He listlessly picked up his guitar and put it down again. He fell back on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Tears welled in his eyes. All of the time that he had been away from this house, in the care of the Bradley's, he had kept the feeling that this is where he belonged. After all, this was the world in which he had grown: the houses may have changed, but this was the same bed he had slept in since he was a child; the chairs and tables in the sitting room were the same ones whose legs he had climbed around as an infant; the metal lined wood box by the fire place the same one in which he had found a faded newspaper with an exciting illustrated story about a journey to the moon. In these rooms he had learned to be a Smith: to keep real feelings inside, put on masks, expect no kindness and see every relationship as a battleground.

There had even been occasional happy times in this and other houses, moments when the family had shared an unpleasant chore like cleaning out an old water tank or just a joke over the washing up. Pleasant moments were rare, but even the unpleasant memories tied him to his family and this house.

Terrible as it was, full of pain as it was: this house was his home. He was torn between hatred of the place, and fear that it would be lost to him. There was a timid knock at the door.

"Hi mum", said Solomon, as his mother poked her head in the door. She gave him the glum half-smile that he knew so well, her 'well things aren't so bad, are they?' smile that always tore his heart.

"Solomon" she said, "I think you'd best do what your father says." He said nothing; enveloped by the pain they shared, he longed for some comfort, some release. "I don't want you to end up like Benjamin: adrift, never achieving

anything.” Solomon was surprised his mother would talk about his brother like that; he knew it was really Clifford talking. “I couldn’t stand it if Clifford sent you away” she started to cry. “I couldn’t stand to lose another boy. I wouldn’t want to live. You know what I mean, Solomon.”

She looked at him with tear filled eyes. He knew what she meant. A year before, she had overdosed on pills and nearly died. Solomon had come home to find the house empty and a note to come to the hospital, where he had seen the flaccid figure of his mother, her face the color of the sheets, surrounded by drip tubes and beeping monitors. Yes, he knew what she meant.

Harmony crept from the room and Solomon cried for hours; not just for what he must do, but for what he must give up: by acquiescing to his father he was denying the better part of himself and its commitment to the truth. It was as if a bad actor, with poor lines and smelly breath, was waiting in the wings to take over his part. He felt his true self slipping away. As he walked off the stage his replacement hissed at him and he saw it had the head of a snake, with beady little green eyes and a flicking blue tongue. “I’ve got you now, little boy”, it hissed. “Oh yes, I’ve got you now.” It slid past him as Solomon walked into the shadows.



“Shit!” Win Burstall, CBE, reached out for the shiny black telephone on the coffee table next to his chair. “You’ve heard about it too, Eden? It’s going to be difficult get any traction with this molestation angle now that kid’s come forward. Yes, I know you don’t like it. But don’t worry; I’ve been talking to that school his son goes to. The principal is a friend of mine. He’s told me some intriguing

## The Tin Parrot

stories about young Solomon Smith; and someone in Melbourne has sent me some very interesting reading matter. I've got a surprise for Mr. Clifford Smith!"





## CHAPTER 12



# Advance Australia Fair

I WAS SITTING WITH MY PARENTS, watching our little black and white television, TV dinners on our knees, the night Clifford Smith launched the Labor Party campaign for the seat of Mulga. The SUN TV news showed him standing on a podium at the Attica Workingman's Club. I wondered why he was there, instead of the Attica Club across the road.

"Ha! One of the workers now, is he!" exclaimed my dad

In the grainy, contrasty image I thought I saw Socrates standing behind his father. After the news, a message flashed up advising of a political broadcast, and a moment later the grinning face of Clifford Smith appeared. "Here we go!" said Dadly, who although he disliked their candidate had become quite sympathetic to the Labor platform.

The camera drew back to show Clifford standing next to Harmony and flanked by his two sons. They were posed not in the dark and beer-soaked interior of the Workingman's Club, but in a sunny spot in front of rows of grape

vines. Someone had managed to remove Harmony's dark glasses, although the result was simply that her eyes remained in a permanent squint from the bright sun. She might have been asleep. Benjamin, who I had never met, was a big man with a bushy beard, awkwardly stuffed into an ill-fitting suit.

The budget did not run to allowing Clifford any time for a long speech. A voice-over declared: "Clifford Smith: a man for these times; a man of the people. A bearer of true Labor principles."

"A vote for Labor is a vote for a bright, confident, proud Australia!" declared Clifford in a smiling close-up. To finish the ad, the camera swung to Socrates, who sounded like a robot, mechanically reciting: "vote for my dad: he's a good bloke!" I stared at the flickering image of Socrates in disbelief: he was wearing an ironed white shirt and tie; even worse, his hair had been cropped, greased and combed back so that his pallid face stood out like a sad clown. The image dissolved to a fluttering Australian flag.

"Well, what do think of that?" asked Dadly.

"It's hardly going to win them the election", said my mother sarcastically.

"But what about Socrates?" I said; "he looked terrible! What have they done to him?"

At that moment the wind rustled the Venetian blinds on the lounge room window and my mother walked across the room to close it. My father sucked on the pencil he was using to complete his daily crossword. "I would say that we have witnessed the death of a Greek philosopher" he said, returning to his crossword. I wanted to kick the floor.

I went to my room and flopped onto my bed. As I dropped off into a troubled sleep, a million thoughts whizzed around my brain. Why had Socrates gone home? Why had he let himself be changed?

My lost friend had become the thing he hated most: Socrates had become a parrot on a tin.



Socrates no longer hung out with our group. Things had gone back to how they were when I first came to Burley College: Socrates wandering alone around the schoolyard, an aloof and lonely figure in a self-contained bubble of anger. This made me feel terrible, but there was nothing I could do.

With the onset of exams there were fewer organized classes so that the opportunities for awkward confrontations were thankfully few; however, I knew for sure I would see him the day of the French test. Sure enough, he was there, lounging in the cloister at the bottom of the admin. block. He seemed to be smiling and without thinking I stopped.

“Hey Socrates.”

“Hey.”

“Ready for the exam?”

“The exam? No!” His expression was more a self-satisfied smirk than a smile. “I haven’t studied for this one at all.”

“But I thought you wanted to go to Uni. and study photography?”

“No, I’m going to do Law now. My dad can get me into Sydney Uni. It doesn’t matter what marks I get. So stuff the exams!”

“If that’s what you want”, I said, doubtfully.

“Of course it’s what I want!” he snapped and for a moment I saw a glint of snakiness in those blue eyes that were now hard and focused, lacking their old dreamy vagueness.

In the exam room, when the time was about half gone, I noticed Socrates had stopped writing and his head was down on the desk as if asleep. The supervisor checked on him to make sure he was OK. I couldn't get La Marseillaise out of my head.



"Whitlam's coming to Attica!" My mother was spooning out the Rice-a-Riso.

"Truly?" asked Dadly. "That'll boost Clifford's campaign!"

"I think it's wonderful", said my mother.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he's a great man and he'll be our next Prime Minister."

"What's great about him?"

"He wants to change things; improve things. Not everything is right about our country, Robbie."

"It seems OK to me."

"Really? I don't think your friend Socrates would agree with that."

"He's not my friend. And I *don't* agree with it. Politics is crap."

I went to my room.

"Well anyway, Robert", yelled my mother at my closed door, "we're going to hear him talk and you're coming."

One cool evening in November, I put on my best, ironed lemon-yellow shirt and fake suede jacket and accompanied my parents down the street to the Methodist Church hall. My hair was brushed, my chin had received a rare shave, and I had used some after-shave and a little under-arm deodorant. It was the first time in my life I had gone out with my parents feeling like an adult.

The hall wasn't exactly full. The audience were clustered in the first few rows, so we found a place around the middle, sharing the hard, stackable vinyl seats with a couple of other families and a few serious faced party members. Gradually more people dribbled in. It was an odd crowd, the kind of folks I didn't usually see around Attica, some that I didn't even know existed: a couple in hippy kaftans and sandals, for example. There were a few bearded, lefty teachers from my school, some black faces, some very well-dressed couples and, around the back, a group of rough looking types who might have just wandered in off the street - perhaps they were fruit pickers or farm laborers. My mother smiled and waved at Mrs. Bishop sitting a few rows in front of us.

On the stage, surrounded by Australian flags and a big banner: "ALP for Australia!" sat Clifford Smith, Solomon and Harmony, and a few other men and women that I did not know. Among them I was surprised to see my English teacher, Mr. Gordon. It was he, finally, who walked to the microphone and asked the now packed hall to be quiet for the playing of the National Anthem. My parents and I stood during a crackling rendition of 'God Save the Queen'; I noticed a few of the serious faced party men and women remained seated. Following this, Mr. Gordon gave a long-winded biography of Whitlam, who had not yet appeared on the stage.

"When are we going to see him?" whispered my mother. "Soon, don't worry love", advised a woman a few seats down. My mother hadn't stopped talking about Whitlam ever since hearing about his visit. 'She's acting like some fanatic waiting for a revelation from her prophet', I thought. I was embarrassed.

Suddenly, there he was: Whitlam was on the stage and more music was playing; this time it was 'Advance Australia Fair', a song that was unfamiliar to me. "This should be our national anthem, not that royalist crap", the solemn

party men nodded to each other. The crowd broke into violent applause that drowned out the music and left Whitlam standing, like a great grey whale, beaming and turning this way and that, afloat on a sea of sound, borne aloft by the adulation of hundreds of hands and voices.

Mr. Gordon stepped back and Clifford and the others on stage rose up and joined the applause. Whitlam seized the moment, strode to the microphone and boomed out his trademark declaration: "Men and Women of Australia!"

The speech that followed was long and technical. He went on and on about 'building codes' and something called 'urban renewal' - I gathered this meant roads, bridges, and ambitious schemes to improve the sewerage system. Words like 'means test' and 'universal health scheme' and 'free education' tumbled out; they meant nothing to me. As he droned on I became sleepy, but I saw my parents were hanging on every word.

I was awoken by a roar of sound. Everyone was standing, and the women rushing to the front of the stage, eager to shake or even kiss the hand of the great man.

"Steady, Betty!" warned my old man.

She laughed "I only have eyes for you, Dadly", but I could see her eyes were shining.

"Don't you think he describes a better Australia, the Australia we could be?"

As the clamor continued, Whitlam turned and strode over to Clifford Smith, grasped his hand, and pulled him onto the centre of the stage. Smiling, they faced the audience together, hands joined in a gesture of triumph. "I give you the next member for Mulga!"

Once things had quieted down, and Whitlam had taken his seat at the side of the stage, Clifford remained at the microphone, inviting questions from the audience. It was this moment Winston Burstall chose to make his attack.

Ruddy faced, no Akubra hiding his streaming white hair, Burstall came careering down the middle aisle of the hall like an out of control beige and white bowling ball. Hands waving and Drizabone flapping, he let fly before anyone knew what was going on.

"I have a question! Is it not true that your son has been distributing communist literature at the local high school?" He waved a copy of 'The Little Red Schoolbook' in all directions: it mimicked Mao's 'Little Red Book' and as far as the audience knew could have been the real thing. "And is it not true that he belongs to a subversive organization: Students for a Democratic Society, that is a front for the Communist Party of Australia?"

There were howls and yells from the partisan audience as they tried to drown out Burstall. He continued: "I quote from the manifesto of this organization, which your son posted in leaflets around the school attended by our sons and daughters!"

He waved a second exhibit, one of the pink leaflets Socrates and I had produced for our school song protest, and another, larger pamphlet. "Look at this, from a pamphlet issued by this organization of which his son is a member: 'workers control of industry'; 'a revolution'; 'student control of educational institutions'; 'power to the people!' This is what the son of this man has been distributing, and this is what his father, the Labor candidate stands for: first, capitulation to the communist menace in Vietnam, then the establishment of those same communistic principles in Australia!"

At this point several men rose from their seats and rushed to accost Burstall; he had anticipated this by having a group of men accompany him in his sweep down the aisle. The rough looking men I had noticed at the back of the hall fended off the attackers, enabling Burstall to complete his accusations unimpeded. As the groups confronted each other a smiling Win Burstall retreated from

the hall.

The fight lasted for several minutes; Sergeant Ed Miller and one of his constables ran down from the back of the hall to separate the warring groups. "Let me at the fascist bastards!" a small leprechaun of a man cried as he pushed past us to enter the fray.

The next day it was clear Winston Burstall had achieved his objective. The front page of *The Daily Cultivator* carried a large item about the Labor meeting, but rather than positive publicity for Gough Whitlam's speech there was a big photograph of the fight between Burstall's men and the Labor supporters, and in giant letters:

#### COMMUNIST ACCUSATION!

The value of a good headline had overcome any personal debt that Rex Coburn owed Clifford Smith.



The following Saturday was polling day. Still too young to vote, I accompanied my father to the polling booth at the rear of the Carnegie Library, next to Clifford Smith's office.

Out the front, on the footpath on Barton Avenue, Socrates was handing out little colored 'How to Vote' cards; Clifford was standing behind a table strewn with Party literature. It must have been a difficult decision for Clifford, weighing up the value of his son's presence against the embarrassment it could cause. My dad had already made it clear that he would change his life-long habit and vote Labor. He accepted a slip from the Country Party man and the only other candidate, an independent, but headed straight for Clifford's table. "Good luck,



today, Mr. Smith” he said generously. I am not sure if Clifford knew who he was; he thanked him and for a moment they chatted about the dreadful scenes at Whitlam’s speech night. I took a ‘How to Vote’ card from Solomon, who avoided my eyes.



On Monday morning the headline in the Daily Cultivator told the story:

‘IT’S THE LAND OF EDEN!’

The results were:

Clifford Smith	ALP	15,420	36.1%
Lawrence Peters	IND	7,334	17.2%
Eden Young	CP	19,914	46.7%

A winnable margin of just 400 votes at the previous election had been turned around into a 4,000-vote loss for Labor.

My father put the paper down gloomily on the kitchen table. “Well, that’s that!”

“It’s such a shame”, said my mother. “It looks like any momentum gained by having a new candidate, and Gough Whitlam’s visit, has been undermined by that man Burstall and his fear mongering.”

“It’s so unfair”, I said. “Labor’s policies were so much better, even if I do hate Clifford Smith!”

“You know, Robbie”, said my mum, “you saw the best and the worst of people the other night. When we were listening to Mr. Whitlam you were hearing the better side of our nature; when that Burstall fellow came in, that was the worst. Don’t forget that, and don’t ever think that the

worse half will always win.”

“No, but they won this time!”

“I know; it’s just that in this country, those who want things to be better often seem to be in the minority.”

“Why is it the better side that always has to struggle?” I asked.

My mother thought about this. “I don’t know. Maybe when something is founded in bitterness, that taste lingers on and spoils everything that follows.”

“You sound like you’re baking a cake!” said Dadly.

“I do, don’t I!” my mum laughed. “But like a cake, it’s all in the ingredients. They have to be mixed correctly and lovingly. It takes love to build a country, too. I mean, some people see all those lovely ingredients and think: what a wonderful thing I could make out of these today; others just worry that someone is going to steal their raisins, so they lock the ingredients away in the cupboard and don’t make anything!”

Dadly looked at my mother in amazement. “I may have learnt to vote Labor at this election, but it’s you who have become the politician!”

“I think that’s what’s happened to Socrates”, I said.

“What do you mean?” asked Dadly.

“Being locked away. I think he’s become split and confused; all of his positive energy has gone underground. I think he’s been damaged by some kind of violence.”

“Now, Robbie: there’s no evidence his father has abused him.”

“Yes, but don’t you think there might be other sorts of violence?”

“Yes, Robbie”, said my mother, “there can be other kinds of violence, not physical, but another kind.”

Lying in my bed, I wondered: Are people and countries alike? Do they both have landscapes of rich pasture and barren desert? Do they both suffer from disaster and benefit from good management? Are they equally capable of

redemption and repair after periods of suffering and pain?



On the last day of school, my name was called over the loudspeakers. Walking down the corridor of the admin. building, I saw Mr. Dreadstone standing outside his office, staring at the old print of the building with its unfinished tower. "Bradley", he said, "your mother's here to see you", before returning to his office.

It was not just my mother waiting at the reception desk; her friend was there, Mrs. Bishop, who having a car had offered to help my mother collect my oversized woodwork project. She also stopped in front of the print on the way out. "That tower!" she said.

"What is it about the tower?" I asked.

"I'll tell you", she said as we left the building.

I went and got my folding chess table and loaded it into her car.

"This might interest you, Betty", Mrs. Bishop said as we drove off. "You see, that tower - or rather the lack of it - speaks volumes . . . about Australia's . . . truncation: political volumes."

"How so?"

"It was never built - why? Well, firstly construction was halted by the Great War. Not only was the Australian government bankrupted supporting Britain's Imperial crusade, the finest young men of the district never returned from Gallipoli and the Somme. It took a generation for the district to recover from *that*. Then the depression: once again revenues dried up. And to make matters worse, the Federal Government capitulated to British demands to repay war debts - money we borrowed to fight

for them! So, the school decided to use money from the Burley Indenture - the money raised from rents on lands put aside by the Burleys to fund the college. The government found out, put a freeze on the funds, and confiscated the tower money to help pay off the debt to Britain."

"How do you know all this, Evelyn?" asked my mum.

"I was a student here in 1935", said Evelyn. "And you know who was my English teacher? A young Edmund Dreadstone!"

We were driving down Barton Avenue. The jacaranda flowers of another summer were bursting out in clouds of pink and purple.

"I'll tell you something I've told no one. The night that decision was made to abandon the tower, I was walking through the quadrangle after an SRC meeting when I heard someone crying. I crept up to my classroom and peeped through the door. It was Edmund Dreadstone, crying like a baby."



That Saturday night my dad took me down to Lock Island to watch the fireworks for Guy Fawkes night. A huge towering mountain of branches and sticks had been built over many days on the wasteland near the lock. At sunset this was set alight. An illuminated ring of eager faces encircled the fire, while all around rockets and bungers banged and whizzed into the night air. There was something ancient, not just medieval, but older still, in this communal celebration of fire. I thought of those other fires, the ones we sat around and told stories on the camp at Lake Regina. It struck me that I was experiencing something eternal; that the troubles of our own little lives are just part of an endless march of time.

In that mood I wandered across the wasteland where I remembered Socrates stooping to pick up rusted fragments of past lives. Looking up at the Burley pumping engine on the bluff I swore I could see a figure silhouetted on the steel framing. Could it be?

Sure enough, it was Socrates. He climbed down to meet me.

"I hoped you'd be here", I said.

"I'll be off to Sydney after Christmas", he said. There was a hint of superiority in his 'I'll be off to Sydney'.

"Me too, I'm going to Adelaide."

"To do accounting?"

"No actually, I've changed my mind; I'm going to do journalism. I want to be a writer."

We gazed down at the riverbank below; the bonfire was still raging. There was laughter and the chink of bottles.

"Wow! That's a big change. What did your parents say?"

"We talked about it and they agreed it suits me better. They don't seem to mind as long as it's what I want. It's all fine."

He looked thoughtful. "Sometimes I wish I could make changes. I wish I had your parents, Robert."

I wanted to say something to Socrates, not the person in front of me, but the real Socrates, the one who had been my friend. "Listen, Socrates, I think you can change. You told me that Socrates listened to an oracle, a wise voice that told him when he was doing something wrong, isn't that right?" He looked at me and I thought I saw him soften, a hint of the old Socrates in his eyes. "I think you have stopped listening to that voice, Socrates; you are letting other voices drown it out. You need to find that voice."

We were silent for a long time. I could see he was struggling to find the right response. Finally, he said softly but firmly: "Socrates' voice left him in the end. It allowed him to die. He even called death a blessing." I was

shocked by his passivity. I did not know then about his mother's suicide attempts, but Socrates' tone worried me. I felt tears coming into my eyes, but I was determined to be strong for my friend. "You're not going to die", I said firmly. "You're going to revisit the oracle and find your voice again. I know you will."

"I wanted to give you this", he said, pulling a package out of his school bag, wrapped in newspaper. I pulled off the paper. It was his old German camera, the one that I had seen him use the first time I really met him, on the same spot where we stood now.

"You can't give me this!" I said.

"It's OK, I won't be needing it. I'd better be going."

That night I placed the camera on the bookshelf. I lay down on my bed and thought about all the things that Socrates and I had done over the course of just less than a year. It had been a year full of delights and horrors. I thought about what my mother had said: 'you have seen the best and the worst' and I cried, cried for my lost friend and for all the sweetness and terror of the landscape of life.

## Gough Whitlam

BACK IN THE NAPOLEON SUITE at the Imperial Hotel, Gough Whitlam paced the floor. Bill Gordon was in deep discussion at a table with his press advisers and strategists. Sitting on the couch, Clifford Smith was dejected.

"It's these difficult policies, Gough, that trip me up: like Vietnam; or left-wing union power. Burstall runs rings about me on these. As you can see, even my own family embarrasses me. What should I do?"

Gough stopped pacing. "Don't talk about them."

Clifford raised his hands in despair. "What's left?"

"Drains", said Gough, settling down in the opposite chair.

"Drains?"

"Yes", said Gough. "Drains. And pits. And culverts."

"Culverts?"

The big man smiled. "Human waste, Clifford. That's something that matters to everyone. You can't go wrong if you stick to the essentials. The electorate is simple minded, Clifford. They can't handle detail. I'll tell you something I've realized: the opposition doesn't handle human waste well. You've got to know how to handle it properly."

"So you don't get your hands dirty?"

Undeterred, Gough continued: "There's to be nothing dirty about your campaign, Clifford; let's get that clear. Just stay in the drains and you can't go wrong."

He stood up, grasped Clifford's hands in his generous paws and gave him a gleaming smile. It was time to leave.

The monarchy, the Vietnam War, the plight of aboriginal people; these were among the many things you didn't mention if you wanted to be successful in Australian politics, thought Clifford as he walked down the softly carpeted stairs of the Imperial Hotel. You acted as if they didn't exist, on the same way that the papers put the deaths of Vietnam diggers in small print at the bottom of Page Three. This was the glue of silence that held Australia together. For a moment, this realization made Clifford sad; he thought: 'but what can you achieve, if you can't tell the truth?'

He walked out into the calm spring Attica night with thousands of sparkling stars scattered across the dark heavens. On a wall near the hotel he passed a couple of campaign posters: one of himself, and next to it, an identical one with the gleaming face of Gough Whitlam. Someone had scrawled "BULLSHIT" across the posters.

He pulled out his pen, ran a line through the insult, and added:

*‘DRAINS’.*



Eden Young was not among the group of hooligans that Win Burstall took to Whitlam’s speech that night; he was not even aware of his mentor’s plan.

“I’ll tell you something, Eden”, Burstall told him a few weeks later, as they tucked into Christmas lunch at the Imperial Hotel; “in all my years in politics I’ve learnt this: never underestimate the capacity to generate fear in an electorate. Most people are scared of something. Most of them don’t know what. But if we, as politicians, can focus that fear onto something, that is a powerful weapon. It can be a person or a country; it doesn’t matter so long as it’s something outside, foreign; something that is unknown and therefore evil. It’s human nature to fear the unknown, and our job as politicians is to convince the voters we can protect them from it.”

“You can have all the fancy ideas you like”, he went on, “but in the end you have to remember that Australia is dependent: on friends and allies of like mind, powers that will protect us and understand our values. We are in a sea of trouble if we forget that and find ourselves alone among the uncivilized and dangerous forces rampant in our region. So: number one for Australia is defense, guaranteed by our great ally the United States. And for that, I don’t care how many wars we fight or how many little yellow men get killed. And I certainly don’t care what I do to prevent the Labor Party destroying this country.

Have some more turkey!”



## CHAPTER 13



# The Last Dance

I DID NOT SEE SOCRATES for many months after that talk on bonfire night. First of all, there was Christmas, and this year it was a very curious one: my father invited an aboriginal man from Paradise to have lunch with us.

My mother, after she got over her surprise, was attracted to the idea. “Of course, Dadly; Christmas is for sharing. Who is this man?” Dadly explained that he sometimes came across the local aboriginal people when he was in the town of Paradise and had got to know this fellow William and his son (or some other relative) called Nathan. “You remember those old clothes of Robbie’s we gave away? That’s who I gave them to.”

I went with Dadly to the bus stop to pick them up. Only one person was there, a man around my dad’s age who he introduced as William. He wore a dark suit and an orange and brown striped Richmond football club beanie, which

I thought an odd combination.

“Nathan couldn’t come?” asked Dadly.

“Nuh, he’s having Christmas with his mum I reckon.”

“Is Nathan your son?” I asked.

William looked thoughtful. “I’m not sure; could be I reckon. All kids my sons, EH! Gotta look after all them KIDS!”

I found his answer puzzling. During the course of that day I noticed he often answered a different question to the one you had asked, giving you a bigger answer than you expected.

“Tell me Derek: what happened to that man CLIFFORD and that son of his you were telling me about?”

As we passed round the roast ham, the turkey, the potatoes and peas, and the cruet of gravy crossed the table, we told William all of the events that had occurred over the past weeks.

“So that Clifford, he never got punished, eh? I told you, eh Derek.” My dad nodded. “Yes, I told you: white man’s law only punishes, and then only if you are POOR.” William looked at me. “Now Robert, I know you worried about this son of his, that Socrates?” This time I nodded. “Don’t you worry ‘bout him. Rainbow Snake takin’ care of HIM.”

I explained my fear of snakes and how they were an evil accompaniment of most human actions.

“Oh no”, said William; “this Rainbow Snake is not a DEVIL; it’s the mother snake, it created everything, and it cares for everything. That Rainbow Snake take CARE of your friend.” It didn’t seem polite to say that, as far as I knew the story, the snake in the garden was no friend of Adam and Eve. As if reading my thoughts, William added: “don’t believe everything your church tell you about the snake. It got power; it can be dangerous; but you got to learn to LOVE that dark snake!”

After lunch, we opened our presents, which were sitting in a little pile under a small Christmas tree: a real little native pine tree, cut from the roadside out past 23rd Street the day before by my dad and I. My father had placed it near the gas heater in the lounge room. He handed a parcel to William. William held it awkwardly; "I am very sorry Derek, Mrs. Bradley, I have no gift for YOU!" He looked up with great sorrow in his eyes.

"Don't you worry, William", said Dadly. "You are our greatest gift this Christmas."

"And so are your people, if only we could understand the gifts you could bring us" added my mother.



On New Year's Eve I went along to a dance at the Methodist church hall, the same place in which Win Burstall had upstaged Gough Whitlam. The dance was organized by the youth club, of which Socrates was a member, although he was not there that night. Most of my other friends were, so it was a good chance to boast of future plans and say our goodbyes. When Dunno saw me, sporting a brand new 'afro', he burst out laughing and taunted me: "Pubic head!"

Everything was ahead of us that night; every possibility available; our choices the best of all choices. Dunno and Tools Tralore were off to Melbourne, to the Police Force and an engineering degree respectively; Joy Boy was also joining the police while Itch Humperdinck was going into his father's business. Pugh Holloway was going to be a teacher. Stan DiMaggio had gotten into music school. Nat Chandler was very mysterious about his plans; given his love of guns we guessed the army, but it might have equally well been a life as a card sharp.

Across the room I saw Marteen.

Marteen was a couple of years younger than me: a curvaceous girl with long brown hair, and a pretty oval face with big features, wide dark eyes, and olive skin. She wore see-through tops that exposed her brown midriff above tight jeans or a short skirt. She hung around Stan diMaggio and a couple of other guys who were trying to start a rock group using the high gain amplifiers cooked up by Tools and Dunno.

Girls were to me remote and unapproachable; most of the ones I knew sat a long way down the pews at my church, in pretty pink and yellow dresses, and I wondered from afar at the smooth rounded forms of their stockinged legs, flattened on the dark wood of the hard timber seats, and the way their dresses fitted tightly around their waists and bottoms: with their made-up faces and brushed hair they were transformed from the creatures I saw at school, creamy white legs disappearing into ill-fitting uniforms.

Then there were the 'other' girls who, it was said, were 'sluts', like the one who offered to show Pugh Holloway 'something special' down the back of the school one day after class; later he told me he had put his hands down her dress and I was extremely jealous of his good fortune.

Marteen fitted into neither of these categories, angel nor whore; I saw in her a real person, vulnerable and full of un-lived energy. Just once, on a school trip, drunk, we shared awkward kisses in the back seat of a teacher's car. Now, vivacious as ever, olive skin contrasted with a white chiffon dress, she was with Mark, the pastor's son. On the wall behind them were signs with Christian quotes: *'Have you asked Jesus into your heart?'* *'Love the sinner, hate the sin'*. Seeing her there with that churchy boy, all her energy imprisoned in a white dress, I saw bursting from within her a vitality that contradicted those trite sayings.

I thought of my classmates, those ‘weeds in the cracks’ as Dunno called them, and how their vivacity, likewise, was incomprehensible in the classrooms that bored and belittled them.

The endless possibilities of youth have their price. Within two years, Marteen would be dead of a drug overdose. Some things are not foreseeable, but even then, a far-sighted person could have predicted that within ten years Tools Tralore would be a millionaire and Nat Chandler would be in prison.

At the end of the night, Dunno was a little drunk. He and Itch had smuggled some alcohol into the dance. We sat outside the hall on the steps and shared a ‘rollie’. “You know what?” he said: “we’re all fuckin’ AWESOME!”

Those were the last words he ever said to me. Later that year I finally found out what Dunno’s genius was: one night during a pursuit, in an incandescent moment of hi-gain amplification, he and his police car struck a concrete pylon at 180 miles per hour.

## Charlie

HAPPY FROM A GENEROUS MEAL and several glasses of Christmas wine, William and Dadly went for a walk around the backyard.

“You know Derek, you don’t belong here.”

“Well, I . . .” Derek felt threatened.

“No, no, I like you, Derek; what I mean is, white people, you don’t BELONG. Not really. Not yet. You got no ROOTS.”

They had stopped near Betty’s rockery. A profusion of prickly cacti and succulents exploded and rambled across

the roughly-laid stones.

“Your wife, she a good gardener, EH! She puttin’ down ROOTS!” William chuckled. He kicked the red earth under his feet and looked up at Dadly. “What I mean, Derek, in Europe the ground you tread on is sacred ground: the ground of your ANCESTORS. It contains their BONES. In Australia, we got 60,000 years of BONES! But for you white blokes, the ground is EMPTY. So what do you do? Dig it up. Put your white town on our red soil. But you never owned it, that soil. It never spoke to YOU. You just bought and sold it, what you call, SUB-DIVIDED. And that town, full of shops, full of signs; all words and things from other places: street names from America, clothes from Japan. Where you gonna go? Where you gonna find your HOME?”

“I think you are right to an extent”, replied Derek; “we do things - mighty infrastructure projects even, like dams and roads. They transform the place. But they are not *of* it; we are not *of* it; we just do things *to* it. But at a personal level, I’m not sure I agree; I feel like I belong in Attica - at least, a lot more than when I first arrived!”

He smiled at William. “And it’s because of you. You welcomed me to your country and shared it with me. And through that generosity I have grown to feel . . . part of it.”

“That’s because you know how to RECEIVE, Derek”, said William, an eager light in his eyes.

William hobbled around to face Dadly, his wrinkled face a rugged landscape that Dadly had come to know. He clasped Dadly’s hands in his and they stood, partners, on the little green lawn of a fibro house in Attica and gazed at the endless blue sky.



In another part of town, at another table, Harmony Smith was doling out coleslaw and cold meat onto plates for herself and Solomon. Clifford had gone to the Attica Club for lunch.

“It’s not much of a Christmas this year, Solly.”

Solomon felt like saying, “just like every other Christmas” but on this day he could not offer a cruel word to his mother.

She looked at Solomon with her sad whimsical smile. ‘It always looks as if someone has taught her the mechanics of a smile, without explaining what it is for’, thought Solomon. “Bonbon?”

They pulled an entire box of 12 bonbons that Harmony had bought, and put on the crepe paper hats they contained; Solomon read out some of the bad jokes. It was a rare happy moment between mother and son; for one fleeting instant he saw her as a carefree woman.

“Mum, why are you always sad?”

“Because I won’t be happy till I see them again.” She smiled that gentle sad smile.

“Who, mum? Who?”

“My dad; and Charlie . . . and some others.” Socrates knew she meant her brother, who died in the war. His own middle name - which he revealed to no one - was Charles. She leant across to Solomon. “But I am glad I have you Solomon. You’re my treasure. I’m sorry I was not a better mother for you.”

Later, after they had shared a glass of champagne and Solomon had gone to his room to lie down, Harmony sat at her dressing table and opened the drawer. She took out an embroidered handkerchief and carefully unfolded it. The handkerchief had “Harmony” embroidered on it; she had done that at school when she was sixteen. ‘Sixteen and innocent’ she whispered to herself, every time she opened that handkerchief.

Inside were four small items. She laid the handkerchief on the dressing table with the objects on top. First, there was the posthumous military medal awarded to her brother Charles; next, a photograph of her father, holding her as a baby; then, a hospital tag that said: Baby Smith/Jonathon; and finally, a faded yellow, cloth rose. "All of my lost ones" she whispered; "all of my lost ones."

She picked up the yellow rose. The music began to play, and she was there again; the lights were dazzling as they swirled across the dance floor. She saw his handsome face, the hint of grey in his temples, his smiling eyes.

"I have nothing to give you to remember this night" he had said, and then, stooping, he had swept up this cloth rose, dropped from another dancer's dress, and presented it to her, mock heroically: "m'lady, will you be mine?"

"Yes, yes!" she had cried and grasped him so close he had gasped; how they had laughed through the remainder of that song!

"You certainly know the right things to wear, moonlight becomes you so . . ." crooned the singer. The lights dimmed, the man was gone, and Harmony stood alone on the darkened dance floor holding a faded yellow, cloth rose.

Harmony put down the rose and picked up the war medal. Tears welled in her eyes as she cried: "Oh Charlie; oh Charlie, oh Charlie, oh Charlie."



From the interior of a plantation chair in a sunroom set among the green vines of Attica came the sound of tinkling ice. Win 'the Goanna' Burstall was on the phone. "A K.C.M.G., Mr. Governor-General? That would be very nice indeed, Paul. How is Mrs. Hasluck?"







## BOOK III



## CHAPTER 14



# The Coral Sea

IN THE JANUARY OF 1971, I went to Adelaide to organize my accommodation at the University. In February I moved down for good, my dad's Cambridge full of things to fill my little room on campus. As my mother helped me pack my things she noticed Socrates' camera on my bookcase.

"I didn't know you had this camera".

"Socrates gave it to me", I said.

"That was nice of him. I wonder how he is. Have you seen him?"

"No, I think he's already gone to Sydney." I didn't know if this was true, but it may as well have been. "We said our goodbyes."

"I should see how Harmony is getting on. She must be lonely with him gone."

Adelaide was a bigger Attica, I discovered; another planned city founded by idealists, I felt at home there. I

would walk around the parklands along the Torrens River, or visit the gallery, museum and library that lined North Terrace. Unlike Attica, however, Adelaide was big enough to have distinct quarters with their own characters: the cinemas and shops along Rundle Street, China Town and the market. I started to write short essays about the people and places I saw.

One day around the middle of the year, I was looking for clothes in the shops along Rundle Street. Reflected in a window I saw a figure that I immediately recognized: the bushy beard and large frame of Benjamin Smith. Without thinking I turned and, as he passed, I called out "Benjamin!" He stopped and looked at me. Of course, he had no idea who I was.

"You're Benjamin Smith, aren't you?"

"Yes", he replied with a puzzled expression.

"I'm Robert Bradley, a friend of Socrates - I mean Solomon - from high school."

"Oh", he said, examining me.

"How is Solomon?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Oh, OK I think."

"That's good."

Our encounter reminded me of that first, difficult exchange with Socrates. But then Benjamin lightened up a little. "I was going to have a cup of tea. Have you got a minute? Maybe we could talk about him."

Over cups of tea in one of the arcades off Rundle Street, Benjamin told me that Solomon was not having an easy time settling in to life in Sydney. His father had arranged for him to live with his uncle, a severe and unsympathetic character who was continually complaining to Clifford about his son's lack of application, his untidiness, and his bad manners, all of which he attributed to his mother's poor parenting.

“What worries me most is that he seems to be going out and drinking a lot. I think he’s got involved with the wrong crowd”, said Benjamin.

“He was always a bit of a loner when I knew him.”

“Yes, he doesn’t get along with people that well, but there’s a certain crowd you can get into where that doesn’t matter; you can hide your shyness by being one of the boys and getting drunk.” Benjamin was talking from experience, I thought.

“Oh well, I suppose he will sort himself out”, he said. “There’s not much I can do.”

“Don’t you see a lot of your family?” I asked.

“Would you see a lot of your family, if you had one like mine?”

As we parted, I said, “I like Socrates. I hope he gets sorted out.”

“Solomon”, he said, “Is a casualty. Just like the rest of us.”



The end-of-year break was the first time I had returned to Attica for any length of time. It was strange to be back there; none of my old friends were around and the town looked tiny now after living in Adelaide. How quickly my perceptions had changed: when I had arrived from Melbourne two years earlier, my new town had seemed small; then it had grown and become a world, complete and full of wonders; now it had shrunk again.

Bereft of friends, all the events of the previous year now memories, I fell into a minor depression as the long summer days dragged on. I stayed home, in my bed most of the day. One evening, determined to get me out of the house, my mum asked me to get fish and chips from the Coral Sea

fish shop near the high school. This used to be my regular job on a Friday night, jostling for attention, trying to get my order taken amongst the swarm at the busy take-away counter. I walked down Barton Avenue, following the familiar path I had taken every day to school.

As I entered the fish shop, I saw a group of young men lounging against the sidewall near the drink fridge. One of them was slumped in a chair and with a shock I recognized Socrates. The other two were laughing; one of them had a stubby of beer in his hand. This surprised me: it wasn't really the thing to drink alcohol publicly like that in Attica. The other took out a packet of cigarettes and offered it to Socrates who looked up with a bleary expression, took a cigarette and lit it from the offered glowing fag end.

"Hey, Socrates", I said. He looked up at me with vacant eyes, then with a spark of recognition.

"Hey it's Robert, Robbie, Robbie, Rob! My old friend Robbie." He rose unsteadily.

Socrates seemed larger and softer; he lacked sharpness, like an out of focus photograph. It was his companions who stood out. One of them, a handsome young man with a ready smile, long hair, and a beard like a youthful Jesus, put out his hand. The other holding the beer bottle was gaunt and tall, with a long amiable face like a happy giraffe.

"Mario and Mario, meet my old school friend Robbie Robbie Rob." I don't know why he kept repeating my name; I supposed he was drunk. His companions said 'Hi' and seemed friendly enough - in a smart-arse city kind of way.

"He's Mario", said one of them to the other.

"And he's Mario", said the other as if this was a great joke. There seemed to be no way into this secret club with its obscure language. Their order of fish and chips was called, and they headed out the door.



“Leave this town! Get out! It’s a death trap!” said Socrates unnecessarily and drunkenly as he reeled out the door after his friends.

“This town sucks”, said the tall thin one, taking a swig of his beer.

“O Robbie mio!” I could hear Socrates calling;

“Shut up, Salami!”

“I am not a salami; I am solo mio, King of Attica! O solo mio.”

I averted my eyes as I collected my fish and chips from Mr. Kosta. “Friends of yours?”

“Not any more”, I said.

I didn’t tell my parents I had seen Socrates. I felt disgusted by the sight of him: self-absorbed, taking no pride in his self, surrounded by his pretentious city friends. I determined not to think about him anymore; I would write him off, he was no friend of mine; he had no place in my thoughts.

I continued this policy the next day, conscientiously editing any thought that arose regarding Socrates. By the third day, I had so succeeded in avoiding any thoughts of Socrates that I dared myself to think about him. It was a complete shock when my mother, as if to deliberately frustrate me, came into my room that evening with a distressed look on her face. “Robbie, I’ve just had a call from Harmony Smith. It’s Solomon; he’s been in a car accident. He’s been in hospital for three days.”

## Cory Corrigan

AS SOCRATES WALKED up the long, straight concrete path to the Law Faculty, he felt a familiar dread. How long was it - twelve years before? - when he had approached his first school, the little brick schoolhouse in the town

north of Sydney?

In the years before school, Solomon had lived an isolated life; ignored by his mother, he played unsupervised, the explorer and king of the little world of his house and its garden. With no playmates, he became the ruler and organizer of that world; with no limits he explored all aspects of it, crawling under the floorboards, climbing the trees, slipping through the fences.

The house interior too had its territories and its domains: the fields of carpet and linoleum, the forests of chair and table legs, the deep rich soft caverns of velvet curtains, the mysterious underworld beneath the sofa. And above all the tart smells and the soft folds of dresses and scarves, the littering of shoes and bags, in his mother's wardrobe.

There were few visitors to the Smith household, apart from his father's business acquaintances, who he would secrete in his study. Solomon never had a birthday party. As a teenager, he once heard an acquaintance of his mother's say to her companion, on leaving the house, "it feels like stepping out of a refrigerator." In a home lacking kisses and embraces, objects offered Solomon an alternative world of softness and comfort. But the world of things held terrors too, like the rusted knife he found buried in the backyard that sent him into paroxysms of sadness as he contemplated the wounded, blunted thing.

In this isolated world, Solomon's emotions were free to respond without hesitation or restraint to the situations he encountered. Sometimes, his feelings found no boundaries at all; distraught and terrified, he looked to his mother for security that was not there. At these moments, his father could become a terrifying ogre, grabbing him and dragging him off to bed in an inconsolable welter of distress and panic.

It was not the loss of his mother that terrified him on that first ever day of school, but the loss of a world in which, with the mother as an attendant ghost, he was free to explore and respond to everything according to his desires. School, in contrast, was a hell of incomprehensible demands: be here, now; or there, then; bells rang, queues formed, groups were assembled. It was all foreign, and worse: when he stood in the delicious, warm rain he was punished; when he failed to catch the balls thrown in games, he was ridiculed; when he fell in love with the colors of the Cuisenaire rods but failed to make sums with them, he was taken to the front of the class and caned.

Rules were an agony to Solomon: stay inside this line, outside that one; don't go past that fence; he was always asking 'why' and just as often getting 'the strap'. Rules terrified and mystified him, so as a result he became obsessed with them. Who created them? What was their purpose? Why was physical pain exacted on those who broke them? He became a persistent questioner of the rules, and when no answer was given, he broke them. Others might ignore the rules or laugh at them; for Solomon rule breaking became a serious and considered act.

School was no fun for Solomon; yet at the same time his father, himself a sickly boy from a poor family who had escaped working class poverty purely by dint of his intellectual ability, made it clear that the only thing that mattered, in general and to him, was academic success. So Solomon endured a double bind: he had to be successful at the thing, and in the place, he hated most. This was just the first of many splits in Solomon's personality, as he negotiated the territory between his warring parents whose main interest in him was as a device to reinforce their battlefield positions and worldly prejudices.

Yes, school had been no fun for Solomon, who now trudged up another path to yet another classroom, the last of so many schools, this one even grander and bigger and stranger than all the others.

For the first few days at university, Socrates put on a show of bravado: he was the son of a big man, a lawyer and politician; he was from a remote and exotic place; he had been 'someone' at school (even as he rejected the person he had been). But he soon found that the other young men had bigger and better stories than a kid from the bush. The loud, hearty, confident private school boys dominated every discussion. Quickly learning that he was a 'nobody', he sought out similar company: he made friends with another misfit, an Indonesian student in Australia on a scholarship. Small and dark, Anwar was also ignored and lacking friends. He was also smart and independent and soon sensed that Socrates was a lost soul clinging to him for convenience; he found Indonesian friends in other faculties and began to distance himself from Socrates.

Socrates next attached himself to a group of boys who, although privately educated, were different from the others; instead of an air of privilege they carried a self-destructive sense of humor. These were the 'bad boys', the 'lads': clever and comical cynics. Chief among them was the attractive and mischievous Cory Corrigan. Corrigan loved a drink, and Socrates became a regular member of a crowd that frequented the pub closest to the Law Faculty. Gradually and deliberately, Socrates supplanted the other students and became Cory's most eager drinking companion; the two of them would stagger between pubs during breaks in the lectures, returning merry and loud and late for the next one. Corrigan carried off these excesses with good humor; he was popular with the girls and tolerated by the private school snobs. Socrates became his shadow, accepted by association with his interesting classmate, rather than for any qualities of his own.

It was Corrigan who had suggested the trip to Attica. "Let's go back to your town, Solomio; must be some interesting watering holes and native women in that outback country of yours!" Corrigan and his friends had invented

various nicknames for their odd country companion; the latest, 'Solomio', had arisen during a drunken night at an Italian cafe in Paddington when Socrates had emptied an entire carafe of shiraz on Cory Corrigan's head. "*O sole mio, sta nfronte a te!*" they had sung as they were thrown out of the restaurant, and somehow the name Solomio had stuck to Socrates.

His boisterous new friends and their drunken excesses were more than an escape from loneliness and pain; they offered a substitute for what he had lost, even while he remained unaware of what was missing: a genuine and creative engagement with life. The radical protests and classroom performances at Burley College might have been borne of pain and abandonment, but they had allowed Socrates to shine as a dramatist. Now, dispirited, full of conflicted emotions and self-hatred, he had abandoned all of the things that had meant so much to him: photography, rebel songs, radical books. He could have joined in the ongoing student protests; he could have exhibited with the camera club or sung in the folk music society; he avoided all of them.

Instead, drunken nights recaptured a part of the glamour of his past life, but the effect was fleeting; he felt empty and unsatisfied. Vaguely aware that things were 'not right', he had lost the capacity to see what the problem was, or to even ask the questions that might have led him to the answer. He was trapped in a mind that was concealing from him the knowledge he needed, placing a screen between him and the source of internal wisdom that had once been his guide. In this darkness the snake slithered on its all-devouring belly, wrapping his thoughts in the coils of its long, winding tail.



After leaving the Coral Sea fish shop, Socrates, Cory Corrigan and the third young man, whose name was Dennis, drove down to the war memorial park near his house. "*O sole mio, sta nfronte a te!*" the three of them sang, winding down the windows of Corrigan's car and yelling the words out at passers-by. At moments like this, comfortably drunk, in the company of his friends, Socrates felt almost happy; doubt was blocked out, he was accepted. Yet as he sat on the granite steps of the war memorial sharing the big pile of fish and chips with his friends, something was eating at him.

"Solomio, have you always lived in that house?" asked Corrigan, nodding toward the big house on the corner. "Your old man must do all right!"

"Yeah well, he's about the only decent lawyer in this town."

"Decent? Decent lawyers don't make money, do they Dennis?" Corrigan winked at his friend. "I think Solomio's dad must get a bit on the side, what do reckon? Solo, is your dad mixed up with the Italian mafia?"

"Shut up, Cory."

Dennis took up the charge: "Mafia Don for sure, bad piece of work. Prostitution, drugs, quite an empire for you to inherit, eh Solomio?"

"Shut up, Dennis! You don't know anything!"

"Ooooooh! Touchy! So what's to know? What are your dad's dark secrets?" Jealous of his closeness to Cory Corrigan, Dennis enjoyed picking at Socrates' weak spots.

"Anyway", said Corrigan, diplomatically, "it's a fine house, and I'm sure Solomio's dad must be a fine fellow and it's not a bad thing to follow in your father's footsteps."

Socrates felt a sharp pain like a knife to his gizzards; it was not at all a fine thing to follow in his father's footsteps, he thought, but he found he could say nothing.

Back at the house, Dennis noticed it first: a long white shape glowing in the near dark of the driveway.

"It's a car; and what a car!" Dennis ran his hands along the paintwork of the 1969 two-door Valiant Regal hard-top, 200 inches of gleaming white Duco and polished chrome. "Whose is it?"

"I don't know", Socrates shrugged.

"It's yours." The ample body of Clifford Smith followed the voice, rolling out of the shadows between the drive and the house. "Time you had a car of your own. Less than two years old. Gift of a satisfied client." Socrates stared at Clifford. Cory and Dennis stared at Socrates. Socrates said nothing.

The gentlemanly Corrigan broke the silence. "Well, Solomon! Looks like your dad has bought you a car! What are you going to say?" Socrates felt his hands irresistibly drawn to the smooth polished surface of the car. He stroked it, noticing the sticker on the bumper: 'Trent's Prestige'. "I think he likes it, Mr. Smith!"

"A fireball V8 and bucket seats. Bucket seats! Of course he likes it!" Clifford Smith walked around the car close to Cory Corrigan. He reached out his hands, caressing the car with one and patting Corrigan on the shoulder with the other. You would have thought Corrigan the favored son as he declared: "You will all be fine lawyers soon and have better cars than this!"

Cory Corrigan laughed and gave Socrates a push in the back.

Socrates stood frozen; in his mind his father and the car merged into one gleaming object, all surface and polish; acceptance of the one meant acquiescence to the other, he knew that. The car would hold him in its smug embrace just as surely as this house, the law faculty, and the life at the bar his father had planned for him. And like these things, it would successfully hide all blemishes of character and eliminate all doubt.

"Well, come on, thank your dad!" cried Cory Corrigan, all generosity and enthusiasm.

Socrates turned to his father and said automatically: "Thanks dad. It's a fine car. I appreciate it."

"Well that's something", said Dennis as they walked into the house. "If my dad gave me a car like that . . ."

Cory shrugged his shoulders. "Solomio is a strange one."

"Mafia money . . ." said Dennis.

Socrates remained quiet though dinner as his father held court. The stories were familiar: the impoverished beginning, the struggle to put his self through law school, the recognition of his talents by influential members of the bar, his political successes. Cory Corrigan was a polite listener; Dennis feigned interest but would disappear for long periods to smoke on the veranda. Socrates found his attention wandering to his mother, who he could hear in the kitchen, washing the dishes. He could see her shadow moving through the open kitchen door. Socrates' gaze returned to his father and Cory, a conspiratorial pair at the far end of the table. 'I am never so alone as when I am with my father', he thought.

"Do you have a girlfriend, young Cory? You must have; you're a very presentable young man."

"Nothing serious; just enjoying the opportunities that come my way."

"I'm sure you are; and I'm sure that they do, a good-looking boy like yourself!"

Momentarily, the image of his father in similar closeness to a much younger boy forced itself on Socrates' mind. The pain in his gut returned. Half drunk, he saw his father and his friend through a haze, on the other side of a veil.

"Yes", his father was saying, "choose well. I did not. You know, someone had to come in and help my wife prepare this meal tonight; she can't cope with life; my mar-



riage has been a great disappointment. Choose well."

Cory picked up his glass in a toast of agreement but looked uncomfortable at the direction the conversation was going.

"Choices work both ways", said Socrates softly, rising unsteadily from his chair and walking towards the kitchen. "Don't they mother? Bad mother? Home alone all day and drinking mother?"

"Hey, hang on" said Cory, "don't talk to your mother like that!"

"No, he's right, Cory, home all day, does nothing, useless . . ." Clifford's speech slurred into a rambling monologue of his wife's inadequacies.

Socrates was at the door of the kitchen now. "Poor mother. Bad choices" he said, shaking his head. Turning to face his father, he called out in a strained and drunken voice, "she made a choice to marry you!"

In the awkward silence that followed, Dennis re-entered the room, cigarette dangling from his lips, sensed the air, and backed out to the veranda. Cory Corrigan declared it was time for bed.

Socrates' father tapped his fork repeatedly on the table. "I've given you everything, Solomon. Why are you like this?"

"No, there's something you've never given me, you or mum. That's why I'm like this."

"I don't understand."

Solomon looked at the oiled hair, the soft smooth skin, the wide fleshy mouth; his father's grey eyes were those of a confused little boy. 'Your eyes are my eyes' he thought; 'we share a history of pain'. He saw an unending line of pain from fathers to sons, across the generations.

"Do you remember", Clifford continued, "when we had a swimming pool at our house in Gosford, and one summer it was empty for cleaning and hundreds of mice got

in?"

Solomon remembered the scene. "You got a plank of wood and put it down into the pool, and the mice all walked out in a big line, one by one."

"Everyone said we should kill the mice. But I couldn't do it. We all need that plank, Solomon."

Socrates headed for the door. "I'm going for a walk."

When Socrates returned an hour later the house was quiet and dark. In his bedroom he shoved some clothes, a few books, and his toothbrush, into a duffel bag. The keys to his new car were on the dining room table where his father had placed them.

Unlocking the car, he threw the bag onto the back seat and climbed into its plush interior, all vinyl and fake plastic chrome. He sat in the bucket seat, running his hand around the smooth black steering wheel, exploring the chrome buttons and switches, playing with the floor shift. He flicked on the radio and tried all the presets. Radio 3SUN was playing 'I feel the earth move' by Carole King. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel. "I feel the sky come tumbling down", he mouthed.

All through the conversation in the park, the confrontation at the car, all through dinner, and the awkward conversation that ended it, one image had hovered in Socrates' mind: his friend Robert, breezing in the door of the Coral Sea fish shop like a breath of wind from a distant, lost landscape. Robert Bradley: his friend from a time almost forgotten, whose ripples now danced through Socrates' mind like a swarm of fish in an aquarium. Swimming in from the left side of the windscreen, Chrome Dome's face contorted with anger as he exhorted the dumb students to sing his blessed song; from the right, 'Snake' Cutting reaching out and grabbing his outrageous white tie; his mother sewing the bright blue velvet epaulettes on his army shirt; the roar of the audience when he demolished the opposition in a debate; his voice singing

out the Marseilles. "*L'etendard sanglant est levé!*" he found himself singing, and tears ran down his white cheeks.

The engine made a satisfying gurgle as he lurched the long chassis down the length of the drive; twice he mangled the plants that grew wildly on either side, finally making it to the road across the nature strip, tire marks spoiling the soft grass.

Socrates didn't know where he was going, he only knew he had to get away. And while this fancy car represented just another part of the massive cage his father had built around him, it also offered an escape from it. He would drive back to Sydney that night, and then . . . and then? He wasn't sure. He just knew he had to be away from that house, this town, and the person he had become.

Seeing the fuel gauge near empty, he swung the wheels into the petrol station on the corner of 15th Street. The young man who ran out to run the pump recognized him.

"Hey, Socrates. Your dad's car?"

"No", said Socrates, slightly annoyed; "it's my car."

"Oh; looks like a car your dad would drive."

Socrates slammed the car into gear and left a smoking trail of rubber as he fishtailed onto the highway.

## The Oracle

THE ROAD OUT OF ATTICA is predictable and straight except for the point where, as you leave the irrigated vineyards for the open country, the road bends, first to the right then to the left: an S-bend. It was at this place, around midnight, that Jessie Cardrey lost his load.

"Shit!" said Jessie as he felt the load on his semi shift as he entered the first bend, too fast; he braked for the sec-

ond but that just made things worse. The straps and ties holding the load, stretched in one direction, now became loose in the other. The slippery cargo slithered forward, tilting the entire rig towards the right. "Shit!" he repeated as he eased off the brake; but this just meant the semi missed the second bend altogether, plowing into the soft soil of the road verge. His cargo was now dangerously loose; Jessie pulled the wheel to get back on the road. As he did so he felt his load move again, not sliding this time, but rolling, pulling the weight of the rig with it, unstoppable. He heard the snapping cables, machines falling from the back of the semi, the crash as they hit the bitumen.

These were no boxes of fruit Jessie was carrying that night; they were road-making machines: graders with caterpillar treads, front-end loaders, excavators with buckets and a couple of tractors. All up, a dozen machines packed onto the tray of his truck. When they loaded the machines at Port Adelaide he had argued with the foreman that the rig was top heavy.

"The load's too big, Mick!"

Mick shrugged. "Just get on the road to Sydney; straight as a die! You'll be right!"

And now, on the unexpected bends of a road he didn't know, these machines were dropping from the back of his truck: Crash! Crash!

With a great creak and squeal Jessie finally managed to stop the rig a hundred yards past the second corner. Shaking and tense, he sat at the wheel for several minutes before reaching for the door. He left the engine running, the lights on, indicators flashing to warn approaching vehicles. Stepping down, he looked back along the highway. Littered on the road behind the truck, like a parade of metal gods, twelve great machines loomed out of the darkness.

“Shit!” Jumping down from the truck Jessie uttered another expletive, “shit!” Then he ran down the road between the scattered machines crying “Jesus! Fuck! Jesus!” It was then he saw the headlight of the approaching car. “Jesus! Fuck! Jesus!” He raced back to the cab to grab his torch. Running through the line of dark, silent shapes towards the oncoming light he flashed his torch: on-off-on; on-off-on.



Socrates knew the road out of Attica. He knew the S-bends at the edge of town. His father was always careful to slow down there. He did not; this car had muscle, and he was angry.

Still irritated by the petrol attendant's remarks, he took the first corner a little too fast. As he came onto the straight he saw something in the distance: some kind of tractor, with a man beside it flashing a torch. ‘Thanks mate’ thought Socrates as he veered to the right to avoid the stopped vehicle. Then he saw that the man was waving frantically for him to stop. In the few seconds that followed, he saw another machine dead ahead of him, which he swerved to avoid, then another. ‘What the hell is this?’ Another great shape loomed out of the darkness. And another. Not enough space between them to pass, Socrates hit the brakes, went into a 360-degree spin and lost control, the long steel car sliding, the trees rushing up to meet the windows.

There was a great crash of metal and everything went silent and dark.

Socrates stood outside his car; he was outside his body, too; he knew without looking that it lay hunched and bloodied in the mangled steel cage at the side of the road. The night stretched to infinity; the sky was black; yet everything around him glowed with an inner light, as if the setting sun had left its traces on the dark world of night.

"It's fraying at the edges" said Derek Bradley, standing beside him.

"Yes", said Socrates; "this is where life runs out."

Socrates turned to Dadly. His face was pale and ghostly, painted with white clay like an indigenous dancer. "Out beyond that edge is peace."

"I cannot cross that line", said Dadly. "I have a family."

"I do not", said Socrates.

"Hey, Socrates." William walked out of the shadows, dressed as usual in his dark grey suit, but without his beanie; his hair flowed thick and black with grey streaks; his skin glistened. He wore no shoes. His body was whole: he did not limp, and he stretched out two unblemished arms.

"Where do you take me?"

William did not answer. Under the pregnant moonlight, he led Socrates along paths of sand between low bushes, deeper and deeper into the sand hills.

"Where do you take me?"

"Socrates, there is someone you gotta MEET!"

As they walked, the sands around them were continually shifting; the landscape was alive. William squatted down and swept his hands across the surface of the ground, and in response the sand swirled up, dancing around his fingers; the earth swelled and subsided. He walked on, slowly, sweeping his hands from side to side and drawing the sand up in drifts and eddies that followed him and Socrates.

"See: I am come!" said a sibilant voice and the sand be-

gan to form a regular, sinuous curving shape that moved in the space between William and Socrates, curling around their moving feet.

"Stop, William; I'm scared!" said Socrates.

The voice answered: "and so you should be, little man."

The sand plumed up and assumed the face of a huge snake, black and hideous, its green eyes glowing with an intense light, its blue tongue flicking in and out of its tiny red mouth.

"Who are you?" cried Socrates.

"I am your weakness, your fear, and your pain", said the snake. "I have come to destroy you."

"But why? What have I done?"

"You are a worm; a filthy thing. For this you deserve to suffer and die."

"I have heard your voice before", said Socrates. "You have tormented me for a long time. But I don't understand. If I am so bad, why do you cling to me; why do you pay me so much attention?"

The snake writhed around in front of Socrates. "Because you are my task, my delightful goal. Your destruction is a pleasure to me."

"Pleasure? Then it is a pretty pointless goal."

"How sssso?" hissed the snake, shaking its scales.

"Because with my destruction you will do yourself out of a job!"

"Ha! Just so, clever one; that is why I keep you dangling on my hook, quivering live bait, not living, not dying. Oh, I love to see you squirm." The snake arched up and its tongue flicked, tasting the air.

"Yet there is something beautiful in your dark scaly surface."

The snake fixed its tiny, bright eyes on Socrates. "You find me beautiful? You delight in your own destruction?"

"No; I find in your scales a reflection; I see myself in your shining skin."

"Of course; I surround you and I devour you."

"Yes, snake, and so you also take on the good parts of me."

"Goodness? You have none."

"Not so", challenged Socrates. "I see it imprinted on your skin. You cannot hide it."

*"Good, Solomon, good", whispered the wind in the dark trees.*

"Clever one, you know my secret."

"That evil cannot exist without good, yes. And the reverse I see is also true: good requires evil. We are partners you and I, not enemies."

*"True, Solomon, true", whispered the wind.*

"What do you propose, sniveling worm, that we join in detestable marriage? Your white skin and my blackness: would you like that sinful union?"

"No, more of a partnership: an agreement."

*"Yes, Solomon, yes", hushed the trees.*

"An agreement with evil? You negotiate with me? Strange one! Uncommon human! Adam didn't dare; I begin to respect you!"

The snake turned several circles, its immense body sweeping up clouds of sand. It stopped facing Socrates. "Then these are my terms: instead of banishing me and ridiculing me, you will respect me. You will open the doors of your city and welcome me in. The nights in the desert are cold and I desire the warmth of your fires."

"I accept. In return, you will no longer work for my destruction. Together we will make a whole; united we will build a great city."

"It shall be so, Solomon."

"Then we have a bargain."



William, Socrates and the snake continued walking through the dunes.

“You know”, said the snake, small now and slithering beside Socrates and around his feet, like a pet, “I have been your constant companion for many years. I have guided you through many storms. You were surrounded by neglect and cruelty, you would have perished without me.”

“How so?”

“Because I placed a dark net around you, so you would not see the evil. In this cocoon I kept you safe.”

“But isolated and frozen, that also, snake.”

“Everything has its price. But you are stronger than I thought. You have broken free from my prison. Well, so be it. My journey continues, Solomon. I have other souls to torment.”

The snake slithered off into the desert, its scales transformed into rainbow colors, its flicking tail throwing off multicolored sparks as it disappeared among the drifting dunes.

William led Socrates to a clearing surrounded by gum trees. Socrates saw that he was transformed: no longer a human figure, he glowed with a brilliant white light like a religious painting of an angel. He beckoned to Socrates.

“Where do you take me now?”

“You have met your FEAR, Socrates. Now you must learn the TRUTH.”

The night-black landscape spread out behind him; a golden dark night, full of voices, the trees singing, crying: *“You are a broken boy - let us heal you.”*

The glowing William walked to the middle of the clearing; his glowing form grew brighter and more intense, he transformed into a great flaming bonfire like the ones

Socrates father used to take him to, on cool November nights, in bush clearings surrounded by men and children: a Guy Fawkes Night bonfire, only whiter and brighter. Socrates knew he was expected to enter the fire.

*The trees whispered: "Solomon, we will heal you. Enter the fire."*

"I dare not. I am scared."

*"Enter the fire, Solomon."*

Socrates walked towards the flames. To his surprise, instead of burning heat a fresh breeze welcomed him. He entered the blazing fire. It was cool and dark. He found himself in a stone-lined passage, deep within the earth. William, returned to human form, preceded him. They walked for a long time, until the passage began to widen. "Here I must leave you", said William.

Socrates found himself in an immense chamber carved into the rock. In the dim light he could make out huge stone figures carved into the walls of the cave. The figures towered over Socrates, dwarfing him.

"Hello, Solomon." It was his voice! The voice he had been hearing all his life, walking across the wasteland, cocooned in his river tree, lying alone in his bed at night: a voice that scared and thrilled him. A woman's voice, gentle and strong, combining all the voices of all the women that he had ever known. Neither old nor young, infinitely kind and wise.

"So this is where you live!"

The voice laughed. "Oh Solomon: I live in you!"

"What is this place?"

"What do you see?"

'Always a question', thought Socrates. He looked around. The statues carved from the rock walls stared

down at him. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the gloom, he saw that there were two of them: a man and a woman.

"These statues - are they . . . my parents?"

"Solomon, do you remember when you were very small; you used to get angry and break things?"

"Yes." Socrates saw a small boy, running through the rooms of a house, flinging vases off tables, throwing ornaments and plates on to the floor. He felt a great knot of pain, of anger and frustration, tensing within him. "I used to get so angry . . . I couldn't express myself . . . I would break things . . . my parents: they were like these stone figures, they didn't respond to me."

He walked closer to the great hewn figures. He no longer felt afraid. He ran his fingers along the carved stone. "It is comforting here in these caves."

"That is because all that you fear has been cast in stone."

"I feel safe here, underground."

"It is the underworld into which you retreated, while on the surface you played your father's games."

"What do I call you?"

The voice did not answer. Only a faint breeze reached him, coming from somewhere far down the cave.

"I will call you my oracle. Like the one Socrates consulted at Delphi. And like him, I will ask you questions! May I?"

"Of course."

"You say I played my father's games. What do you mean?"

"You are his prince, aren't you?"

"He calls me that sometimes."

"Is that prince your true face?"

"No, I guess not; it's a mask I put on to please him."

"So: is there one Solomon or two?"

"I guess there must be two."

"What do you think would make a person split in two?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think this normal, a result of normal circumstances?"

"No, I suppose not; I don't know enough about people. I thought I was asking the questions!"

"Then let me tell you. Generally, people are whole; they have parts and are complex but are held together by the bonds of security and love. But imagine a boy who lacks these, whose only way to express himself is through destruction, by breaking the vases. Oh yes, you were angry, so angry you could not cry, so angry you could not weep. You realized that all that mattered to your father was the appearance of the vase on the shelf, the nice flowers; the 'family arrangement'. You were smart. You saw that if you presented that to your father you could remain safe inside, safe from the terror."

"What do you mean, 'the terror'?"

"The terror is the thing you fear most."

"Is it death?"

"Does death frighten you?"

"No, I don't think so; not after meeting the snake."

"Solomon, what is worse than death for a child?"

A stronger, colder wind blew from somewhere far down the cave. Socrates thought he saw the giant figures move, as if in anguish, in response to the wind.

"I guess to feel . . . unloved?"

The breeze grew stronger from deep within the cave, and he thought it carried a sound of a distant lullaby, and the scent of a girl, warm and sweet: Benjamin's girlfriend on the couch, generous and loving.

Socrates gazed up at the great stone figures. He saw for the first time the woman's swelling abdomen.

"She's pregnant! She is holding that lump like it is a pain, and my father is angry."

"It is her shame, and he is angry at her for bringing him this shame. He is angry, and she is glad, glad to bring him pain."

“You mean my mother had me as an act of spite? Of revenge?”

“Your birth locked them together in their pain, Solomon; you became the focus of that pain. By bearing you, she locked your father to her in his pain.”

Distressed by what he was hearing, Socrates walked to the centre of the cavern. A thousand confusing images crowded his mind. What did all this mean: his anger arising from neglect, a neglect that was the product of his birth, his birth a product of his parent’s pain . . . he cried out:

“Oracle: who am I? What am I? What shall I do?”

“Solomon, don’t let a bad beginning define you. Know that you can grow and change. For that to happen you have to go beyond the pain. Only love and growth can take you where you need to go. One day, these statues will crumble. Already, they are losing their power. Beneath them, the human form of your true parents awaits: the parents who loved you. Can you, Solomon, find that love?”

‘In their weird, strange sort of way, do my parents love me?’ wondered Socrates. And for a moment he saw the human faces of his parents, imprisoned within the stone, revealed from some place deep in this heart, and he felt pity for his troubled, flawed, sad parents.

“Oracle, thank you . . .”

But the voice had gone, and Socrates found himself once more standing in the desert with William. It was day now, a blinding bright inland day, yet with no heat. William was in human form again.

“Who was that voice? Was she an oracle, a goddess?”

William smiled. “Look over THERE.” Socrates saw a little boy sitting on a low wall of stone. Socrates approached the boy, who seemed to be crying. He was sitting under a tree laden with blossom, and Socrates realized that the

path was bordered by flowers and fruiting trees. The desert had changed into a bountiful garden. Socrates put his arms around the little boy, who snuggled into his breast. As the two of them stood in this close embrace, he heard again that wonderful feminine voice:

“There are many fences and walls in your world, Solomon: the walls of your house, the fences of the school. But in my world there are no walls. Know that all walls are fabricated, they have doors, and they can fall. Respect them when they are useful, but step through them when your heart needs to be free.”

He looked up to see William’s smiling face.

“Hey Socrates! You been somewhere SPECIAL, eh! You listen to that lady; you put your hand out to the WORLD: it’s your FRIEND. Then you’re gonna GROW; you’re gonna take down those WALLS! Socrates: you are HEALED!”

## CHAPTER 15



# Attica Base

I SPENT WEEKS in that milk-white ward at Attica Base Hospital; it was me that existed there, not Socrates; I who experienced the cream paint and stainless steel and baked enamel, the white cold steel bed-frames, the disinfected linoleum, the crisp linen and crisper nurses, while he slept, in a kind of pre-heaven under starched white sheets, bright lights and thin hospital blankets.

Yet I was not the most constant visitor: that was Harmony. My mother joined her often, in a shared vigil of hushed voices and cups of comforting tea. Clifford came 'when he could' - which was not often. My dad popped in occasionally and a couple of old school friends. But apart from the two mothers, sitting like twin Mary's visiting the tomb, it was I who was the constant disciple, waiting while his master slept. I even read to him from that book, 'The Last Days of Socrates'.

Once I saw Rex Coburn talking to the sister at the nurse's station. Another day Sergeant Miller passed me in the corridor, hurrying to another ward with a serious look on his face. The Reverend Burncott always called in on his weekly rounds, and once a group of uniformed scouts filed in behind a pale and hesitant scoutmaster Paul.

The sleeping Socrates wasn't capable of hate, so I hated for him: his self-serving father, the negligent pastor, the lazy reporter, the weak scoutmaster; I hated them all. Hated them not just because of what they did to him, but because he was better than them and they had not risen to be better men themselves.

Once I asked my mother: "Why are people cruel?"

"Robert, I don't think everyone is cruel. But I do think they don't show enough love sometimes. Not to be loved is the greatest cruelty", she added, looking across at Socrates' sleeping body, a hint of pale skin and tousled hair showing above the sheets.

Whether they paid Socrates attention or ignored him, seeing these characters from Socrates' past made me mad. Their concern rang false in my brain like a screech of a cockatoo in a back-yard cage. Worst of all were those moments when I found myself in the room with Socrates' dad; as he placed his big fleshy hands around those of his son I felt as if it was my life encased in those suffocating, greasy palms.

"Maybe he won't wake up!" said Clifford one day to the doctor, as we gathered in the waiting room; "what then? There will be a decision to be made; a difficult but practical one."

"You're not taking another son from me! You're not!" Harmony's face was shining white, her body shook; she rose from her seat with clenched fists. I thought she was



going to run at Clifford, scratch his eyes out, beat her fists into that pudgy face and bloated belly, but she stood there, tense and strained while my mum put her arms around her shoulders.

Seeking support, Clifford turned to my father, "Women! What can we say, Derek? Irrational and impractical creatures!"

My dad looked at Clifford. I expected him to offer a conciliatory remark, an agreeable Dadly-ism. "Clifford, maybe women are sensitive and emotional creatures. And so might men be, if we were truer to our natures, and be better men for it. I dare say love is more important to your son at the moment than your so-called reason and practicality."

As Clifford left the room he passed Harmony, muttering "stupid woman".

"And men's hands were made for better things than hitting", said my mother after him, quietly but distinctly.

At that moment William's shuffling figure ambled into the room. I was so happy to see his open and friendly face. He looked at Socrates' mother with concern. "Mrs. Harmony, has something BAD happened?"

"No, William", answered my mother. "Not to Solomon, anyway."

William was puzzled. "Mr. Clifford, he looks like he's got some great big spring wound up in him, gunna BURST!" We all laughed, even Harmony, wiping a tear from her eyes.

"Mrs. Smith!" The matron was suddenly in the room, all starched cotton and bustle. "It's Solomon. He's awake!"



Socrates' accident occurred in the middle of November, 1971. He awoke just in time for Christmas. We celebrated it by his bedside: mum and dad, me, Harmony, even Benjamin had managed to make the trip from Adelaide.

Through the remainder of that summer Socrates and I got to know each other again, first as he underwent rehab at the hospital, then after he returned home. That must have been a difficult homecoming for him. He did not return to his old bedroom but set himself up in a sitting room at the front of the house that was rarely used. On the day after he arrived home, that is where I found Socrates, sitting up in bed in bright red pajamas, reading J. S. Mill's 'On Liberty'.

"My mother got me these", he said, pulling at the sleeves of his extravagant pajamas.

"They suit you."

"Yes, I think they do."

"They are very 'Harmony'."

"Uh Huh."

"Why are you sleeping here?"

He put down the book. "My mother's in my old room."

"Really? How come?"

"She started sleeping there while I was at Uni; I didn't realize till I came home for the holidays. It was a bit embarrassing. I turned up with some mates without warning and found she'd changed the house around, I mean, it was obvious she'd been sleeping in my room. She couldn't stand sleeping in the same room as my dad, I guess. Anyway, we set up a bed in this room for my friends and I went back in my old room. But when I came home from hospital I said to mum she could have my old room back. I helped her move her things in there. Dad was really mad. He wouldn't talk to me for days."

Socrates looked at me with a direct, confident look that was new to me. "I have decided to stand up to my father. I'm not going to just accept things anymore."

“That’s good, that’s really good.”

“I know that’s what you wanted, you told me that once, that I need to find my voice.” He smiled. I remembered our parting at the pumps.

“You know this guy Mill” - he indicated the book - “had a difficult father; well not really his father, but this fellow Bentham who brought him up as a kind of experiment. Bentham was a great thinker, actually. Anyway, Mill eventually rebelled against being Bentham’s lab rat, and he did it by going beyond his training, by becoming a great and independent thinker himself.”

I couldn’t have cared less about Jeremy Bentham or J. S. Mill but the sound of Socrates’ lively voice, full of energy, made me tearfully happy.

A couple of weeks later, we went together to Baxter’s Photographics with the money from the insurance payout on the accident. “A Nikon with a fast 1.4 lens!” he exclaimed as we left the store. “Baxter never thought he’d sell one of these!”

During that summer, I often saw him around the town, taking pictures with his new camera. I would see him at different times of day obsessively photographing the landmarks of his life in Attica, strung along Barton Avenue: one day, the cloister at Burley College; another the portico of the Carnegie Library, the pumps down by the river, or the stepped granite form of the war memorial.

One day he invited me down to the art gallery next to the old Burley mansion. He had begun to spend time there and had got to know the curator. He took me into the stock room in the basement of the workroom behind the main space. There were racks and racks of paintings on wire frames that slid out on rollers across the concrete floor. He pulled out a few to show me.

“Come and look at this”, he said mysteriously. At the back were some larger works in wire cages. He rolled one out to show me. In it was a flat but lumpy parcel, roughly square, about a meter across, wrapped in dark cloth and tied up with an intricate network of thin rope. “Do you know what this is?”

“No.”

“It’s a Christo.”

“That artist! The one who wraps things, so you see them better?”

“Yes! I never knew they had it! It was on loan from a dealer in Sydney for that big sculpture show last year, and he went bust, so they got it for a song. Not sure they even wanted it. Doesn’t really go with the Drysdales. But how cool! Attica has a Christo!”

“You know what?” he said, as he caressed the black cloth. “I always wondered what Christo puts inside his works.” He looked at me mischievously, tugging at the cord.

“Socrates! No! You can’t!”

“Don’t worry.” He closed the cage and rolled it back. “I wouldn’t do anything wrong - you know that.”

“No! I don’t! You always do what you think is right, that’s what worries me!”

We left the gallery and walked towards the river. Near the old pumping engine, we stopped. Socrates grabbed one of the steel railings and swung on it. Letting go, he said: “You know, I was very jealous of you, your nice parents, your happy family.”

“Really? A lot of people thought you were lucky: big house, famous dad. . .”

“Yeah, funny, huh? But it’s what I didn’t have. I used to lie in bed thinking: ‘it must be nice living in a house where you want to be there’. I woke up every morning and wished I wasn’t in mine.”

We clambered down the red embankment to the wasteland.

"To be loved unconditionally by your parents. That's what you had. I never had that; I was like a piece in some game they were playing."

"I remember the first time we came here, the day the Queen came. I wondered why you were always picking things up off the ground!"

"Yes", he laughed, "I still do. It's not just an old dead thing; the surface of the earth is alive; it breathes", and he knelt down and ran his fingers through the leaves as if caressing a lover's hair. "One day our bones will go back into that soil and help make it rich."

We walked across the lock to the island, serene and otherworldly as always.

"You seem different", I said as we walked under the great spreading gums with their thick trunks of speckled white and grey.

"I've learnt it is important to love, not hate. Yourself, mostly, but also everything around you." I nodded. "I know everyone says that" he continued, "but I want you to know Robert that I really have experienced love, unconditional; the power of infinite love. It happened when I was near death." Then, as we walked around the island, he told me about the oracle.

"After all that, I can't hate any more. I can't hate or blame my parents or, if they deserve blame, I forgive them."

We walked back up the hill towards the gallery.

"Did I tell you? I'm going back to Sydney, but not to do Law. I'm enrolling in fine art at the Sydney College of Art."

"That's great! It's what you wanted; that's wonderful."

"I'm taking my mum with me. I reckon we can get a little flat. Benjamin's going to help out financially."

“What will your dad say?”

“I don’t know, Robert, and you know what, I don’t really care.”

As we walked back past the old pumps he said: “You’re still going to be a journalist, or a writer, yeah?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I was thinking, maybe one day you could write about us.”

“I guess so. Hey, I could be your Plato!” We laughed.

“You know”, said Socrates, “I was a very angry person at school. But I was angry for a reason: I was angry because the things that people need most - love and caring - were absent, and instead there was this assumption that keeping up appearances is enough. But it’s not enough, it’s never enough, whether it’s a school or a family or a religious congregation, or a country, it’s not sufficient. You have to care, and as much as I can be accused of being too angry, too serious, a misfit, a ‘corruptor of the young’ (he laughed) you cannot say I didn’t care.”

He looked at me with those transparent grey blue eyes that always reminded me of the open sky. “No Socrates”, I said, “no one can say that.”



On Socrates’ last day in Attica he asked me to join him down at the Dale Carnegie Library.

‘What’s up, Socrates?’ I asked as made our last walk down Barton Avenue. It was a burning hot summer’s day very like the one, two years earlier, on which I had arrived at my new school and seen him for the first time.

“I have to return something”, he replied cryptically, pointing to the bag he was carrying.

I had hardly ever been inside the library. It was Socrates who, during that last year of school, had been its resident ghost on Saturday afternoons. It was smaller than I remembered. Mr. Spincks recognized Socrates.

We walked around to the shelf of 'Ancient and Modern Philosophy', where Socrates removed a small parcel from his bag. It was a book, wrapped neatly in dark cloth with numerous strands of string running across and around the assemblage: a mini 'Christo'.

I laughed. "What book is it?"

"'The Last Days of Socrates'. I borrowed this in Year 11; I don't think they ever noticed I hadn't returned it."

"Well, this is kind of Socrates' last day . . ."

"Yes, I suppose it is." He slipped the wrapped book carefully between Plato's 'Republic' and Thucydides' 'History of the Peloponnesian War'.

## The Fair-Haired Boy

WALKING BACK UP Barton Avenue from the library, Socrates noticed a small boy in school uniform sitting on the footpath, his back against the front fence of one of the houses near the War Memorial Park.

"You OK?" asked Socrates.

The boy looked up. Tear marks streaked the dust on his cheeks. "Hey! You're Socrates! I know you!"

Socrates smiled. "I know you too!"

The boy got up.

"So how come you're not at school?"

"I don't want to go."

"C'mon. I'll walk with you."

They walked up Barton Avenue towards the school. It was a journey Socrates had often made and seldom enjoyed,

counting the cracks in the yellow concrete.

“What’s it all for?” asked the little fair-haired boy.

“What?” asked Socrates.

“Life” said the boy.

“Well”, said Socrates, “life is a struggle. I used to think that was a problem; that life shouldn’t be like that. But someone explained to me: that’s what life is. It’s a struggle. We have to keep doing it, that’s how we learn. The sad people are those who just accept everything, they never ask questions, they never try, they never struggle, they never learn.”

They walked on silently towards the school.

“Who told you that? I’d like to meet them.”

Socrates smiled. They had reached the school gate.

“Really, I need help”, said the boy.

“Then look inside”, said Socrates.

“But there’s nothing there!”

“Oh yes there is; yes, there is!”

At the school gates, Socrates stopped. “This is as far as I go; I don’t belong here anymore. You know what I think?”

“What?”

“You’re gonna grow up OK; you just have to learn to love yourself.”

As the little fair-haired boy walked in through the school gates, he turned and called out: “Socrates! I miss you!”



“I am so happy, Betty!”

Harmony had lights in her eyes like little stars, thought Betty Bradley. They were sitting once again on Harmony’s porch. “I will get to leave this place, and Clifford;



and Solomon thinks I may be able to see Jonathon again, even if I have to call myself his Auntie."

Betty smiled and patted her friend's arm.

"It's funny, but Solomon was always the difficult one, always trouble; you never know how they will turn out, I suppose."

"I think he was always a good boy; I think he took after his mum."

"You know", said Harmony after a long silence, "I always hated myself; always thought I was a bad person. But you know what? I've decided we can all grow. Oh! I nearly forgot! I have something for you."

Harmony reached into a big woven straw handbag on the floor near her feet. She pulled out a little plastic pot with a tiny cactus inside. "Oh dear!" she said, as the bottom of the pot gave way and dirt poured over her skirt. The two of them laughed as Betty scooped the soil from Harmony's knees. "I have been growing this for you. Look, it's even got a little flower!"

"Oh yes", said Betty, "a yellow one."

"I'll tell you a secret", said Harmony. "I once had a boyfriend, oh, before I had children, before Clifford even. He once gave me a yellow rose - and he broke my heart. I hung onto that rose for years. But recently I've decided that broken hearts can mend. I threw the flower away! Then I decided to grow you this, and what happens? Another yellow flower!"

"Oh Harmony! Hearts are like flowers", said Betty. "Water them and they will always bloom!"



“Hey, Derek!”

Derek Bradley was surprised to see William standing in the door of his office at the Paradise Cooperative Packing Company. “William! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing Derek, it’s all GOOD! It’s just Nathan; he’s not going back to school and he’s got nuthin’ to DO. I wondered if you could give him a job?”

“Oh.”

Daddy knew there would no jobs at the packing shed that year. Bad weather meant a poor harvest, and there were more than enough takers for the few positions available from the sons and wives of the fruit growers. He felt a momentary surge of indignation, fueled by impotence. He imagined Dave McIntosh’s scowling face should he suggest the shed add Nathan to their shrinking work force.

“I’m not askin’ for charity”, said William, entering the room and taking a seat. “It’s just I’m worried what will happen to him. With nothing to do the young men turn to GROG. I don’t want that to happen to Nathan.”

Daddy thought of the groups of men lying under the trees in the local park. “You never went that way, William. Why not?”

“I don’t know Derek, somehow I am STRONG. I got that William Barak blood in my veins, I reckon! You know how I got to be like this, Derek?” William rotated his damaged shoulder. “It was in the WAR. They wouldn’t take me at first. No blackfellas! Later they got desperate. A man, enlistment man, he said to me: ‘William, as of today you are WHITE!’ And they took me in, put me in the army. Sent me to France. D-DAY. They were bombing our POSITION. I was next to the Major. He liked me, that Major. Someone said, ‘look out, another one!’ and I jumped on top of that Major. Took most of the blast I reckon. Major thanked me, said I saved his LIFE. Promotion maybe or medal for me, I’m thinking, when they took me away. Ten minutes

later, that major was DEAD! Another bomb. I cried like a baby for that man. You got to FEEL, Derek. Never saw that medal after that, EH!”

“You were very brave”, said Dadly.

“I just doing what you gotta DO! I just helping people, Derek. I got no regrets. Life is STRONG, life is powerful! It’s bigger than us, I reckon.”

Derek Bradley thought of Dave McIntosh, drinking at that moment down at the bar of the Paradise Returned Servicemen’s Club. Did a brotherhood of arms stretch that far he wondered? Would those who had suffered extend their pity to the suffering of others, even those who had suffered at their own hands?

At that moment he heard Dave’s drunken footsteps along the packing house corridor.

“Hey, Dave!”

His boss’s red round face appeared in the doorway. “Yeah, Derek?”

“Your club, the RSL, does it need any barmen, waiters, store men, anything like that?”

“How the fuck would I know?”

“The manager down there owes you a few favors, yeah?”

“Fuck he does! Won’t employ any old boongs though”, he said, looking at William.

“Not him, his son; healthy young bloke. And his dad’s a veteran.”

“Is he now? Won’t make any difference. They won’t put a black behind the bar.”

“Not if you push them?”

“Why should I do that?”

“Maybe you owe me a favor.”

“Oh yeah, do I? What would that be?”

“The letter I’m not going to write to the Cooperative telling them about your long lunches.”

“You’re a cunt, Derek.”

Dave stood swaying in the doorway. “What do I care

about some boong? Tell you what: I'll put him on here. What can he do?"

"He's very HANDY", said William. "Good at woodwork and metalwork. Top marks at school. Good at ARITHMETIC too."

"Is he now? Well, he can give you a hand, Derek."

Derek raised a hand in protest; he had barely enough work to justify his pay.

"Just a day a week; teach him accounting! He can help me fix the shed the other days. It needs some work."

Dave McIntosh turned and staggered out the door. "Veteran eh? Fuck, it didn't matter what color you were."

"You're still a cunt, Derek" echoed down the hall.

## CHAPTER 16



# Full Circle

WHEN I VISITED ATTICA at Easter, 1972, there was a big ‘FOR SALE’ sign on the Smith house.

“They’ve moved to Sydney”, said my mother. “I am going to miss Harmony.”

My dad smiled. “Clifford’s still here. He’s shackled up with some woman down on Ranfurly Avenue.”

Later that year the general election was held, and the Labor Party came to power. I half expected to see Clifford Smith’s beaming face among the host of newly elected MPs, but another candidate had stood in Mulga, to no avail: Eden Young retained the seat by a comfortable margin.

Labor’s success made me want to contact Socrates. I rang my mother and asked her if she knew his address. She did, since she regularly wrote to Harmony. I dashed off some

lines about how ‘the struggle had finally been won’ and how excited he must be; I never got a response.

Around 1974 the Sydney College of Art was in the news for a student strike: rebellious art students, allied with young and ambitious academics, forced the resignation of several long serving staff members and demanded changes to the curriculum. I searched in vain for a mention of Socrates in the Sydney Morning Herald.

The next year, the country was in crisis. Whitlam had been dismissed by the unelected representative of the English queen: Sir John Kerr. I joined the protests, standing with thousands of others on the banks of Adelaide’s River Torrens, in those parklands of an enlightenment city founded by the free, while in Canberra the colonial elites - symbolized by a Knight in a ridiculous top hat - treated democracy with disdain. I wondered if this likewise incensed Socrates and whether he, too, was marching with an angry crowd down George Street. I looked for his face in the news photos of the crowds outside Government House. But no: during that whole tumultuous time, I heard not a word from Socrates and had no idea how he was reacting to these events.

By then I had finished my journalism studies and found work at the Adelaide Advertiser. Occasionally I would run into Benjamin, who worked in a government office on North Terrace. He would tell me little snippets about Socrates life, but he was not a person to provide rich and useful detail; I gathered that Socrates and Harmony were ‘doing OK’.

Shortly after this, I got a job with ‘The Age’ in Melbourne. It had turned out I didn’t have much aptitude as a writer, however I was happy to get a job sub-editing the finance pages. At around the same time my father re-

tired from the packing company due to ill health, and my parents also moved to Melbourne. All my ties with Attica were severed; busy with life, I forgot about Socrates. My mother kept up correspondence with Harmony, and every year, a month before Christmas, she would receive a card from Benjamin.

When I finally caught up with Socrates, it was under unexpected circumstances.

“Robbie, I’ve got some bad news. It’s Harmony. I’m afraid she’s . . . gone.” It was mum on the phone. There was a silence as I digested the news and my mother sobbed.

This was in 1977. I drove to Adelaide to pick up Benjamin. He squeezed into my little Holden Torana and together we made the long trip across country to Sydney. We passed through Attica and I noticed Benjamin took no interest in his parents’ old house as we drove up Barton Avenue. I stopped the car for a moment at the S-bends; we didn’t say anything; I made a pretense of needing to ‘stretch my legs’. I got out and kicked the red dirt by the side of the road; I picked up some fragments of shattered glass. For a moment I thought I heard a rustling in the grass.

We met my parents at Central Station and drove out together to the suburban crematorium.

“I wonder who’ll be there?” mused Dadly. “I don’t suppose she had a lot of friends.”

“Why not? She was a lovely lady”, protested my mum. “Anyway, I expect some friends of Solomon’s will be there, and there’s . . .” We all knew who she meant.

“Actually, I think you were mum’s best friend, Mrs. Bradley”, said Benjamin. My mother smiled.

Jonathon was indeed there, a Downs Syndrome man about Benjamin’s age on the arm of a silent woman we took to

be his foster mother. There were a couple of Harmony's lady friends and a mate of Socrates' from the university. Socrates was thinner, his hair short and punkish. He was serious and thoughtful as he delivered the eulogy. He was the only speaker. This must have been difficult, I thought, organizing your parent's funeral alone.

"Hey Robbie", he said afterwards, giving me a warm hug. "Long time no see."

"It has been a while."

"Come and have lunch with me tomorrow. The Criterion on Circular Quay."



"I'm off!" said Socrates over a schooner in the front bar of The Criterion. "My two reasons for being here have gone: my mother, and my hope that this country could ever get off its arse and be anything!"

There was a trace of bitterness in his voice; he looked at me intently over his beer.

"You were pretty pissed off over the dismissal, I expect?"

"That's not really the word. Sad, I suppose. Australians are so fucking passive. When Whitlam got in I thought everything was going to change; then with his dismissal I thought everyone would rise up: it'd be Paris '68. But you know what? Not enough people wanted Whitlam's vision for Australia, and in the end, he folded too; folded to Kerr when the real power was in the House of Rep's, in the people who voted for a different Australia: one where we've got the funk to stand up to authority and say: 'we have our own destiny'. I'm not mad at the Lib's; it's Labor that failed us."



We drank our beers. I noticed a couple of blokes at the bar watching us with interest.

"I sometimes wonder what would have happened if he'd refused to go, if Whitlam had defied Kerr", I said.

"That would have been interesting; it would have divided the nation; people would have been forced to take a stand. But it didn't happen, and that exposed the lie: that Australia is a mature democracy that can honestly face its deficiencies and change. We're still a monarchy, for Christ's sake!"

"Seeing Whitlam and Kerr made me think of our protest at Burley College!"

"Totally. We tried to change things but all the time we knew who was holding the cane. In '75 it was the same: we all just accepted a strap on the hand from the headmaster and returned to our desks. Australians are like that, like children; we all obey the cane; we're the colony of the colonized; we've been under our own jackboot so long we don't know what's in our own interests. The dismissal exposed all that for me."

Socrates was getting emotional; I changed the subject: "so what have you been up to? I heard there was some kind of protest at the art school. Was that you?"

"Ha! You'd think so, yeah? Actually it was the opposite."

Art school had not been at all what Socrates had expected. "I thought it would be a place of creative ferment, but instead it was terribly conservative; the lecturers all came out of the Second World War as idealists, but by the time I met them they were worn down by years of battling in a materialist culture. They taught us about the 'Old Masters' but they knew all we would be doing was making washing powder advertisements. All the purity and clarity of the confrontation with life, the essence of art, were missing. The photographs I took in Attica gained me a place at the college, but those dinosaurs made it perfectly clear that 'there was no money in that!'"

“Was that what the protests were about?”

“Sort of. There was a crowd at that time - conceptual artists - political radicals as well, Marxists loosely, who wanted an art that came from the people, not art galleries and art schools. But they were wrong - art may have been lacking in the art school, but it isn't a mass movement or an ideology either. It happens here.” He thumped his chest. “Anyway, they started to demand changes to the curriculum and were pretty nasty to some of the staff . . . I was sympathetic at first, I was lecturing myself by this stage - doing my Masters as well - but when they picked on Ben . . .”

“Who's Ben?”

“Ben Naples? He's a lovely old bloke: a sculptor; been on the staff for years. Ben's important to me; he taught me that art is about beauty and meaning; he started me looking at spirituality in my art. I think that's why I found myself on the other side of the fence, I mean, you would have expected me to side with the protesters, but I could see what was going on.

On one side were the radicals who wanted a new art that was not really about art at all; on the other side were the professors, who had forgotten what art was; and in the background? Well, thanks partly to Whitlam, there's now an entire industry of gallery directors and curators, art ministry bureaucrats, grants commissioners and art entrepreneurs. Art's becoming a subsidized 'industry' sanctioned by the State. I know what will happen - one day there will be a dreadful combination of the two: the non-art of the radicals will be institutionalized by the art bureaucracy as the 'new art' and we'll all settle down in a materialistic paradise!”

Socrates voice had become strained and angry. I could see the men at the bar looking at us. “Settle down, Socrates”, I said.

“Sorry, it's just when I think of Ben I get mad. Anyway,

they forced him out. He was too idealistic. When he left he said: 'I don't care what they say, you can't fence in beauty.' That's when I decided to get out too."

I couldn't help smiling. This was so like Socrates, to question the very things I assumed he would embrace. "Wow! You're leaving the art world as well?"

"Well, not exactly; I'm not abandoning art, I'm just leaving . . . this place. Socrates waved his arms around. "Australia! The Manchester of the Pacific! Founding member of the Consumer Republic! The country where nature was defined as a commodity, materiality was made king and utility a god; a foolish, misguided, deluded, selfish, narrow-minded brown land; a land of crippling mortgages, of droughts and foreign debt; of craven politicians." He raised his glass. "To Australia: the land that fences in beauty!"

Socrates was more than a little drunk and far too noisy. I saw the two men at the bar pushing their way in our direction.

"Having a go, are you mate?" said the first.

"Hear you're leavin'", said the other. "Maybe our country's not good enough for yer!"

The first man leaned close to Socrates. "I'll tell yer somethin', mate; if you don't like it here, you can just FUCK OFF!" He stabbed his fingers onto the bench.

"I'll tell you another thing", said the second man: "Whitlam was destroying this country. Good riddance to both of yer."

"I don't think", said the first, standing back a little, arms folded, "that this bloke love's his country."

"No", said Socrates. "That's where you're wrong. I'm not leaving because I don't love Australia; it's because I DO."

How often had I heard him speak like that! But for once he continued: "I mean, you have to consider what you mean by those words, 'love' and 'country'. A country is many things: a set of physical facts, for example. Take the

weather: do you love Sydney weather?"

"What's he talking about, Jimmy?"

"I don't know, Mick; but I tell you what, Mister Art School wanker: Sydney's got the best fuckin' weather in the world!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes'", said Socrates. "Then what about Melbourne weather? Ah hah! I thought not. Already there are choices to be made about this country we 'love'; there are some things we love and others we don't."

"Fuckin' Melbourne-lover now!" But Mick was smiling.

"Let's just say that we can love different things about Australia. A Melbourne person can love Melbourne weather and still be an Australian. That suggests Australia is more than a place. So what is it?"

"God's own country, mate. That's what it is!"

"Fair enough: God's country. That's the image you have of Australia; we all inhabit an image of an Australia that we have constructed. Your image satisfies you. But it's not my image. Whitlam, you say, was destroying Australia. That means destroying the Australia of your image: God's country."

"Are you having a go? Are you? Art School prick!"

"No, go on", said Mick.

Socrates continued: "So at the end of the day you and I both carry an image of Australia that doesn't exist in reality. We are in love with that image. We both love Australia, but different ones. The Melbourne person loves his Melbourne weather, and you love your Sydney weather, and it's all sweet."

"Exactly!" I broke in, relieved that Socrates was sounding conciliatory.

"Ah, let's leave these mad cunts", said Mick. I watched the backs of the two men in relief as they returned to the bar.

Socrates had that far away look in his eyes. "I know my Australia can't exist but I love the idea of it, Robert; it

hovers in front of me, like breath on a cold Attica morning." He took another sip of his beer. "See these blokes: they love their Australia; it gives them what they need. They're lucky. My needs go unsatisfied."

"What do you need, Socrates?"

"I don't know, Robert: somewhere . . . where the things that *I* feel matter, somewhere that knows itself and expresses itself, which grows and lets things grow. Ha! Somewhere where they don't prune the trees and cut the grass. But can it be that, can it be truthful enough?" He was gazing out the door, where a golden light was settling on Sydney Harbour. "My beloved Strathbogie Ranges . . . will I ever see you again?"

"What the hell?"

"Ned Kelly. On the train to his trial. Now there's someone who understood *my* Australia." At the top of his voice, Socrates yelled:

"NED KELLY!"

"Yer a mad cunt!" cried Jimmy from over at the bar.

"In my Australia", cried Socrates, rising unsteadily, "the hokey pokey is punishable by death!"

There was silence in the public bar of the Criterion Hotel. Everyone turned to look at Socrates. To fill the void, I surprised myself by yelling: "in my Australia . . . all pelicans . . . have penthouses!"

Socrates cried back: "In my Australia, every suburb has a dirigible!"

I returned fire: "in my Australia, possums carry parasols!"

"Mad cunts!"

Socrates leapt onto the table, bent down to pick up our two full schooners and held them high in the air, crying: "and you know what our Australia is? Robert, do you remember Dunno?" I got his drift. "Yes, Socrates, yes!" I cried and together we yelled: "our Australia is FUCK-IN' AWESOME!" as Socrates poured the contents of both

schooners into a combined golden stream down upon his own head, standing there on the table in the middle of the public bar at the Criterion Hotel, the honey-colored Sydney afternoon sun streaming in through the stained glass, illuminating the spray that cascaded around him like a statue of a Greek god in the temple.

“Fuckinggggggg maaaaadddd cuuuuuunttt!!!!” cried Mick.

The barman ran over. Socrates climbed down, gave him ten dollars and we were shown the door.

Outside the pub, I said to Socrates: “I used to have a simple life. I didn’t realize there were more complicated lives till I met you.” He laughed.

That was the last time I saw Socrates Smith.



The next day I drove Benjamin back to Adelaide. Remembering the long silences of the outward journey, I started a game: I had discovered he liked classical music, so I tuned the radio to the ABC classical network whenever I could. Benjamin never failed to get the piece and composer correct, often the performer as well.

As we neared Attica I tried to explain my conversation with Socrates.

“The thing is, I always knew he was angry, as a result of his upbringing and all that; but I thought that once he had reconciled himself with the past, he would lose that anger and calm down. But from what I saw yesterday, he hasn’t changed that much at all: he’s transferred that anger onto new targets, he’s asking new questions.”

"Maybe that's not a bad thing", suggested Benjamin. "I always like the way he questions everything. It makes people think."

"Yes, but he has this way of annoying and provoking people. It gets him into trouble. And yesterday he sounded . . . bitter. I'm worried he's setting himself up to be a permanent . . . I don't know, outcast."

Benjamin looked across at me. "I wouldn't worry about Sollie. He enjoys being on the outside. Once he goes overseas - he'll be on the biggest outside of all."

We were both silent for a long time. The same thought was on both our minds.

"You'll miss him, won't you, Benjamin?"

"I suppose I will. A bit."



As the years passed, it was Benjamin who provided my only knowledge of my friend's life overseas, in photographs and notes he added to the yearly Christmas card to my mother.

"Solomon's in India", stated one card, "seeing some guru!" Another year: "he's in a temple in Japan, practicing Zen." He had included a photo of Socrates, barely recognizable in shaved hair, sitting cross-legged on a tatami mat next to a meditating monk.

In 1995 I went back to Attica for a 'class of 1970' reunion. None of my close friends were there. Chrome-dome was, however, long retired; he recognized me in the corridor, gave out a dismissive 'huff' and refused to take my hand. There was a petition nearby to reintroduce the school song. 'They still don't sing it!' I thought, signing the pe-

tition; it seemed the only fair thing to do.

I asked everyone about Socrates, but no one had any news of him. Most people no longer remembered who he was. “Who?” asked a tall stringy woman with big glasses and a blank look, a younger version of whom used to sit at the front of our French class. “Oh, that annoying boy who got in trouble all the time, Samuel Smith wasn’t it? I heard he’s living in a commune in America”.

Over time the realities of the past become echoes. I married and had children. One of them bears the middle name Solomon. We lived in many houses. Always, on a shelf in the lounge room or study, I placed an old German camera.

In 2000, Benjamin wrote to me to tell me Clifford had died. I was attending a conference in Vancouver. Not long after, my own parents passed away in quick succession: first Dadly, then Betty. My marriage broke up, my children grew away from me, and I found myself increasingly alone. I took to walking a lot, and as I paced the concrete paths of the streets near my Melbourne home, the regular rhythm of the cracks in the pavement reminded me of another walk, the long straight sunlit path from my house in Barton Avenue to Socrates’ house, and as I turned the corner towards home it occurred to me that all journeys are circles.

## Brother Sokratis

IT IS 2013. Waiting for me in the letterbox is an unusual package.

It is a large, padded post office envelope. The sender’s name is neatly printed on the back: BENJAMIN J SMITH. Inside there is a second envelope, along with a short,



handwritten note on a card from Benjamin that reads:

*Dear Robert*

*I am very sorry, but I have received a letter advising me that your friend Solomon, my brother, has died. He had been ill for some time. I have not heard from him for several years. Another letter was also sent to me, addressed to you.*

*Kind Regards,  
Benjamin Smith*

I sit for a long time at my desk. The room has contracted to this little space, centered on the innocent-looking envelope and Benjamin's note. I imagine Benjamin in his big brown suit; how taciturn he is, his affection for Socrates barely evident in his clumsily written lines. But he will be grieving, I know.

The enclosed envelope has airmail stickers and unfamiliar stamps: from Cyprus. It is addressed to 'Robert Bradley, c/- Benjamin Smith'. I open it to find yet another envelope and another note. It is like a Russian doll. Is there no end to the layers surrounding my friend Socrates?

The note is typed on pale blue paper with a letterhead in Greek; from the prominent Christian symbol of the cross, I gather it is from a religious institution. It reads:

My Dear Mr. Bradley,

It is my sad task to inform you that a member of our order, Brother Solomon, passed away recently. Before he died, he wrote the enclosed letter to you, explaining to us that you were his dearest friend. Unfortunately, his disease progressed quickly, and our brother died before he was able to send it. Luckily it was

already addressed so I am able to do so for him.

One day, about ten years ago, Solomon walked into our monastery. For the first few months that he was with us, he remained a mystery. Why had he come? What was his vocation? One day I found him in our small library, looking at the few books on art we have, religious art of course. I asked him: 'are you interested in art?' He looked at me and said: 'I am an artist.' I said: 'what does that mean?' He said: 'I don't know, but that's what I am.' I said to him, 'for us art is a gift, an inspiration from God that allows us to communicate with him. If you are truly an artist, you have a place with us.'

In time, your friend became an accomplished painter of religious icons. And what icons! We have never seen paintings like these. You know, we regard the icon as a literal window into paradise. Yet never did I see such a vision of heaven as in Brother Solomon's work! The faces of the saints so open, so honest; there is something cheeky and irreverent about them. I wonder where did he see such faces? And the light and atmosphere surrounding them: so pure, so revealing. He told me once about his hometown, how remote and strange it is, in a desert yet a place of flowers and vines, just like our own Cyprus. We laughed together at the name of it: Attica; an ancient name from this part of the world, a place of learning and culture. I would love one day see his Attica.

Solomon was a lost soul; I do not know enough of his background to understand his homelessness, but he finally found a home with us. It interested us to discover that as a young man in Australia, his friends called him 'Socrates'; one of the monks, in jest, placed a sign 'ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΘΗΝΑΣ' (SOCRATES OF ATH-

The Tin Parrot

ENS) over his door and there it remained. He gave us permission to use that name for him: it pleased him to be our 'Brother Sokratis'.

Your Servant in the Ministry of our Lord Jesus,

Father A. Demetriou  
Ayios Michaelis Monastery  
Troodos, Cyprus

I find myself weeping and cannot face opening Socrates' envelope. Later that evening, I do.

*Hello Robert*

*A lifetime has passed, and I will never see you again. That is the one regret of a life that otherwise has been blessed.*

*As I look out the window of my little cell, high in these beloved mountains, I can smell the blossoms of a coming summer. I will not see this one, but I have enjoyed many, and more beautiful, than anyone deserves.*

*You know, all those years ago in Sydney, when I saw you for the last time, I thought I was on a great adventure: I had a desire to be something bigger, something deeper, wider. Something outside the boundaries most people are happy with. I wasn't sure what was outside, but I wanted it. I can tell you, Robert, my life has been an adventure, although not the one I expected.*

*It turns out Chrome Dome was right: I AM a dropout and a wanderer. My life has been a journey of discovery, and the shores on which I have landed have at times been strange; often enough it has seemed - and I have felt - that my life is*

*a failure. But, in the end, what can I claim? These things at least: I have traveled, I have searched, and I have found. I have, in this sense at least, 'been someone'.*

*Now, at the end of that journey, I feel the great gulf that divides me from you, my life in Australia, and the friendship we shared. You, who understood me so well, deserves more than anyone to know my story. Let this poor letter bridge the divide, and be my act of reconciliation, my last act of friendship.*

*The last time we met, in Sydney, I explained to you my reasons for wanting to leave Australia. At the time it was perfectly clear to me: I felt trapped, like I was in some giant truck that had got itself bogged and had no intention of getting itself out; I had to escape that trap, grow and establish my identity. You know how difficult that was for me, you know how my father controlled my life; at one point I was lost entirely - I lost you. I know what it is to struggle, Robert, to search when there is no clear path ahead.*

*I suppose you would have expected me to join those student protests, but despite what Chrome Dome thought, I was never simply a rebel who sought change for its own sake; in all those things we did at high school I was seeking the truth, and increasingly I have come to realize that truth does not reside in ideologies and political agendas. It has taken me a lifetime to realize that all those quests for political transformation, for artistic expression, are disguised forms of something deeper: a hunger for spiritual truth.*

*The dismissal? What can I say; it's all so long ago now. At the time I was incensed by the passivity of the population and the timidity of their leaders. Now, I occasionally catch items of news about Australia on the TV news and smile: all those failed attempts to pass a republican constitution, that blind following America into yet another war; Australia re-*

*ally is a child lacking the confidence to stand on its own two feet. Look at the vilification of Assange, the demonising of China: it's Burchett and Vietnam all over again!*

*Should I have stayed? Could I have helped build a new Australia? Australia made its decision in '75: it said 'no'. It said, 'we're happy the way we are, thanks.' Can Australia grow beyond that position? I hope so. It is full of good people - not the leaders, who continue to act like colonial serfs - no; I mean those battalions of big-hearted, unruly rascals, like the ones we knew at school. If only Australia could harness that energy: that and the spirit of its beautiful original people.*

*I went first to India; where else would you go, back then, looking for spiritual enlightenment? In an ashram at Benares, near the Ganges, I found a guru and stayed there for five years.*

*Guru Deshik helped me to understand the meaning of my encounter with the oracle, my 'near death experience' in the summer of 1971. He showed me how a lack of kindness in my upbringing had infected me with self-hatred: "you can't apply love and kindness like a dressing", he would say; "it has to come from within. You must be reborn in love to learn to love, to feel love."*

*He and I spoke about the snake that haunted my early life, and how these creatures that we fear and despise, symbols of evil in the West, have another interpretation. He explained to me that while in Christianity the destructive and chaotic force of the snake is regarded with dread, in Hinduism, destruction and decay are seen as part of a natural cycle, the necessary counterpart of creation and renewal. "You have to appreciate the role of both, at a personal and a cosmic level", he said. "Jung makes a similar point when he talks of the necessity of facing one's shadow."*

*Through him I realized that I had been given a very special gift: a second chance at life. I had let myself be imprisoned by a tyrant, and that tyrant was I: being what I believed I had to be, to please my father. All that time another part of me was lost, wandering in a desert, locked in a dungeon; all the metaphors of cruelty and containment cannot suffice. I was rescued by love and knowledge: not instructed knowledge, not the knowledge of a school, the other kind, an inner knowledge.*

*Robert, I do not have very long to live. It is some inoperable cancer. I will briefly describe the experiences that I went through in the following years.*

*After India, I traveled to Japan, where I studied Zen meditation and also learnt the trade of Japanese carpentry. This led me to America, where I became involved in building houses at communes in California and on the east coast. I became highly sought after as a teacher and practitioner of fine woodwork. The top architects all wanted me; the best bars in Toronto and Boston are fitted out with my woodwork and interior designs.*

*I established a successful business, got married and had two wonderful children who live with their mother in Connecticut. Yes, I found love! She was a real American beauty, Ivy League, a social princess. I worked so hard at that marriage; I had to make it a perfect marriage to compensate for my upbringing in a loveless one. From the outside it indeed looked perfect.*

*But for all the glamorous parties, the fame, the money, the big house, something was missing; I was living a life that wasn't mine. I learnt to tolerate my wife's politics, which were to the right of Genghis Kahn, but the turtleneck sweaters, the designer jeans and the 911 belonged to someone else. The creative success was just another mask. Deep in-*

*side I was lost; for the second time in my life I became that parrot on the tin. I had to go searching again for the truth.*

*One day, in meditation in Rhode Island, it struck me: I could no longer hear the voice that used to be my guide. Much to the distress of my family, I went traveling again. First to Delphi – you know, the sacred grove in ancient Greece where Socrates consulted the gods. I guess I was expecting to find my oracle. But you know what? I heard nothing. My voice wasn't there.*

*I then traveled through the Greek islands and ended up in Cyprus. Being damaged myself, I was drawn to this place that is also wounded and divided. All the while, I kept noticing the churches and monasteries in every village and on every hill.*

*Do you remember me telling you that I refused confirmation into the Methodist church at fourteen? Old Burncott was so disappointed - in himself, I think, for not having convinced me - and I was cocky, sure that my certainty was superior to his. At the time I saw it as a matter of honesty; only later did I see it for its true character: pride. It is not the belief that God does not exist, but the idea we are better than God, that rules the modern world. We have replaced God and so become him. What a terrible role to play!*

*I realize now, you see, that I rejected Burncott's Christianity not because it was too godly, but because God was altogether absent.*

*Anyway, gradually the idea of returning to the faith that I had rejected grew in my mind. I developed an interest in the Greek Orthodox Church: a denomination that seemed closer to its founder's principles and less secularized than the Christianity I rejected as a teenager.*

*At first, those black-robed monks with their long black beards, pacing around the village where I lived, were alien to me. The church I attended, a glittering cave full of icons, gold and incense, spoke to me in a language I could not yet understand.*

*Finally, it was the land itself that showed me my path. As I explored the island, walking amongst the ancient olive groves, the roots of the trees entwined with the rocky earth from which they grew, I heard echoes back into my deepest past, my earliest memories, of finding inanimate objects, buried in the earth, that spoke to me.*

*Then I thought: 'if inanimate things are alive, then what IS life?' and I realized that our human concept of 'aliveness' is anthropocentric; that the universe and everything in it, is alive in some other way, and that life in this total sense could best be described by the word 'God'. I made the decision then to enter this monastery, high in the Troodos Mountains of Cyprus.*

*Guess what, Robert: here in the forests, I met my oracle again! I heard once more that wonderful voice that visited me when I nearly died in the crash near Attica. It explained to me – no, it showed me – that the divisions we see in the world are illusions.*

*Have I abandoned art? No: it has transformed in me. One day I was talking to Father Demetriou about love. I told him I thought that the Greeks had the best idea about love - and most things. They knew you could put no limit on beauty, or on any of the great passions. If one god or goddess reached the limits of its dominion, they created another. That's why they had so many gods of love - love cannot be contained, it just keeps changing form.*

*I expected the Holy Father to be angry at this statement, but*



he surprised me. "Come", he said, "I want to show you something." He took me into the chapel, in which hang numerous paintings of the saints: icons. "You know, we believe that the icon is not just a painting: it is a window into heaven. The frame of the icon limits the view yet within that frame there is, strangely, an infinity." The Father's gentle message was clear to me: there do have to be limits; we do not possess absolute power. I found my limit in the frame - the frame of the icon.

You may be surprised to see where I ended up, but you see, I wandered many lands until I found myself on a shore very like that on which I started. Cyprus is warm and dry and full of mysteries, like the Mallee. Flowers grow from the stones as they do in Attica. The ancientness of the earth speaks to me as it did there.

Once you told me that I had to rediscover my voice. That journey took me many years, and to many places, until I realized that it was not the voice of Socrates I must relearn, but a deeper voice that exists within all of us: a voice that is ancient and true, and entirely lacking the anger, pride, and cruelty - not too strong a word - of the person that I had been. My father, you see, used his intelligence as a weapon; I have had to learn to use it as a source of love.

Robert, I am tired, and I have said all that I can. I felt that I owed you an explanation: for my silence, for the pain I put you through when we were young. Do you remember the times I confronted old 'Snake' Cutting, wearing some outlandish parody of a military uniform? Or that time I walked out of the French class singing 'Le Marseilles'? Do you remember how we stopped the singing of the school song, old Chrome Dome's eyeballs nearly popping out of his red face? Our attempt to wrap Attica's war memorial, the day we stood on the bar at The Criterion and roared our young hearts out?

Robert Bradley

*Sometimes my heart aches for that past, when we were young, foolish perhaps, angry certainly, but full of life and love. Do not regret those times, Robert; do not be embarrassed or ashamed. Life had us in its hold and took us where she would. We may have taken some wrong paths, but that is humanity's plight.*

*Did you become a writer as you had planned? If so, one day you can write these things down and tell my story, our story; perhaps as you once proposed, you can be my Plato, if you wish to take on that name and play that role: my best and truest friend.*

*Evening is settling on the valley, and I can hear the scops-owl calling to his mate. Let this one last call reach you, across the valley of time, my distant friend.*

*Your friend, Socrates*

*PS: My brother Benjamin has a box of my old photographs from the Attica days; he won't know what to do with them, but you may; perhaps you could arrange to have them exhibited in some way, in my old hometown, in gratitude for all it taught me – if you think they are worth the trouble. S. S.*

*PPS: Don't forget to offer a cock to Asclepius.*



It is a warm spring day in the Troodos Mountains in central Cyprus. Solomon Smith leaves the little village of Platres and enters the cool forest, climbing the path that leads up the mountain, stepping over the roots of the trees that grow out of the stones of the riverbank, moss clinging to rocks and trees alike as his hands graze the

sides of the rocky path.

Sunlight splashes reflections across limpid pools of an endless sky, merging with the depths of the water. Dead leaves accumulate along the sides of the stream, forming the mulch from which fresh, wet, green plants spring in the clear waters. In the distance he hears the murmur of waterfalls. Shadows dance on the rocks. Stone and wood, light and shadow, decay and life become indistinguishable in the symphony of the moment.

All around him, Solomon sees the roots breaking apart the rocks for their sustenance just as they, too, over long years, will break down to form new rocks and earth; the two - the living and the was-and-will-be-living - in an endless embrace.

Sitting on a gnarled tree root, Solomon starts to day-dream, just as he did many years before in the embrace of a willow tree on the banks of a great river.

Suddenly, she is there with him, the dark-haired girl, the girl from the couch when he was four. In the voice that he has known all his life, she says: "Solomon, look at the stones in the river. All shapes. All sizes. All colors. Do you see them?"

"Yes."

"Hold out your hands." Into his cupped hands she places stones of many colors, large and small, rough and smooth. "So many stones, of all shapes and colors, but one pair of hands: do you see?"

"Yes", said Solomon.

"Do you see?"

"All are one."

"Yes, Solomon: All are one."

Solomon stands up. He walks down the path and towards the sound of distant bells.



## CHAPTER 17



# The Package

“THAT MUST BE IT”, says Benjamin, as I pull a dust covered cardboard box from under his bed; it is two months after I receive Socrates’ final letter. The yellow dust is deep and fine: 40 years’ worth, I reckon.

I have never been to Socrates’ brother’s flat. A small room jammed with books, records, and magazines, filling the shelving on every wall, in piles across the floor: a hoarder’s house. I see he likes occult magazines, books about the Second World War, and Gustav Mahler.

There are school trophies on the mantle, none of them his; I see with surprise several of Socrates’ debating cups. Beside them, photos: a glamorous looking Harmony, captured at around 40 by a good photographer (Socrates? No; he would have been too young, and this shows the keen eye of an admirer); Clifford, looking satisfied and proud, swelling out a barrister’s gown.

And a portrait of Socrates, as I never knew him: a cheeky young boy, perhaps ten, crunching on an apple, juice dribbling down his chin. There are no group photos, I notice, just this collection of individuals in separate frames.

“So: this is it?”

“Yes, I think this must be what he means. He left these with me when he left for overseas in around - 1978? Said they were important to him.”

Benjamin helps me lift the small, heavy box, sealed with brown tape. On the side, in large capital letters:

SOLOMON. ATTICA PHOTOS.

“Take the box home, Robert”, says Benjamin. “Don’t open it and make a mess here.”

Given the state of his flat this seems an odd request, but I take the unopened box out to my car. Perhaps he does not wish to release the memories it contains. The next day I drive back to Melbourne, the precious cargo nestled on the passenger seat beside me.

When I open the box the following day, I find its contents are neatly arranged in two sections. At one end are half a dozen identical loose-leaf binders with green plastic covers. These contain hundreds of 35mm negatives, color and black and white, filed in strips on pages of transparent paper.

In the other half is a pile of thick cardboard envelopes that had once contained photographic paper. In these I find a large number of prints, 8”x10”, a mix of color and black and white. Amongst this pile there is a card with a motto written on it, in Socrates’ handwriting:

Teach it AND LOVE IT.  
Preach it AND FEEL IT.  
Display it AND UNDERSTAND IT.

At first, I think the prints are rejects, or damaged. I open envelope after envelope: in every one, the photos are blurry and unclear, under or over-exposed, vague in subject matter and confusing in composition. I struggle to see the value in them; there are none of the dramatic landscapes, the picturesque street scenes that I had expected. I had hoped to see the striking, colorful form of the old pumping engine. I am puzzled and disappointed.

I lay a selection of prints that Socrates had labeled 'BEST' out on a table, gaze one more time in frustration at the puzzling images and go to bed.

When I look at them again next morning I am just as confused. Here, an out of focus fragment of a building, or a tree; there, a blurry shape in deep shadow; in others, an image hopelessly over exposed into blinding areas of silvery white. What is this? What has Socrates done?

It is three days later that I pass by the table in the late afternoon, when a soft light diffuses the room through yellow curtains. Out of the corner of my eye I see the images jumbled on the table, and it strikes me: the photographs are moving! I approach the images. They do seem to be dancing. Is it just the light? No, it is the images themselves. I move closer. Seen in this light, at an angle, avoiding any attempt to 'understand' them, the images come alive to my eyes, each one a little abstract composition of contrasts.

I can half recognize the Attica I know, but it is Attica seen through a screen, transformed into a play of light and dark, sharpness and blur, clarity and mystery, with occasions of deep melancholy and moments of transcendent lightness. All the details are there but altered so they become something new. It is like looking through a window to another world, composed of light, space, and

color. It is art.

A shiver shoots through me. I remember a warm spring afternoon in the park opposite his house; Socrates holding his camera, saying: “the world gets changed in here”; his enigmatic, knowing smile. It suddenly hits me: *Socrates is not trying to depict the world in these photographs; he is interrogating it for its meaning.*

Display it AND UNDERSTAND IT.

I know then: these images have to be shown.



I have never had anything to do with art exhibitions, so I have no idea how difficult it will be to get Socrates’ work displayed. I telephone the municipal art gallery in Attica, the one housed in the old Burley house that Socrates and I used to pass on the way to Lock Island.

“I don’t really think this is our thing”, the curator tells me; “I mean, he isn’t a known artist, and we like to show work that has some relevance to current issues. Anyway, our program is fully booked for the next eighteen months.”

I next contact the only commercial gallery that I can find on the Internet. “Yes, we could exhibit your friend’s work. The standard gallery fee is nine hundred dollars per week; however, we would need to assess the work to see if it is commercial enough to generate sales.” How do artists get their work shown, I start to wonder?

In May I make the long drive to Attica, entering the town



through those S-bends where Socrates nearly lost his life. I have not been back for twenty years; the town has mushroomed, spreading out along Barton Avenue to 15th Street and beyond. Burley College is still there, as is the Coral Sea fish shop. The old Smith house is gone, replaced by a medical centre. And there are different, newer types of development: shopping malls, supermarkets, cinemas, and an indoor swimming complex. The town has grown outwards, yet I find a comforting familiarity in Barton Avenue, its wide central lawns, the churches on the street corners, that regular and repetitive walk that I used to make from my house to the centre of town.

During the drive it has occurred to me that I should find a place to show Socrates' work that is not an art gallery: that would fit his contempt for institutions. After putting my things in my room at the Imperial Hotel, I drive back along Barton Avenue to the old Methodist church. Socrates and I attended youth club dances there, and I remember the time I saw Gough Whitlam give his speech. Perhaps the hall could be the venue for the exhibition? But the church is no longer a church, and the old hall has been replaced by the concrete and steel headquarters of an employment organization.

What about the Carnegie Library? That was the place where Socrates read the books of Greek philosophy that informed his actions. I am relieved to find that the building is still there, with its stucco tower, next to Clifford Smith's old offices. These are still occupied by lawyers, I see.

When I enter the library, it becomes clear that this is no venue for an exhibition. I have forgotten how small it is; there is not enough wall space for any kind of display. I wander among the few remaining shelves of books; most of the room is now taken up with computer terminals.

"Do you happen to have a book called 'The Last Days of

Socrates', by Plato?" I ask the librarian.

"I don't think so, let me check; no, we don't, but we could have it sent up by courier from Bendigo. You could have it next week."

"Nothing by any of the Greek philosophers?"

"Hmmm. Well, we do have the 'Clash of the Titans' videogame."

Where else? There is the school, of course, but I can't stomach the thought of that confrontation, Socrates' radical works in that same dark hall where we challenged the system.

I start to think about more creative and radical ways to show the work. What about projecting the images onto the sides of buildings, as I have seen done elsewhere? No, that would destroy their intimate quality. Set up a marquee on the lawns of Barton Avenue? Too casual. Show them in one of the old Burley-era pump houses near the river? Too dirty.

Nothing jells. Lying on my bed back at the Imperial, my thoughts return to the gallery in the old Burley house. Socrates deserves to be there, I think. The town owes it to him: the venue for his final performance.

It is not far from the hotel to the gallery. It is a crisp, sunny autumn day and I decide to walk. Strolling across the green lawn of the gallery, I look for the bright colored shapes of the old pumping engine, but it has disappeared. A new gallery building has been built next to the house, and beside it a performing arts centre. It's the Attica Regional Arts Complex now.

I lay out the prints on the curator's workroom table. "These images are interesting, though . . ." she says, shuffling through the pile. "We could possibly give you a slot

in our community gallery; it's in the old ballroom in the basement of the Burley house."

We go and look at the space. It's a long room, with a sprung ballroom floor that is slightly bowed. It has a quirky quality that I like, but it is isolated.

"Do many people come down here?"

"Of course." Yet as we walk up the stairs and back into the gleaming white halls of the new gallery, I see crowds of people milling around the artworks. There was no one in the community gallery. Still, it's a space and it's available the following January.

"Have you thought about how you would present them?" asks the curator. "What size you would print them, and on what paper? Would you frame them, or just pin the prints to the walls? You will also need to make a selection; have you thought about organizing the work into themes?" I haven't thought about any of this.

As I walk back out through the foyer between the old house and the new gallery, I notice a tall, thin man with groomed grey hair, chatting to a couple of well-dressed women. He looks familiar. I wait a moment, and when he is alone, approach him.

"Excuse me, aren't you Eden Young?"

Eden is ten years older than me. When he stood for parliament in 1970, he was an adult and I was a school-boy. Now he is an old man, long retired; I am an old man too, it occurs to me, with discomfort.

Over coffee in the gallery café I explain about Socrates' photographs, my visit to Attica, my search for an exhibition space. Eden remembers Socrates' dad clearly. "I got along with him well, really; despite the things he is supposed to have done, I found him a charming man." His memories of Socrates are less confident; "Yes, I remember he had a son. He was part of his campaign back in 1970. Ha! Yes, that's right, I remember old Win Burstall

found out that he was in some radical student group and brought that up. But I don't remember meeting him. So: he was a photographer?"

"Actually", he says later, "I am a bit embarrassed by the muck raking that went on back in those days. I would do things differently now. Anyway, I am out of that game, at least in an active sense. I got out ten years ago when I could see the party moving too far to the right. I'll see what I can do about your exhibition."

Two days later, back in Melbourne I get a call from the gallery curator. They suddenly have a spot in the main gallery for January.



Who will come to the opening of Socrates' exhibition? Who will leave their air-conditioned homes on a hot Attica night? Will anyone remember him? And how can I explain these images to those who did not know him; what can I tell them about my friend, Socrates?

I watch the small crowd gather. There is the curator, and a few other gallery staff. A city councilor who always attends openings is introduced to me. A clutch of opening night regulars huddle in a corner. None of the old gang has shown up. I had hoped to see Joy Boy or Itch; perhaps at a long shot, Tools. Even Nathaniel Chandler. But no.

A girl sets out wine glasses on a table. I stand nervously nearby, concerned at the scarcity of people and the lack of familiar faces. Benjamin, I know, will not be there; his health has been poor, and he could not manage the bus trip from Adelaide.

Finally, across the room, a face I know: Eden Smith. With him, a middle-aged black man I do not recognize.

A few more people wander in. There are now about thirty people in the room, chatting in groups or looking at the photographs. On the advice of a photographer friend, I have chosen twenty images, had them printed larger than Socrates' proofs, and mounted in elegant black frames. They look fantastic: grainy, contrasty black and whites, brilliant color prints, vibrant and strong, with recognizable detail emerging from fields of jet black and overexposed white.

"Can you tell me about these?" asks a twenty-something girl with long blond hair and a camera. "I'm from The Daily Cultivator". I explain the origins of the photographs, how they had been created by a young man that I knew, a troubled young man, in Attica in the summer of 1971; I describe how I discovered the photographs and arranged to have them printed for the exhibition. "They're 'different', aren't they" she says. "What's so special about them?"

That same question had occupied my mind as I prepared the notes for my speech. The curator comes up to me: "I think the crowd's as big as it's going to get. We should make a start."

The curator calls the people together, says a few words, and hands over to me. I have never felt so alone.

"Someone asked me a moment ago", I begin, "'what is so special about these photographs?' I could simply say: 'they are beautiful', and I honestly think that would be sufficient. Yet saying these photographs are 'beautiful' raises a whole lot of complexities that troubled the person who

made them. Solomon Smith studied art at a time when the whole notion of ‘beauty’ was being thrown out; art in his lifetime became, in his view, materialistic, prosaic, and concerned with trivialities. He became so distressed by this that finally he abandoned art altogether and devoted his life to something that he considered greater, the foundation of art and of life itself: the spirit, the landscape of the soul.

When I look at these photographs, I see the complex, caring and often awkward personality of my friend, Solomon Smith. That is their importance to me. Our friendship awakened new insights in me and made me see the world anew; he bestowed on me his gifts of endless curiosity and a willingness to question accepted truths.

It is easy to belittle those who are different; those who dismissed Socrates as a naïve troublemaker did not know him as I did. He earned his nickname for his persistent – and to many annoying – habit of questioning everything he encountered. Yet I remember the sensitive, quiet boy sitting in the near-empty town library, reading books of Greek philosophy that must have had very few borrowers.

When I look at these photographs, I think of these things. But for you, who see them for the first time, and did not know Socrates, what can I tell you?

I would say: look at these photographs and you will see the pure light, the true color, the absolute form, behind the myriad partial and unsatisfactory things we see around us. Behind the facade of Attica, here is its ideal counterpart, the true form of the place, the real Athens to which it aspires.

Perhaps his vision was too bright; most of us prefer the shade to exposing ourselves to the pitiless light of truth. Socrates knew pain and was not afraid to confront the dark side of life. In these photographs the truth is exposed, truth as Socrates Smith saw it, limitless, divine and available, open to those with the heart to try and willing hands to receive.”

“Robert, there’s someone here who knew your father”, the curator confides in me.

“G’day”, says the aboriginal man next to Eden. “I’m Nathan. Your dad gave me my first job, at the packing company in Paradise. It’s because of him I became an accountant.”

We shake hands.

“I didn’t know much about my dad’s work.”

“He used to talk about you a lot, don’t you worry.” I smile. “And he knew that you had a friend who was in trouble. Your dad and William used to talk about him.”

“What did they say?”

“Well, I think uncle William’s take on it was that Socrates needed to face his fears.”

“That’s exactly what he did.”

A waiter walks past with glasses of wine on a tray. “I’ll have one of those, young lady” says Eden, who I notice has already had quite a few.

“What became of William, Nathan?” I ask.

“Uncle William? He passed away not long after Socrates left Attica.”

“Really? He didn’t seem that old.”

“No, but black men back then only lived to fifty.”

“Any news of Clifford Smith?” Eden asks.

“I went to Sydney to give evidence at the Royal Commission.”

“Did you! That must have been difficult.”

“Not really. I did it for my mum.” I think of that night at the scout hall, my mother’s earnest and determined face, scoutmaster Paul at his desk in that stuffy back room. “Anyway, it was a bit of a non-event. He’s dead now of course, and they couldn’t stick anything on him. When he was in Gosford, there were rumors, suspicions, allegations, but never any real proof. Maybe that’s why he moved to Attica, maybe not. The only one who could tell

us is that small boy, the one in the tent.”

Just then, the curator whispers in my ear: “You’ve sold something!” I look across at the wall. I have almost forgotten we put prices on the prints. Sure enough: a red spot. A short man with wispy grey hair hovers nearby. I leave Eden and Nathan talking.

“You won’t remember me. I was a couple of years below you; I remember you and Socrates. Socrates was always nice to me.” I remember! The small fair-haired boy from my first day at school! His name is Ross. “I was always a bit jealous of you, actually. I just used to hang around.” We look at the pictures together. “It takes me back”, he says. “Happy memories. When we were young.”

Ross grins and a vision leaps up at me, of the town that hovers behind Socrates images: fresh, white, clean, like the mind of a young boy, driving around the town in his dad’s Austin, his mother’s roast dinner waiting for him at home. Is that what Ross means? I see dark shadows too, all the darker for the brilliant white and green of the sparkling town. I see a night out in the desert, still and dark, campfires, and shadows inside a glowing blue tent. But there is no fear now in those shadows, they have become reconciled to the white walls and the snakes sleep peacefully in the drowsy alleyways. I shake Ross’s hand and rejoin Eden and Nathan.

“You know”, says Eden, “I am embarrassed to say it, but back in 1970, my old political mentor, Winnie Burstall, wanted to use those allegations against Clifford in the by-election. I refused to do it; I simply didn’t believe they were true. I guess I made the wrong decision.”

“Clifford could talk, though”, I say after a pause. “I remember hearing him give a speech at the scout hall, just after I arrived in Attica. He asked some pretty challeng-



ing questions.”

“Like what?”

“His view seemed to be that Australia was at a turning point; it had to decide which way it wanted to go. He was asking what kind of country are we: are we going to stand on our own feet and do the right thing? Foreign wars, land rights, the Republic; sometimes I wonder if we’ve come any further since 1970!”

“How far do you think we’ve come, Nathan?” Eden is curious.

“Well, Paradise Mission is gone. No one’s living in humpies over there anymore. I guess that’s progress.

“There’ve been some good things. Uncle William lived just long enough to see Gough Whitlam pour the sand through Vincent Lingiari’s fingers. I saw Keating at Redfern and I heard Rudd’s apology. I was able to go to university.

“But you know what? Paradise might have gone, and we live in houses, but on the cheap side of Attica there’s an ice epidemic, STDs, and a bucket load of family violence. People are dying from alcohol, drugs, poor nutrition and suicide.

“There’s a lot of pain. That pain goes deep, it goes to the destruction of our culture. That hasn’t been faced honestly. I think that’s something your Socrates understood.”

“I think so”, I venture.

“But what I don’t agree with is his strategy” Nathan continues. “I mean, he was unhappy with Australia; it failed to meet his expectations, so he left. But the rest of us stayed and kept working at it.”

“Well I don’t know”, says Eden. “Socrates wasn’t a doer; he had a talent for asking questions, and he used it, and I can respect that.”

Eden looks around for another drink. He catches the waiter’s eye.

“When I was at school with Socrates, we did this kind of protest: we distributed leaflets and persuaded all of the students to refuse to sing the school song.”

“That’s right! I remember! The Little Red Book! That’s how Winnie Burstall got that idea for our campaign in 1970!”

“Is that right? Anyway, I didn’t realize it at the time, I mean, I thought it was a bit of fun, but nothing was just fun for Socrates; what he was on about was: if you have a symbol, like a song, then you should be damn sure it actually expresses something you believe in. And that means you have to examine the symbol, what it says, but also your own heart, to see if you actually live up to the ideal.”

“That’s why I left politics.” Eden sways a little and waves his half empty glass in my direction.

“Really?”

“It was after Tampa, when John Howard sent out those anti-terrorism fridge magnets saying: ‘We are a welcoming country!’ That lost it for me, total self-delusion, turning back refugees with one hand, claiming to be kind hearted with the other. That’s not the country I believe in. I followed Malcolm Frazer and quit the party I had belonged to for thirty years.

“I’ll tell you one thing that hasn’t changed.” Eden is expansive with drink and on a roll. “You talk about honesty, and the truth behind things. Well, this year is the seventieth anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I’ve seen a lot of reports and read a lot of news stories about how sad it was and how much suffering there was, but not one, not a single expression that maybe we did something wrong, something terrible.

“And you know why? Because we are beholden to America; not just as part of an alliance, or some military debt, but because we were complicit in that act, that horrifying demonstration that showed America - and therefore ‘us’ - to be powerful beyond all nations. We enjoy the benefits of that power. From our point of view, it’s a good thing

that thousands of women and children got burned alive.”

The tremor in Eden’s voice reminds me of Socrates.

“It all goes back to our origins. We were created by the British Empire and when that collapsed, we joined the American. Australia is a creature of Empire, and empires are essentially racist, because colonized peoples must be inferior if they are to be dominated. That’s the truth we never face. That’s why we incarcerate aboriginals, or put refugees in concentration camps, or support dictators in the Middle East; that’s why we keep on going into foreign wars. And you know what? You can’t talk about it. It’s a great big dark silence.”

“That’s odd”, I say. “It’s like an echo.”

“What do you mean?”

“Socrates once wrote an essay saying exactly the same thing.”

“Now”, says Eden, after the waiter has yet again refilled his glass, “tell me about this.”

On the wall I have placed a poster-sized duplicate of Socrates’ mottoes:

Teach it AND LOVE IT.

Preach it AND FEEL IT.

Display it AND UNDERSTAND IT.

Eden listens intently as I explain. “I found this in a box along with the photographs. I think it means, ‘if you are going to do something, don’t just go through the motions, actually care about it. It’s about authenticity.”

“Well, I think it’s about examining yourself. This (Eden points an emphatic finger at the mottoes) is the most important thing in this exhibition. I tell you something: self-examination is about the hardest thing for people to do.”

“Who said that”, asks Nathan. “Our Socrates or the an-

cient Greek one?"

"Eden!" I cry, "Eden Young, the Australian philosopher!" We laugh.

"What do you think it means, Nathan?"

"I think it's about love."

"Love?" says Eden.

"And staying away from snakes", I add.

"Snakes?" says Eden, puzzled.

"Ha!" Says Nathan. "That makes me think of uncle William and his stories about the rainbow serpent. You know what that old fella always used to say to me? 'You wanta know? You gotta ASK!'"

We laugh at his mimicry of William's emphatic delivery. Eden raises his glass: "Socrates would have agreed with that."

I am thinking about a sweet girl called Marteen, and my mother sitting in Harmony Smith's kitchen, and my dad driving the Cambridge to the packing shed; I feel the hot wind of a distant February, I feel the freshness, the expectancy of a new boy walking into the wack and pummel of a country schoolyard.

He is standing there, staring at me with his pale blue eyes. And he is smiling.

"Yes", I say, "Socrates would have agreed with that."



I have requested that the gallery's 1970 piece by Christo be included in the exhibit, the one Socrates mischievously showed me in the back room in '72.

"Socrates admired that work", I had explained to the cura-

tor. "I think it was one of the things that inspired him to be an artist; it expresses many of the same ideas he had."

So, it has been brought out and placed against a sidewall of the gallery, in a place of its own. There it sits, an enigmatic oblong of dark cloth trussed up in string. Due to its value – it is now by far the most expensive item in the gallery's collection – it is protected by a length of crimson rope strung between decorative bollards.

I look over at it now and notice that it is being studied by a man in police uniform. A moment later the curator comes over to me with a concerned look on her face.

"Robert, I know this is ridiculous, but someone's phoned in a bomb scare. The police think the Christo is a bomb!"

I laugh: "how fantastic! I wonder if Socrates phoned from heaven?" My smile vanishes as two men in heavy flak jackets walk in and start to tape off the part of the gallery where the package lays. A policeman in a flak jacket walks to the middle of the room, calls for attention, and asks everyone to leave the gallery and assemble in the foyer.

"But it's a Christo!" says the curator in exasperation.

"I don't care what it is", says the man in the flak jacket. "It looks like a bomb and we're going to defuse it."

"But it's an artwork!"

"That may be, but it has the appearance of an explosive device."

"It might be a fake", adds his sidekick. "Made to look like an artwork."

"Clever", says the first. "These guys are clever."

"But they hate modern art!" I break in; "I mean ISIS."

"Of course they do! So maybe they target art galleries!"

"This is ridiculous", explodes the curator. "You can't destroy a hundred-thousand-dollar artwork because it looks like a package!"

"Maybe the artist should have thought of that. Is he here?"

"Of course not; he's dead."

"Ah", says the sidekick; "That's the way most of them end up, terrorists."

"He wasn't a terrorist, he was a . . . a . . . conceptualist!" I scream.

"Anyway, not a good idea to create something that looks like a bomb."

"It doesn't look like a bomb - it looks like a package!"

"A package bomb", suggests the sidekick.

"Exactly", says flak man. "He should have considered."

"But that was his art", I plead: "to wrap things. He came and wrapped a beach near Sydney once."

"Did he, now?" asks flak. "When was this? Did he get permission for that? There might be a report. Perhaps it's linked to this incident!"

"What incident?"

"Perhaps he left packages in different places as a multiple attack."

"But this was years ago! He's done work all around the world!"

"Just my point. An international network, multiple attacks . . . What was his name?"

"Christo."

"Doesn't sound Muslim", says sidekick. "Christian fundamentalist?"

"Could be one of those Filipino bomb makers."

"I think he was Bulgarian . . ." ponders the curator.

"Enough said!", says flak. "You may think we take this too seriously. But our country is under attack from these fundamentalists and we've got plenty of them right here in Attica. All on temporary protection visas out in the community unsupervised; no jobs, government handouts and nothing to do. Fights down in Peartree Mall: we get callouts all the time."

A third policeman comes over to tell flak and his mate that no secondary devices have been found in a search of the gallery.

"Of course not!" cries the curator. "There's not even one device!"

"We can't be too careful", says flak. "So what's the technician's decision? 'Safe in place' or take to a cook off?"

"Safe in place. Here he is now."

A man in an enormous bulbous green suit, with a huge padded neck protector and a helmet like a space-man shuffles past. From the foyer, we watch as he kneels next to the package. From pockets in his suit he takes various instruments and passes them over the package. I see him poking the package with some kind of stick.

"That doesn't look very scientific", I comment.

"He knows what he's doing", says flak.

There is a chattering of talk on flak's helmet radio. "Yep. Yep. OK. If that's his decision."

The technician in the bomb suit shuffles out of the gallery. A dozen firemen run through the foyer in full emergency rescue gear. A mountain of foam is heaped on the artwork from twelve fire extinguishers.

Watching Christo's 'package' enveloped in foam, sagging down into a shapeless mass, I conclude that the evening, for me, is ruined. Ruined by the very things that Socrates hated most: ignorance and blind authority.

Eden and Nathan make their apologies and leave. In a rage I wander over to the soggy remains of the artwork, remembering the first time I had seen it, in the company of Socrates. As I pick at the sad, damp, torn fabric I notice something sticking out from inside. It looks like a piece of stiff board. I tug at it and pull it out. On a large piece of soggy cardboard is written, in straggly red letters:

Robert Bradley

*THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!*

“The bastard!” I cry; “the bastard!” I jump up, desperate to tell someone. But there is no one: no one to witness this last act of Socrates. Just me.

Did Christo put this sign into his package? No: I recognize that scrawly handwriting. I have been the accomplice in the last performance of my friend Socrates.

I run out of the gallery, shoving the sign into the hands of the surprised curator.

“What’s this?” she asks.

“A sign!”

I run down the gallery steps into a hot Attica night. It’s 1970; I am seventeen; a wall of air hits me; I smell the green grass, the rising heat from the cracked pavements, and I cry:

“Yes, Socrates; YES!”

THE END



The Attica Agricultural High School  
(Burley College)  
School Song

Attica, blest by the sunshine,  
Your bounty grows year by year;  
On plains where once wandered black men,  
A civilisation we shall rear;  
*Flowers will bloom in the desert:*  
*Water and progress, Attica!*

Attica, home of the heroes,  
Whose likes we may yet see again;  
Jason, Pericles and 'Memnon,  
In new lands your faces shall be seen;  
*A bright new Athens we are building:*  
*We wonder at you, Attica!*

Attica, pride of the Empire,  
In battle your sons shall be brave;  
Like scions of Eton and Harrow,  
Their King and country they shall serve;  
*The sun shall not set on your glory,*  
*Your faraway son, Attica!*

1928

## La Marseillaise

Allons enfants de la Patrie  
Le jour de gloire est arrivé !  
Contre nous de la tyrannie  
L'étendard sanglant est levé  
Entendez-vous dans nos campagnes  
Mugir ces féroces soldats?  
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras.  
Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes!

Aux armes citoyens  
Formez vos bataillons  
Marchons, marchons  
Qu'un sang impur  
Abreuve nos sillons

Tremblez, tyrans et vous perfides  
L'opprobre de tous les partis  
Tremblez! vos projets parricides  
Vont enfin recevoir leurs prix!  
Tout est soldat pour vous combattre  
S'ils tombent, nos jeunes héros  
La France en produit de nouveaux,  
Contre vous tout prêts à se battre.

Aux armes citoyens  
Formez vos bataillons  
Marchons, marchons  
Qu'un sang impur  
Abreuve nos sillons

Jim Jones at Botany Bay

Oh listen for a moment lads and hear me tell my tale,  
How o'er the sea from England's shore  
I was compelled to sail;  
The jury says 'he's guilty sir' and says the judge, says he:  
'For life Jim Jones I'm sending you  
across the stormy sea'.

The waves blew high upon the deck and pirates came along,  
But the soldiers on our convict ship were full 500 strong;  
They opened fire and quickly drove that pirate ship away;  
I'd rather joined that pirate ship than come to  
New South Wales.

For day and night the irons clang and like poor galley slaves,  
We toil and toil and when we die  
must fill dishonoured graves;  
But bye and bye I'll break my chains, into the bush I'll go;  
And join the brave bushrangers there,  
Jack Donahou and Co.

And some dark night when everything is silent in the town,  
I'll kill the tyrants one and all and shoot the floggers down;  
I'll give the law a little shock, remember what I say:  
They'll yet regret they sent Jim Jones in chains to  
Botany Bay.

## The Isle de France

Oh, the sky was dark and the night advanced  
When a convict came to the Isle de France;  
And round his leg was a ring and chain  
And his country was of the Shamrock Green.

“I am a Shamrock”, the convict cried,  
“That has been tossed on the ocean wide.  
For being unruly, I do declare,  
I was doomed to transport these seven long years.

“When six of them they were up and past  
I was coming home to make up the last.  
When the winds did blow and the seas did roar  
They cast me here on this foreign shore.”

So then the coastguard he played a part  
And with some brandy he cheered the convict’s heart:  
“Although the night is far advanced  
You shall find a friend on the Isle de France.”

“God bless the coastguard,” this convict cried,  
“For he’s saved my life from the ocean wide.  
And I’ll drink his health in a flowing glass,  
And here’s success to the Isle of France.”

God Save the Queen!

God save our gracious Queen!

Long live our noble Queen!

God save the Queen!

Send her victorious,

Happy and glorious,

Long to reign over us:

God save the Queen!

O Lord our God arise,

Scatter her enemies,

And make them fall:

Confound their politics,

Frustrate their knavish tricks,

On Thee our hopes we fix:

God save us all.

Thy choicest gifts in store,

On her be pleased to pour;

Long may she reign:

May she defend our laws,

And ever give us cause,

To sing with heart and voice,

God save the Queen!





“Awesome.”

Your purchase of this book supports

