

1862



A STORY BY C J HALBARD

Tempest Bay on the south coast of Wellington, New Zealand is the end of the earth: a quiet place filled with secrets and strange dreams. People come here to go mad, sometimes. But for others it's where freedom begins.

For a short break from our noisy busy world, 1862 is designed to be experienced in less than an hour. If you enjoy it, please share with a friend.

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Project Tempest

C. J. Halbard

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“Madness, the object of my studies, was, until now, considered a mere island in an ocean of reason; I am beginning to suspect that it is a continent.”

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis

1.

From A Dark Sleep

He dreamt of nightmares in the ocean depths and a pale burning sun and a long lost conversation beneath an apple tree. Her voice touched his face but she wasn't there, she never was, and he awoke thrashing with a pressure in his chest like a fist squeezing his heart.

He was on the floor. The brass frame bed was a tangle of sweated blankets above him. He lay there feeling the rough wood grain of the floorboards against the back of his skull, breathing shallow and fast then deeper and slower until finally he could let air into his ribcage without it exploding.

He had a choice, of course. A decision every morning when he woke like this. The machinery of his body was just that, machinery, and it could be switched off. Like a ship's boiler or the coal feed of a locomotive he could cease stoking it, could allow the bellows to dwindle, feel the circulation of air and the pistons of his limbs slow down, down, down as the fire dimmed, as energy turned to inertia, and then at some blessed point it would all simply... stop.

Today? Finally?

But there was bacon frying somewhere below him in the hotel. The piss-pot was seven feet away in the corner of the room. And he was finally in New Zealand, within reach of the elusive hope that plagued his heart.

If a man advances confidently, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

On the morning of September twenty first 1862 he got off his arse, pissed in the corner, hauled on his travelling clothes and advanced downstairs, determined to look the uncommon hour in the eye and make it blink first.

**

The dining room like the rest of the Criterion Hotel was made from bare hardwood framing with no luxuries. The smell of bacon mixed with some type of vegetable stew. Seven people, four men, two women, and a girl, were lined up or eating at the bench tables. A few looked like goldfield types. Heads turned—people saw a tall well-built man with a handlebar moustache and milky eyes—and he nodded as he made his way to the serving line.

The bacon was good and crispy but the stew put a rock in his stomach. As he dabbed at his face afterwards he saw the girl slide her plate under the bench where a pug dog trotted over and began to gobble. He winked, a co-conspirator. She giggled. He felt a smile in his chest.

When he stepped out of the Criterion and into the New Zealand sun the wind caught him hard. Cold and chill but a clear sky. The last breath of winter and the rebirth of spring on the southern ocean.

He'd arrived late last night on the steamship and this was his first real look at Wellington. To him the town felt like a muddy child trying on its first suit of clothes. Clusters of wooden buildings sheltered beneath a ring of naked hills, with rough tracks and dirt roads threaded through. Not far removed from the whaling station, native village, and New Zealand Company

land swindle it had recently been. There were signs of greater ambition though. Two brick churches underway down the road. To the north an English garden taking shape.

The air smelt of salt and seagulls. He found a pleasant ramshackle quality in the arrangement of the houses on the hills. But there was something else here, too. Something behind the appearance of a frontier town. As he'd journeyed south from Hongkong and then Sydney he'd felt it approaching all the while, and his dreams on the ship had grown more vivid with every league. A sense of masks being removed and illusions stripped.

Using a map bought from the hotel proprietor he made his way towards the harbour shoreline past a spot named Kebbell's Mill. The people out and about were mostly hard-arse settler types with a sprinkling of genteel folk. Their clothes looked well-worn and most of the men were without hats. He was interested to see some Māori in rough trousers and travelling jackets. He understood little of their nature and had expected grass skirts.

He reached the shore road and surveyed the inner harbour. To the north along Lambton Quay was a line of single room wooden shops and businesses with signs announcing baking, millinery, tailoring, shoeing, gunsmithing, and the like. Even a lawyer, god help them.

To the south was more tangled, a motley set of wharves, jetties, and sheds that looked halfway to smuggler's dens. There were few ships at anchor: fishing boats, a pair of clippers, and the steamer that had brought him from Sydney via Auckland. It was drawn up by the largest wharf with longshoremen unloading supplies, mostly flour sacks. He imagined business would pick up through spring.

A strange thought came upon him: that this was the furthest south he had ever been, and reckoned from the place of his birth he now stood at the end of the world. The end, perhaps, or a new beginning.

**

He found the station some way past a boatbuilder's. A small island, an outcrop really, joined to the shoreline by a jetty and the beginnings of infill. On it sat a cluster of storage sheds and a house built from dark timber. It looked to have had a stake fence around it but on the shore side this had been cut down and replaced with wire. Somehow, to his eyes, the house seemed to be watching him.

He made his way to the jetty and crossed. The timbers creaked under his weight. The water below looked freezing cold. Crabs scuttled on the seabed.

Screeching from inside the house. A man and a woman tearing into one another with full-throat fury. It sounded like wild cats if wild cats could throw crockery.

Another man lounged in the yard. Lean and squirrely with an ugly nose and the attitude of someone who did tough work for a living.

If there's a woman being treated badly I've a mind to interfere, he said.

The man spat.

Cuddy Plumber, Cuddy said, speaking with a slight impediment. Believe me she don't need your help. What's your business?

Something smashed to pieces inside the house. Disturbed seagulls rose from the roof of a storage shed.

I need to reach Tempest Bay, across the hills on the south coast, he said.

Nothing in Tempest Bay, Cuddy said. 'Cept tempests.

An expedition ship named the Starry Voyager ran aground there forty one days ago, he said. Nearly all hands lost. I think you know this. My job is to find the survivors and learn what happened. What truly happened. And I'm not a man to be mistaken for a soft touch or an idiot.

Cuddy stared. The fighting sounds inside the house stopped like a candle being snuffed out.

2.

Glory In Sunlight

The woman's name it turned out was Glenda Plumber, sister to Ham Plumber and some type of cousin or aunt to Cuddy, and no she didn't need any help at all. She kicked his arse at a negotiation that ended up with him digging a hole for several hours.

We'll take you to Tempest Bay, she said, her red hair curling round the whiskey bottle in her hand. Payment's upfront in gold or specie.

I have a line of credit from the Amicable Society for Perpetual Assurance, he said. Drawn on the First Bank of Boston.

Credit's a fiction and we don't trade in stories, she said. But I've got a patch of dirt needs shifting.

I'll pay twenty percent extra to settle this like civilised folk, he said.

Mister, she said, you are in the wrong place for delicacy. Cuddy, fetch the spades.

So he spent the morning working alongside Cuddy Plumber to dig out a storage pit on the island. Spades in hand, they made hard work of it for the next while.

The sun lifted and the wind died down. Business picked up along the Wellington shoreline. He saw farm carts, traders, schoolchildren, and shopkeepers. Packs of goldminers, rough men who walked like broken dogs. There'd been recent strikes in Otago comparable to California and even the Comstock. He figured prices and suicides were about to take a lift. Gold rushes did not end well, ever.

He and Cuddy hefted soil and the pit began to take shape. Harbour waters sloshed around the island as the tide came in. He relaxed into his rhythm, enjoying the use of his muscles. Felt the tug of the sea and the land.

Cuddy had whined about being forced into donkey work but the little man knew how to dig.

Race you to the Orient, Cuddy said. First one through gets their pick of Celestial trim.

His mind turned stubbornly on the shipwreck. On the survivors. The survivor. The reunion and conversation forthcoming. But the future is the assassin of the here and now. Racing Cuddy on the dig dragged him back into his body and was a good distraction.

As the morning continued people of all types made their way across the jetty to the island. Clumps of dried plants, herbs and flowers hung from the eaves of the Plumber buildings—he recognised some like cress and hemp but many were foreign to him—and Glenda doled these out for cash. Others seemed to want advice, or a lecture from Glenda, or goods that were kept wrapped in clothsacks and never revealed. A young woman came by in her housemaid's dress, weeping and clutching her stomach. He could guess the trouble she was having, and the sort of man it was with.

Glenda dealt with the housemaid and everyone else like a brisk, skilled shopkeeper. She was sympathetic but not gullible, welcoming but not fawning. She got things done. He found himself in no doubt, as if there'd been any before, about who was the head of the Plumber household.

Ham Plumber, who'd been fighting with Glenda in the house, was tall and thin with tufted hair and a pot belly and looked like a wayward natural philosopher. He retreated to a shed on the south side of the island, emerging every twenty minutes or so holding sheets of stitched canvas. Resolutely ignored Glenda even though she snapped her fingers at him several times. The bruise beneath Ham's eye told a story. This was a hot, close, in-your-face family. One where emotions ran high.

**

There was still something else, though, behind it all. Behind the pleasant scene and the local colour and the fresh breeze something felt out of place here. Like a child's unease, or a closed curtain in a carnival booth hiding some ghastly deformity. Wellington wasn't fully right with him. He wondered how much of that feeling was arcing over the hills from Tempest Bay and whatever waited there.

**

A flock of whores stopped by around noon just as they were finishing the pit with kauri wood planks. The girls were all shapes and sizes, wearing dresses that you'd call fancy by south seas standards. They catcalled at the sight of the two shirtless men and Cuddy whooped in reply. Glenda cut the whores into shape like a schoolmistress, no nonsense, interrogating them on the state of their nethers and their choice of perfume and reminding them to hold pricks between their thighs when they could get away with it, especially with the goldminers, whose seed was black and smoky from the river tailings and shitty food.

Get off now, Glenda said, sending them back towards Lambton Quay in a two-by-two line to start attracting the afternoon's business. An auburn-haired Irish lass blew a kiss and as always he was just a little bit of a sucker for it.

Glenda inspected the two men and their pit. Clapped her hands. Hot sweat and a job well done. Cuddy Plumber leaned on his shovel.

He looks like an asshole but he's no donkey, Cuddy said. I say we take him where he wants to go.

There was another option? he said.

More for your sake than ours, Glenda said. There's action over in Tempest Bay that no right minded person wants a part of. And I tell you what, you stay in town I'll credit the dig against some time with Victoria that you took a liking to just now.

I'm determined, he said. With apologies to Victoria.

Tempest Bay it is, Glenda said. Get going with him, Cuddy. And none of your damn firework tricks.

What's a firework trick? he said.

**

Half of Cuba Street laughed as Cuddy Plumber bent over crabwise. He flipped like a monkey, walking on his hands through the mud of the thoroughfare. The crowd grew as people hung out windows and called to their friends.

Watch this bit of magic, Cuddy hooted. Just watch!!

Cuddy's bare arse hung white under the southern sky. Sticking in there, bouncing on its stalk like a flower, forcing you to look in the same way you can't help but gawk at a hideous accident, was a massive Chinese firecracker.

Light it! Cuddy squealed, his face turning red as his hands kept their balance. Light it quick!

They'd set out for Tempest Bay at noon, headed up Cuba Street towards the western hills. Cuba was more developed than the shoreline road having brickyards and stores and the beginning of tram tracks, with a line of saloons and cathouses further on. At this time of day the place was sleepy but looked like it would wake up fast later.

Lots of ideas for expansion, Cuddy said. Billy Tonks has plans to fill in half the harbour. Not sure how Glenda and Ham feel about it, though. We like our little island.

You mind my saying, he said, but you have an interesting speech tick. How'd you come to it?

No 'fence, Cuddy said, clucking his tongue. It is a beauty. My noggin ended up below a steam driver in Otago. Never spoke quite right since.

Cuddy didn't elaborate on how his head found its way inside a piece of goldfield machinery and it felt rude to pursue the matter.

They stopped at an ostler for a pair of horses and that's when Cuddy pulled his firework move. One moment they were negotiating for a clydesdale and a dark bay, the next—

Light it! Light it quick!

One of those moments where you feel a choice in front of you, two doors with no third way. And with everything else on the horizon, with humour in short supply these recent weeks, he thought well, why not.

He came forward. Got an eyeful of Cuddy Plumber's intimate details. Took his Lindsay two-shot pistol from his jacket, held it close to the underside of the firecracker, and worked the hammer a couple of times with his palm. Sparks struck. A couple fell into the gaping maw below and Cuddy howled. The next caught the wick, and he even managed a showman's flourish as he stepped back and the crowd roared—

The firework hissed like a snake and took off. It soared on a sharp angle, looped above a church spire and headed for the hills before exploding in red and green sparks.

The crowd cheered wildly. Some, especially children, wept with laughter. Cuddy sprang to his feet, hauled his britches up, and bowed.

He grinned, transported outside of himself and happily distracted just for a moment from the Starry Voyager run aground off Tempest Bay.

**

The two of them were still laughing as they headed up Cuba Street on their horses.

I'll be honest, Cuddy said, feels like a swordfish got to me.

After the main thoroughfare they turned north and crossed some cart tracks, coming soon to the beginnings of a narrow valley lined with buildings including a bakery and a stable, sheltering in the lee of the hills. It was quieter here, fewer people than before and those out and about looked poorer—

A madwoman crouched in the middle of the way. She was old, at least sixty. Tearing her black hair out in clumps with slow determination. She looked up as they passed. Her mouth slackened then formed a cruel smile.

Words came out of her throat that were not her own. She choked up a mouthful of bile and collapsed, twitching. Cuddy's bay shuddered but he pulled the horse in tight.

There's been more of that around recently, Cuddy said. After what might've happened on that ship of yours.

What'd you mean? he said. But the squirrely little man wouldn't say. Cuddy just kicked his horse towards the wilds of the Wellington hills, and the stranger part of their journey began.

3.

A Fine Misty Rain

The way out of Wellington was by a steep switchback track. Traffic was thin and there was no one in sight when they began the climb.

Cuddy pulled out a tin flask of the cheapest hooch he'd ever tasted. They handed it back and forth over the horses. Cuddy tried singing a line but he couldn't pick it up, then he tried some shanties but Cuddy didn't know them.

They finally reached agreement on an old catch and call, him doing the main lines and Cuddy the refrain, and they mucked it up a bunch and it never came out right but nonetheless they kept at it as they left the relative civilisation of that frontier town:

*I'll sing you one, O
Green grow the rushes, O!
What is your one, O?
One is one and all alone
And evermore shall be so.
I'll sing you two, O
Green grow the rushes, O!
What are your two, O?
Two, two, lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green, O
One is one and all alone
And evermore shall be so.
I'll sing you three, O....*

**

The country grew wild fast.

A fine misty rain spilled over the hills as they wound through bush and slopes and meadows. Soon everything turned white. He felt as though they were journeying back in time through some primordial landscape, a place where the clouds were trying to mate with the earth.

They came upon a work group of prisoners from Wellington gaol. Eleven men widening a roadside cut with two turnkeys guarding them. The exposed wall of the cut had giant bones in it like the remnants of impossible reptiles or dragons. The men stared, and one said something about the path of the wicked, and there was no answer for that.

He and Cuddy rode away through the mist, vanishing from the work crew's lives like phantoms from another universe.

**

What're you hoping to get out of this? Cuddy said, as the clydesdale and the bay moved single file along a thin ridge. Everything felt eerie quiet, no wind or ocean.

I have to verify the wreck and recover the log book, he said. That's the business part. But I'm most concerned with survivors.

Someone you know? Cuddy said. Or just professional interest?

Maybe both, he said, as the pressure in his chest tightened. But I can't say more until I meet them. One thing that's not clear to me is why weren't these people brought over into town? Makes no sense unless there was fear of disease.

Disease ain't the worry, Cuddy said. But Glenda was strident that Tempest Bay is off limits without her say-so.

Glenda runs Wellington, then? he said. Her word stands in place of the Dominion government?

Glenda runs whores and medicine, Cuddy said. Government can stand in line with everybody else.

**

It wasn't as long as he expected—just on two and a half hours—before they reached Tempest Bay.

The mist began to thin and the sun took on an eerie tinge. When they rounded an enormous kauri tree and the vista unfolded, his heart pulsed and he looked in strange wonder.

A long, curving, windswept beach hemmed tight by the hills. Black sand trailing shoals of seaweed. Cliffs that looked as though giants had shaped them in a lost age. And everywhere, horizon to horizon on a southward bearing, the immensity of the great ocean.

Somehow being on land and looking out at it made things worse. New Zealand felt so small, a raft in the midst of primordial time, floating between the continents and the last truly unexplored region on earth.

A raft the Starry Voyager had died trying to reach.

Surprisingly close to shore, less than 200 yards off Tempest Bay, the expedition ship had failed. She was a good size—the documents said 102 feet by 30 on the beam—but was leaning at a savage angle in shallow water. Enough to put her decks right at the waterline with waves crashing over. No sure sign of what had undone her, though two of the main spars were broken.

She was alone on that coast, was the Starry Voyager. Alone except for a single building high on the cliffs above the shoreline, a shadow that stood out from the mists like a clawed hand.

**

It looked like it had once been a mission, or a school, though for who and what he had no idea. Perhaps a refuge for pilgrims. As on the ship below there were no signs of life. But inside those walls—

That's your place, Cuddy Plumber said. They've been holed up in there since August.

He felt something wail inside his chest. His knees gave out and he slid from the saddle of his clydesdale. Lay there on the wet ground, the enormity of the coming moments sweeping through his body like fever.

Cuddy looked down at him.

For a man who's not a soft touch or an idiot, Cuddy said, you sure seem to have a mess of feelings going on. You need a sip of sheep's milk, settle your hysteria?

4.

There Is No God Here

During his life he had seen many places that housed and treated the insane. Gaols with chains on the wall and lengths of rubber hose. Restraint jackets and torture instruments and blood-spattered surgery rooms. Lockup wagons hauling their screaming cargo across shallow rivers. Churches and monasteries where broken people were sequestered like lepers.

But that building on the clifftops of Tempest Bay disturbed him more than any of them. No matter what it had once been, the aftermath of the Starry Voyager had turned it into something else entirely.

A hundred yards out the horses refused to go any further so they made the final approach on foot. Getting closer the building felt like it was breathing, like an animal sheltering from harsh weather. The wind howled. Far below waves swamped the wreck.

I'll be straight with you, Cuddy said. I won't be here come nightfall.

The front double doors stood shut. But the left one was half off its hinges. They pushed on it and entered —

**

What can you say about purgatory, that poets didn't already cry?

The main corridor twisted and turned, giving off to rooms shaped like cells. An enclosed garden held ruined plants. There were dark piss-puddles in the corners and caked lumps of shit smeared on walls. A blackboard had a single sentence scratched on it in an obsessively neat hand, one that began with the word SILENCE and ended with the word ABANDONED.

Two stray cats wandered the place like they owned it. One of the cats was so coated in worms that you could see them wriggling, white and fat, out the sides of its eyes.

There'd been violence and rapacity and madness. That much was clear. There was no one in charge and no one to talk to, which left the survivors as the only other souls in that place.

Four of them still living, all men. They wore rough smocks made from sail canvas except for one who was naked. They wandered the halls or cowered in their cells. One had his nose bitten off. Another had drawn star-charts on the floor in his own blood. One was catatonic, sealed up like an egyptian tomb, protected but adrift from the reality around him.

Humans with broken lights in their eyes, their eerie resemblance to functioning beings somehow making it worse to move among them. These weren't demons or monsters. You couldn't put them so away from yourself.

No women here. He felt sorrow and failure and yet a sense of relief at that. He couldn't imagine her like this. But it meant he had only a job to do, and the long journey had been for almost nothing, except the balancing of a ledger somewhere.

**

There were other ways to see it, of course.

Once Cuddy Plumber got over his nervousness, or perhaps avoiding any deeper response, he treated it like a visit to a zoo. Strutted down the corridor quacking like a duck. Imitated the survivors and laughed when they couldn't respond. Yelled and hooted at one man huddled in a corner. He told Cuddy to stop but the little man wouldn't. Feeling a bonedeeep anger rising at everything in creation, he left Cuddy to it and wandered further.

**

The dishevelled garden was enclosed on all sides. Mist had rolled in again, spilling over the walls and putting a damp blanket on everything.

He heard a faint cricking sound like an animal struggling to move in a trap. He followed it into a thicket, his feet tramping through sloppy overgrowth.

A man sat there in a stained and ragged uniform. The captain of the Starry Voyager. Trying to dislocate his own fingers with a twisted brass spoon.

I'm an insurance agent representing the Amicable Society for Perpetual Assurance, he began formally. I'm here to ascertain—

No worry at all, sir, the captain said with a welcoming smile. You can trust me to make a full report.

The captain doubled over and vomited blood onto the wet ground. Waved an apology then went back to his spoonwork.

**

Stop your jibber-jabber, Cuddy Plumber screamed at the shaking, moaning man. STOP BEING AN ANIMAL!

He drifted out in front of the broken doors feeling like a ghost. Blanched at the sight of Cuddy toying with the noseless survivor.

Any luck? Cuddy said.

Found the basics, he managed.

All right then, Cuddy said. Let's get out of here. Whores at the Floridita before suppertime. You coming?

No, he said, barely able to restrain his contempt. There's more work to do here.

The noseless survivor moaned. Cuddy shook his fist and the man cowered.

Should burn this whole place to the ground, Cuddy said. These animals ain't worth anything—

In less than an eyeblink the Lindsay two-shot pistol was in Cuddy's face.

Leave this place, he said. Now.

The noseless survivor scuttled back inside the doors. The mist seemed to take an inward breath.

Cuddy stared mean and hard.

What if I don't? Cuddy said. Long way from rules and regulations here, 'case you hadn't noticed. Man signals bad intentions, he better be ready to follow that ante up—

So he pulled the trigger.

**

The pistol clicked. He'd pulled the second trigger, the false one set just behind the main, that made the hammer shunt but didn't fire the charge. It was a useful trick of the Lindsay two-shot. Made most people shit themselves then reconsider their position. Insurance was rough work, sometimes.

Cuddy stared, shocked at not being dead. But the little man didn't shit himself.

Well ain't you broken as a bad toy, Cuddy said.

Cuddy backed away towards the horses, never lowering his eyes. A short while later he was mounting the dark bay and fixing the reins of the clydesdale to his saddle.

Find your own fucking way back to town, Cuddy said. And don't come near me or Glenda or Ham again.

Then Cuddy was gone into the mist, and he was alone.

That's not the people pleaser I knew, said a voice behind him.

He turned. She was standing in front of the broken doors, pale and ragged but alive, her hair the same as it had been all those years ago, something in her eyes faded but still there.

Sophie, he said, his chest lighting up like firecrackers.

One and the same, his sister replied. What in the hell are you doing here, brother?

5.

Conclave of Ghosts

Through the evening and deep into the night, their conversation. A makeshift fire in what was once a scullery. The sounds of the ocean breathing below. Once an hour they made a circuit of the corridors offering water and small comfort to the men dying there.

Rediscovery. A reunion watch at the ends of the earth. These new words we speak. These attempts to find each other in the strange twilight of who we once were, to ourselves and each other.

As mad men die above the ocean one by one by one.

**

She had a scar on her forehead running from midway above her left eyebrow back around. It had not been there twelve years ago. But she refused to speak of it, or the wreck, or the expedition itself, except a few cryptic words.

How've you been supplied, then?

Provisions from the wreck lasted a good while. Then a couple deliveries from Wellington.

Not from those Plumbers?

The same.

You're kidding me.

No kid.

Then why no other help? Why were you all left to rot here?

It's complicated. And grisly. But all done for the best.

This isn't like any best I've ever seen. It's a damnable sin.

Best open your eyes, brother. Wider, with less pride and prejudice.

I'll not be spoken that way—

I mean, an insurance agent? Was that the only story you could tell yourself?

It was a stinging blow but he tried not to show it. Gave no outward answer. It was the only story that would have me, he didn't say. The only story that didn't get eaten alive by this thing inside my heart.

**

She dabbed at the noseless man's face and held him as he died.

Get the old kettle, she said sharply. Through the scullery.

He found it fast—a heavy brass thing, probably from the *Starry Voyager*—and brought it back to the cell. It didn't need water. The man's hands just wanted to grip it as he passed. She had known something about what was in his mind.

The final breath came out like a slow wheezing whistle and the man voided himself.

Working together they got the stinking body outside to the cliff edge and hefted it off then watched the fall of it in the moonlight down into the foaming waters below.

It's what he wanted, she said by way of a eulogy. What they all wanted.

**

Did you ever see it. Antarctica.

Icebergs and islands. And a few times there was a whiteness on the horizon but we never reached it. Storms. Currents. I'm not entirely sure Antarctica's real.

People have landed on its shores. Whalers.

Oh I believe it exists. But I choose my words more carefully than I once did.

**

They both remembered the walled garden in London. The world of high windows and the secret trellis. Of angry restless dreams shared in diaries. Plays and dares in the attic. But neither of them spoke it.

You're coming with me back to civilisation, Sophie. Away from all this.

No I'm not. Not until the last of them is done. There's an arc to be seen out here.

There are asylums and hospitals—

None of that'll help. Believe me.

Then this is a place abandoned by god.

God's abandoned lots of things. Left his toys in the gutter one by one. Doesn't mean we have to do the same.

**

Is there something outside?

It's just the wind.

I can hear something. Feel it.

It's nothing.

**

The London world had always been so abrasive to her. To them both, but he'd had the advantages of his sex to help in hiding it. To her it had been like sandpaper. Like a gas lamp burning in fog. So much energy just to maintain appearances.

I always feel like someone else's Christmas present, she had said once. Wrapped up and not the right choice.

But as the second man died gargling his own tongue down by the front doors, and they made their second trip to the cliff edge, and she handled every detail in the rising wind with a firm pragmatic hand, he saw new facility. Like she'd learned to move among the dead and dying with ease. He didn't know how he felt about that.

You came all this way, she said as they moved back towards the building again.

You'd have done the same, he said.

No, I wouldn't have, she said. I'm not like you. We're not living the same story. We never were. That's the cruelty of it.

He had read something somewhere once about staying true to people as they are, not as we insist on remembering them. That it's the gift, not the packaging, that matters. But it was hard either way. Very, very hard, and his chest felt as though there were spiders crawling through it, biting his blood.

**

The captain appeared after midnight, roaming in his tattered uniform, swinging a ship's lantern before him in the corridors. Drinking his own piss from a misshapen jar. They left the man to his orbit.

We could be back in Wellington shortly after morning, he said. We can take both men with us and get the care they need.

I need you to stop trying to negotiate with something that isn't negotiable, she said.

Then I can go and fetch help—

Help might come but it won't be in the form you expect.

If you mean those Plumbers, I've a notion to send them off—

I mean you don't understand the first thing of what's going on here. Or what's to come. And being a self-involved prig won't help any of it.

That old energy rising. When they used to fight, argue, rip into each other with words and feelings. The grip between them tempestuous and wild and at angles to everything else, even though it had stretched so far as to be on the other sides of the earth—

His chest tore shreds and he went down on one knee, clutching at the mildewed wall. She cried with concern and got her arms under his shoulders and tried to help and it was the first time they'd touched in twelve years but they were the same arms that'd been out throwing dead men's bodies off the cliff edge and he shrugged her off and knelt there a long time while he tried to get his heart slower and stop the fist squeezing inside him and eventually it let up enough that he got back to his feet determined to show just how goddamn stubborn HE could be, not just her, goddamnit—

I still have my insurance investigation to complete, he said.

That's the weakest thing I ever heard, she said.

I need the Starry Voyager's log book, he said. In the absence of testimony it's the only way to settle things without lawsuits.

The log book's still out on the wreck, she said. No one brought it ashore. And that water's violent and dark and cold.

She knew he feared it. All the way from his earliest childhood. The icy grasp of black liquid reaching up to take you—

Then I'll go down first light, he said. With or without assistance. And I'll find answers, wherever they lead.

**

They had done terrible things for each other once. Violent unspeakable things, that no living soul knew the truth of except them. Things that should've bound them together for all existence. But now trying to rediscover each other, here at the end of the earth in a misty landscape above the pounding sea, they were finding a simpler truth: the past is forever naive, while present tongues and temper fuck things up just about every time.

6.

The Starry Voyager

He stood on the beach and looked across at the wreck of the Starry Voyager, searching for his courage.

At dawn he had made his way down the cliffs by a twisting half-hidden path. The curvature of the beach felt stronger now, the sand and lumps of seaweed marking a strange flat-plane geometry. To the north beneath a high hill the mouth of a cave gaped by an inlet.

A rowboat waited nearby, hauled up on the sands beneath the cliffs. He assumed it was the last one off the Starry Voyager. It looked seaworthy.

No sign of the bodies they had thrown down from the heights last night. No sign at all.

A light mist hung over the water refracting the morning light. The wreck waited, a black half-hidden shape.

What dream was this, now? How had he ended up here?

His task was simple. He would go out to the Starry Voyager and retrieve the log book. Then he would return to Wellington with his sister and board the next ship for Sydney, and from there file his report with the Amicable Society for Perpetual Assurance and then, on being wired his bonus, take a long break and do... something.

Something. In a life that seemed filled at times with moments of nothing, joined together by the ropes of his inner dread and anxiety, he would finally change his circumstance and set his mind towards joyous things.

He just had no idea exactly how.

He dragged the rowboat down to the shoreline. Hopped in, set the oarlocks, but didn't move. He hadn't pushed it out far enough for the swell to catch, so now he sat there like a walrus, which was what Sophie used to call him in those mornings, long ago, when he would stay cross-legged in bed listening to the rain and unable to move.

**

He feared the ocean and the water. Especially this water. This bay. He could feel the irresistible connection with Antarctica.

It held him back even as everything else seemed determined to compel him forward.

Not just the requirements of his job, which after all he could have shirked, but a strangely clear sense that Sophie wanted him to go out there. That the gulf between them might be bridged, even just a little, by his experiencing something of what she had been through and would not communicate to him.

When he was eleven he had invented a way to approach unpleasant tasks—often the tasks that Sophie set him. He imagined a white door appearing, right at the edge of the thing that needed doing, and through that door was a bizarre cacophony of peacocks and trumpets and monkeys and naked dancers. The noise they made drowned out everything behind him, every thought that made his limbs heavy or searched for excuses. By choosing to step through that

door he was committing himself, both to the task at hand but also to the possibility of madness and destruction.

He tried to summon the door and the peacocks now but couldn't. It was just him, just an insurance agent alone in a rowboat on a New Zealand beach.

The ocean roared on the wreck as the sky began to turn its colours.

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him.

He rose back out of the boat, levered his dead-feeling limbs to push it properly into the surf, then hopped in again and began to row.

**

Water water water. Water water water water.

A fraying connection to the land, a knot in your chest rising with every stroke.

Imagine this water in a winter storm. Imagine the things beneath the swells, waiting for you.

**

The wreck of the Starry Voyager felt like a corpse. It was huge, much bigger than it had looked from shore, tilted half sideways in the water, the ocean slapping over the gunwales and the main deck. He couldn't see the cause of the expedition ship running aground. But he tied a line of rope from the rowboat to a jimmy lock and clambered on board.

As soon as he set foot on the decking the whole ship lurched like a child's toy. The landing went underwater, soaking him in freezing seawater. He yelled and grabbed a stay. Felt shafts of heat running through the water like eels.

The ship lurched again and the water sluiced off. He staggered his way to a topside hatch that should open towards the captain's cabin. It led him aft into a dark waterlogged passage and he was immediately lost.

**

He clambered through a series of doors and passageways with a rising panic in his chest. Imagined the former crew as the ship journeyed south across the great cold ocean all those months. The rhythms and sounds of life. Creaking timbers and ropes and sails and songs and secret midnight buggery.

**

The ship tilted again. It felt like a paper boat toppling back and forth across twigs in a stream.

Somehow he was in the captain's cabin. And he could see the log book, shining somehow in the gloom, right where it should be all this time—

He took a grateful hopeful step forward—

The floor gave way with a shriek and he punched straight down into black water.

**

In the ocean there is no up. There is only deeper. And deeper holds all the monsters of the dark—

The shock of full immersion froze him solid as he plunged—

He kicked, kicked, wrenched—

Something wrapped onto his face. A jellyfish. And he couldn't get it off and it was stinging him over and over and over—

Terrified, horrified, his chest flooding with seawater—

He couldn't get it off his face and so he bit it, tore at it with his teeth and swallowed it and felt it slithering down into his stomach. Felt it rooting around in the shit and acid of his intestines—

He couldn't breathe and he couldn't find the log book which was so important—

Thrashing, he found a tiny air pocket beneath something rough and iron. But though he could feel the air above the water he still couldn't breathe. His head was like a vise, squeezing every thought out of him except raw animal instinct and he plunged again—

A note resounding through the water, a sound so deep and concussive—

Burrowing into his bones and sinews, the jellyfish in his guts thrilling with it—

A shimmering line like refracted light—

Something's out there. A presence amid pulsing waves that shudder like earthquakes. Hungry awareness, searching searching searching—

Further to closer, there to here, closer, closer—

Dead bodies disturbed in their sea graves. This malevolent thing entering the ship now, this overpowering blind hunger pursuing him—

His eyes opened and he saw the huge hole in the side of the wreck, saw what had truly happened to the Starry Voyager out there in the vast uncharted depths of madness—

He was truly aware for the first time ever that he was made by something. That he was planted in the soil of time to grow into this creature that experienced and felt the universe—

He swam forward through the jagged hole. Tasted churning silt—

The thing behind him getting closer and closer—

He found an outward spar and hauled himself towards the light that wavered in a circle above his head. No up, only light. No up, only light—

Blessed air. Salt. Breeze. Oxygen bellowing into his lungs. The deck of the ship in two feet of water. Mist and rain and the sea but no rowboat, there's no rowboat, where's it gone where's it gone where's it gone—

The jellyfish inside him squealing and squirming and pulling towards the malevolent thing below him in the wreck, his guts shitting inside himself as his bowels turned to gravity—

A rogue wave from nowhere right over the Starry Voyager. Swallowing all light and time. As the entire southern ocean entered him he felt the icy fringe of Antarctica, thousands of miles away, and in that last moment something touched his ankle.

**

He woke on Tempest Bay beach.

His sister was forcing seawater out of him, slamming her fists into his stomach over and over again. He rolled over and vomited and a black gush splattered onto the sand but something was tickling the underside of his tongue, near the back where the muscle joined—

She held him back down with unexpected strength. Forced knotty fingers past his teeth. Hauled the jellyfish tendril out of him. He felt it leaving his stomach and sliding up his throat and passing his lips with a horrid taste. She threw it onto the high tide mark where it wriggled a while then stopped.

The captain died, she said. Just us now. Alone together again. So let's act like it and stop all this foolishness.

7.

Most Basic Of Animals

He never quite knew how they made it up from the beach. Maybe there was a different route than the way he'd descended that morning. Maybe he had somehow climbed and scabbled his way back up. Maybe Sophie had placed him on her back like a sack of irish potatoes and used secret strength to transport him.

Whichever way it happened, they reached the clifftops with his eyes burning, his lungs feeling like they'd been kicked by horses, his mind spiralling.

There was indeed only this, then, he realised: nothing more to the dreamed-of frontier reunion than a broken building full of broken souls at the end of a broken earth, on cliffs above a broken ship foundering in an endless ocean with the icy walls of Antarctica beyond. Nothing more than he had expected, but so much less than he'd hoped.

Something's going on, he managed. Something you're not telling me.

They rounded the final hillock on the cliffs—

There stood Cuddy Plumber, waiting for them.

**

The spindly little man had left two sacks of supplies by the front doors. On top of them sat a single sickly flower, a chrysanthemum it looked like, which even in his state he realised was a sweetheart offering.

What're you—

Come to provision you, Cuddy said. Glenda insisted. Check on them poor survivors, she said. Make sure they're cared for. Show concern.

Everyone's dead, Sophie said. The Captain went this morning.

Well that's a shame, Cuddy said. They were all past gone though. Sometimes it's best just to let dying dogs die. Even help 'em on their way a little.

Cuddy looked to them both. Sophie looked back with something in her gaze.

He realised from the wordless exchange that something was indeed going on beyond his understanding, there was an act being performed here, and that he had emerged from the wreck of the Starry Voyager with some kind of recoloured vision but couldn't yet see the full truth of things, just their wrongness—

Cuddy smirked. Winked at him.

Wonderin' if I can buy an insurance policy, Cuddy said. Something 'gainst catching crazy from a certain trough I intend to hog in.

Half-drowned or no, he went at Cuddy like a honey badger.

**

They fought on the Tempest Bay clifftops like the most basic of animals. They scabbled and bit and gouged, throwing wild haymakers at each other, their bodies tangling until they became

one hideous eight-limbed creature trying to tear itself apart. One went for the other's balls. The other tried to wrench a head clean off. All the while it felt somehow as though there were voices and faces in the windows of the building, dead men in smocks howling and jeering with wild energy.

Sophie made no effort to separate the two men. It was the type of fight that could easily end with one of them a corpse.

He stopped first, gulping down wet hot air as he held Cuddy at arm's length. Cuddy responded by trying to bite his thumb off. He shoved Cuddy hard and Cuddy went sprawling in the grass where he lay for a full minute, breathing but not speaking.

The final tally was that on top of his injuries from the wreck he now had a busted eye, aching balls, and scratches all over his body. He felt practically out of his head with exhaustion and his lungs couldn't suck enough air. Cuddy Plumber's mouth streamed red and his face was smushed like a newborn calf.

You're a goddamn idiot, Cuddy said, wiping his mouth. D'you not see we're trying to help you?

I don't need the help of a man laughs at the damned and brings flowers to my sister, he said. I don't need that at all.

Oh, your sister? Cuddy said, smirking again. Well forgive me. From the signs and signals and suchlike I just assumed you two were sweethearts, and maybe you wouldn't mind sharing the bounty.

He lurched forward. But Cuddy was already making for the hill track, towards a donkey that he'd left there, without a backwards glance, leaving him and Sophie alone again on the wild mad clifftops of Tempest Bay.

**

You shouldn't have done that, Sophie said. All the ways back go past those Plumbers.

Something in her eyes. Something strange and bright and different.

I'll do what I need to, he said. No matter how much you try and toy with me. In fact I feel a surprising vigor—

The soil came up fast as he fainted dead away.

8.

I Kissed Maisie Cartwright

A strange night the second one. Much stranger. In his fever and physical collapse he huddled by the makeshift fire in the scullery. Felt himself melting into the walls while a spring storm raged out in the strait beyond Tempest Bay.

She made him pungent tea from the supplies and kept him drinking it. They talked as they hadn't done in years. Weird and honest. An attempted charting of the space that lay between them, and the territory out there beyond in the long stormy dark.

**

I miss the feeling of dancing. I used to trip over all the time, do you remember? Right when the music would start. But I'd get up and there'd be that awkward tangle of getting it going again, sorting out feet and hands, catching the music like a train, and each time in the middle of that I felt a feeling I have no word for but I remember it.

**

Just being in the bathtub. Outside under that scraggly tree by Nonna Perkins' cottage. When we'd stay there. She'd make me carry the bucket up the hill from the river half the morning until the water was sloshing over the sides of the tub and my arms'd be so sore and my back felt like it was broken. I never knew why she was so mean about that but then I'd hop in and I was so small I could turn around and around under the water and it was warm even without a fire 'cause the sun had been on it all morning but the world was nicely enclosed and understandable and I could fart underwater and feel like Neptune in my bubbly little kingdom.

But then one day a parakeet flew down out of nowhere to the edge of the tub and peered at me and shat in the water then flew off. And that birdshit was all white and gunkey floating there, and I wasn't coming up through it not for anything, so I stayed under as long as I could and tried to shake the whole tub over but it was far too heavy so in the end I tried to drown myself but it turns out that doesn't work, your body rebels, and my legs pushed me up through the parrot-shit water surface and a hunk of it washed into my eye and I screamed and screamed and screamed and Nonna Perkins came running and fixed me up and then slapped me and said, that's what you get for thinking about fornication.

**

You didn't get the log book, did you. In the end.

No. Too busy drowning.

I didn't truly mean you to. Sorry.

Why'd you send me out there?

Because you wanted a quest to go on. And because I wanted you to taste just the edge of what happened. What happened to us all on the Starry Voyager.

**

You know I kissed Maisie Cartwright that time just after autumn solstice when she came back from Liverpool with her aunt.

I know she was angry at you for six full months. But I never knew why.

I told her she tasted like flour. And that you tasted like apples which I much preferred.

Well that would do it. She pushed me over at hopscotch soon after and now I forgive her for it.

**

Master Higgins, I don't know if you remember him, back at the parrish school, all that time ago, Master Higgins told me one day that you become the thing you fear, always, and that's why it's important to love and fear the right things, otherwise you chart a course for yourself that ends up being exactly what you never intended to be.

Like an insurance agent?

Something's coming. I can feel it in my chest. Coming up out of the wreck, crawling onto land, hunting along the beach and the cave and climbing the cliffs, some horrid blind thing that wants to crawl down our throats—

Hush. Hush. Have some more tea. Stop thinking about fornication.

**

We did horrible things. Years ago we did horrible things together.

Yes we did. But they were inevitable.

Nothing's inevitable.

We are. We just got trapped in a bathtub for a while.

You see this all as a great quest, a drama. But I see it as something else now.

How's that you mean?

There's no dragon to be killed. No maiden to be won. There's just choices we make and emotions we feel.

But there is a monster out there.

It's all monsters and darkness and madness out there. That's what campfires are for.

**

I just never understood anything. Never was in time with the music. A little girl who lacked comprehension. And I burned so much effort over the years trying to simulate myself that it was like a forest fire, I was like a forest fire. And fires burn out or they consume everything. Until the expedition. I felt sometimes on that ship like we were sailing into the future, or the past. Moving across the surface of the world in all its dimensions. And that when it was throwing storms at us, it was really throwing time at us. Time like the spray of an endless ocean. Time like the soil our souls and dreams can grow in. And I grew. Finally. I realised on the Starry

Voyager in the midst of horrors and trials that I've been living the wrong story this whole time. Running. Hiding. Twisting and turning. But there's something else. A different current. I'll never understand, I'll never truly comprehend, but I no longer feel panicked about other people's music because I hear my own.

**

All I hear is silence where something used to be.

You go fly little bird. I'll be here when you return.

You promise?

I promise.

What's in this tea?

9.

Korimako Bird

The sun fell in the west like a comet and somehow he was not in Tempest Bay, he was on Cuba Street in Wellington town.

The way was alive with lights and music. A full turnabout from the sleepy lane of yesterday morning. Goldminers and bushmen roamed in packs between the saloons. Rowdies and respectable folk jostled under a balcony where a half-dressed woman with massive bosoms strutted, shouting filthy jokes and playing lewd songs on a mandolin. Pianos and fiddles and a farting trumpet sounded from doorways. Cuba Street at night was all frontier, all energy, with the dirty abandon of a pirate den.

He moved through the crowd unsure what he was looking for. But he knew he was looking for something.

Glenda Plumber stood in a wide doorway surrounded by ladies of the night. Dressed in a black and red-trim corset with a hoop skirt below and an angled french hat. She saw him, nodded, beckoned him hither.

Come on you ghost of a man, she said. We're not done with you yet.

**

He entered the Floridita whorehouse with Glenda on his arm. The atmosphere was a hot slap. Glenda's establishment was the vortex of Cuba's evening madness.

The smell came first, a weave of beer and hash and rum and pussy and tobacco. Then the bodies, a sweaty horde of men already half pissed, girls perched on their knees, belting out a chorus:

*Oh, Maggie, Maggie May, they have taken you away
And you'll never walk down Lime Street anymore...*

Others too. Men in lipstick and rouge and oversized bonnets cavorted. Separate from the whores and barmaids he saw women in suits and trousers with clipped hair. One creature by the bar, so symmetrical you couldn't tell what sex they'd originally departed from, gave Glenda an elegant eyebrow-raise.

He felt unseen. Like his real likeness was coiling inside him but to these people he was invisible.

One who did see him was Cuddy Plumber. The little man was whooping it up in a corner by the piano, his arm round a strumpet. Cuddy looked across and saw them both and flushed, turning his head away and singing louder, but otherwise didn't make a move.

You boys ended up about how Cuddy usually does, Glenda said. Is it a shame to say I never expected more?

He said nothing. Allowed himself to be guided through the mass of people and up a stairway.

*You may search from here to China, you'll not find a girl that's finer
That is finer than my darlin' Maggie May...*

**

They reached the balcony and went to a door on the left. Glenda knocked twice, rat-tat, and it opened. The Irish girl Victoria who he'd noticed on the jetty yesterday morning was in a half-open corset, her auburn hair spilling over her shoulders. He couldn't stop the blush that curled his toes and flowed up through his body to his cheeks.

Here's the choice, Glenda said. You can have the whore or the truth. Believe me, I'd take the whore. She's more pleasant company by far.

**

But he wasn't that man and never would be. The hard road beguiled and undid him every time.

**

SKRUNCH.

He hoped like hell this was in fact a dream.

The Irish girl gone. The candlelit room unexpectedly luxurious with carpets and a star-chart tapestry on the wall. Sweet-smelling smoke in a brazier. The noise from downstairs mounting, the sound of a well-oiled quim machine heating its boilers, but all he knew right now was the double-twisted hemp rope trapping his limbs and neck and naked body, and Glenda's fist descending again—

SKRUNCH.

You could've gone with Victoria. She's a sweet lass and good intentioned. Not cynical yet like me.

I'm just—

Loyal to foolish notions. We know. We all know.

This is a dream.

Yes.

Why am I being hit if it's a dream.

Because I enjoy hitting foolish men. And there's no one in this whole hemisphere to tell me I can't.

SKRUNCH.

**

Over the threshold now. Pain a distant starlight. Glenda's truth the moon.

You're a broken thing on a lonely journey.

Yes.

You've spent your life collecting sisters. Surrogates. But you lack the courage to take what you really want.

Yes.

Everything you do is from fear. You run from things but tell yourself you're running to them, all the way to the ends of the earth.

YES.

SKRUNCH.

Time to stop running, sunshine. Time to quit your day job.

**

Walking now through the bones of a mountain. Side by side. The smell of rotting fish and salt. Distant crashes as thunder spoke.

Glenda waved her hand at the dark.

SKRUNCH.

This is not the ends of the earth. It's the start of a rescue operation. We need to learn how to go out into the dark waters, find the mad and the abandoned and the lost and bring them back to shore. It's tough work. Brutal and cruel sometimes. But the alternative is a world of blind technology filled with neverending plagues. Melancholia. Hysteria. Delusion. That mustn't happen. Not here. Not us. We're more than stalks of corn before the reapers.

The thunder cracking. Louder and louder as the pacific sky breathed invisible.

SKRUNCH.

She turned and faced him in the black.

Your sister needs to see mad men to their rest. You need something else, and I'm not sure what. But it's more than this.

I don't know what to feel, he managed, his throat tightening—

That's all right, she said. You're about to reach an outcry. On the house.

SKRUNCH. SKRUNCH. SKRUNCH—

**

Something grabbed him by the balls and threw him like a volcano—

Gusts caught his mind-feathers—

He screamed. Clutched at the shreds of his constructed self. Flaied at his life-line like a child drowning in a bathtub until it hit him with profound embarrassment that he had already drowned, long ago—

He rose on currents of time and space like a Korimako bird, felt forests and hills and basalt-black volcano diamonds and the deep swell of the endless sea under the stars—

Umbilical cords of creation coiling inside him like jellyfish as stories pecked at his eyes, a giant sea creature hacked to death by fishermen, a journey from the setting sun, an impossible star child slumbering under aeons, geologic plates at war with the gods and the moon and monsters—

With one last SKRUNCH between his eyes he saw a towering wall of ice thousands of miles to the south at the very end of the planet, felt the primordial intelligence lurking behind it—

All a glimpse. Nothing more.

But it opened its eye and saw him. Saw his heart.

He disintegrated. Drifted through the void forever. Crash landed between two arms. Faded. Slept without dreams for the first time in decades, since the days of a walled garden and two young voices long ago.

10.

The Sinister Parade

He woke full of wretched shame and self-loathing. His chest was coiled tight worse than ever before. He felt like he was going to explode. He could barely move.

It was morning. The light was coming in through a window. The sky was the sky of Tempest Bay.

He tried to reflect on last night, searched for a thread of positive inspiration but there was nothing. He was empty. A ghost trapped in Tempest Bay.

His only hope was to get out of here. He crawled to the window just to taste the sunlight. Just to get a sense that there was indeed a world out there that could be traversed, that somehow he was going to get himself and Sophie from this desolate damnable place back to civilisation, back to Wellington town and then Sydney and then to a future—

The Captain's body hung to the left of the window from a spar. A thick length of rope doubled two over in a hitch knot. The man had died naked and docile, not even kicking back at the wall. Sophie mustn't have had time or strength to gather the body yet for its final journey over the clifftops—

Where was Sophie? Had she, too, all been a wild hallucination?

But then he saw the sinister parade over the ridgeline. And realised they had his sister.

**

It was a twisting, bizarre line of people making their way along the Tempest Bay heights towards the edge of a high hill in the distance. He saw Cuddy Plumber and the Criterion Hotel proprietor and others who had come to Plumber island or been on Cuba Street and others besides that. Even the madwoman who'd crouched on the road out of town. They wore flowing coloured robes and proceeded haltingly in the light with odd, jerky movements. Some played discordant music on pipes and drums.

Among them, carried high on the shoulders of two men, was Sophie. Her face was expressionless like a tailor's dummy. But she was being carried towards some terrible purpose on that hilltop above Tempest Bay.

**

I am not mad. Everyone else here is.

The knowledge was a gift, a blessing, an intense relief. And though he didn't know what horror awaited Sophie in the hands of these cultists, he knew suddenly that he had to do something, do it right now, and the pressure in his chest subsided enough that he was able to move and get a plan together.

He rushed through the corridors. Found a cell with a mess of clothes that had belonged to the Starry Voyager survivors. The garments were filthy and degraded and reeked of piss but they looked the part, close enough to the robes of the parade.

He pulled them on and went back to the window and forced it open and crouched on the sill and reached up and took the captain's hat from the hanging corpse. A wide blue-black thing. Pulled down low over his head it concealed his features and so off he went, his heart racing.

**

After climbing out the window he made his way across the track behind them, keeping low and ducking down into the grass.

He could see Sophie ahead, still unresponsive on the men's shoulders. He wondered how they'd gotten into the building and carried her off without waking him. Though given the state of his fevered hallucinations last night—and they had been hallucinations, he insisted, nothing more than that—it was perhaps not surprising.

He heard more of the music as he got closer. Amid the drums and pipes were other instruments he didn't know, including pieces of wood with holes in them, tied to lengths of string, that people swung round their heads at great speed producing a buzzing sound in the wind. The vibration felt as though it were crawling into his spine.

He caught the tail end of the line. The rear was brought up by a hefty man he recognised as the bartender of the Floridita whorehouse. He took a breath, made sure his hat was low, sauntered forward with a jerk in his gait, and began to move among them. He half expected to be spotted immediately but the weird revels were such that he blended right in.

He still couldn't see what lay ahead over the high hill. But he was getting closer to Sophie. No firm plan yet on how he'd rescue her and get them away, but he'd figure that out.

It was so good to be moving with true and justified purpose. His heartbeat urged him on like a racehorse.

The ocean crashed below. The wreck was still out there. He could feel a strange pedal note rising below the music. As though something was watching them. Feeling them.

Closer now amid the robes and faces and masks—

Closer—

Close enough to reach out and touch the trailing edge of Sophie's dress—

The music stopped. Someone snatched the captain's hat. Cuddy Plumber stepped in front of him. Grinned nastily.

You're buggered, sunshine, he said. Buggered straight round the bend.

11.

Caverns Of Death

If one advances confidently—

Fuck Cuddy Plumber. He charged at the little man with a roar of anger, tossing him to the ground and tearing Sophie from the arms of the men who carried her. He felt surprising strength, a righteous surge in his blood—

Sophie gasped and awakened as though from a trance—

Oh brother, she said—

But now they were both running, running for their lives and possibly more, straight down the wild slopes onto the sands of Tempest Bay.

A tremendous hullabaloo followed, echoing all round the cliffs. Shrieks and cries and howls and the flapping of robes. The parade was after them. But some kind of strange speed entered their legs and they stayed ahead.

Down on the flat sand now. Charging towards the shoreline. His only thought was to somehow get to the rowboat beneath the high cliffs, make their way out to the wreck, shelter there and then flag down a ship in the Cook Strait, report these mad killers to authorities in Sydney—

A pistol shot whistled past. Another.

Over here, Sophie yelled, steering towards an opening near the base of the hills. The cave he'd noticed earlier. Dark and foreboding with a slender entrance. He changed course, following his sister.

Wellingtonians streamed down the slopes. This enraged flock descending like murderous birds. Gaining but not fast enough.

Sophie reached the cave entrance and slipped inside. He had only enough time to register an acrid smell before they were alone in the dark together.

**

Neither of them had a light. But Sophie seemed to feel the right direction. They pushed ahead through winding rock tunnels, their hands groping the walls in pure darkness. The elevation increased and he sensed they were climbing upward again, back into the hills.

Sounds and lights rose behind them then faded. They had, for now, lost their pursuers.

How'd this happen? he managed when it felt safe to speak.

Where would either of us start with that question? Sophie said.

On they pushed, climbing higher, slipping sometimes on the rough terrain. A subtle light infused the tunnel and a breeze blew the smell of grass on their faces. He sensed they were coming to an exit, and hoped they'd be sheltered well enough by the Tempest Bay hills that they could make their way back overland—

Round a corner. A meadow inside a cave entrance, grass growing under a light above.

Glenda and Cuddy Plumber waiting for them with a dozen others.

He flung himself in front of Sophie to protect her—

But she giggled in a way he hadn't heard in years, slipped past, and ran across to wrap her arms round Glenda in a huge hug.

The others smiled. Terrible, sinister smiles.

A man who comes here with the power of an insurance company, Glenda said in sonorous tones. A man carrying a lifetime's guilt and misdirection. A man who is in love with his sister, and can't forgive himself for it. A man who is so mad he insists on thinking himself sane.

She winked.

You're exactly who we need sir, she said. You're coming with us.

Sophie grinned happily, her face aflame in the meadow's light.

It's going to be all right, brother, Sophie said. It'll all be just as it should be, and you'll be happier.

**

He tried to dash back into the rock tunnel but robed men surged forward and grabbed him. He pulled and resisted and screamed and bellowed and invoked the lord and the law and the power of the Amicable Society for Perpetual Assurance but it was for nothing.

They carried him out of the cave just beneath the crest of the high hill. Below them all of Tempest Bay was spread out in a long curve. The shipwreck still foundering in the Cook Strait waters. The beach with the rowboat. The building on the clifftops where those poor lost souls had wandered and died one by one, Sophie tending them on their way. In the morning sunlight it was beautiful. But dangerous. Oh so dangerous.

With one more secret to reveal, and one fate to observe.

Looking across the sand and rocks and water he saw tendrils of seaweed and pink scum running out of the shipwreck. You could almost imagine a breath-smell, some sickly gruel of whale meat and crab shit and fungus, exhaling into the wind. Knowledge ran through his body: the cold certainty that *this was it*.

It hit him, in that moment, one of those long-awaited occasions that you were never quite sure would ever arrive but suddenly came up on you with the force of a sea-wave, like losing your father or realising for the first time that you were really, truly going to die. This here, this now, had been the future for nearly his entire life. And now it was here. And here it was now.

Cuddy Plumber held firm to his elbow and led him atop the hill. When he saw what waited there he groaned and sank to his knees in the New Zealand sun, shocked by the terrible audacity of it all—

12.

It Could Be

It was eighty feet high. It sat in a depression behind the hill ridge so that when you came upon it you came fully, without warning, forced to confront its height and terrible majesty.

Ropes and valves and a hot blue flame connected its skeleton parts. Above and below were two cages, one open and the other closed, one for humans and the other for the air itself.

It was a hot air balloon, made of stitched sail canvas and painted in rainbow colours. He had read of such things but never seen one, certainly not here at the ends of the earth.

Ham Plumber stood beneath it wearing a fleece jacket and trousers. The spindly tuft-haired man was fussing around a machinery of pipes and valves and controlled flame, sending heated air up into the thing as it expanded. It was clear now what Ham had been working on back at Plumber Island in his shed.

He remembered a feeling from his earliest childhood. From when he knew that magic existed.

There were others waiting for them. All in all perhaps forty people, arranged in a horseshoe shape around the giant balloon. He saw easels. Hemp canvases. Brushes and coloured pencils. Pies. Beer. Sandwiches.

Glenda and Sophie took him by an arm each.

Welcome, Glenda said grandly, to the first spring meeting of the Tempest Bay Art Society.

She waved with her hand. Forty people took their clothes off in the New Zealand sun.

**

He felt as though he'd been plunged yet again into a fever dream.

If you blushed at the sight of bosoms or buttocks there was nowhere to escape. Winking genitals and undergrowths everywhere. Sophie and Glenda were as naked as everyone else. A few of the younger women were pregnant. Paintbrushes blinked in motion, dabs of colour hanging in the air like daylight butterflies.

Ham, who hadn't disrobed, gave him a mocking salute. The balloon was still inflating, he realised, nearly at its final shape and already lifting strong against its guy-weights.

You can see the edge of the world from here, Glenda said. The thing is not to fall off it. A bad thing happened out on that ship, to those poor men. Something that couldn't be stopped or saved. And clearly you've brought your own struggle here too. But this is not an insurance problem. Or a tragedy.

The sweep of her hands took in not just the bare fleshy silliness of the Art Society but the sun and sky and the town that lay somewhere behind them over the hills. Her nipples jiggled in the sun.

A seagull plunged over the water, riding the air currents.

Here we are, all trying to make it work in our own way, Glenda said to everybody. Some people just want to chop down some trees and build themselves a cottage. Some want to ride the ocean or dig for gold or write a book or shag themselves rotten. Some go mad. Some go

sane. Some get married, the poor buggers. And some people just want the notion that maybe in a hundred years there'll be a little part of them still around to carry on this daft parade.

Someone laughed loudly, with others joining in. Ham switched a valve.

Glenda stopped, her cheeks flushed.

It is your life, she said to him and Sophie. Both of you. So live it, down here in the gutter with the rest of us. We fight horror and madness with humanity and art. As simple as that.

The wind shifted a moment and he could smell cold beer and mutton pie.

He looked to Sophie for something—

Let it go, she said. It's time we all did.

**

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a highest order of things.

Sophie led him forward. He imagined a white door with a cacophony of peacocks and trumpets and monkeys and stepped through it without breathing.

In front of the balloon he peeled his clothes off to the cheers of forty naked people at their easels. He gulped a flagon of beer that tasted like someone had set fire to a beehive. Swallowed a hunk of mutton pie.

I'm ready, he burped, and with those magical words he realised that he was.

Ham Plumber goosed the flame in the basket below the vast suspended canvas of the balloon. The whole mad structure was held to the ground now by a single rope with a barrel-weight tied to it.

He and Sophie climbed into the basket. Ham made room and hefted the barrel-weight into his arms.

Keep your balls well off me, Ham said. And no fondling.

The balloon strained at its bonds. The sky called.

Welcome to New Zealand, Glenda Plumber said, and a roar went up from the Tempest Bay Art Society crowd.

He held the barrel-weight a long moment. Felt the wind sharp on his body. Imagined the endless ocean and Antarctica. Felt nothing from his long life of anxious memories, and preferred it that way.

Here it is. The uncommon hour.

Whoo he roared, and let slip the barrel-weight. The balloon jolted then caught the wind, rising at unexpected speed towards the sky, and Tempest Bay fell away—

Nice arse, someone yelled and there was laughter below—

**

September twenty third, 1862.

A sunny day at the ends of the earth with the rest of his life ahead of him.

Rising. Rising. The people and the shoreline and the madhouse and the shipwreck below. This endless ocean. In his mind he sees Antarctica. Sees Sophie seeing it too. Then an eye closes somewhere but another one opens, and something in his chest is finally released, the pressure in his heart and hidden stress in his blood that's been there so long it was invisible to him, and it flutters into the sky like a bird in the New Zealand sun, never to return.

Did you enjoy 1862? If so, help others enjoy it too. Please recommend to friends and leave a review where possible!

Project-tempest.net is the home for all things Tempest Bay. Join our mailing list to keep up with new releases, listen to the Project Tempest podcast, and be part of our story development community.

Goodreads.com/cjhalbard is C.J. Halbard's Goodreads author page. Share your reviews and join the largest community of booklovers on the planet.

Read on for a conversation with C. J. Halbard and an excerpt from Her Mad Song, available now.

A conversation with C. J. Halbard

You originally planned 5 standalone episodes to kick off Project Tempest. 1862 is episode 3, so we're now at the halfway point. How's it feeling?

Writing 1862 has been much harder than Hearts & Minds or The Island were. But I do think this is the hump, and we've climbed it, so that feels satisfying.

All the other episodes are likely to take place in more or less the present day, following the events sparked in Hearts & Minds. But 1862 is a century and a half removed from that, though it's still set in the same place and following many of the same emotional threads. So it was always going to be an outlier. I had to build up a lot of 19th century Wellington from scratch and flesh out this weird self-contained story.

Do you enjoy the research?

Very much so—the trick I reckon is not getting lost in it. Research is often so fun, certainly more fun than sitting down and actually doing the bloody writing, that you want to keep on going forever. 'Ooh, yes, I really should chart all the vintage coaster designs in the old pubs on Cuba Street, just for veracity's sake', you know? But stories that wear their research too heavily end up dragging, at least for me. I wanted to create a vivid sense of place and time, especially early on during the Wellington arrival, but not giant disquisitions. Well-evoked moments feel better than ten pages of detail.

One thing I'm clear on now is that this overall style of working really clicks for me. I find it easier to generate chunks of story and put them out in front of an audience at regular intervals, than try and do it all in one big 100,000 word lump. There's a rhythm to it I love because it's starting to feel more like a conversation with readers. I was always jealous of comic creators, probably because I never went through the pain of actually trying to make a comic. But the idea of, you know, you're on a monthly treadmill and putting things out in a very old style serial way. That always felt like a more natural rhythm to me. And we're not exactly doing that here with Project Tempest but we're kind of doing it.

Madness seems to lie at the core of 1862, in several ways.

Madness is a tricky word that comes freighted with baggage. But certainly, if you will, there's an upside-down-ness to it. Strange territory. And if there is a point to 1862, it's that finding yourself in strange territory is not a minority position. Humans aren't mostly sane and occasionally mad. Quite the reverse. We just put a lot of effort into hiding it, like the narrator.

That almost sounds Lovecraftian. And back in Episode 2, the Minister, in conversation with Lucia's father, made that connection.

H.P. Lovecraft to me is one of the most antiquated yet super modern storytellers. A fascinating, contradictory mind.

He's this delicate man who died quite young in the 1930s and never really left the northeast of America. But he was driven by a visionary imagination. To me he very much deals with madness as territory, as a place or dimension you can find yourself trapped in. Space and time and history and humanity all wrapped around this insane geography.

Over and over in his stories and letters there are things that seem like they fill him with absolute horror. And it's important to be clear that there are extremely unpleasant aspects to his worldview from a modern perspective. He was a creature of deep prejudices and sometimes bizarre predilections who came from a different time, and wanted to have lived several centuries before that.

But one of the H.P. Lovecraft patterns I connect with is that to him the south seas, going all the way down to Antarctica, is this terrifying, faraway place where all sorts of monstrous things happen. For a delicate young man up in Providence and New York, it's the ends of the earth. The farthest unexplored wilderness, where you'd never willingly travel. He'd barely go to New Jersey on the train, he probably wasn't coming to deepest darkest Wellington.

So he fills this whole space, that he fears but knows nothing about first-hand, with his imagination. One way of reading *The Call of Cthulhu* is that R'lyeh, the ancient underwater city where a Great Old One lies imprisoned amid cyclopean architecture for aeons, is a ways off the east coast of New Zealand. Near the pole of inaccessibility.

I read that story a long time ago but didn't notice the connection.

I think it's fair to say there are quite a few Lovecraftian elements in 1862. Things lurking out there in the depths. This expedition ship that was on a mysterious journey for months, where all we really know is that it ran aground off the south coast of Wellington, the entire crew went mad, and the one survivor who could give real context about what happened, she isn't talking. A lot of those sorts of elements, but also a more general, contrary take on that whole worldview.

I also felt like *Deadwood*, the HBO TV series created by David Milch, was an influence.

I've always felt a real kinship with *Deadwood*. The way it compresses a parade of human drama into a 19th century gold rush town amid the Black Hills.

It's this frontier that's being built up almost week by week through the phases of civilization. When you first see *Deadwood* it's a muddy track filled with tents. And by the end of the series it has a free(ish) press, property rights, banking, telegraph communications, the beginning of paved roads, even corporations have arrived. Yet amid everything there's the thread of these very human characters living their lives and adjusting to constant change.

For me 19th century New Zealand, especially Wellington in this year 1862, there's a feeling that from a European perspective it's a very young place, almost like a child trying to put on its clothes. Most of the buildings have gone up over the last few years. They're right on the edge of wild unexplored territories, especially the southern ocean. There are gold strikes down south in Otago and that's starting to spur this flood of people coming through New Zealand seeking their fortune. So there is a real *Deadwood*-ish aspect, I think, and that was one of the key things I wanted to try and evoke. The type of people and characters and personalities that thrive in those environments. A place for chancers, for people who will try it on, for people who very much are out of place in London, or New York or even San Francisco.

You can push boundaries more in a frontier place, then you could in somewhere like London where the structures are far more established.

Absolutely. There's that vigor, right? That myth of the West where the old world becomes ever less free, enmeshed in its bureaucratic structures and institutions and autocracies. And if you're the type of person who wants to escape that then you push away, you come to America, and then as the East Coast becomes 'civilized' you move to the Midwest and then as that gets paved over you set out for the Northwest and California. And eventually, the truly restless types end up here in New Zealand.

I mean, 1862 is still thirty, forty years before the age of Antarctic exploration. The southern ocean is this terrifying unexplored place with vast mythic walls of ice beyond it. People have just barely even set foot on Antarctica, and they've no idea what lies over the mountains there. It scares the shit out of them but they're fascinated by it. And the Starry Voyager was out roaming those waters for months. Until this strange disaster on the coast that no one wants to talk about.

A lot of Tempest Bay, especially 1862, is about combining these things, the frontier with the mad. Deadwood and Lovecraft thrown into a sack together.

And yet at the same time people are planting english gardens in Thorndon. New Zealand does have that dual thing of feeling cozy but extreme, in some ways.

All the way through. On the one hand, even today there's still a way of looking at New Zealand like it's a sort of off-colonial retirement home. A little model village that hasn't necessarily thrown off all the old patterns of English parish life from the 1950s. There's definitely a viewpoint to fit that—you know, we're in the Pacific and right next door to Asia yet still cherishing long-lost Dominion fantasies.

But another side is that this is a place where people have always come to go mad. With all sorts of outsider behavior and unusual perspectives, the growth of ideas that can't come from anywhere else. And for me that's the more compelling shading, the distinct identity.

You always want to look wherever you are and ask, what's truly unique about this? How can right here, right now, be the center of the world? Because a lot of the message that gets absorbed when you grow up here is that, well, New Zealand's the end of the world. Everything happens somewhere else. If you have big dreams of some kind—a fancy career or to be famous or just go visit Disneyland—you have to leave and seek them elsewhere.

But the other way is to say to yourself, well, the outsider aspect is precisely the point. We're away from all the old ways of doing things. This right here is a fresh slate and you can do what you want. Embrace the challenges of having to build things up from scratch, start with first principles and run riot from there.

You're enjoying Project Tempest still?

It's a pain in the arse and very hard sometimes and just about the most fun I've ever had. Coming up as a professional writer, the advice I had over and over again from people I respect was that in the end, you need something that's your own. Your space that you get to shape and fill with the things that matter to you, that you can put in front of an audience with no filter. And it turns out to be very true.

If there's one thing you'd ask readers to do?

Two things, if they're enjoying these stories and are up for it.

First, tell someone else about Project Tempest and point them to project-tempest.net, especially the newsletter and podcast. This helps enormously with spreading the word and is much appreciated.

Second, write in with any comments or questions to hello@manonfire.org. The very best part about all this malarkey is connecting with people and building our strange little community around Tempest Bay.

Read on for an excerpt from Her Mad Song, out now on project-tempest.net.

Her Mad Song

They got off the bus at the crossroads in Tempest Bay. This rangy man with scarecrow eyes and the twelve year old girl who kept looking at everything like it puzzled her. It was only mid afternoon but he was tired and his leg ached and he could smell himself and he needed to take a shit. He was irritated with the girl who'd been in a grump all day. Yet as he stepped down onto tar seal that looked like it'd been laid in the 1930s, distractions faded. He felt obsession rising.

Last stop on the south Wellington line. The bus driver, without any acknowledgement, hauled himself out of his chair, stomped down the steps, and headed for a building marked Doris Cafe in faded red font.

No one else on the bus. No one else on the street. A small New Zealand coastal town at the end of the earth. The Pacific ocean and Antarctica the only places beyond.

It looked so normal. With the world going the way it was, that was the strangest thing of all.

**

There'd been moments when he doubted the bus would even get them to Tempest Bay. Main services didn't go the southern route any more. Not with the cutbacks. And the old banger had seen better days. A diesel engine and flaking paint and the windows scuffed with marker pen graffiti. Smell of dead nicotine imprinted into the woollen seat covers. But the driver, heavy and sullen, seemed to take pride in his charge. As the bus had wound its way from Wellington city out to the coast, chugging up hills or along lanes, regulars had hopped on and off. Canvas shopping bags and frame walkers and prams. Most greeted the driver with a cheery hello. The driver gave grunts back and never made eye contact.

In a high thin notch above Roseneath the street was blocked by two cars parked across from each other. The driver hauled the bus to a stop like the brakeman on a cable car, banged the door switch, marched out onto the road. After five minutes of thumping on the doors of nearby houses he found the owner of a 1986 Subaru Legacy and told him to fooking well move it.

The way was clear soon after. The driver climbed back onboard, satisfied, and restarted the engine. No sign from anyone that this was unusual. You took the bus, you took your chances.

The girl had munched a chocolate chip biscuit as she watched from a perch on the seat above the wheel well. Purple-gold trainers with mismatched laces. Tired from the long journey but still absorbing everything. Twelve years old going on two hundred. The force and meaning of the man's life with crumbs in her hair.

She blinked. Looked around.

The sky here is different, she'd said. Like it's hiding something.

The last other passenger had been a nurse with flaming pink hair. She hopped off carrying her shopping bags at a village far from Wellington. Thanked the driver. The driver grunted.

Looking in his mirror the driver saw the man and the girl still sitting there. Stared. Kept the door open.

Tempest Bay's all that's left. End of the run, the driver had said. Something in his voice. A question not asked.

The man nodded. Didn't move. The girl ignored everything except the puzzle of the sky.

The door slammed shut on its wheezy pneumatics. The bus trundled on towards a high hill range ahead, and twenty minutes later entered a dark tunnel—

Deep, deep dark. No lights. Dripping roof. Dynamite scars. The bus this tiny vessel. The driver snorting like the coachman of a horse-drawn carriage.

Chugging, chugging, chugging through a twisty blackness that made your chest tight and the girl had clutched the man's arm—

Sunlight. Lemonwood and manuka trees flitting by. Jagged hills wrapping half the skyline, opening onto the blue-green curve of an ocean bay below. Wooden houses dotted along ridgelines and through the trees. Glimpses too quick to absorb except for one particular sight, one eyeblink that grabbed him, shocked him as the road insisted downwards to the shops.

**

Now standing at the crossroads he could feel the ocean salt in his nostrils. The light had a vivid intensity. The air circled, always moving, always on his face. There were odd flowers tufting from the edges of asphalt and doorways. Spindly purple things unfamiliar to him.

Tempest Bay, then. A charming seaside town, at first glance. The cafe, the second hand bookstore, the dress shop, the stationers'. A place just a little bit out of time. But already he knew there was more here.

His eyes on the western clifftops. Bleak and rough with the weathering of a hundred storms. A ruined tower stood framed against the sky. The thing he had seen. Old, broken, somehow ominous. It transfixed him. They'd been right to divert from their main journey and visit this place. Though he was anxious to be back on the road soon. You couldn't stand still, any more. Not the way the world was going.

He went to the luggage compartment on the side of the bus. Hauled it open. One small green suitcase, much used. The girl's duffle shoulder bag. He grabbed them both, handed the bag to the girl.

The driver emerged from the Doris cafe. A thick white bread sandwich poking out of greaseproof paper in his hand. Already munching at it, gobbling the onions. Stopped as he passed the man and the girl. Gulped his mouth clear. Looked them up and down. Something unexpected in his eyes.

I do one route here a day, he said. One p.m. sharp. No more. You'd know that if you were local but you're clearly not local, right?

Clearly, the man said.

The bus driver breathed deep.

You get back on this bus, I'll drop you in Roseneath or Kilbirnie or even the city centre, he said. Won't even charge you the fare. That's generosity, that is. That's a fookin' bargain. Now I leave when I finish this ploughman's.

The driver glanced at the girl with something like sympathy on his face. Shuffled up the stairs of the bus, hefted himself back into his chair. Tore into the sandwich with gusto, spraying crumbs on the already well-abused window glass.

The man and the girl looked at each other. The look they sometimes shared, the conspiracy that the man found so precious. We're in a strange land on a strange adventure, in a world pulling apart at the seams. Do we stop now, do the sensible thing when it's offered?

This place has secrets, she said matter-of-factly. Can we stay?

No surprise. No fear. As though she'd been waiting for a town like this her whole life.

We're just passing through, he reminded her. We'll walk out through the tunnel come nightfall, if need be.

By the time the bus growled to life, its diesel engine spewing fumes in the air, and the doors shut and it began a tight turn round the edges of that neat little intersection, by the time their last ride out of town chugged past without them, they were entering the Doris cafe, committed.

**

The Doris cafe smelled like fatty bread. Grease-filled sandwiches, mock cream buns, one type of coffee. It at least had people. A thin moustached man behind the counter, a fussy-looking woman nearby at a table. Arguing about something but paused when they saw the man and the girl.

Which one of you is Doris, the man said.

The one that passed last summer, thank you for asking, the counter man said. I help you?

Both locals looking at the newcomers like they were creatures emerged from the sea.

Apologies, the man said. Just trying to open the mood. I need to use your bathroom and get some directions. If that's okay.

Bathroom's out back through that door. But only for customers.

I'll have whatever's good, the man said, and so will the girl.

Everything's good. But we're just about to close up.

You just served the bus driver, the man said.

Joe knows his business. We don't know yours.

The man considered his options. He was someone who liked to get things done. Sometimes that involved a direct approach. But he sensed that wouldn't be much use here, in this linoleum-tiled establishment out of time.

My business is that I'll pay double asking price for something cold and quick, the man said. In memory of Doris.

A long pause. The counter man and the fussy-looking woman looked at each other. Gears whirring.

We do a nice margarine cheddar sandwich and a lamington. Doris's favourite.

Two of those, the man said.

He paid up. There was no electronic payment. For that matter, no one seemed to have a mobile phone or screen of any kind.

He left the girl and went out back and found the bathroom behind a whitewashed door and did his business. A pink furry toilet seat. A little poster on the facing wall with a winking

cartoon grocer done in thick ink lines. Mr Sixbox, whoever that was. Sells but never tells. The toilet seat was prickly on his arse. There was a fingernail embedded in the fur.

He returned. The counter man was folding up two brown paper bags and arguing again with the woman. The girl sat on a counter chair playing possum, which was when she pretended to be a well-behaved child with respect for her elders. It was a trick that often worked.

I guess we're taking those double-price meals to go, the man said.

I guess you are.

Mind telling me where everyone's gone, the man said. Town feels empty.

Is that your directions you want?

No just some curiosity, the man said.

They're down by the shoreline on traditional business. Nothing needed for you there.

Alright, the man said. My directions are that I'm looking for someone. A meteorologist.

Faces freezing. Long and cold. A blank wall.

None like that here, I'm sorry, said the counter man. Maybe you're wanting up Kilbirnie way, or even the Hutt Valley. Lots of meteorologists there.

It was a choice right then of whether to stretch out, turn it into something more. Make an impact on this town right away. Or not. He turned it over fast in his mind, his back and neck muscles starting to tense—

A voice from nowhere.

Oh Gurney, the voice said. Do stop giving people the run-around. We don't get many tourists. Maybe you're why. You and Angela both.

Something unfolded from behind the fussy woman at the table. Another woman, tiny and much much older, her skin so tight it was almost translucent. Wrapped in a green coat and a bodge hat that might have been in fashion 80 years ago. The man hadn't even noticed her.

She shuffled over. Shook the man's hand. Winked at the girl. Her skin felt like dry paper.

Jessica Flower, she said with a smile. Welcome to Tempest Bay. We've got a little tension in town, makes us all a bit rude.

He gave her the untrue name that he used these days. She nodded.

What's your interest, dearie? she said. In meteorologists of all things.

Something in her eyes. Perception. He decided to play it straight.

We're headed through, the man said simply. Away from the weather up north. But this meteorologist had an idea I wanted to ask her about.

On your way through? Jessica said.

On our way through, the man said. Don't want to add to any tension.

He saw her respond, acknowledge him.

Well now, Jessica said. Person you want's up on the western clifftop. By the tower you've no doubt noticed. Best way's to turn right out of the cafe, follow Bridey Street all around the curve then climb the iron stairs you'll find there. But I'd stay off the beach, just now. As a courtesy. Can you do that for us, dearie?

I can, the man said. And thank you.

Jessica beamed. He could imagine young men a long time ago being suckered by the corners of her smile.

I tell you what, maybe you'll take a little peace offering up to the clifftop. Jessica said. There's been a few disagreements of late. A slice of something, all nice and cheery.

I'm not getting involved in anything, he began—

But with surprising speed Jessica darted across to the counter and returned with a slice of what looked like dry pink raspberry cake cut into a four inch square. Popped it into one of his paper bags and winked, ignoring the baleful stares of the other two behind her, who had no courage to say anything but clearly despised every moment of whatever it was that was going on.

You both have a lovely day in Tempest Bay, Jessica said, and that was that.

He took the paper bags of lamingtons and sandwiches from the counter, gestured to the girl, and headed for the door. Felt daggers from the other two hitting his back. But it was clear who ruled the roost here.

**

Out on the street Tempest Bay was still eerily deserted. The early afternoon light hitting the clifftop tower. He felt somehow like the policeman in that old film the Wicker Man. Trying to unravel the town of Summerisle before it unravelled him. But he could handle it, he felt. Handle it and more.

There was something else here, too, so far. They'd been rude and odd but there was no sign anyone had recognised him. That, in this world right now, was a double blessing.

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They paused halfway up the old iron cliff stairs. His lungs felt bruised. He was not in good health, not for a long time now. But the view helped.

Tempest Bay curved eastwards below. The town rough and beautiful and real like a child's drawing. You could see that at some point long past a street grid had been imposed on older patterns. The ridges and shape of the hills. An ordered series of seven cottages right on the sand. Across a tidal inlet, a housing development near cricket fields. North east, past the town centre and the road to the tunnel, a wood with a boxy abandoned building peeking over the trees.

He could smell gull shit and heavy salt wind and the rock dirt of the cliffs. And those spindly purple flowers. On the way along Bridey Street they'd been peeking out of letterbox bases and or hedgerows and paths. He would learn that Tempest Bay locals called them whisper fingers.

The man looked again in his paper bag from the Doris Cafe. Despite his hunger, the margarine sandwich and the lamington just didn't feel like something he could eat.

The girl, of course, with the stomach of a goat, gobbled hers right down.

What is a lamington? she said quizzically, spraying crumbs after eating it.

I don't know, the man said. Something to do with sponge and coconut.

She thought this over.

Lamingtons, she said, taste like dry spiders.

She hadn't spoken much that day. Conversations between them were random and sometimes difficult. Earlier on the bus they'd had a fight about which seat to take. Such things

sometimes meant a day or two of quietly ignoring the universe. But he would come to find that Tempest Bay sparked conversations of all kinds.

She picked one of the nearby flowers. Munched it thoughtfully as a chaser to the sandwich and lamington. Pointed.

There, she said. Down by the beach.

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A trail of people filing across the sand. Heading for something at the water's edge. A rickety-looking structure, an improvised raft of some kind. He saw Gurney the counter man and fussy Angela from the Doris Cafe among them. Further back, hobbling over the sand, old lady Jessica. Perhaps two dozen others all up.

Everyone carrying something. A guitar. A photo. A travelling box. A dress. Sheaves of paper. As the man and the girl watched, they gathered around the raft and began placing the items on it. Ordering and fastening them in some unknown scheme. Preparing, clearly, to push the raft out into the ocean, laden with cargo.

It doesn't make sense to me, the girl said. But I'd like it to.

You'll wait a long time, the man said. Things always look strange from the outside.

So when do we get inside? the girl said.

He had no answer to that so he turned his gaze from the beach and resumed climbing.

**

The clifftop was higher than it had seemed. The ruined tower dominated everything at the top of the stairs. Up close it felt primordial: hefted blocks of stone framed with ancient timbers, a simple ringed shape perhaps forty feet high, wrecked and split at the crown with a shattered balcony. Utterly out of place there on that grassy clifftop, a defiance to the sky and sea and shore and town.

They call it The Lighthouse, a Scottish sounding voice said.

An intense woman digging a small trench in the grass near the cliff edge. Ragged in her own way as he had become.

It's not a lighthouse, the man said.

Why'd you say that, she said, and it felt like a bit of a test.

He looked up. Studied the oppressive, crumbling structure.

Wrong place, he said. Not to mention the features.

Unless you're trying to draw travellers onto the rocks, the girl said. Then it's right where it needs to be.

The woman stopped her digging. Stared at them both, especially the girl, trying to figure them out.

You the meteorologist? the man said.

I look like a meteorologist? she said.

Right now you look like a ditch digger, the man said.

Guess that's what I am, then, she said. Nice to be properly pigeon holed by such an accurate looking man.

What's that down on the beach? the man said. With the people.

They call it the Letting Festival, she said. An old town tradition. They've lots of them here.

Sounds like there's been some tension, the man said. We were told to bring a peace offering.

He brought out the paper bag with the remaining slice of pink cake and stepped forward across the grass to hand it to her. Her face was drawn and her hands shook. The cliff was very high above the ocean.

She inspected the bag. Took out the slice and held it as though it were a wasp.

Jessica? She said. Old lady with a smile like a cat?

That's her.

She dropped the cake into the dug up earth and grabbed her shovel. Buried fast, with an urgency. Dusted her hands off. Looked at him, thin and bearded and in bad shape. Looked at the girl, healthy and clothed but with that otherness. He could see the gears turning in her head. A squall hit the cliff, rustling through.

Bugger this place, she said. People here just like their pitchforks.

Not for me to say, the man said. I lack implements myself.

Well you've seen the sights and made your delivery, she said. State some business or piss off.

I read your book, the man said. Came a ways off our journey to ask you about it.

Her face changed. Curious and scared.

No one read that book, she said. Except to laugh.

I wasn't laughing, the man said.

You don't strike me as someone who laughs much. Does he?

That last directed at the girl.

He laughs when he thinks it'll set others at ease, the girl said.

So he doesn't really laugh.

No, he doesn't.

The woman laughed herself a moment, a warm, honking, human sound.

I'm Hedy, she said, which matched his expectation.

He gave her the untrue name that he used these days.

She peered at his face, searching.

I recognise you from somewhere? Hedy said.

No you don't recognise me from anywhere.

I'm Lucia, the girl said. What's all this digging about?

Speaking of the broken earth in the shadow of the ominous tower.

Something I've been investigating, Hedy said. In my meteorological capacity.

Out of nowhere Hedy raised the back of her hand to her mouth and bit it. Hard, for a long breath. The man and Lucia watched, unsure. Then the moment was over. Hedy lowered her hand, now red with teeth marks, and it was as if nothing had happened.

Let me show you something, Hedy said. Being as you're the only person in a thousand miles who read my book. I'm not completely mad. Halfway at best.

Fifty yards down the backside of the clifftop, beyond the tower, stood an orange 1974 Concord caravan on blocks. It was rusted and hinky and probably not fit for human habitation. A broken aerial poking out of the roof. Chunks of corrugated iron and an awning over campfire remnants. An improvised washing line hung with t-shirts and skivvies.

Inside was a lumpy mattress, some notebooks, a forest of abandoned liquor bottles. A small chest by the counter.

You own this? the man said.

I showed up for the summer and squatted here and they haven't managed to kick me out yet, Hedy said. I'm stubborn 'case you missed that.

Stubborn enough to write that book, the man said.

Indeed, Hedy said.

She reached into the chest. Took out an instrument with reverence. It looked old, perhaps Victorian. Spindly tripod arms and what looked like a surveying device. Lucia, he saw, was instantly drawn to it. But it felt somehow ominous to him. Intrusive.

A Dramolite, Hedy said. My mother left it to me.

He felt that she was watching him very carefully, for his reaction. He tried to stay neutral—

It's beautiful, Lucia said. But beautiful things lie a lot, I find.

With a snort of frustration Hedy pushed out the door. Headed back up to the clifftop. The man and Lucia followed. Passing the spot where Hedy had been digging, he saw something in the ground, the arrangement of the dirt. Like a science experiment seen sideways, somehow. Or something else.

At the top of the rise the sun bathed the clifftop with golden light while driving a long shadow across Tempest Bay. The headlights of commuter cars arriving into the street grid via the road tunnel. Lights beginning to blink on in the houses.

Hedy pointed. The beach was empty again. But out to sea, bobbing on the Pacific ocean, a tiny shadow getting smaller. The raft, loaded with silhouettes. Headed towards the deep on the current. Like an offering.

Hedy arranged the Dramolite on the clifftop. Fiddled with it, peered through the lens. Moved back and forth.

So the townsfolk have a problem with you digging up here? the man said.

They've a problem with everything, Hedy said. This is a place that hides every secret it can. Then watches you.

What's that thing supposed to show?

Certain aspects of geography and climate, Hedy said. Invisible aspects. But real.

Like in your book, the man said.

Like in my book, Hedy said.

Long pause.

So is it working? Lucia said impatiently.

Hedy snorted. Stepped back from the Komngolite's eyeglass.

I need a goddamn drink, Hedy said.

There must be a pub in town, the man said, thinking to draw her away from the caravan with its bottles.

Not one I can go to, she said, and he had a very clear sense of long solitary nights up here on this clifftop, in the caravan.

Come down just for a while, the man said. Couple of pints for company before the girl and I leave.

He saw the war of pride and alcohol in Hedy's eyes—

About the Author

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