

1

NORTHERN VICTORIA

There was someone else inside his body, some stranger, telling him to go.

The boy stood high on the pedals, pushed himself off and felt the soft tyres of his bike roll down the drive and into the street, his heart tripping over the pedals. He sped on, by the single street light burning on the corner, banking his body low into the bend, by the deserted shops in Main Street, past the place where the dead soldier was supposed to have been found, and before long, beyond the far end of the town, he could spy the fringe of Italian cypresses and powerful banks holding the reservoir in.

Tom Lakeman laid his bike down and listened, but there was just the swishing of an intermittent, high breeze moving the ragged spires of the cypresses. Behind the trees, a wash of black cloud had come in from nowhere and shut the whole world in. Immediately he felt a sense of being the only person alive, and as he walked through the dry, strawy grass he was suddenly heroic; wasn't even worried about tiger snakes or the scratch of papery weeds against his bare legs. Nothing could stop his feet carrying him up

the bank of the reservoir to the mat of spidery leaves beneath the trees. He knew he had to come, but what had taken him here he couldn't now say, except perhaps a feeling of loneliness made worse by the sky and cypresses when he looked. Despite the dark, the air had stayed clammy, the kind of heat that would lie sticky and still right through the night.

Finding a vantage point near a tractor engine gone red with rust, the machinery half-buried in the bank, he could see right over the brackish surface of the reservoir, follow black poly piping out to the middle of the dam where it ducked its head but didn't resurface. Now that treated water was pumped to the rest of the town, water from here was only drained to a handful of shops in Main Street, the ones that had somehow missed the reconnection.

Tom wriggled against the bank and waited.

The earth and cypress leaves still had the sun's warmth in them and he snuggled against the ground, settling himself in. There was no telling how long he'd be waiting, or if the voice inside telling him to come had been right. At night there was no chance of anyone seeing him. Someone would almost have to tread on him here to disturb him. He wondered why everything looked so different at night too, all the angles and shadows and sounds changing everything.

He dreamed in shallow sleep for a while then. It was like lying in bed against his mother when he was little; comfortable smells and the slow rising of her breath. He pushed his face closer against the ground and breathed in the faintly musty scent of mouldering cypress leaves as if trying to catch her again. Loamy earth mingled with a dream; a clutch of sky-blue marble-size eggs that peeled away in drifts of bril-

liant white light. How long he dreamed, or slept, he couldn't tell, but when he opened his eyes he had to guess for a second where he was, and then, forcing his eyes wider open, follow a rip of smudgy, black cloud overhead as it disappeared behind the top of a cypress.

Then suddenly a noise.

A cracking of sticks made him freeze and press his body even harder against the bank, every bone and muscle in him tensing.

For a moment he lay there, too frightened to lift his head. Someone could've been in the tree above him ready to drop down and smother him, or pounce out from the side of the bank and bundle a hessian sack over his head before he had time to unfreeze, dump him into the reservoir with his arms pinned to his sides, an axe at the ready to finish him off.

The fright of it made him lift his head, but not move his arm to brush away whatever was stuck to his cheek, impressed into it, the skeleton of a leaf or a spindly piece of bone.

Then came another sound – a squeaking of boots against glass – and Tom instantly recognised it as someone walking over a fragment of one of the hundreds of broken bottles that littered the opposite bank.

He knew the geography of the sounds now, and crawled up a little, wiped the side of his face and tried to gain a better view over the gloomy surface of the reservoir.

At first he couldn't make out anything. On a night when dense cloud had come to swallow every star and liquid moon, there was barely enough light for him to squint through. Then another squeak of glass came calling across the water

and he could focus on a point. Like magic, a figure began to materialise out of the night; a blurred shape like a creeping animal, cautious and skulking through the brambles on the levee holding back the far side of the reservoir.

It took his eyes a minute to adjust to the movement but by lifting his head higher and straining he could pick out the figure that, as he continued peering, dissolved into a shadow lugging what looked to be a drum.

Whoever it was had struggled to the very top of the bank with the drum and Tom could tell by his heavy movement that the container must have been near full. A moment later the figure slid down the side of the bank to the edge of the water and the man, because he could see now that it was a man, turned his face away from his watcher, as if he knew someone was there spying. What little light there was glinted off the drum's rounded edges and, for a fraction of second, caught the man's tin-grey face.

Tom puzzled over what was happening.

Lying down on the opposite side of the reservoir, he could see the man strain to lift the drum, try to chug it up and down like champagne ready to be sprayed before giving it up, and then dump it just as heavily at his feet as if exhausted by the effort. He was too far away to see the lid being unscrewed, to see the contents run gurgling and lapping into the waters of the dam, but in a flash he guessed what it was and in his head he could see every detail: the man's clenched teeth, his knees sunk down to hold the drum steady as it emptied, fingers nearly pushing more dents into the tin, his nails rough and the tip of one finger crushed blue. A second drum followed, then another.

Why was he doing that?

Tom's mind flew, excitement racing alongside fear in him. But before he had time to make a decision whether to show himself or not, the man had disappeared himself back into the night and the next thing he heard was the sound of a car driving away, a ute.

When he was safely back home, Tom's finger traced an ancient riverbed scoured into the wooden kitchen table, as a ripple ran through him again. Almost involuntarily, he pricked his ears as he imagined a noise far away where the sun had slid earlier in a mist of burnt orange. He could see night stalking secretively through their town, hear a clank of metal pipes carried on the hot night air, a burst of laughter breaking from a neighbour's house, startling like plates dropping.

Since his father had disappeared, even his brothers had grown more subdued and surly. They wolfed their meals as ravenously as ever, but looked about themselves morosely as if hoping to find someone or something to blame. There were words between his brother, Iain, and his mother, a spat over something or nothing. If his father had been there, Tom knew, it would've taken only a simple look to finish it. But this morning, Iain had wanted to go on with it, almost goading his mother, and in the end she had just shrugged herself away.

And tonight Iain hadn't even come home, while his other brother Phillip had parked himself next door at the Holloways, listening to records, shouting he'd decide for himself when he would come home too.

So it was just Tom in the house now, with his mother turning the pages of her *Sun* in the poorly lit lounge room

when he went in there, tugging the thin sleeves of her cardigan up to her elbows as she waited for the boys to come home. The single, yellow light on the front porch burnt more in hope than expectation, a dirty flurry of moths battling in competition around it.

‘Where have you been?’ she asked, but more to say something than to really ask.

‘Just out for a ride.’

‘In the dark?’

She was tired and he could hear it in her voice, and see it in the way she turned the pages of the newspaper.

‘It’s not too dark. There’s a moon.’

He wanted to talk with her and stood there, waiting for her to look up and ask him something, what he was thinking, anything.

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea going out riding in the dark.’ Another page of the newspaper flipped itself over. ‘I don’t want people thinking I’m irresponsible.’

The pale blue curtains of the front windows were still open, hanging limply from metal rings encircling a simple wooden rod. For the first time, Tom noticed that the curtains were actually too short for the windows; glass visible underneath even where they were scrunched to the side, like someone wearing long pants way too short for them.

‘You know that soldier during the war,’ Tom began.

‘Hmm?’

‘They didn’t find out who did it, did they?’

‘It was twenty years ago. Or over twenty years ago,’ she said. ‘If they haven’t found out by now, they never will.’

‘And the body was somewhere towards the end of town?’

Her finger was helping follow a story that had taken her interest. 'So they say.'

'Was it someone from the town?'

'If I knew that,' she said, without looking up from the paper, 'I'd be employed by the police by now.' Tom waited and then she noticed him. 'You don't have to worry about that,' she reassured him. 'It was a long time ago. And nothing has happened since. Probably whoever did it is even dead himself now.'

'They could be,' Tom agreed, though thinking of what he had seen at the reservoir. But his mother was right, it was a long time ago, and he shook it out of his head, at least part of it. For a second he thought about saying something, but instead asked, 'What time are Iain and Phillip coming home?'

When she looked up, he could see how tired she was; in the saggy, smudged bags under her eyes, the dim light of the lounge room making her seem even more drained.

'I really don't know. Those boys are a law unto themselves.'

Then she went back to the paper, bowed her head toward it and Tom walked back into the passageway.

'No more riding at night time!' she called after him.

'No, mum,' he replied, but he was already at the back door.

The black night was thick with heat, and silent. He paused by the water tank stand to let water run into his mouth and sop the neck of his shirt. When he listened again, there was nothing, not even the barking of a dog disturbing the night. Light years burned in the stars above. He'd go for a

walk now. It was too hot to sleep and his head was rattling with his brothers, his mother and father, the reservoir, all the things happening there.

There was stillness over the town tonight too, a calm, as if everything had lain down with exhaustion and let sleep cover its bones. No traffic roamed Main Street and no soul wandered along it. The illuminated *Peter's Ice-Cream* cone shone feebly outside the closed London Cafe and the butcher shop's blue and white-striped blinds were pulled snugly down. Inside, a bristle broom would be lying amongst the strewn sawdust, Tom knew. He could picture pushing rivers and roads through the sawdust with his bare feet, wishing they had a bread-crumbs floor like that at home.

But he wandered on by, past the grocery store on his left with its cricket teams stickytaped to the windows and homemade sign-writing trumpeting this week's bargains. Empty cardboard boxes lay stacked up against the bottom of the display windows and it made him think of Gilly at the cafe saying to the girl behind the counter, '*Do you sell everything that's in the window?*' and the girl sullenly answering '*Yeah*', as if to say *So what?*, and then Gilly thrusting his hands deep in his pockets and glancing around, as if making sure of his buy, before confidently pointing and ordering, '*Well, I'll have half a pound of those dead flies there.*'

He laughed, thinking of it, and the memory gave him company as he walked to the far end of town, past the garage and the red Caltex horse painted high up on the water tower. The only person he saw, Joe La Scala, was busy carting part of a car's greasy axle down his driveway

– perhaps the heat was keeping him up too – but he didn't swing around to look at Tom, not even when his feet crunched noisily over gravel.

It hadn't been long, but he missed his father. And he'd have to come home soon. It was like this town at night; it was dark and everyone was inside because everyone had to have somewhere to go. His father had to have somewhere to go. He might even be there when he got home, beating him back.

He couldn't be very far away now.