



AHMESSIA

a_novel

PETER CAREY

winner_of
the_Booker_Prize

The Chemistry of Tears
Parrot and Olivier in America
His Illegal Self
Theft
Wrong About Japan
My Life as a Fake
True History of the Kelly Gang
Jack Maggs
The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith
The Big Bazooohley
The Tax Inspector
Oscar and Lucinda
Bliss
Illywhacker
The Fat Man in History

AMNESIA

Peter Carey



RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

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Penguin
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RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

For Frances Coa

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PART 1

IT WAS A spring evening in Washington DC; a chilly autumn morning in Melbourne; it was exactly 22:00 Greenwich Mean Time when a worm entered the computerised control system of countless Australian prisons and released the locks in many other places of incarceration, some of which the hacker could not have known existed. Because Australian prison security was, in the year 2010, mostly designed and sold by American corporations the worm immediately infected 117 US federal correctional facilities, 1700 prisons, and over 300 county jails. Wherever it went, it travelled underground, in darkness, like a bushfire burning in the roots of trees. Reaching its destinations it announced itself: THE CORPORATION IS UNDER OUR CONTROL. THE ANGEL DECLARES YOU FREE.

This message and others more elaborate were read, in English, by warders in Texas contractors in Afghanistan, Kurdistan, in immigrant detention camps in Australia, Woomera, black sites in the Kimberley, secret centres of rendition at the American “signature facility” near Alice Springs. Sometimes prisoners escaped. Sometimes they were shot and killed. Bewildered Afghans and Filipinos, an Indonesian teenager wounded by gunfire, British Muslim dying of dehydration, all these previously unknown individuals were seen on public television, wandering on outback roads.

The security monitors in Sydney’s Villawood facility read: THE ANGEL OF THE LORD BY NIGHT OPENED THE PRISON DOORS, AND BROUGHT THEM FORTH. My former colleague asked, what does this language tell us about the perpetrator?

I didn’t give a toss. I was grateful for a story big enough to push me off the front page where I had already suffered PANTS ON FIRE. I was spending my days in the Supreme Court of New South Wales paying Nigel Willis QC \$500 an hour so I could be sued for defamation. Nigel’s “billable hours” continued to accrue well past the stage when it became clear that he was a fuckwit and I didn’t have a chance in hell, but cheer up mate: he was betting 3:2 on a successful appeal. That my barrister also owned a racehorse was not the point.

Meanwhile there was not much for me to do but read the papers. FEDS NOW SAY ANGEL IS AN AUSSIE WORM.

“Would the defendant like to tell the court why he is reading a newspaper.”

“I am a journalist, m’lud. It is my trade.”

Attention was then brought to the state of my tweed jacket. Ha-ha, m’lud. When the court had had its joke, we adjourned for lunch and I, being unaccompanied on that particular day, took my famously shambolic self across to the botanic gardens where I read the *Daily Telegraph*. Down by the rose gardens amongst the horseshit fertiliser, I learned that the terrorist who had been “obviously” a male Christian fundamentalist had now become the daughter of a Melbourne actress. The traitor appeared very pale and much younger than her thirty years. Dick Connolly got the photo credit but his editor had photoshopped her for real life she would turn out to be a solid little thing whose legs were strong and sturdy, not all like the waif in the *Telegraph*. She was from Coburg, in the north of Melbourne, a flat-forgotten industrial suburb coincidentally once the site of Pentridge Prison. She came to him

own arraignment in a black hoodie, slouching, presumably to hide the fact that our homegrown terrorist had a beautiful face.

Angel was her handle. Gaby was her name in what I have learned is “meat world.” She was charged as Gabrielle Baillieux and I had known her parents long ago—her mother was the actress Celine Baillieux, her father Sando Quinn, a Labor member of parliament.

I returned to my own court depressed, not by the outcome of my case, which was preordained, but by the realisation that my life in journalism was being destroyed at the time I might have expected my moment in the sun.

I had published several books, fifty features, a thousand columns, mainly concerned with the traumatic injury done to my country by our American allies in 1975. While my colleagues leapt to the conclusion that the hacker was concerned simply with freeing boat people from Australian custody, I took the same view as our American allies, that this was an attack on the United States. It was clear to me, straight away, that the events of 1975 had been a first act in this tragedy and that the Angel Worm was a retaliation. If Washington was right, that was the story I had spent my life preparing for. If the “events of 1975” seem confusing or enigmatic to you, then that is exactly my point. They are all part of “The Great Amnesia.” More TC.

In court, I listened as my publisher got a belting from the judge and I saw his face when he finally understood he could not even sell my book as remaindered.

“Pulp?” he said.

“Including that copy in your hand.”

Damages were awarded against me for \$120,000. Was I insured or not insured? I did not know.

The crowd outside the court was as happy as a hanging day.

“Feels, Feels,” the News International guy shouted. “Look this way. Felix.”

That was Kev Dawson, a cautious little prick who made his living rewriting press releases.

“Look this way Feels.”

“What do you think about the verdict, Feels?”

What I thought was: our sole remaining left-wing journalist had been pissed on from mighty height. And what was my crime? Repeating press releases? No, I had reported rumour. In the world of grown-ups a rumour is as much a “fact” as smoke. To omit the smoke is to fail to communicate the threat in the landscape.

In the Supreme Court of New South Wales this was defamation.

“What next, Felix?”

Rob a bank? Shoot myself? Certainly, no-one would give me the Angel story although I was better equipped (*Wired* magazine take note) to write it than any of the clever children who would be hired to do the job. But I was, as the judge had been pleased to point out, no longer employable in “your former trade.” I had been a leader writer, a columnist, a so-called investigative reporter. I had inhabited the Canberra Press Gallery where my “rumours” had little power. I think Alan Ramsey may have even liked me. For a short period in the mid-seventies, I was host of *Drivetime Radio* on the ABC.

I was an aging breadwinner with a ridiculous mortgage. I had therefore been a screenwriter and a weekend novelist. I had written both history and political satire, thrillers, investigative crime. The screen adaptation of my novel *Barbie and the Deadheads* was workshopped

Robert Redford's Sundance Institute.

But through this, even while bowing and scraping to get "seed money" from the Australian Film Commission, I remained a socialist and a servant of the truth. I had been sued ninety-eight times before they brought me down with this one, and along the way I had exposed the deeds of Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch (both Old Geelong Grammarians, btw) always a very dangerous occupation for a family man, and apparently terrifying for those who rely on him for succour. As the doors of the mainstream media closed to anyone unworldly enough to write the truth, I still published "Lo-tech Blog," a newsletter printed on acid paper which was read by the entire Canberra Press Gallery and all of parliament besides. Don't ask how we paid our electricity bill.

I worked as a journalist in a country where the flow of information was controlled by three corporations. Their ability to manipulate the "truth" made the right to vote largely meaningless, but I was a journalist. I did my best. In "Lo-tech Blog," I revealed the Australian press's cowardly reporting of the government lies about the refugees aboard the ill-fated *Oolong*.

"I can't comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard," said our Prime Minister.

Once again, like 1975, here was a lie of Goebbelsque immensity. The fourth estate made a whole country believe the refugees were animals and swine. Many think so still.

Yet the refugees belonged here. They would have been at home with the best of us. We have a history of courage and endurance, of inventiveness in the face of isolation and mortal threat. At the same time, alas, we have displayed this awful level of cowardice, brow-nosering, criminality, mediocrity and nest-feathering.

I was overweight and out of breath but I was proud to be sued, reviled, scorned, to be called a loser by the rewriters of press releases. I took comfort from it, which was just as well because there was comfort nowhere else. As would be confirmed in the weeks ahead, none of my old mates were going to rescue me from the slow soul-destroying grind of unemployment.

A FIVE-STAR HOTEL might seem an unwise venue for a bedraggled outcast to lick his wounds but the Wentworth was favoured by my old mate Woody “Wodonga” Townes. My dearest friends and I exhibit a passionate love of talk and drink, but of this often distinguished crowd it was Woody Townes who had the grit and guts. He had attended court every day although he had had to fly seven hundred kilometres from Melbourne. Any fight I had, he was always by my side. And when I had endured the whacking from the press I found him where I knew he would be, where he had waited on almost every gruesome afternoon, with his meaty body jammed into a small velvet chair in the so-called Garden Court. The moment he spotted me he began pouring champagne with his left hand. It was a distinctive pose: the heavy animo leg crossed against his shiny thigh, the right elbow held high to ward off the attentions of an eager waiter.

I considered my loyal friend’s exposed white calves, his remarkable belt, his thick neck, the high colour in his cheeks and I thought, not for the first time, that it is Melbourne’s talent to produce these extraordinary eighteenth-century figures. In a more contested space, life would compress them, but down south, at the Paris end of Collins Street, there was nothing to stop him expanding to occupy the frame. He was a Gillray engraving—indulgence, opinion, power.

By profession my mate was a “property developer” and I presumed he must be sometimes involved in the questionable dealings of his caste. My wife thought him a repulsive creature but she never gave herself a chance to know him. He was both a rich man and a courageous soldier of the left. He was a reliable patron of unpopular causes and (although he was possibly tone deaf) Chairman of the South Bank Opera Company. He financially supported at least two atonal composers who would otherwise have had to teach high school. He had also bankrolled my own ill-fated play. Woody’s language could be abusive. He did occasionally spoil his philanthropy by demanding repayment via small services, but he could be relied upon to physically and legally confront injustice. In a time when the Australian Labor Party was becoming filled with white-collar careerists straight from university, Woody was old school—he did not fear the consequences of belief.

“Fuck them all,” he said, and ground the champagne bottle down into the ice. That would be pretty much the content of our conversation, and three bottles later, after several rounds of fancy nibbles, he called for the bill, paid from a roll of fifties, got me into a taxi and gave me a Cabcharge voucher to sign at the other end.

“No surrender,” he said, or words to that effect.

It was only a short drive across the Anzac Bridge to our house at Rozelle. Here the best part of my life awaited me, my wife, two daughters, but—in the narrow passageway of our slightly damp terrace house, there stood, by poisonous chance, five cardboard cartons of my book, maliciously delivered that very afternoon.

Were these for me to pulp myself?

Was this not hilarious, that my puce-faced publisher, with his big house in Pymble, had gone to the trouble and expense of having boxes sent to my humble door? I was laughing so

much I barely managed to carry this burden through the house. Apparently my daughters sa
me and cared so little for my distress that they went straight up to watch the Kardashians.
Claire must have been there somewhere, but I didn't see her yet. I was much more occupied
with enacting the court order.

I could never light a barbecue. I had no manual skills at all. It was my athletic Claire who
handled the electric drill, not me.

Naturally I overcompensated with the firelighters. Did I really enclose a free firelighter
in every book? Was that a joke? How would I know? It was not necessarily self-pitying and
pathetic that I set my own books on fire, but it was certainly stupid or at least ill-informed to
add a litre of petrol to those feeble flames. I was unprepared for the violent force, the great
whoosh that lifted off my eyebrows and caught the lower limbs of our beloved jacaranda.

As the flames crawled from the branches to the second-floor extension, I should—people
never cease insisting—have picked up the garden hose and put it out. Fine, but these dead
friends did not see what I saw. I made my judgement. I chose human life before real estate.
I rushed up the stairs and snatched the audience from the Kardashians. Yes, my babies were
teenagers. Yes, they resisted, but here was no time for explanation and I had no choice but
to treat them roughly. Apparently I smelled “like a cross between a pub and a lawnmower.”
I rushed them out into the street and left them screaming.

I don't know what happened then, but somehow the next-door copywriter stole my girls
and the Balmain fire brigade were soon pushing me aside, dragging their filthy hoses down
our hall and Claire, my wife, my comfort, my lover, my friend was waiting for me.

The next bit should remain private from our kids. But I will never forget exactly what we
said.

CLAIRE WAS CLEVER, kind and funny. She slept with her nose just above the sheets like a little possum. She woke up smiling. She stripped a century of paint from the balustrades and waxed and oiled them until they glowed. She climbed on the roof during lightning storms to remove the leaves from the overflowing gutters. She canvassed door to door for the Leichhardt by-election. She was a Japanese-trained potter whose work was collected by museums but there was never a night when I came home from Canberra or Melbourne or a union pub in Sussex Street that she was not waiting to hear what had happened.

She was commonly regarded as a perfect mother while I was known to have been unfaithful or at least to have attempted it. I was said to be continually drunk and impatience with decent people whose politics I did not like. I was allegedly unemployable. It was thought I was a communist who did not have the intelligence to see that he had become historically irrelevant.

All day Claire ripped her strong square hands with gritty clay, from which human sacrifices she extracted long necks and tiny kissing lips. She cooked like the farmer's daughter that she was, leg of lamb, baked vegetables, proper gravy. But each night she devoured the life that brought home. My darling was what is commonly called a political junkie—awful term—but delivered what she wanted most. We had fun, for years and years. Yes, I developed a Canberra belly and was ashamed to jog. She, as everyone remarked, stayed neat and trim. She wore jeans and windcheaters and sneakers and cut her hair herself, eschewing "sexy" legs and teetering fuck-me heels. After the fire I learned that certain mates had wondered if she might be gay. Idiots. None of them had the slightest clue about our love life. We were tenderness maniacs in ways known only to ourselves. If not for debt we would be in bed today.

Some people are good at debt. We were bad at it, and only discovered it in the way people who get seasick learn of their weakness when the ship has left the shore. We were a journalist and a potter thinking they could send their kids to an expensive private school. You get the joke.

Earlier I described how I abandoned these children on the footpath. Abandoned? For God's sake, they were almost at the end of their investment curve. To listen to their conversations you would never dream that their parents were both third-generation socialists. Did they even remember their father toasting crumpets in the smoky fire? Can they hear their mother's lovely voice sing "Moreton Bay"?

*I've been a prisoner at Port Macquarie
At Norfolk Island and Emu Plains
At Castle Hill and cursed Toongabbie
At all those settlements I've worked in chains
But of all places of condemnation
And penal stations of New South Wales*

*Of Moreton Bay I have found no equal
Excessive tyranny each day prevails*

She sang that to our little girls? You bet she did.

We had made the awful mistake of sending the girls to school with the children of our enemies. We thought we were saving Fiona from dyslexia. In fact we were wrecking her family by putting it under a financial strain it could not withstand. I would never once, nor for a second, have thought to call Claire timid. How could I know that debt would make her so afraid? We got a line of credit for \$50,000 and every time I acted like myself she hated it. She had loved me for those qualities before: I mean, my almost genetic need to take risk, to stand on principle, to poke the bully in the eye. I could not compromise, even when I was so often—physically afraid. A sword hung over the marriage bed and I did not see it. refused compromises she privately thought a father was morally obliged to make.

And of course the girls had not the least idea of what was at stake. If they paid attention to a newspaper it was only the Life and Style section. I doubt they had read a single one of my words, and had no notion of my work and life. They had never seen the evidence that might have justified my absences. If I allowed Claire's bond to be the strongest it was because I saw how much she wanted them to be "my daughters." Only once I bought them clothing (T-shirts, that's all). Then I learned that this was not my job and I should never try again.

Before this final defamation suit, Claire had been the pillion passenger who closed her eyes and hung on tight but the Supreme Court's finding was the final straw. When she heard the size of the damages, she quite collapsed.

As a child she had seen the family farm taken by the bank. Was it that? Was it something else? In any case, she did not believe my assurance that "everything will be OK" because Woody had flown up from Melbourne for the court case. He had promised nothing. She was correct to say this, but she could not grasp that this was exactly the sort of situation where you could rely on Woody. Claire could not grasp his influence. She did not care that he had saved me from my burning car. All she could see was that his father had been a slumlord and a thug.

Nor did she trust Nigel QC because she believed, correctly, that he was the prosecutor's friend. I told her that did not matter. I was right. If only she had trusted me, I would have got back on the bike and taken her hurtling through the bends at a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour. I would have won the appeal. I would have sorted out the legal costs and we would have celebrated as we had celebrated many times before.

"Everything will be OK," I said, and it was dreadful to see the fury in her eyes.

I WAS FROM a small town in Victoria, but I had thought of gorgeous wicked Sydney as my home for fifteen years. Yet once I was cast out of Denison Street, Rozelle, I saw I had no home at all. I was pushed up into the heartless traffic of Victoria Road and across the vertiginous Anzac Bridge. I had to admit my mates had all abandoned me. Darling Harbour was below. All of that bright chaotic city lay before me. I had no mobile phone. I had no bed. I was reduced to ringing doorbells in the eastern suburbs. I cannot go into the details of my reception, but so reluctantly was I given refuge that I felt compelled to refuse my host coffee in the morning. I certainly would not crawl on my belly to ask to use his phone.

I spent the day at Martin Place, at the post office, searching the Sydney phone books and getting change at the counter.

“Do I know you? You were on TV last night?”

“That’s me, mate.”

This clerk was a pale red-headed fellow with no bum and his sleeves rolled up to show his biceps. He slowly counted out my phone money.

“Felix,” he said.

“Yes, mate.”

“You’re a wanker, mate.”

I took my money down the far end and crouched in the gloom, trying to find someone to take my call. I had expected my colleagues might enjoy a gossip, but they were clearly nervous of what I was going to ask of them. So many people “stepped away” from their desks at the same time, they must have made a conga line, from Pyrmont to Ultimo, from Fairfaul to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

I left Martin Place and walked under the gloomy Moreton Bay figs in Hyde Park, down along William Street, past Westfield Tower, an ugly building once occupied by the most exhilarating mix of power, almost forgotten figures such as Gough Whitlam, Neville Wran, Harry Miller before and after his spell in Cessnock jail.

Dusk came early and I really had no heart to test another friendship so I ended up at the inevitable: the Bourbon and Beefsteak in King’s Cross. Why did we always love the B&B? It was an awful place, owned by an American called Bernie Houghton. We all knew that Bernie Houghton was an arms dealer with an uncontested CIA affiliation. That never stopped us from going to eat there late at night, and even when we discovered Bernie was a partner in Nugan Hand, the same CIA bank that helped finance the events of 1975, we continued to go to drink at the Bourbon and Beefsteak.

My wife said I was a romantic, that the B&B was my idea of noir, with prostitutes and tourists, bludgers and transvestites, well-connected criminals and murdering policemen. She may not have been completely wrong.

It was not dark yet and I got a breezy table near the street from which vantage point I soon saw—approximately forty-five minutes after my arrival—our dinged-up Subaru rise from the street and mount the footpath. Did I cower? Oh probably. But I did not dive under the table.

no matter what your friends have told you. In fact my wife was carrying nothing more frightening than a plastic bag which would later turn out to contain a mobile phone, charger, a framed photo of my daughters, and my complete signed set, all six volumes, of Manning Clark's much loved *History of Australia*.

The photograph was on the top. It gave me hope. If I had seen my treasured Manning Clarks I would have known this was the coup de grâce, but in my foolish optimism I thought sweet girl, she knows my life is built upon my family. She came straight at my table. I thought, thank God, I would have died to lose her.

"They cut the jacaranda down this morning."

She had such a pretty face but her eyes were red-rimmed and her mouth was straight as a knife. What was I to say? Sit down?

"Call Woody," she said, attempting to hand over the carry bag.

I grabbed at her. She said not to touch her. The charger fell to the floor. By the time I had discovered the Manning Clarks, she was gone.

And who would ever feel sorry for me? Had I not risked my family's life?

But even then I was an optimist. Woody wanted me to call him and I knew exactly why. He had talked to Claire. He knew I was in the doghouse. Naturally he would find me a place to stay. I called immediately and he picked up.

"You're in the shit."

"I am."

"Where are you now?"

"Where else? The B&B."

"Fucking Bernie," he laughed.

"I thought he was dead."

"Yes mate." His tone became weirdly serious and I thought, of course Woody would know about Bernie Houghton, and probably Frank Nugan too. There were stranger friendships in this town. Shoot me for saying it, but Sydney, our dense dark city, is really very small.

"I've got something for you," he said. I thought, thank God. I could not bear to go begging for a bed.

"You're a mate," I said.

"You're going to have to get your arse down here."

"Where's here?"

"Melbourne."

"Why Melbourne?"

"Jesus, don't argue with me Feels. I'm about to save your life again. Why Melbourne? Jesus, don't be offensive."

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate everything you've done."

Of course Melbourne was where he owned most property, where he would most easily find an empty flat for me. I should be very, very grateful.

"You want this or not?"

"Yes, I want it."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow in my office. I'll take you to lunch at Moroni's like the old days."

I could have charged the flight to our joint credit card, but truly, I had seen Claire's face.

was Thursday night, late night shopping. I took a cab to the distinguished book dealer on Oxford Street where I offered my Manning Clarks. Each one was signed "To Felix with respect." I argued that they were association copies.

"The association being?"

I was not one of Manning's many worshippers, but I liked him and he was unfailingly amused by me. "He is Manning Clark," I said. "I am Felix Moore."

The bookseller showed no particular reaction, although he did spend an awfully long time staring at the spine of Volume I. He was a gentle, diplomatic young man. He did not call me a wanker or argue about the plunging value of my name. Rather, he indicated, quite correctly, that Vol. I was associated with red wine and biro and Vol. V was foxed. He offered two hundred in the manner of his caste, giving me my books back as if to say, don't even try to haggle. Of course I took the money and it turned out just enough: \$112 for the ticket, \$60 for a shitty room I found nearby in Surry Hills.

Sad and sorry on my slippery motel sheets I called my wife.

To my delight she took my call.

"If you do this one more time," she said, "I'll have your phone cut off."

BEFORE EXHAUSTING the last of the birdshit deposits which were the source of its fabulous wealth before going into business as a detention facility for asylum seekers, the nation state of Nauru destroyed two landmark buildings in Collins Street and erected a 52-floor octagonal monument to its own ineptitude and corruption.

Who would want to have an office on this site? My mate of course.

"If I applied your standards, Feels, I'd be sleeping on the beach. Also," he said, revealing his true Melbourne heart, "the last time I looked, you lived in Sydney."

Woody had his office on the fiftieth floor and here he liked to swing back and forth in his fancy chair and gaze up at the violent scudding clouds and down on Parliament House and out to his developments at Docklands. He could see all the way south to St. Kilda and north east to Collingwood and all that rising damp he had inherited when his father was shot to death.

That murder was not a subject I ever raised with Woody. His personal history resided in the world of "it is said." It is said that he was a stellar student at Melbourne High. It is said he had wanted to be a literature professor. It is said he had no choice but to pick up his father's revolver. It is said that he continued that habit long after he employed others to collect his rents. I know this last is true because he once persuaded me to go to the beautiful old Florentino restaurant to pick up "something" he had stupidly left behind. He didn't say it was a pistol but I noted the blanched face of the unerringly polite Raymond Tsindos when he presented me with a shoebox marked "Mr. Townes." Outside, on Bourke Street, by the window of that famous bookshop, I lifted the lid. I never told him what I saw.

It is not common for people in Melbourne to carry guns. Indeed it is a criminal offence. So it may seem odd that, rather than stain his good name, my friend's idiosyncrasy brought certain frisson to his reputation. Patron of the arts, collector of first editions, street fighter, champion of the left, also, of course, most of all, a property developer. In a different society Woody Townes would have been a player in nothing grander than a city council, but in our dry sclerophyll country his species nests very high indeed.

"I'm going to save your arse, young Felix."

"That's very noble of you, mate."

He stared at me and I, like a drunk who realises he has caused offence, was confused and hurt and dared not look away. This was not Woody in the Wentworth but Woody in his office. My mate had scary moments.

"Thanks for this," I said.

"Ah, comrade," he sighed, "you know I am not noble."

"In your fashion, mate."

"You thought you were fucked," he said. "You were up shit creek again."

"Pretty much, yes."

"Now you're going to be top dog."

Oh fuck, I thought, as I sat down opposite him, he is offering me one of his disgusting

penthouses on the Yarra. It would be impossible to refuse.

"Just a place to stay till I get started."

"But what would you possibly start on? Workwise."

"Jeez. I've just arrived."

"Maybe you'll be working sooner than you think. You know who the Angel's mother is?"

"Yes. And so do you."

He raised his big eyebrows, grinning, withholding.

"You've been in touch with her," I suggested.

"Mate, I've never stopped being in touch with Celine."

The innuendo was not prettily expressed, but I wanted to believe what he was hinting at.

"You got me a gig?"

"You write *the* bloody story, mate. Exclusive. Felix Moore. The defendant won't talk to anyone but you."

"Bullshit."

"I bailed her. Five hundred k," Woody said, as if he'd purchased a Dobell portrait. I did not judge him for his vulgarity. I admired him. Who else in Australia would have stepped up to his place? "While you were packing shit in the park in Sydney, I was on the phone. I bailed the bloody Angel before the US could touch her. What about that? She's yours." He was grinning at me like a wide-mouthed frog. I didn't have to tell him I was already on her side.

"And she wants me to write her story? That's what you're saying."

"Mate, she never heard of you."

I didn't believe him for a second, and in any case I did not care.

"No newspaper's going to run this," I said.

Wodonga threw his sandwich in the bin and I recalled I had heard his stomach had been stapled and that when you ate with him at Florentino he would vomit discreetly into his handkerchief. He sat more formally now, his awful elephantine hands clasped gently above his stomach.

"Book," he said. "Big advance. You can lose your court appeal and pay your damages and still buy Claire a sexy nightie. The contract is being written now. But if you don't want the job, just say so."

As it turned out the money was terrific, although his company would own the copyright and I would have no royalty, ever, and no recourse if my name was, without consultation, removed from the title page. Nor did he tell me that he did not control the source at all. For many weeks I would be tormented by the subject's unavailability. If he had warned me? I would not have changed a thing. I saw myself accept a fat brown envelope that I imagined contained a paperback. Woody said it was \$10,000 and I did not even count.

"A good-faith deposit," he said. "Buy yourself a suit."

"Fair enough," I said, thinking, fuck the suit, I can pay the school bills.

Woody slipped into his jacket and took a dainty umbrella from his drawer.

"You're going to write about a traitor," he said, watching me stuff the envelope into my jacket. "Being the mug you are, you will fall in love with her. The only problem is: she will most likely be put to death." I was about to remind him that Australia had no death penalty but he retreated to a private bathroom in the office and peed so long and loud I knew he was showing off his prostate operation.

"I've got the table at Moroni's," he said when he emerged. "Do you need a comb?"

"Certainly not."

I did not need a comb to gain admittance to Moroni's. I had eaten there a hundred times with Gough Whitlam, John Cain—that is, a Prime Minister and a State Premier whose speech I had once rewritten in that very restaurant, assisted, it might be added, by Moroni's lethargic grappa.

The maître d' was named Abramo. He was always the same, like a benign James Joyce with perfect vision. Abramo had good reasons to be fond of me as he shortly demonstrated by ignoring Wodonga and warmly welcoming my slovenly self. He showed me to a corner table where there sat an unusual individual. First, she was a woman, the only one in all the hushed besuited room. She was wearing a charcoal silk Shanghai Tang jacket with a brick-red lining and her haircut was a million-dollar job, by which I mean short and simple and sustained by strong, almost springy, silver hair. I was wrong about her age, and so would you have been. She had all those looks that come from great cheekbones, the sort of structured beauty a hundred years of Gauloises could not corrode.

As I approached she stood to shake my hand. She said her name but I did not catch it. I assumed she was the publisher.

"Felix Moore," I said. I heard Woody groan. He could not believe I didn't recognise the famous face.

"Felix," she said. "It's Celine."

I began to speak but could not end the sentence. The traitor's mother leaned across and kissed me on both burning cheeks.

IT WAS NOT simply a famous face I failed to recognise. We had known each other for years and years. Celine and I had been two of 347 freshmen at Monash University. There had been many second- or third- or fourth-year students. Indeed there had not been a Monash University the year before. The so-called “campus” was a raw construction site twenty kilometres east of Moroni’s. There were acres of hot shadeless car park across which a young woman walked in stiletto heels.

This Celine was a vision, like the redhead on the Redhead matches box. She was in no way like the woman at the table in Moroni’s. She was much taller, fuller breasted. She had flouncing skirts, gorgeous bouncing fair hair.

The woman at Moroni’s was famous. Her lips were full but also pale, carved in soapstone. The nineteen-year-old had a violently red mouth and was dramatically “accessorised” by what we might now call her “posse,” a very dangerous-looking collection of young men who immediately decided would have to be my friends. There was a beatnik, a poet, a queer boy, a sort of Hell’s Angel, and finally her lover, Sandy Quinn, an older man in a linen jacket who certainly had not come from high school. It would be years before I learned a trade union was paying him to go to university. I did not notice any sadness in his eyes. I saw his beard, sun-bleached, trim and sculpted to his jaw. I took his silence to be both powerful and judgemental.

“I was a total dork,” I told her, and this was true.

“He was very cute,” she said to Woody.

“So he was a randy little dog,” said Woody. “Cop a feels.”

This caused a silence. I thought of my tumescent adventure with her father’s photograph of Abramo filled my glass.

I had been short and scruffy with the nasal vowels I had learned in Bacchus Marsh. My hair was short and less clean than it might have been. I did not have the requisite sloppy sweater. Celine’s gang had been at first amused, then appalled, then made completely rat-faced by my presumption—that I was fit to be their friend. They said things which would have made a lesser person run away and cry.

But I was the son of a man who would stand in a muddy potato paddock all afternoon that was what it took to sell a Ford. Those were my genetics.

Celine never thought me cute. But she saw my will, which was well in advance of my other attractions and was therefore dazzling. One afternoon in Springvale she told me I would be the only one of all of them who would make something of my life. Now she was about to make her own prediction come true. She would give me sole access to her outlaw daughter. So watch me, I thought, watch me do the rest.

The waiters had surely seen my recent humiliation on television and I was pleased they would now be witnesses to this redemption, those tall private men with white aprons and elegant grey moustaches. Now they saw the queen of stage and screen kiss me on my raddled cheek.

“To Felix,” she said and clinked my glass.

“I am in disgrace,” I said, referring of course to PANTS ON FIRE, but also, in my own way underlining my outcast character which could never really be acceptable. I did not reveal that I had information about her life that she herself was unaware of, but I most definitely hinted in my subtle way, that an honourable writer needs to be a scorpion as well. A writer serves the story. He dare not weigh the private consequences.

“It is not you who are in disgrace,” she said. “You shamed them, as usual.” And I recalled that very particular fire in her grey eyes, her characteristic arousal at the prospect of a little danger.

“You might have lost the case but you made them look as corrupt and venal as they are.”

Yes, I had fought the good fight all my life but I had also become an awful creature along the way.

THE BEGINNING OF the academic year had been stinking hot. The rain fell in buckets and the steam rose off the lawn where I had recently stood beside my father while the Chancellor of Monash University delivered his opening address. I was the first member of my family to graduate past the lower reaches of high school. I had no conscious knowledge of why I had chosen this university with no cloisters, no quadrangles, no suck-up colleges, no private school boys with their Triumph TR3s. Instead I had chosen the sea of mud that had been a market garden where the footpaths were not yet paved, where the campus was surrounded by light industry and the cream brick homes of those who worked beneath those sawtoothed roofs. My choice was not political. I had no politics I was aware of.

This was three years before the Gulf of Tonkin, three years before conscription for Vietnam, seven years before the Monash Labor Club invented revolution, which would involve—I was given this message personally—being put against a wall and shot.

We students walked on narrow paths, single file like cows on their way to milking. We returned to landladies whose husbands were fitters and turners but were introduced as engineers. We were barbarians to our hosts to whom we delivered our Monash mud (PLEASE REMOVE YOUR SHOES) and splashing urine (PLEASE LIFT THE SEAT).

I am not sure that Celine's high heels were muddy as she later claimed, but there is no doubt she had peed standing at the urinal. Everybody mentioned it. I was impressed by Sando's crumpled linen jacket and did not know enough to buy my own clothes second-hand. I tried too hard, most likely. I listened to everything they said. As a result I got the train from Clayton into Flinders Street and found, not without some difficulty, both *Ulysses* and *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound. I carried these heavy volumes back to the suburban bedroom I shared with a chemistry student from Wonthaggi. There was just one desk. When that was occupied I read lying down or wrote whilst kneeling at my bed. I shoplifted an expensive commentary on *Ulysses* and made margin notes on the significance of "Agenbite of inwit," for instance "Inwit" should have been "inwyt." Did Sandy know James Joyce couldn't spell? Did he understand that "U.P.:up" was meant to suggest urination and erection? I kneeled. I annotated. I stored away my ammunition. Beyond the sad lace curtains, parallel with my bed was a grey wood-paling fence. One kilometre away, the electric train line was also parallel. In a long black cape, Barry Humphries stalked the streets.

It should have been obvious that I was not suited to engineering, but my father's ambition was to see me established as Shire Engineer of Bacchus Marsh. He bought me an expensive slide rule which I never learned to use. I faked my physics experiments, working back from the correct value of g which I still recall as 980 cm per sec per sec.

I had no idea that I was on the path to catastrophic failure. Indeed, anything seemed possible. Celine's friends were drama majors, psychologists, political philosophers and poets. They discussed Description, Narration, Exposition, Argumentation. Had I been capable, I would have faked this too, but all I had to offer them were some controversial facts: Agenbite of inwit. U.P.:up.

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