

Another day, another book to burn. The days are cool again and the shack is without insulation. In the evenings I light a fire in the living-room fireplace, which is shallow and smokes; it spits embers onto the rug and the first billow of smoke stings my eyes.

This morning I unpacked some of my son's books and stacked them at random on shelves fixed to the wall by a previous owner. I have made a pact with myself not to look within any of the books but this morning I was tempted by an old leather-bound copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* that I recognised as having belonged to my father. I sat on one of the wooden boxes, opened the book and with my father's voice echoing in my head began to read. Ken had liked to read aloud, a practice intolerably tedious as far as Axel and I were concerned; we would roll our eyes at one another, captives for the moment of his vain pursuit to reel us in to his boyhood pleasures. *I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house. The sun began to shine upon the summit of the hills as I went down the road; and by the time I had come as far as the manse, the blackbirds were whistling in the garden lilacs, and the mist that hung around the valley in the time of the dawn was beginning to arise and die away.*

Was ever a story begun so directly and with such

artless conviction? And all those years later I too had read aloud to Daniel, every night when we lived out of a tent in camping grounds, driving for months up the east coast, a time when I schooled him myself, clever kid that he was. He was an anxious child and the reading soothed him. It was then that he began his fantastical drawings and could not go to sleep at night until he had completed at least one. Even though, at the time, I had packed hastily I had thrown some books into a box and at night he would draw in their margins, and sometimes on the flyleaf; would put his stamp on them, as if to take possession of the thing he loved. I ought not to have allowed it but so artful were these miniatures that I came to prize them and would look forward to the next one, and the next. They offered me a window into his psyche. One night he pointed to an intricate constellation of crenellated towers he had sketched and said: 'This is where my father lives.' And I ought to have drawn him out, and asked him to describe this place, but my heart sank in my chest from the pity of it. I was young, and not wise, struck dumb by the defiant hope in his eyes.

Daniel's favourite story was also one of my father's books, Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, and I suspected that this was a fantasy, an imaginary self: he was its young hero, Ralph Rover, shipwrecked on an idyllic island and smart enough to outwit the savages who inhabited it. And for all that time he, Daniel, had been shipwrecked with his mother, on the run from a man who threatened them,

not his father who had abandoned them, but another man. I had made a bad choice, had fallen into a sexual thrall, something no mother can afford other than with the father of her child, and perhaps not even then. And Daniel, with a child's intuition, had felt the cord begin to fray; had felt alone, twice abandoned.

But now, as I read, here in the shack behind the dunes, time is annulled. *I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June...* And Daniel is a boy again, and we are driving up the coast and singing together in the car. We are alive within these pages and there is such a thing as a year of grace.

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I have come to feel that this house is my web. On some days I am the spider, on other days the fly. Like both I exist only to survive through the ritual of feeding. In the case of the spider the form of the web is incidental, a by-product of its predatory instinct. And it's the form of things that can disorient me, times when the everyday, its smallest detail, can seem uncanny and the most mundane object strange. A loaf of bread on a wooden carving board. Why that shape? That size? That density? It's the form of things that is uncanny, not their function.

My days are full of undefined lack, but they are not dull, though to the observer they might appear so. Each detail of each day is defined by my impending visit to my

son, not the previous visit, which I contrive to not dwell on, but the next, which is never without potential. Though all now is static, something surely must shift, for this is in the nature of things. In the city it was impossible to sustain this faith; the very flurry and insistence of constant movement around me had the perverse effect of its opposite—amid the frenetic movement what lay beneath the surface seemed petrified. Now the placid surface of the coast suggests not resignation but waiting. Here we gaze constantly at the weather, and weather is volatile.

And this shack is in sympathy with the weather: its refusal of conventional form, its rough extensions, the fact that no two windows or doors are alike, its asymmetric nooks, its one long hallway and two foreshortened ones, its dated picture rails. Nothing definitive and yet not ugly, not bound but flagrantly improvised. Not subject to renovation and so wholly heterogeneous that it cannot be improved upon other than with a little paint over the bare Masonite walls of the two small bedrooms. At least this was my initial supposition. But when I painted one of the walls it somehow looked worse, absurdly shiny and new, cheap and dishonest. Leave me alone, the shack says. You bought me because I am as I am: in no way a statement, an expression of style. A dwelling of accidental charm.

This morning I am headed for the lagoon and my daily walk up the long ocean beach. It's a season of low tides and the smell of the seaweed is neither rank nor pungent but aromatic, a heady blend of salt and briny

sweetness. On the wide expanse of exposed sandbar by the edge of the lagoon I find a large bird's egg nestled in a depression in the sand and covered in black streaky markings that look like the imprint of seaweed on the shell. The egg is exposed to predators and I imagine the sea sweeping in over it and the egg barely moving, listing a little in its hollow in the direction of the incoming tide.

Back on the road I can see the postman parked in his van beside my letterbox. In the box there is a letter from Axel. He has written to me before this but I have burned his letters unopened. Perhaps he has intuited this because this time he has written on the outside of the envelope and my glance cannot escape the words: 'Please, Erica, I am not the enemy.' No, he is not the enemy but I do not welcome any display of sympathy, least of all from Axel, to whom I might have been a more loving sister. We had quarrelled over his wife, who had made plain her disdain for me, and what she referred to as my irresponsible child-rearing practices. Axel had attempted to make the peace but my pride rebuffed him. He owes me nothing. I must deal with this alone. Meanwhile, far from being known to me, my closest familiar, my son, is now an unknown. On each visit to Daniel I travel towards this unknown; I do not know what I will find when I arrive and this alone makes the pain of these confrontations bearable.

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*Daniel is mute. Not since he shouted 'Rubbish!' on my first visit has he uttered a word.*

*The air in this room is vile; it smells of metal and the acrid ammonia tang of fresh concrete.*

*One day the younger of the two guards had winked at me as I left and said: 'Not much of a talker, is he?'*

*Today Daniel's thick black hair has been shaved to stubble and his eyes are bloodshot.*

*I begin carefully. 'I have something to tell you and I hope you won't be upset.'*

*Not a flicker.*

*'I have written to the prison governor, Daniel. I've asked for permission to send you some oil pastels and some drawing paper.' I take a deep breath before the lie. 'I haven't had a reply yet but I think they'll agree.' In fact they have refused but I have taken it up with Jodie of the prisoners' support group and I will write to the governor every week until he grants permission.*

*At the word 'pastels' Daniel closes his eyes as if in pain. Then he shakes his head as if to say: I'm done with that. His hands rest on the table, fine-boned hands, well formed, the hands of his father. I try not to look at them and look instead at the clock on the wall, a plain round face, white with black hands, the kind of clock you see at IKEA stores. Cheap to replace if smashed, though it's set high on the wall and your aim would have to be good.*

*On the drive home I recall the day—he might have been eleven—when Daniel asked me what his name meant. I knew*

*this, had looked it up when he was born. I told him: 'God is my judge.'*

*'Is that bad?' he asked.*

*'We don't believe in God,' I said. 'You must be your own judge.'*

*Until it was too late I had not known about the woman, the woman he was obsessed with, the woman he had painted over and over, dismembering her body in a series of drawings of her body parts: the curve of her hip, the volume of her breasts, the roundness of her elbow, the tilt of her chin, the perfect circle of her navel. Drawing after drawing, no detail spared: the mole on her left shoulder, the scar above her top lip. Had she been afraid when she was confronted by this disaggregation that covered the walls of his studio? Whatever the reason, when she abandoned him for someone else he slashed his canvases and poured kerosene around the perimeter of his studio, a room in a warehouse that was being converted into apartments. I understood his fury. I understood that either his work or the loved one had to be annihilated. And, in a sense, he had chosen self-immolation, but blindly, and five people who had moved into the new apartments above his studio had died, among them a young couple not long returned from their honeymoon.*

*Homicidal negligence. The judge had described it as a monstrous act of egotism, as if nothing mattered other than the defendant's work, even in the act of destroying it. And all Daniel could say when first I saw him after his arrest was: 'I have been my own judge, mother.'*

*And now it's the faces of the honeymoon couple, laughing in colour on the front pages of the newspapers, that are etched now in my mind's eye, there to flicker, off and on, like half-resurrected ghosts. Had Daniel known they were in the building? He had refused to answer this question, as if it bore no relation to the necessity of the deed. He had refused to say anything more at all.*

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Tonight I eat late and drink more than usual. There are some nights when it's best not to sleep, for fear I will dream again of Daniel. In these dreams he is always a figure just out of reach: a baby abandoned in a straw-lined crib; a knight in armour on a black horse careening away from me; a small boy immersed in roiling surf up to his neck, a grinning, disembodied head bobbing above the waves. So painful are these phantoms that I open my eyes in a blood rush of panic and with a rumble in my chest like the wheels of a tumbrel. Then I must get up, and leave the house, and walk up the steep hill to prowl along the grassy headland.

Tonight the sound of the ocean is unfamiliar, its slow rhythmic surge more like a quickened throb. Garra Nalla is dark at night and I must rely on my torch as there is only one streetlight. I have learned from Lynn Gittus that the council once proposed to install street lighting, along with kerbs and guttering, but the residents organised a petition against improvements; they do not want to live



in anything resembling a suburb; they want to preserve an illusion of the primitive, the unspoiled. It means that the verges are grassy and pocked with shallow bandicoot hollows and the gutters are roughly excavated swales, deep and lined with sharp-edged stones that sprout weeds.

Beside the edge of the cliff, just a metre away from the blowhole, my left foot drops into a sinkhole created by the roots of an old macrocarpa cypress, and as my ankle twists I fall forward, and then sideways, my foot caught in the hole, my shoe wedged between the roots. Bracing for the pain I wrench free, then hoist myself up and limp back down the hill. I am lucky not to have broken my leg.

Inside the house I can't be bothered to undress. Instead I lie on the couch and cover myself with an old Guatemalan shawl. I would like to be rid of this shawl, which reminds me of a brutal love affair that left me with a broken nose and two broken ribs; then again, on nights like this I would like to be rid of everything. I could strip the house until I have only a table, a chair and a bed. I could take all of Daniel's books out onto the sandy gap, the tufts of coarse grass and the yellow capeweed, and burn them in an immense bonfire that would light up the dunes. Or I could just lie still and let the cortisol surge through my veins in a tsunami of dread. But my ankle continues to throb and after a while I lift myself up and limp down the hallway to rummage in the bathroom cupboard for codeine. The body makes its demands with no regard for the past. I have fallen down a hole, I have bruised my leg, I

am alive and the blood flows in my veins, in the body that has carried me here.

I hobble into the sunroom, and rest my foot on a low stool. A book has arrived in the mail, a book that promises to be a compendium of labyrinth designs. A London artist has installed a different labyrinth in each of the city's 270 Underground stations, though these installations are of necessity small designs silk-screened onto enamel plates, fired and then fixed to station walls. There is no question of walking them. The choice—the variety—is bewildering, and I push the book aside and practise, again, drawing the seed pattern by hand with a pen. This is the pattern to which I keep returning: the nub of the cervix, the runnels of the womb. But my drawing is poor, the proportions distorted. Daniel would often laugh at my attempts to draw anything, he who had the sure hand of his father. But under the pool of lamplight my hand moves now on auto pilot while my ankle throbs, page after blank page inscribed with lopsided ovoid shapes while I wait for the relief of the opioid and the unthinking flow that will achieve some semblance of symmetry. Over and over until the swallows stir in their nest and light appears at the window.

But this trawling at night, this taking of endless notes, is only a postponement of the inevitable, of the task itself. Though a labyrinth is in no way as complicated as a maze, when I study the designs online the mathematics of the task are daunting: the proportions must be finely calculated with a compass and hard edge. I who am

too impatient to weigh the ingredients of a recipe with accuracy and cannot wrap a present with any degree of finesse cannot, with confidence, envisage how I might become my own geometer. When I look at the diagrams, the dotted lines of precise calibration, the constellation of numbers and decimal points, iron markers driven into the ground, outlines sprayed with white paint, esoteric talk about sacred geometry and the significance of the number twelve, I am deflated. I am the prisoner of an idea with no path to its realisation. Were it not for the dream I would not persist, but for now I remain its captive.