

Incredible
FLORIDAS

STEPHEN ORR



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Roland Griffin couldn't stomach horses, classical music or chat about what was best for cleaning shoes. But Sam would pop in, take the transistor from the work bench, and fiddle until he found Moonee Valley; correct weights and prices for a win or place. He'd sit and watch Roland paint, sketch, or just look at a blank canvas. On those days he'd say, 'What yer gonna paint?'

'Haven't decided.'

'What about a still life? I could go pick a few oranges.'

'Na, did that once, didn't like it.'

A red-brown canvas with vaguely cubist fruit; an embarrassment from the early days, stacked with a dozen others behind the timber pile in his shed-cum-studio. It was corrugated iron, painted brown, green, leftover beige from the sleep-out. Hot-in-summer, cold-in-winter, cracked and crumbling concrete. He'd covered the oil stains with an old rug and set up his easels and canvases, an armchair and a table for his brushes and paints. The Dodge sat in the sun, or rain, while Roland painted, listened to the third from Randwick, as old Sam from next door rolled cigarettes. There was still a workbench, and tools, a knife grinder and a tea chest full of walnuts and almonds (which Sam'd sometimes start cracking) – but mostly, it was Roland's studio.

'Cezanne, they sell his pictures for millions.'

'Well, that'd be nice,' Roland would reply.

'That'll be you one day.'

'Yeah, maybe, Sam.'

Roland wanted to tell Sam he was doing okay, that his name had got around, that his shed had hosted directors from several state and overseas galleries. But he knew Sam wouldn't understand. To people like Sam, unless you were Cezanne, painting was a hobby. Something a man did after work, if he was that way inclined.

'Why they always standin' in a desert?' Sam would ask of Roland's figures.

'Just are.'

'And they're always lookin' at yer, like they think you're stupid.'

Sam would eventually tire of asking questions, light a cigarette.

But there was no Sam today, and no desert, either. Roland sat in his painting chair, his don't-get-comfortable chair, and looked at his canvas. He'd managed some jungle, a river, a boy in a boat with a bag of wheat, a bale of cotton and a look of amazement. Tigers, panthers, and in the background, a collection of natives wearing war paints. Submerged rocks, and the boat taking on water. But the boy didn't seem to care. Whatever he was seeing held him transfixed.

The boy had Hal's nose, but Roland was careful to avoid letting the lines add up to Hal. He was just a typical child. A boy. No one in particular.

Roland thought about the boy's shirt. Plain or stripes? Even this was too much of a decision. Perhaps he shouldn't work for a few weeks, or months, even years. Maybe it was reason enough to stop altogether. Get a job up the Murray? But here he was, sitting on his chair, drawing mental lines before actual ones.

Roland Griffin was only forty-two, but he had the face of a sixty-year-old. Receding hair, a cast-iron forehead with single wrinkle-as-horizon, heavy eyes (that might've had more to do with his horror week), a strong Scot nose and a chin that stuck out slightly further than his wife, Ena, liked.

Roland stood, walked through the shed doors and stopped in the carport. He leaned over his car and felt the grille, the fender, crushed,

the paint crumbling. Wondered whether it would need fixing. The radiator had survived, and the wheel was still turning. So it was just cosmetic. Ena had already insisted they fix it, but she'd get used to it. Cars couldn't stay new forever.

He opened the door and sat in the driver's seat. He'd powdered the carpet and seat covers with baby talc, but the smell of beer was winning.

'See, that's why you have accidents,' Ena had said, but he'd explained that he'd only had a sip as he drove. 'I wasn't even tipsy.'

He got out and crossed the cracked drive to where soil had turned to sand. He put his bare foot in it, moved his toes through it, and remembered sitting beside his tent, one shoe on, one off, paper on a folder in his lap, the smell of Hal's beans drifting over from the campfire. A few marks, another horizon, a hill, and Hal, in his short shorts, body painted, stealing old King's thunder as he danced his propitiatory dances, interrupting the Pukamani when it had reached its loudest moment. But no one stopped dancing, or said anything about the white boy. The same boy, at the wheel of their Dodge, driving into the scrub, headed for a truck that was headed for them, the red letters on its side: DANGER HIGH EXPLOSIVES.

Roland flattened the sand with his foot and returned to the shed.

The breeze was coming in. He could hear Ena inside clattering through the drawers. He studied his canvas and wondered whether to continue. Jungles, adventures, were so old-fashioned. His friend, James Bailey, had explained how they'd both been left behind. This Warhol character in New York, with a dozen soup cans. Not even painted, but copied. There was always the chance people would tire of his work: small towns, deserted pubs, half-castes addressing the viewer. But it was all he knew. It was a big investment (his whole life) if it was going to come to nothing.

Roland was walking into a barber shop in Darwin. Hal was beside him. Lionel Mill welcomed them. He took Hal by the shoulder and

sat him in the leather seat. Roland watched Hal's eyes as he attempted to work out the backwards letters on Mill's front window: CIVILITY, SERVICE AND LONG ODDS. Mill himself never stopped talking. He knew they weren't local.

'Travelling?'

'Yep,' Hal replied. 'Right around the top.'

Roland could remember all of this. It wasn't so long ago. And yet he counted the years: 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62.

He stretched back, looked up. The iron roof was supported by wooden struts and crossbeams. His good eye passed across the central support; the one he avoided looking at. He'd dropped a mental plumbline; the imaginary weight dangled just to the left of his easel. He wondered, for the hundredth time, if Hal had chosen this spot for the message it might send. But his son wasn't like that. Simple, practical, no-nonsense; just got on and did a thing. There was nothing *Ada and Elsie* about him. His life was a nail that had to be knocked in.

Yes, he guessed. It's best being alone. As much as possible. He had cried, but stopped. The physical act had exhausted him, and itself. Now, it was just the worst sort of self-pleasure.

He watched a shadow moving across the far wall. The window had cracked but you couldn't tell from the dusty light. He waited for the dark patch to touch the edge of a rake. Another day gone, and wasted.

He heard Ena calling.

'Griff!'

There was a cup of tea every morning and afternoon. Whoever was handy, sitting around the table, sifting through the penny-jar of conversation. But it didn't matter. As long as the water was hot and the tea strong, the milk cold, chipped china with the strainer rattling in the lip, soft biscuits that had to be eaten because what else would you do with them. A cosy that Shirley had knitted. All of these things set out on the table like some Japanese ritual.

It was always the same. Tea sipped, a few words about the Christmas puddings hanging in Mary's laundry, all gone mouldy. 'I'll just have to start again,' she'd say. Mary, sister of Sam, mother of Shirley and her fortunate, unfortunate life, the trio of survivors washed up next door to the Griffins.

Mary shuffled into Ena's kitchen at ten-thirty. Always ten-thirty. Shirley followed a few steps behind and, without speaking, picked up the kettle, filled it, lit the stove and put it on to boil. Ena barely acknowledged them. It was as though her family extended out the back door, across the drive, through the arch and past Sam's sleep-out.

Mary placed seven biscuits on a plate, took a bite from one and put it back down. That would be hers. Then the kettle was boiling nicely and Ena was at the back door, one hand in her apron pocket, calling to Roland. 'Griff, you comin?'

Mary was wearing her apron too. Her pockets were full of brown leaves from where she picked lemons, popped them in, and returned to the house like a cow that had missed the milking.

The women stood in Ena's kitchen looking out of the window that didn't let in enough light. She'd asked Griff to do something about it. He had the tools and the wood, and there was a glazier at the end of the road, but he didn't really have the will. It still worked. It still let in light. So, he'd just say, 'I'll get to it, dreckly,' and Ena would think, Bullshit. Typical Griff: always off with the fairies, sitting on the toilet sketching old men in pubs.

The dining room was all table. There wasn't enough space to get around the sides. Ena had suggested they cut it down but Roland wouldn't hear of it. 'It's an antique. You can't take a saw to an antique.'

'But you can barely move.'

Like Shirley now, adjusting chairs to get to the teapot. She filled it from the kettle, returned to the kitchen and came back with the lid and cosy. Sitting beside Mary, she waited for the brew to draw. 'They got that pole sitting at Brighton,' she said, one hand half-hiding the

butterfly rash that spread from her neck, across her chin, to her face.

‘What’s that?’ Ena asked, coming in.

‘They sit on top of a big pole, in a box, for a week.’

‘Why?’

‘Just do.’

‘How do they go to the toilet?’

‘Dunno. Just saw the picture in the paper. Maybe they got a bucket.’

Mary sniffed the cut flowers and said to Ena, ‘Them roses are strong.’

‘Rotten leaves, from the gutter,’ Ena explained, but Mary already knew, had seen Griff up his ladder, flicking the leaves to the ground, gathering them and spreading them around his rugosas. She saw everything from her window, or in transit to the letterbox. That was life: a succession of moments, other people’s, overlooked, -seen or -heard to a soundtrack of scratchings droned down her lamb-mint hallway.

Silence. As the tea took its time, and they fell into their own thoughts. There were other things to say: the Pope ill, Menzies off overseas again, sniffing out the new queen, Weet-Bix on special. News seemed out of place, still. But Mary felt the silence more, the inference that it was quiet for a reason.

‘Griff coping?’ she asked.

Ena shrugged. ‘I suppose. You never know with him.’ And what she really meant: with a man. They were all shopfront and no eggs. The door was locked, and they were always out the back doing something else.

‘It’ll take time,’ Mary said.

‘Yes.’

Mary thought of other things to talk about: the Thebby school closing, but that involved kids, and it was best to avoid that. The murder of a woman at Belton, but that led to courts, and gaol, and hangings. So, in the end, there was less than usual to discuss. But you

had to keep talking; if you didn't you started thinking, and wanting reasons for things that didn't have or need reasons.

'Griff!' Ena called.

Mary started pouring the tea and settling each cup in its saucer. 'Sonia 'round?'

'Sonia!'

'Coming,' a voice replied.

'Everyone's coming,' Ena said. 'Always coming.' She wished people would just do what they said.

Sonia came into the room. 'Hi, Mary, Shirley.'

'Mornin', darls.'

Shirley just smiled, lowering her head.

The Griffins' daughter sat down and said, 'You want me to come shopping with you today, Mum?'

'No, just need a cabbage. Go get yer father, will yer?'

Sonia did as she was asked. She went out to the shed (she knew there was no point calling) and looked in. 'Dad, cuppa.'

'Said I was coming.'

'Come on, that can wait.'

Roland listened to his daughter. He knew she knew better than him, or Ena, or anyone. She'd topped her Leaving Honours, and university degree. She'd got a good job and moved in with her best friend. He wondered how he'd managed to contribute to such a good girl. Maybe she'd just managed to overcome anything he'd given her.

He stood and followed her in and they settled around the table. He said, 'Where's Sam?' and Mary replied, 'The stables.'

'Late in the day for that?'

'Tim's got him exercising them. Think they were going to the beach.'

Roland wondered why Sam hadn't asked him. Perhaps he'd thought he wouldn't be up to it, or that he'd run out of things to say, or was best left alone. Maybe he'd guessed he was better off with the women, for now.

Mary was thinking, Quiet, isn't it? But she couldn't say this. Instead, she asked Roland, 'What you workin' on?'

Roland knew she didn't really care, but it was a neutral question. 'Not working.'

'Another desert, perhaps? You've done a few of them, eh?'

'They're easy to paint.'

Sonia was reading her father's face. 'You can get lost in a desert, can't you, Dad?'

'There's a bit of that goes on,' Mary said, like a seagull stealing a chip from a man's hand. 'That family, in the desert, that was terrible.' And then she realised even this would lead back to Hal.

'Those immigrants?' Ena asked.

'Yes.'

'What immigrants?' Sonia said.

Mary leaned forward, determined. 'This fella from England. He tried to drive his family from Marree to Queensland. Had no idea.'

'What happened?'

'They got bogged. Tried to walk back to Marree. Three days in the heat. Two little boys and his wife, and the radiator was full of water.'

'Terrible,' Ena said.

'They reckon they coulda burned the tyres,' Mary continued. 'They woulda been seen. But I suppose you mightn't think of that, especially if you'd just come from Kent.'

There was silence again, and in the silence, agreement: never leave your car, tell someone where you're going, don't get bogged.

Mary knew there was lots of meat left on the bone. The family, the daughter they'd left behind in town, the visit she'd received from the police as she was ironing her husband's shirts. But it was a tragedy, and someone's kids were dead, so she'd have to let it go.

Then Roland said, 'They found footprints, where the father had walked in circles, hundreds of times. He must have gone mad.'

No one wanted to buy into it.

'Imagine that ... lookin' at his wife and kids.'

'Is that who yer painting?' Mary asked.

'No.'

Mary felt the weight: the three of them, and their grief. She was still expecting tears. That's how it had been. Since Roland has discovered him, since the ambulance and hospital and the first night they'd all sat in the lounge staring at the telly. The following day, when sleep alternated with rambling treks around the yard. She'd busied herself cooking casseroles. Sam had helped her take them in, warm them in the oven, and clear them away, uneaten, as they all sat staring at the ground. 'I done a coupla banana cakes,' she said.

'You keep 'em,' Ena replied.

Roland liked banana cake, but he wasn't going to argue with his wife.

'I still can't understand,' Sonia said. 'If he hada said something.'

'You don't, do you?' Ena said.

We all know why, Mary thought. Now we've just got to wait, and drink tea.

From her window, Mary could see Hal walking up the drive in his school uniform, satchel in one hand and brown paper bag in the other. She knew it contained his pants. It did every day. Within half an hour they'd be washed and hung on the line. And one day, she remembered, he came home at one in the afternoon, when his parents were out. Sam saw him and called, 'Home early?'

'Half-day.'

'Really? It wasn't a half-day today.'

'It was.'

'Maybe I can take you back. They're gonna miss you.'

At which point Hal dashed up the drive, down the road, off to God knows where.

Roland finished his tea and Mary poured another. She was taken

by the way words ebbed, then flowed in a reflux of conversation. She guessed that humans were just full of puff. Try not talking for one minute, she'd say to Hal, and he'd try and try, but he never could. Grinning, his mouth full of words, the alphabet spaghetti spewing onto her apron. Hal, who had always teased Shirley, but then always apologised, like it was a misunderstood joke.

'I can smell him,' Sonia said. On his pillow, and sheets, as she slept away the days since he'd left them, but her, especially.

No one had a response. People had a smell. But that would go, quickly – quicker than any other part of him. So, Sonia guessed, she'd just have to lie on his bed for as long as possible. Breathing deeply. Remembering every stupid comment, every lifted eyebrow, every flick of hair from his eyes.

For Roland it wasn't so much the smell as the seeing. Hal was still sitting on the floor in his shed – on the rug, on his gristly knees, painting a jungle and river on a piece of old cardboard. He was biting his lip, looking up for approval, working on the wobbly horizon.

Roland asked, 'What about some trees?'

'No.'

'You gotta have trees for a jungle.'

'You don't have trees.'

'I like people.'

'I like them too.'

The paint had splattered onto his knees, and legs, and shorts. 'Your mum's gonna kill you.'

And Hal smiled at Roland and thought, Not me. You. You're the adult.

The last of the tea was drunk, and water bills discussed. They still had to be paid. Mary said, 'There's no point watering the lawn in summer. You end up paying for it.' But of course she did, or at least made Sam do it. She wasn't going to be the first to let the street down. 'Sam wants to rip up the lot and concrete it.'

‘You can’t do that,’ Ena said.

‘That woman round the corner, she did, and she painted the bastard green. Fancy that? Like we wouldn’t notice.’

Roland was determined to buy the cabbage. Sonia wanted to go with him. Walking along a street was a simple task, a sort of meditation, and he liked to do it alone. But things were different now. He sensed he had to open up to others.

‘How you feelin?’ Sonia asked, as they set off.

‘How about you?’

She smiled. No, you, she was saying with her eyes.

‘I was wondering who else we need to contact,’ he said instead.

‘What’s it matter?’

‘You don’t want people finding out in the paper.’

‘You’re gonna put it in the paper?’

He thought about it. ‘No, I suppose not.’

Mr Ireland’s front yard was carpet grass, cut low, perfect. Roland never saw him out watering. Green grass just came to Mr Ireland, apparently.

‘I was wondering if I should tell Alice,’ Roland continued.

‘Why?’

‘Of all the people ... she was the one I thought would get him through.’

Sonia knew this was true. For a while Alice had become her brother’s fifth limb. She was the only one (outside the family) who understood him, knew what to ignore and consider, when to stand up to him and when to back off. ‘She’s probably got her own life. Some other fella.’

‘Maybe not.’

Sonia thought about it. Even Dr Neri hadn’t understood him. No one at Glenside, for all their diplomas and degrees. ‘Would you know where to contact her?’

‘Didn’t she live in Westerly?’

‘No, that was Rose.’

So Alice would have to wait. She and Hal had spent two years together – weekly flicks, Coke and sandwiches on the Garden lawns, long days filled with the kids they’d make, the house they’d build, the lamb shanks they’d cook.

‘Say something.’

They walked, coins rattling in pockets.

Roland shook his head. ‘What’s to say? It happened, you deal with it.’

‘*You deal with it?*’

‘Yes, you do. Your grandfather, fifty years at the chemical works. Falls into a vat of sulphuric acid. Eight weeks lying in bed. I was six years old and I can still remember the smell of his flesh. *You deal with it.*’

‘But he got better.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Hal won’t.’

He glared at her. What a stupid thing to say.

The footpath was uneven. Mrs Ireland had tripped on it and done something to her knee, so Mr Ireland had phoned the city manager, but nothing had happened. That’s how it was these days. Now the residents of Burleigh Avenue, Pennington, unclogged the leaves from the street gutters and mowed the verges themselves.

‘I’m concerned,’ Sonia said.

‘Worry about your mother.’ He walked faster to get the cabbage over and done with. He wished she hadn’t come.

‘It’s just ... you were the one found him.’

‘Men in the war saw that every day.’

‘Not their own sons.’

He was quiet.

‘You haven’t told me about it.’

‘Christ! I got the shears and cut the rope. He dropped into my arms.’

And Roland was there, again.

‘He was heavy.’

Roland was laying the heavy body on the old rug, pushing over his easel, straightening and examining his son, as though this moment was always going to arrive. He was feeling his neck for a pulse, somehow surprised by the whiskers. Adjusting his head, although it just kept dropping onto the rug. ‘I don’t need to be reminded.’

‘You can’t pretend it didn’t happen.’

Roland focused on another neighbour’s clivias, but the thought persisted. Him calling out, ‘Ena!’ The click of the back door, and her running into the shed, as though she, too, knew what she was going to see. ‘What do I do?’

She was kneeling beside her son, but she could only look at Roland. ‘What do I do?’

‘Blow into his mouth.’

Neither of them did. There was no point. They just dropped, sat on their bums, and she started screaming, and soon Mary and Sam were standing in the doorway. Sam didn’t need to be told. He turned and headed back to his house, and the phone they’d just installed.

As they walked, Roland said, ‘Everyone’s got their own way.’

Sonia couldn’t agree. You had to talk about it, even if it was painful. You had to have a ceremony and let people look and cry and remember and sing and get drunk and go home with a head full of anger.

They approached the front door of the shop and Mrs Ireland came out with a few things in a string bag. She covered the shock of the moment with a smile. ‘Morning, Griff,’ she said. ‘How are you, Sonia?’

A plain, string-bag sort of how-are-you.

‘Good, thanks, Mrs Ireland.’

‘How’s mum?’

‘Well, you can come see her.’

This wasn’t the answer Mrs Ireland wanted to hear. She stiffened at the commitment. ‘I was going to wait.’

‘No, she’d like it.’

‘It’s only been a couple of days.’

‘She’s just got the four walls, and us.’

‘Right. And how are you, Griff?’

He just wanted to get the cabbage. ‘Getting there.’

‘We all worry about our children, don’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘After a certain point, there’s little you can do. I mean, it’s their life.’ She realised this might sound wrong.

‘Yes.’ Roland didn’t want to make it any easier for her. Then she’d start talking about her Alvis and her polio and the six weeks in the iron lung and all the kiddies in the kiddies’ hospital, dying of terrible diseases. As the cabbage went unbought.

‘Well, give Ena my best,’ she said.

I take it you’re not coming then, Sonia thought.

Mrs Ireland was gone, down the road, a week’s worth of cordial pulling on her arm.

‘Old cow,’ Sonia whispered.

‘Come on.’

They went in to trays of over-ripe tomatoes and bruised peaches, half and quarter watermelons and pumpkins that waited around for weeks until someone got desperate enough. Roland couldn’t see how they’d come from a market. Maybe a collection of backyards associated with the little Balt who sat, all day, behind a counter tackling crosswords. Roland had always wanted to tell him to come out, arrange his fruit, restock the shelves, price some of the groceries and at least *pretend* he wanted to stay in business.

He found a tin of Elastoplast, Lifesavers and the cabbage and

placed them on the counter as Sonia examined bunches of wilting carnations, wondering if they might do any good.

They started home. John Carey, watering his lawn, scampered behind his house. He'd left his hose running and hadn't gathered his dogs in time.

Fair enough, Roland thought. Carey was a man of few words, happy to chew over a drought or wheat prices, but as for death ... He wasn't a Hallmark man, although his wife, who was about half his size, was a volunteer visitor at the repatriation hospital. 'G'day, John,' Roland called, as they walked past, and a faint voice came from the side: 'Is that you, Griff?'

They continued. "Patrons must not bring bottles, dogs or peanuts into the theatre," Roland said.

Sonia just waited for the story.

'It was up on the screen – the open-air theatre in Darwin. I thought it was beautiful. Hal had a laugh, too.'

It was Mitzi Gaynor in *South Pacific*. They'd hated every minute, but there wasn't a lot of choice. Still, there was a breeze, and they could hear the sea. The locals (in gloves and hats for their big night out) sat creaking and farting as the songs went on and on. A few people had smuggled in grog, and this was shared along the rows. Then the breeze dropped and half the audience went home, sweating. By the time the nurses started washing their hair, Hal and Roland had had enough too.

Wandering through the deserted town, Roland had asked, 'What next?'

'How about a swim?'

So they'd walked to the beach and stood looking north to Sorong until Roland said, 'Well?'

Hal had stripped down to his underpants as Roland looked away. Sixteen was an uncomfortable age. The boy had become part-man

but the man was still mostly boy. Hal had walked to the water and tested it with a toe.

‘I wouldn’t,’ a voice had said.

They’d turned and noticed an old man, shirtless, sorting through his lures.

‘Them jellyfish are bad today.’

Hal had got dressed and they’d returned to their car and driven back to their camp.

When Roland had finished telling Sonia this story she smiled. She guessed her father had softened and realised she’d gone about it the wrong way. There was too much water to navigate to get to Roland Griffin.

‘I ended up squirting him down with a hose,’ Roland said.

‘No shower?’

‘Na. Every coupla nights, if there was a motel. But it was damn hot. Dunno how anyone can live there.’

‘I bet Hal was grizzling?’

‘Not much. There was no use complaining. The weather’s no one’s fault.’

They turned down the drive and found Charlie Bass, from number eighty-two, sitting at the milkie’s table with Shirley, two children at his side. Sonia said, ‘How are you, Charlie?’

‘Fine and dandy,’ he replied, as he always did, often invoking his blood cancer, and the way, one day, it just went away under the curing hand of God. Retired tailor Charlie always wore his beige suit (with a carnation) and his bow tie, white socks and polished shoes. Charlie, the Jehovah’s Witness, with his belief in the End and his two prop grandkids, as Roland called them. The girl in a pink dress, with her own little Bible, and a boy, a year or so older, with long shorts and high socks. Neither child spoke. Or seemed to have a thought. Like Charlie had cast them from plaster and animated them with the spirit of his angry, impatient God.

‘Just talkin’ to Susie,’ Charlie said.

‘Shirley,’ Shirley said.

Charlie had his Bible open to Matthew 24:7. Roland sat down with the vegetable in his lap and said, “‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom’”.

‘I was explaining how Hitler was the second Antichrist.’

‘Who was the first?’

Charlie either didn’t know, or care. Sonia noticed how the girl was looking at her. Like she was planning violence. Jealous, perhaps, of her older neighbour’s escape from this purgatory of whitegoods and memorised psalms.

‘But I’s explaining how there’ll be others,’ Charlie said.

Sonia just shook her head. ‘If he was the Antichrist, how come he didn’t win?’

‘There are others, stronger.’

The prop boy wiped his nose on his hand, and seemed to be using his tongue to get something from between his teeth.

‘Shirley!’ Mary was standing under the arch on the border of their territories. ‘Come on, you’ve got jobs.’

Shirley stood and walked away. Catholic Mary waited, her arms crossed. She couldn’t stomach Charlie. She called, ‘No harm meant, Griff. It’s just she tends to believe what she’s told.’ And she glared at Charlie. ‘You leave that to me, Charles.’

‘We all got the same Bible,’ he called back.

Mary knew that God was a bus timetable. He could be read in many different ways. But she also knew the Witnesses were evil, subverting the Word, the quiet prayer beneath the jasmine. She turned and went inside with her daughter.

‘Mum’s probably got the kettle on,’ Sonia said, in a way that didn’t imply an invitation.

Charlie closed his Bible. ‘I can return, with some reading.’

‘Don’t bother. There are other things going on, in case you haven’t noticed.’ And whispered, ‘Or cared.’

Roland followed Sonia in and presented his cabbage to Ena, and she said, 'It's a lettuce.'

He looked at it. 'Shit.'

Roland had made a carport from wood, but hadn't roofed it, preferring to leave the job to the wisteria. He was standing underneath it. It was nearly one in the morning, but still warm. He was smoking Capstan, looking through to the cinnamon stars, wondering. If they were a trillion miles away, what did an arbour, or painting boats, or anything really, matter? This was some consolation. Hal could've lived till ninety before the starlight had reached them. The sky was a sink with the water emptying out of it. Roland could feel himself going with it.

He heard the wheels of Hal's Austin pedal car. No matter how many times he oiled them they still turned like fingers down a blackboard, urging and receding as Hal pedalled up and down their cracked concrete river. Around the Dodge, the garden, a U-turn, back at full speed, and again, for hours, as Roland tried to paint, eventually emerging.

'Hal, could you do that later? I'm trying to work.'

He was the man who never wanted to kick the footy. Sitting on his bonnet, he inhaled and blew the smoke into the sky in a little oil spurt.

'Not too fast,' he said to a toothless, cow-licked Hal, as he pedalled past.

'I'm timing myself.'

'You'll end up arse-over-tit.'

Hal swerved and the wheels lifted. He pedalled so fast Roland could see the wheels coming away from the car (he'd only repaired them with wire), rolling down the road, as his son tumbled and his face ground into the concrete.

He heard Mary's front door opening and turned to see Sam coming out and sitting on the porch. Opening his paper, he started reading

from the light that was coming from the bedroom behind him.

Roland finished his cigarette and threw it into the garden. He watched Sam studying the form guide. He'd be up at four to walk to the racecourse, to take the times for the trainer, Tim Johnson. Every weekday morning, sitting with his stopwatch in the starter's box, writing down the figures, holding his binoculars to his old eyes as he watched for signs of improvement – anything that might offer some hope (and justify his two quid).

Roland noticed how Sam stopped reading, rested the paper in his lap and looked out. He could tell his thoughts had nothing to do with horses. How he studied the ground, and seemed to sigh. Folded the paper and placed it on the table beside his smokes.

'Early start?' Roland asked.

Sam wasn't surprised by the voice. He looked over. 'Yeah.'

'You better get to bed.'

'Don't need sleep these days.'

'You need some.'

'Hardly any.' Sam scanned the street and there was a long pause as he wondered whether the conversation warranted a smoke. 'I still can't believe it,' he said.

'No,' Roland replied.

'You never think it's that bad. But it's how you see it, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'You can only say so much.'

Roland stood. 'Well, I'm tired now.'

'Good-o.'

Roland came inside. He pulled the screen door but it wouldn't close; it had to be taken down and planed. There wasn't much point using it now anyway, there was almost no breeze. The bricks and mortar held the heat, keeping them sweating and miserable through another slightly-cooler-than-day night. Sleep came with difficulty, and it never lasted long.

He lay down in bed and lifted his legs. Woofed his jama pants to get air to his machinery.

“Dear Mrs Griffin ...” Ena said.

‘What?’ Roland asked.

‘Remember, that note from school? “Mrs White noticed that Hal didn’t have lunch today. We managed to arrange a sandwich from the canteen.” I felt so bad.’

‘Once,’ Roland replied. ‘In how many days? Thousands?’

‘Then it said something like, “If you’re having problems supplying food ...”’

‘Nerve of them.’ He wiped his forehead with the wet flannel he kept beside the bed. ‘You should go to sleep.’

‘No point.’

‘You’ll feel shithouse tomorrow.’

She didn’t reply. What did it matter how you felt?

‘What made you think of that?’ he asked.

Ena really didn’t know.

‘When was it? Fifteen years ago. But you still remember what they said.’

She got out of bed and walked across the hall to the toilet. He listened as she dropped the seat, sat down and emptied her bladder. He knew how it began and how long it lasted. How long she’d wait before standing up, hitching her daks, returning to bed without washing her hands.

But tonight Ena went into the lounge room, switched on the light and sat down in the recliner. She tried the radio, searching for some piano – perhaps Lucie McCabe playing a nice nocturne. She’d grown up with a piano in the house; a sign of civilisation, her mother would explain to visitors. They had Chopin and Mozart scores, open to the trickiest-looking passages, spread out for fingers that would never play them. Lessons, lessons, her mother always nagged. Just try. But Ena wouldn’t have a bar of it back then. The piano was school,

sucking marrow from the bone with the promise of great things, although, from what she could tell, there was little beyond the hoover and steak-and-kidney pie.

Nothing but twangy guitars; she turned off the radio and saw Sonia standing in the doorway. ‘When you gonna get an air conditioner?’ she asked.

‘Ask your father.’

Sonia sat down on the lounge. ‘Wanna cuppa?’

‘No.’ Ena walked over to a glass cabinet and produced a decanter of sherry. Took two small glasses and filled them almost to the lip. She gave one to her daughter and said, ‘I don’t know if it’s any good, it’s been sittin’ there for years.’ Ena wasn’t even sure she wanted it, but if anything warranted alcohol. ‘That room’s hot,’ she said. ‘It always got the late sun.’

Sonia shrugged. ‘Back a coupla days and I’m used to it again.’

It was still her favourite room, her favourite place, in the world. Where she’d spent sixteen years with her brother – listening to his breathing, cursing, singing and, after the Change, other things. It was a small house, and there were only two bedrooms. Eventually Roland had strung a line down the middle of the room and hung a curtain for privacy. But every time Sonia looked Hal was peeping, smiling, telling her she didn’t have very big tits. She’d asked for a room in the shed but that had always been her father’s studio. There was nowhere to go.

When Sam suggested a sleep-out, Roland delayed, but in the end agreed. As did Ena, who saw that her children wouldn’t survive a shared adolescence.

No council permit; the concrete was mixed and laid, the pine erected, the asbestos painted and hammered on, Mrs Ireland’s brother brought in for the power, a set of louvred windows installed.

‘What colour for the inside?’ Roland had asked, and Sonia (who was at that difficult age) had just said, ‘Leave it to me.’

One day, Ena and Roland had come home to find the sleep-out decorated with newspapers. Sonia had mixed the flour and glue and started work on the dozens of front pages she'd been collecting for months in anticipation of her own room: Eisenhower, Korea and Radium Hill; Elvis Presley and Doc Evatt's piercing eyes watching at night. At last, she was happy.

But now Sonia was more interested in the early days. The times they'd sleep bed-by-bed and she'd read him *Robinson Crusoe*, and he'd fall asleep as she told him about muskets and Friday. In a way, she guessed, only she knew her brother. Only she'd shared the same stale air for thousands of nights. Listened to him fart, and giggle about it. There was always something about brothers and sisters, beyond even what parents knew. Something that was given up, regretfully, when the world beckoned. He was in every corner of their room: where he'd carved his name in the mortar; drawn pornographic images (probably of her) inside the darkness of their wardrobe; spilt paint from his models on the rug; knocked in nails for his posters, leaving cracks that were never filled.

Sonia had known when she'd seen Ena and Roland on the porch. Her flatmate had watched from the hallway as her parents sat silently in the lounge. Maybe it was the same way brothers and sisters learned to communicate without words. Like she knew, and Hal knew, there was no thought or word the others could have or say they hadn't anticipated and understood. Maybe it was like mashing potatoes. You only had to be told once, and probably not that, if you'd seen it done.

Sonia had eventually asked, 'When?'

'A coupla hours ago.'

And then her flatmate had come in, and they'd all embraced, and shed a few tears, before the friend had fetched a bottle of vodka from her room. Sonia could remember lino. They'd just cleaned it, and it still smelt of laurel and lemon, and this seemed to overpower even the news of death. Now, she couldn't comprehend how cleaning and

suicide could coexist in such an intimate way. But they did. It was like one was no more or less important than the other.

‘How long you gonna stay?’ Ena asked.

‘As long as you want. As long as I feel I want to.’

‘Your father would like that.’

‘Until work want me back.’

‘He likes having you around.’

Still listening from his bed, Roland unstuck his legs and watched the fan go round. He hoped she’d stay forever, but of course, she couldn’t.

They sat in the shed, busy in their worlds: James Bailey on a fruit box, Roland on a stolen dining room chair. Bailey sketching Griffin, Griffin staring at the child in the boat.

‘That boy’s got Hal’s nose, and mouth,’ James said.

‘No.’

‘I’m not an art magazine, you don’t have to hide it.’

Roland shook his head and made a move to attempt a few more lines. ‘It’s not Hal.’

‘No?’

‘It’s rubbish, anyway.’ He removed the boy and laid it on the rug, replacing it with an aborted townscape. ‘Everything I do lately ... looks like something else I’ve painted.’ He opened a tin of white putty and started applying it to the canvas with a knife.

‘What are you using?’ James asked

‘White, raw sienna, bit of black.’

‘It’s not that bad.’

‘It’s shithouse.’ Roland continued removing the memory of the deserted main street that looked like a hundred others he’d attempted.

‘Paul’d be mad with you.’

‘Paul isn’t here.’

‘Paul’s always here.’

Their teacher, Paul Bell, wandering the room (or shed), studying sketches and saying, 'That looks like a pig's face.'

'What do you reckon I should do, Mr Bell?'

'Cheeks, chin, something recognisable.'

'Remember what he said?'

James reminded Roland.

'That was years ago.'

'Move the lines, shape the face – no, don't throw it away! Keep at it!'

Roland knew James was right: Paul, with his brandy breath and whistling nostrils, always behind him, watching.

1932. Roland was sitting bored in bed in hospital, his left eye bandaged. He found a piece of paper and made a few sketches of the old Greek who was sent in to clean his room at eleven every morning. Later, when the nurse saw the pictures, she said, 'They look just like Eleni, Mr Griffin.'

He'd hidden them beneath his newspaper, thrown them in the bin, but when she returned she got them out. 'You got a talent for it.'

Then the ophthalmologist came and said, 'Didn't quite go as planned.'

Roland wondered why it'd taken the doctor several days to tell him this. 'How do you mean?'

'That's the problem with a detached retina ... it's tricky. But we'll see, when the bandage comes off.'

When it did, things were no better: the same blur of shape and colour. He'd tried to focus on the doctor and said, 'What's next?'

'That's it.'

'There's not another operation?'

'I could try again, if you like.'

If you like. What did that mean? I can fiddle around again, charge you hundreds of pounds, and we'll be back where we started.

The doctor was examining the crumpled sketches the nurse had left out. 'These are very good.'

'There's no other procedure?'

‘I’ve got this friend, teaches art. Paul Bell. I can pass these on if you’re interested. He learnt from Fox, and Conder. He’s good.’

Roland was too angry to say no.

James had finished his sketch. He showed it to Roland, still flattening the surface of his canvas. ‘Who’s that?’

‘No one. I’ve learnt from you, I don’t do *real* people.’ James didn’t want it to go on like this, but wasn’t sure what to say. Sorry for your loss? He was a good kid, wasn’t he?

Instead, he put the sketch aside and took a small bottle of gold from his pocket. ‘I found this at home.’ He handed it to Roland, who abandoned the knife to examine it, turn it in his fingers. ‘Hal threw it at me when we had a fight. I was trying to tell him something, then he’s shouting at me: “And take yer fuckin’ gold, too!”’

‘That sounds familiar.’

‘But I knew it wasn’t him.’

Roland was grateful for this chunk of understanding. ‘It wasn’t, eh?’

‘Not when I’d known him that long. I knew it wasn’t him screaming at me.’

Roland had seen this version of his son a hundred times. This wasn’t the way he wanted to remember him, but it was okay because it was James, and he was as close as anyone. ‘He could be frightening.’

‘My word. But times like that, I always remembered him when he was little.’

‘That was okay for a while ... till he grew muscles.’

James didn’t know how to answer; this wasn’t a time to make Hal accountable. ‘I can remember when we found it too,’ he said, examining the gold. ‘Remember?’

Roland could. ‘How many ounces do you reckon?’

‘Dunno. It’s strange he never sold it.’

‘Maybe he had plans for it?’

‘Maybe it was for good luck?’

Roland took a deep breath. 'Yeah, good luck.' He handed the gold to James but he said, 'No, you keep it.'

'I don't want it.'

James took it. 'Maybe I could ...' But he stopped himself.

Roland placed the canvas on the ground and picked up the boy in the boat again. 'Just keep going, eh?'

'That's what Paul would say.'

Roland worked on the child's face; a smile, or grin, full of wonder at the waterspouts and breakers, the green night and singing phosphorus. Each fine line; azures; flotsam. As Paul Bell came up behind him.

'Your name?'

'Roland Griffin.'

'Your background in art?'

'None.'

Bell had studied the drawing, but given nothing away. 'You seem to have the dimensions, and accuracy. But why couldn't you become a designer, or engineer?'

'I reckon it might be fun.'

'Fun?'

'The doctor said there might be a scholarship, if you thought there was some promise.'

'You're not meant to ask for a scholarship.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Well, I'll tell you what. Go home, sketch some faces, bring them back in a month and we'll talk.'

'Faces?'

'Yes, faces. That seems to be what you're good at.'

Meanwhile, James was studying the several dozen photos Roland had pinned up around the benches, on the window frames, the walls. Some were studies: Shirley, turning away from the camera; Mr Ireland in his yard; a pair of Aboriginal jackaroos holding a

steer's skull. There were family shots, awkwardly posed: mother and daughter standing under the arbour; a self-portrait with roses; the two artists in their shed, lighting each other's smokes. Only one showed the boy, posed with Sonia, pulling a face. 'Where are the photos of Hal?'

Roland went to the drawer of the old kitchen cabinet and took out a shoe box. Then he sat down and opened it. 'Just for now,' he said.

James pulled up alongside him on the fruit crate and took a photo from the box. It was a head shot of Hal, a study for a painting called *Figure alone in the bush*. 'I recognise this. Didn't you sell that one?'

'No.'

Roland sorted through his pile of aborted paintings leaning against the iron wall and pulled out the transfiguration of his son, standing alone in scrub. James came over and stood beside him. 'It's a good one.'

'I couldn't sell it now.'

'Yes, you could. I'll give you a bottle of gold.'

Roland placed the painting on the easel on top of the boy in the boat, and sat down to look at it.

James placed the photo on the ledge beside it. 'Every time I look at him at that age I see that movie poster, and him running around Kalgoorlie.'

Roland let out a lungful of air. 'You take it home.'

'No, but you don't want to leave it here. The heat'll get to it.'

'Take it home, please.'

Roland didn't like the undertaker's suit, or the way he looked at them like he was trying to sell them something. It wasn't like they hadn't bought his product. He didn't like the forms on the desk. Paperwork, even in death. As if they could have their son back if they filled it all in correctly. The expensive-looking fountain pen. How did that change anything? But most of all, he didn't like this Robinson man's