

Prologue

HUT SWAM ALONE only because none of the others would come with him.

The party was plumbing its eleventh hour when he gave up his station at the music system and stood in the centre of the sunken living room. The beach house looked as if ransacked by half-hearted burglars: furniture dislodged but not overturned, empty bottles unbroken on the tiled floor.

Stretching his arms showily above his head, Hut groaned as if answering a question: ‘Taking a dip. Clean out the pipes. Anyone?’

He finger-combed his awning of orange hair—bloom of rust, the colour of heartbroken adolescence. Outside, the day was being dragged out of the dark, its rosy claws scratching the eastern blue; inside, there was also a reluctance to let go of the night. Pen, Nayce and Janey sprawled in a murmuring V on a daisy-chain of cushions and beanbags. Hut’s announcement hung in the stale smoke, unbidden, unremarked. Pen dismissed her husband’s offer with a distracted wave, her feet resting on Nayce’s thigh.

Hut receded through the rubble-strewn coffee tables and dining

suite: half-drunk glasses, good ideas at the time, discarded as if the evening had been a quest for some ultimate answer. 'Okay. Just me then,' he said with his customary brightness when taking no for an answer.

He found John and Susannah Bookalil sitting on the balcony, calves scissored on the glass table, sucking back champagne and orange. Smilingly they shook their heads at his invitation. Pongrass and Blackman, whom Hut had delivered to the house like a pair of trophies, had driven out an hour ago for an emergency resupply. *Comes a point*, Pongrass had said, *when the only answer is More*.

The methodical, urgent hedonism of parents on a night without children, Hut thought. Ten, twenty years ago they'd partied like there was no tomorrow. Now they went at it like there was not a moment to spare.

Down on the dewy beach, only a couple of fishermen had ventured out, well-spaced, in no danger of either entanglement or conversation. Jaundiced streetlight bounced off the sand-smear road. Hut's hands were yellow and the shadows tinted, as if seen through smoked glass. The air smelt of salt, Norfolk Island pine sap, and the earth's night-sweat.

Big surfs seldom got up before dawn so Hut paid no attention to the waves. He dropped his towel onto the sand and considered taking off his rash vest, which he usually wore as protection from sunburn and mockery. With his redhead's complexion and tendency to buxomness, daytime beaches hummed with threat. In this solitary pre-dawn, he might have liberated himself, even swum nude in celebration of his diminishing torso. He didn't. The spandex skin coddled him, made him feel like one of the normal race, one of them.

Though no-one had come with him to the beach, Hut entered the water feeling jubilant and vindicated. It had been his idea to

invite Pongrass and Blackman, his idea to abandon the Bookalils' overcrowded weatherboard and reconvene the holiday in the big house. His idea to leave all the kids, for one night, with Bookalil's parents. He'd come up with the week's five grand in rent: *Spare change*, he'd said, waving off the protests. The last eleven hours confirmed his wisdom: as his guests they'd whaled out—one of those unforgettable beach nights to add to the collection. He'd spent two thousand at the bottle shop as a guarantee of goodwill, Pongrass had unfolded his El Primo It, and everyone, in the end, after all the grumbling, had been up for it. Good old Papa Hut: they'd remember his generosity longer than their hangovers.

The darkness, and Hut's ecstatic indifference, threw a shroud over the sea like a sheet floating onto a bed. It wasn't until he was waist-deep that Hut felt the chunkiness of the current wrap his middle. He ignored it: although the break was further out than he could see in the half-light, the whitewater was frothy rather than steeping. He freestyled into a trough, enjoying his stretch and his kick too much to notice the sea's heft.

He had duckdived under six or seven broken waves before he realised he had been swept several 25-metre frontages to the north. The holiday house was now five doors down. Pen, as hostess, would be thinking about breakfast and cursing Hut for leaving her to clean up and cook. His legs reached beneath him and found the sandbank. As his toes touched the bottom, they skidded north. He breaststroked a little to save his breath; streetlights sailed southwards.

Rips didn't worry him. He reminded himself to go with it, let it take him out and drop him off, like a bus. The trick was to stay cool, get past the impact zone and not tire yourself fighting it. Seas were always calmer further out. Clinging to the sandbank, while seeming safe, exposed you to the combination punches of incoming waves. If you let the rip cart you into the deeper gutter,

you could relax, tread the calmer water and plot your next move. The key was not to pick a fight you couldn't win.

Even while rehearsing these thoughts, Hut heard them echo as in a draughty classroom, a hollow set of principles. *Principles*. There was a school camp when they'd gone solo sailing, aged fifteen or sixteen. Hut had told everyone he sailed—his family owned a yacht. Big-noting, he'd pretended he didn't need help. The truth was that his father sailed the boat and wouldn't let Hut do any more than perch in the cockpit and duck the swinging boom. In front of the class, on his knees, in his skiff, tangled among ropes and tiller, centreboard jammed in his hands, Hut had been blown straight back from the jetty to the headland. He fumbled and cursed. The other boys rolled around laughing. *You don't know how to sail, do you*, the pissed-off instructor called out. Face knotted, drifting towards the rocks, Hut retorted with that instinctive comic touch he used to be able to pull from the fire, defiant buffoonery, which could swing the mob and redirect their laughter against the haplessly furious teacher: *Sir, I know the principles!*

He knew the principles. He dogpaddled with the rip and was again surprised by the disproportion between the waves' macchiato tops and the deep force beneath. These were nuggety waves, stocky and packed. He found a lull between sets and coaxed himself into freestyle. But when the sets weren't breaking onto him there was a powerful drag, like an afterthought that is more persuasive and lingering than what's been said. He'd been in negotiations like this: the surface is unruffled but everyone's sitting there thinking: *Did that really happen? Are we at war here?*

It was when the next set arrived like a gang of pug-nosed brothers and Hut had still not reached the calmer sea that he realised maybe he was at war. Beyond the sandbank and unable to stand, yet inside the breaking zone, he took a gulp of air and braced

as the first wave collapsed onto him, hurled him up, then dragged him down. He let himself go limp, conserving energy. When he bobbed up he had time for one gulp of air before the next wave. Again, up, down: nature's empty-eyed even-handedness. On the rebound, he thought he could make it up for a breath. As long as you got one good lungful between waves, you would be all right. The set would pass. It was a question of maintaining your rhythm. Like a singer, you had to know when to breathe. More *principles*. But the milky greyness of the light confused him, and when he gave a strong dolphin kick he realised he was sending himself down, or across, not up. Bursting, he went ragdoll again, tumbled over, then found himself at the surface; but this time there was no chance for a breath as the next wave—the third-born, always the mean brother—came down in a great wrathful crump. Hut recognised the first colour of the day: a hope of green buried within the white of the falls, a keyhole, a ring.

The fourth of the set grabbed his ankle and shook him in its teeth. Spearing into the sandbank, he crossed his arms above his head to brace against the blow. The wave yanked him with a second wind towards the centre of the earth and reefed his rashie up his ribcage, peeling it halfway off. His arms flared to stop it but succeeded only in winding the vest around his neck, shoulders, and elbows. Trussed like a hostage, disarmed, he was thrown down again by the next wave. The shock of the situation—the rashie now acting as an effective binding of his neck and arms—robbed Hut of his composure. Being strangled by your own rash vest was not in the manual, as unnatural as a snake choked by its own half-shed skin. The freakishness of what was happening sucked the remaining calm out through his throat; he began flailing in a screaming blue panic.

Years before, he'd nearly drowned in the surf several times each summer, once a week at least. Like anything, he improved at panic

with practice and had mastered his fear so that mountainous waves became less threatening than people smirking at his body on the beach (a malignant torment from which even the nastiest seas offered sanctuary). But that was twenty-five years ago, and he'd come into this surf as complacently as if his terrors, having once been subdued, were vanquished for good rather than, with death's infinite patience, simply lying in wait.

His arms were bound; another dumper dropped its load on him; a realisation of immense, authoritative clarity pierced his bursting chest: *I have nothing left. Don't pick a fight you can't win.*

It was as if God had spoken, with a matter-of-fact wisdom that suspended time, a voice that was steps ahead of him. *Giving up* presented itself as a seductive offer—a red, dreamless, hot bath filling him from inside. And so it came to Hut, with the calm and inviting brutality of a statistic, that this was it and he should wave life off, take his leave, with the glossy, slow-motion helplessness of watching himself in a car accident. It was all so easy. Pity—just as he'd glimpsed his first truth of middle age, he was going to die. What a waste. Drunk, stoned, high, tripping, his last contribution to the world's overflowing out-tray would not be (as he'd anticipated) the carnage of his financial affairs but a ripe and fruity toxicology report. *And with all that under his belt*, they would say, *he came for a swim, alone, before dawn, in a dangerous surf.* As if anyone needed proof of his stupidity. This *father of two*. This *employer*. As if anyone needed proof.

Immersed, forsaken, Jeremy Hutchison began to cry. Not literally—his literal shell was turning blue, indigo, and the ultimate colour, violet, his eyes distending in panic—but beneath his skin something of Hut retreated into the centre, circled his arms around his knees and began to bawl. His face, when they found him, would be black and sea-swollen, but his child face would be wrinkled into this woebegone tear-sponge. He cried and cried.

* * *

It was one of the fishermen who saw him. A sandblasted windcheatered man—not a local but a visitor from down the peninsula who'd heard about sand whiting on a run—had watched the round-shouldered redhead, twenty-dollar haircut on a ten-dollar head, trundle in, get carried down the beach on the rip, fight his way suicidally into the break, then after a moment's disappearance get spewed into the gutter between sandbanks with his arms twisted inhumanly above his head.

The fisherman would tell him he was lucky the sun had come up just then. 'I saw yer bloodnut, mate, yer red hair in the water. Five minutes earlier, yer'da been grey on grey and I'd nevera seenya.'

The fisherman waded into the gutter and dragged out the jellied figure, untwisting the rashie, bunching it and throwing it disgustedly onto the beach. Hut tried to walk away but his knees liquefied onto the blushing sand. Now, as his breath and colour returned, he did cry.

'Yawright, matey?' said the fisherman, face like a chewed caramel. 'Coulda been worse. Coulda been yer mum cryin'.'

Hut shook his head, on all fours, and emptied through his eyes and nose the tears collected beneath the waves. He folded in on himself and lay curled on the beach, his fleshy side crusting with sand, calling to his rescuer's mind the nice breeding he'd give the whiting he'd caught.

'Wasn't worth the trip, eh matey?'

The fisherman, who didn't expect thanks, packed up and left before Hut had regained his feet.

Hut wobbled back to the holiday house on gelatinous legs. He used the outside shower under the balcony. His sobs had scoured him out and left him ravenous.

In full sunlight, the house had fallen quiet. The night's fun

had soured into the day's chore. Hut drank orange juice in three shots from the last vessel in the cupboard above the stove, a Peter Rabbit egg cup. Pongrass and Blackman must have come back: half-snorted egg cup. Pongrass and Blackman must have come back: half-snorted lines cross-hatched the kitchen table.

Hut padded through the house on bare feet and began pushing at the doors to the bedrooms.

Two days later, all the possible sources of his tears in the water were still jostling in his head like a creditors' meeting. They overwhelmed him. Nothing could bring on a crying jag like a fresh memory of near death. He was weeping again on the Monday morning, sitting alone on the beach in front of the house, remembering how, when that wave flipped him over and flattened him like a master pizza-maker working a pad of dough, he had heard the conclusion to his story: *I have nothing left.*

That voice had carried a warm and welcoming immensity, like a president inducting him into a club whose membership he had always craved. The Eternity Club. What brought him to tears now wasn't so much how close he had come to death as his grateful surge towards it. Like vertigo: it wasn't fear of falling, it was fear of seeing how much he *wanted* to fall. Was this him, was this Jeremy Hutchison? He couldn't escape the feeling that he'd given the incorrect answer to a crucial question. The vital part of him, the Hut part, had fallen out somewhere. Where? Whose was this acidic, death-loving voice? What had made him so fucking tired?

Hut's fists drove into the sand by his hips. He remembered the fisherman's dry Good Samaritan wit and wanted to punch the man's face. Hut didn't want to be saved. He wanted to save himself. He was as angry with the fisherman as his sons were when you did something for them that they were determined to do for

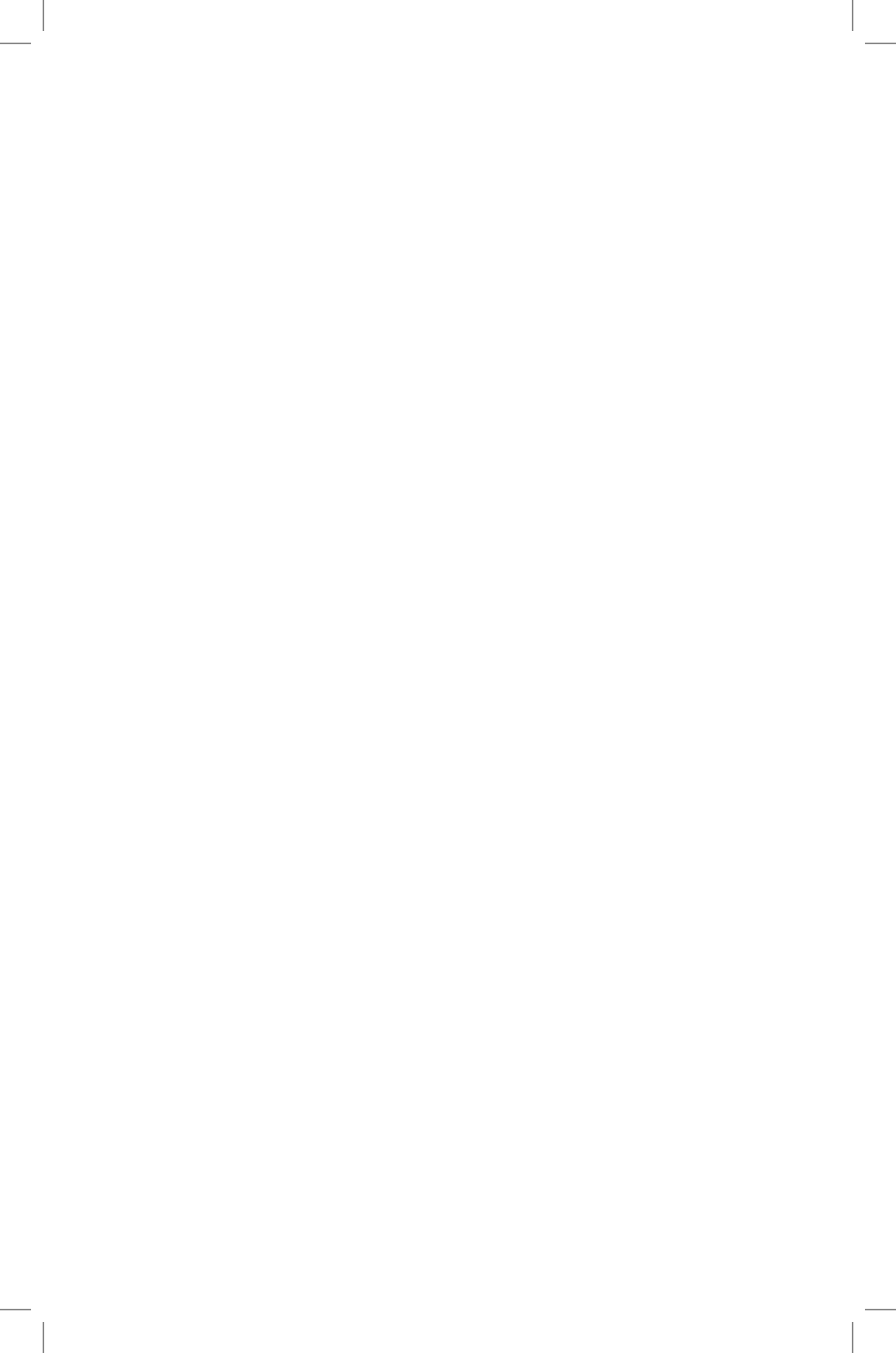
themselves. Screaming at you to rewind the clock, let them start again. Daddy, *I want to do it myself.*

A sniffling fragment of a laugh: his boys.

He waited on the beach for the seas to rise. If Hut wished for anything, it was to be out there again, pressed under the ocean's thumb so that this time he could save himself. As he would have, if the fisherman hadn't stepped in. Wouldn't he? He needed to find that vital part, that Hut part, under the water. And then, maybe, if he could find that again, he could also have found something different in the bedrooms of the holiday house. Two failures coming so close together—he couldn't help feeling they were coupled, like the two parts of a tumbling lock.

But the heavy swell had subsided, leaving a pond with a guiltless sleeper's face. The two-faced sea.

He took his mobile phone out of his beach bag and called his company's travel agent to book the tickets for Jamaica.



1

Brace. Brace. Brace.



1

THE HOUR BETWEEN check-in and boarding was such a happy one for Jeremy Hutchison that he would revisit it with a warm throb of nostalgia. Moments of pure happiness were elusive; reliving them was like trying to trap a flea. He lived this one in the velvet-roped First-Class reserve of the frequent flyers' club at the international terminal of Sydney Airport.

Hut always got a lift out of airports. They contained the nasal thrill of jet fuel and the gravitational heft of things that cost three hundred million dollars; he felt warmed by proximity to such capital-intensiveness. But most of all, airports sighed with the relief of having *made it*. When you had checked in, you were scot-free. Nothing could touch you. In this way airports reminded Hut of prisons (places he'd been thinking about more and more). Prisons and airports put you beyond care, in a higher pair of hands. Hut could be as happy in either; which gave him something, at least, to hang on to.

He had found Justin Pongrass and Andy Blackman, tousled from the velocity of their check-in queues, in armchairs overlooking the main runway. Hut, holding a glass of Coke he'd poured at the open

bar, pulled up a third chair to complete a semicircle before the sheet glass.

A pop tune, arranged for strings and wind, laid down a soundtrack to the tableau of Hut's satisfaction: a First-Class semicircle with these two mates and their retired-athlete bodies, staring into space, letting it sink in: the flight ahead, the escape, the holiday, the race, the *success* of it all.

Outside was the double-dealing of thrust and flap; but the boys weren't watching. Inside magazines and newspapers were pinwheeled on the glass coffee table; but the boys weren't reading.

The boys were neither reading nor watching, though Pongrass, in his way, was singing. Soft and surprisingly tuneful, Pong cooed with the muzak, one of those '70s choruses that Hut knew to be intimate with everyone except him. It wasn't that all popular music had passed Hut by. He knew the tunes. He just didn't know the names.

The muzak changed its tune, if not its mood. Pongrass's falsetto wafted over the First-Class lounge as Hut went to get a mineral water. He'd have liked a drink but didn't want to dehydrate—or didn't want to dehydrate yet. There'd be plenty of time for dehydration, for deep-vein-thrombotic languor, twenty-seven hours of it, and Hut demanded value for his First-Class fare. He'd do his dehydrating on a couple of flutes of something French, then a forthright Barossa red.

He watched Pongrass's once-famous face forget itself: 'Le-eh-eh-eh-ets! Let's stay togethah!'

His own eyes squeezed shut, and he joined in: 'Loving you whether/ Times are good or bad/ Happy or sa-a-a-ad/ A-a-a-ah . . .'

Carried away with the moment, Hut punctuated the last three beats with a slick pelvic thrust, his teeth gripping his lower lip with emotion. He opened his eyes to find a silent Pongrass and Blackman staring at him like a pair of magpies.

‘Um,’ Hut tried to laugh. ‘Penny loves that song.’

There occurred a prickling instant when Blackman’s and Pongrass’s mouths both opened to pass comment on Hut’s enthusiasm, and then, as they saw each other, their breeding reasserted itself in tightened lips and a change of subject.

Blackman spread his arms and groaned: ‘Man, First-Class, long trip—be so good. Inhumane to let you travel anything else.’

Hut cleared his throat. ‘I don’t know how the others can do it. Economy. Christ.’

The last time he’d flown long-haul Economy was with Pen and the boys when they’d had to return from Europe at no notice for a funeral and there hadn’t been any other seats. Two babies, twenty-six hours, noses red from blowing into cheap napkins: after that, ten K was loose coin well spent.

Blackman roused himself from the peaceable contemplation of his incoming Valium to shoot Hut a wink that anointed him with a full-body blush.

‘Stick with us, son. Stick with the heavy stuff.’

Blackman and Pongrass were heavy hitters (Hut rolled the words around his mouth). He meant *heavy*. Money, Hut had learnt, was a heavy metal. It endowed weight, gravity. It embedded you in your earth, and when you grew large with money you earned not the power of flight but the power of mass: you were so heavy with it, you attracted other money. With sufficient money you weren’t free from anxiety or obligation; that was the spiv’s dream. Perhaps it had even been Hut’s dream—to buy his way clear. If you observed real money, serious money, you learned that freedom was the last thing it wanted. It wanted to be weighty. Pongrass and Blackman were heavy as earth’s crust. They weren’t just rich for life; they were sedimented in it for several lives, inheritances before and to come. You couldn’t spend your way out of that kind of money. You’d need too much imagination.

'Real cutlery,' Pongrass said. 'Right up the cockpit's clacker and they still give you steel knives. That's what First buys you. Respect. Common decency.'

'I've heard,' Blackman said, his self-oiling gaze brushing the floor-to-ceiling windows, 'that if you threaten a hijack in First-Class, as a joke, say you've got a bomb in your bag, you know what they do? They laugh. They get it.'

'Respect,' Pongrass nodded appreciatively, warmed by the fact that there remained places where the courtesies and traditions of the past endured. 'They ought to put up a sign: "WARNING: We don't take jokes seriously".'

Hut could get drunk on thinking about these guys. If Pongrass and Blackman were wines, they'd be the bottles you could only get a look at if you'd known the sommelier on first-name terms for fifteen years. Hut felt the rare privilege—the hairs in his erectile tissue stood up—of having friends of this calibre. When he had boasted of his friendship with Pongrass and Blackman—the Justin Pongrass, the Andrew Blackman—hoping to impress his parents, his mother had said in that dreamy, sedated way of hers: 'Ah! Theirs is a different world.' This was how the top half per cent regarded the top quarter per cent: a different world. The Hutchisons were rich by any measure, but relative deprivation—or 'aspiration' as it had come to be known—was a permanent mood.

'Dare you to try it!' Hut said, a quiver of delight jetting his words too forcefully over the coffee table. It happened again: Pongrass's eyes overshot Hut's to Blackman. They swapped something masonic, the pair of them, a micro-conference.

'Eh,' Blackman winked at Pongrass but directed his reply at Hut. 'You try it, pal. You try it. I swear, it'll be fine. They won't shit themselves—they'll *piss* themselves, yeah?'

Hut frowned hard at his nails. He'd seen the eyelids, the fluttering exchange. He had for most of his life been cultivating

the disguise of an open-faced unsuspecting man who misses everything: a sound business trait he had learnt from his father. His real competitive advantage, though, the trait he inherited from his mother—his curse—was that he missed nothing.

When the boarding call came, Hut followed the weathered heels of Blackman's deck shoes down the sky bridge. The other three in the team—Nayce, Janey and Bookalil—were flying Economy. Hut was relieved he had avoided bumping into them on the way in, which would have been annoyingly awkward. He became troubled—or scratched his way down to existing troubles. An understanding flew through the nylon air and attached itself to him. He couldn't put his finger on when the happy moment had been whole and stationary, but he knew when it was on the turn.

Hut tried to shrug off this bleak flash. He would be happy. He would live, even if it killed him.

2

IN ROW 58, seat B, a breath downwind of the aft lavatories, David Nayce woke from a nap to read, on his seat-back video display, that the Time To Destination was two hours longer than it had been when he'd fallen asleep. The pleasant texture of his nap disintegrated. By the time he realised he was reading not Time *To* but Time *At*, he was feeling desperate and haggard, undone by a misread preposition.

He found long-distance travel a dislocating experience: it dislocated his neck from his back, his hips from his thighs, his jaw from his skull. How vivaciously the early hours passed, how miserably they matured, how malevolently they gummed up. In real life, the only comparison for your body falling apart was that the years accelerated and you got it over with sooner. But on an aircraft you had the worst of both worlds: as you slowed down, so did time. The last three or four hours of a long flight didn't drag; they had to *be* dragged. The only consolation was, it didn't matter whether you were in First or Cattle. The mulish last hours showed no respect for class.

He watched a movie and sank into his own dreadfulness. To

his right, in 58C Janey Quested's eyes were compressed with what appeared to be the effort to inhale her headrest, and in 58D John Bookalil was dozing.

Nayce scratched his newly shaven head with both hands. A bad deal, shaving: you never knew what lay beneath.

His boyish crop of straight dark-blond hair had been one of his better points, greying imperceptibly over his pleasant if not quite handsome features. He hadn't shaved for the forty-year-old's standard reason: to thwart baldness by bringing it front and centre. (Though he liked the fact that the head-shaving craze had put neo-Nazis out of business; a skinned head these days meant not a swastika-worshipper but a middle-manager striking pre-emptively for male vanity.) Nayce had shaved because of the swimming race—shaving seemed a professional, Olympian act, bringing him skin-to-skin with the ocean. But he'd been regretting it. Shadowy remnants of stubble had disclosed an unexpected male pattern: on his forehead a pubic Tasmania detached from the mainland. In a horrible irony, the shaving of his head had revealed his bald patch. It had also uncovered a dark secret: a steep-pitched gabled skull marked with inexplicable gashes and knuckly lumps. Rather than a perfect globe, his head was a half-flat rugby ball with hives, a nineteenth-century criminologist's dream: the rear bumps for sexual deviancy, the pointed crown for avarice, the sloping front for murderous impulses. A bad deal, all up.

And to make matters worse, here, two movies into the flight, was the devil himself, freckly hands parting the curtain of the section before the section before Business, which was the section before First, now rowing himself along the headrests. His genial eyes sought out faces, warming the cabin with his smile, like a man receiving appearance money: a celebrity visiting the *hoi polloi*. He looked brown and almost wiry and, Nayce had to admit, fit.

Nayce braced himself. *Brace. Brace. Brace.* Like the flight

attendants told you to do when disaster was imminent. The beautiful futility of it touched him somehow. Faced with a nine-hundred-kilometre-per-hour impact, what could you do but assume a good body position?

'Hey.' Hut's radiance betrayed simultaneously his relief at having a First-Class seat and his obligation to hide the fact.

'Mr A1 himself,' Nayce said, hooking his headphones around his neck and stretching to shake Hut's hand. These were handshaking men. Their fathers and their schools had taught them to shake hands. They did so genuinely, when they met; and ironically, such as now.

'My apologies. *Lord A1*,' Nayce corrected himself.

Hut was visibly fighting the temptation to gloat about First (steel cutlery, interactive games, respect, general awesomeness), but Nayce cut him short.

'What am I? You pay through me to sit in me.'

'Um.' Hut usually tolerated Nayce's fondness for wordplay, but there were only so many ways in which he was happy to have the piss taken out of him at once. 'No idea,' he sighed as if whatever the answer was, it couldn't matter.

'The nose.' Nayce tapped the side of his.

The seat to Nayce's left was empty. Its occupant, whose conversation had comprised a kind of public service announcement on the dangers of deep vein thrombosis, and who watched the seatbelt sign like a sprinter under the starter's gun, had leapt up hours earlier to 'stretch my legs and enjoy the view'. Before departing for the rear bulkhead, he had paused, giving Nayce a reproachful glare. People on planes were no longer satisfied with talking to you; they had to convert you.

Now Hut squeezed past Janey then Nayce and plonked himself into the vacant seat, causing the jumbo to sway minutely, or so it seemed. Although no longer a large man, Hut remained a large

presence: his ghostly fat threw itself about, cleared a radius, shuffled and stretched and took its time arranging itself.

'Oi,' Nayce grunted abstractedly, as if Hut was interrupting important business. Hut was impervious to this kind of hint, however, particularly when it was feigned.

'Dave? Are you okay?' Hut was frowning at something above Nayce's eyes.

Rubbing his scalp, Nayce shrugged. 'Worse can happen. I guess.'

'But . . . are you okay?' Hut's voice trembled.

'Ask for clippers in haste, repent at leisure.'

'Oh. Oh. Right. I thought it might be, you know . . . medical.'

Nayce wondered if Hut was joking but could see the shine in his eyes. This was the trouble with the fucker. He let too much in. You had a haircut, and the next thing you knew Hut was offering a private room in the top hospital and a blank cheque for your bills.

Hut started inspecting the inflight magazine and safety cards, as if checking that they were suitably dog-eared and child-bitten compared with those in First. Nayce went back to his DVD. He had brought twenty DVDs and six books with him. What could he not pack into these five days, into this very flight? In the four years since he'd become a father, Nayce looked forward to trips away with a truant's excitement, almost a wild panic. When he stepped on a plane he could stand on time's brakes and forget he was married to Sophie, forget he was a father to John, forget he was forty; but only for a moment, before trailers loaded up with family, marriage, position, possessions and ambiguous unfinished love jackknifed into him. The excitement of going away begat a child of its own: guilt.

Why was he doing it, why had he been eating up that swimming pool as if it were his daily bread? He didn't need Sophie to tell him

(though she did, and did) that it was all about mortality, about not wanting to let go, about proving his strength once more before it was too late. About, in her wifely nutshell, ‘your midlife crisis’. What Sophie didn’t realise was that she wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t know. He had caught an early whiff of death’s hot breath and was swimming away from it. But what Sophie underestimated was the extent to which *everything*, now, was about mortality. The frenzy of the six books and twenty DVDs was about mortality. The 747 was about mortality. Jamaica was about mortality. The only time Nayce wasn’t thinking about mortality was when he was playing with, or shouting at, or chasing around, or cleaning up after, his son. And so, more mixed feelings: he was euphoric to be escaping domesticity so he could contemplate his death in peace.

He wondered if he had any feelings left that he could take unmixed.

‘What you watching?’ Hut said as soon as Nayce had settled back down.

‘Nothing.’ Taking his headphones from his ears with an ostentatious sigh, Nayce offed the player.

‘In First we’ve got a whole DVD library.’

‘I don’t know why you’re down here then.’

‘I don’t know why *you’re* down here. Twelve hours to LA, five to Miami, another hour and a half to Kingston—and you chose Economy? That’s one whole day of your life with your knees against your chin.’

‘Let’s think of it another way,’ Nayce said. ‘It’s only one day.’

They were continuing a kind of fraternal bickering that had been going on for thirty-three years. Their friendship circled inside the soiled cage of early impressions. Even in second grade Hut had seemed more of a child than anyone else: eager to please, innocent of consequence except when it affected him. More of a child, and also a born materialist, Hut had an innate grasp for

the power of toys. At seven (at eight, at nine, at ten, at forty), Hut understood the magnetic pull of a home bulging with brands. Hut's house was the first place Nayce had seen a colour TV (Thorn); a dishwasher (Westinghouse); a video recorder (Sony beta); a computer game (Pong on Atari); a refrigerator with an ice-maker and cold water (some impossible German name); an automated swimming pool cleaner (Kreepy Krawly). At Hut's house Nayce and other friends were introduced to inventions such as the bidet (Nayce urinated in it by mistake); the jacuzzi (that too); the sauna; the handball court; and, by observing Hut's permissively 'European' parents (Ken Hutchison hailed from London's East End, but gold-and-white Ines was German), poolside nudity, the seven-hour lunch, adult conversation, the adult chunder, and, the next morning if Nayce stayed overnight, the mysteries of sweaty penitent adult exercise regimes circa 1979: starjumps, neckrolls, burpees, running-on-the-spot, as well as the timeless elegance of the push- and sit-up. Hut wore the newest manmade fibres in the latest colours, and second grade's first digital watch (Seiko, with calculator). Like an exclusive little club, the Hutchisons had family in-jokes and in-words. They always owned a basset hound named Fred. When Fred died, they replaced him with another Fred. Obese bassets didn't last long in the Sydney humidity, so there were generations of Freds; the Hutchisons didn't bother to distinguish them as Fred I, Fred II and so on. Just one eternal, reincarnated, wattly, panting Fred.

The in-jokes owed more to Hut's father than his mother. Ken Hutchison liked being captain of his little club, and his son was a loyal card-carrier. Ines Hutchison's wishes took him longer to read.

Later on, Nayce would come to think of the Hutchison house (Spanish hacienda: white stucco arches, terracotta tiles, hidden courtyards) as a kind of permanent technology expo, with Hut the

resident PR flack. But for Hut—and this was always evident to his friends, who pitied it—his self and his possessions had been fused so that he never knew for certain whether his mates liked him or his toys. Ken was an importing entrepreneur, Ines (which Ken rhymed with ‘penis’) a retired TV lotteries announcer, twenty-two years in and twenty-two out of Dusseldorf. Cocksure and worldly, Ken fed Jeremy’s fear with DIY aphorisms, loaded up with one constant subtext: *In the long run it’s only your money that people like, so you’d better start shoring it up.*

‘Why torture yourselves?’ Hut said, shifting in his narrow Economy seat to make his point.

‘What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.’

‘Ha.’

Good old Nietzsche, the busy man’s desk calendar. Nayce had read just enough gloomy German philosophy back at university to spread the impression that he was a dazzlingly educated man, a civilised merchant banker. This was how the businessman could earn his name as a Renaissance man: he couldn’t quite raise an original idea, but he could work flavour into his commonplaces. The prudent fund manager left nothing to waste, not even the embarrassment of an arts degree.

‘The difference between my ticket and yours,’ Nayce said, ‘is ten thousand dollars. If we’re hitting a rough patch in Economy, I’ll think about you spending ten grand for a couple of inches of leg room and wine in a real glass. When you’re not eating, not watching a movie, not sleeping, not using real cutlery, you’ll be paying ten grand to stare out the same-sized window at the same fluffy cottonwool clouds I’m staring at. I do think of you up there. It gives me a happy flight. And nothing makes me happier than to see you joining me down here. Did I tell you? I’m really pleased to see you, Hut.’

‘You know what?’ Hut closed his eyes for a short moment’s long

division. ‘The difference is four-oh-nine dollars and eleven cents per hour. And if we get delayed, the longer it drags, the more the hourly difference comes down. Think about that.’

Nayce’s mouth made a white hyphen. ‘That’d take me ten minutes on a calculator, you bastard. You’re a freak, Hutchison.’

They could say what they liked about him, and God knows they had, but no-one denied that Jeremy Hutchison had the Maths. The Maths was what had got him where he was. Or no—even he would admit that it was eight figures of patrimony that had got him, largely, where he was. But the Maths had saved him from pissing it away; the Maths had given him his self-made name, his ability to write in black ink. They all thought he was a buffoon, but they respected his idiot-savancy in simple (if not complex) mathematics. Calculus, matrices, the dark arts of irrational numbers—he’d had none of it. But give him addition and subtraction and division and multiplication, give him practical problems involving compound interest and if this costs this and that costs that—give him real maths, and he was a wizard, as proven by his topping the state—the state!—in school maths. All right, it was the lowest level. They’d called it vegie maths. But Hut was no vegetable. He’d taken pride in his inattention to every other subject, but they all knew he’d been the top vegie in the state. That was one of the upsides in still being friends with your schoolmates when you were forty.

‘And then between flights,’ Hut went on, ‘what do you do at the airport? You don’t even have a lounge to go to.’

He shook his head like a disappointed parent whose children are paying the price for ignoring him. After being with Pong Pongrass and Abo Blackman, it must have been unavoidably saddening for Hut to be with the Economy Three—as if they were transitorities, penniless, lacking history, his heart sinking as he adjusted his thinking from many generations to one, from reserves to inflow.

‘I’d have upgraded you all.’

‘Ah, not that again.’

Hut had, two months ago, tried to upgrade Nayce, Janey and Bookalil to Business: another of those acts that had earned him his reputation for generosity. Nayce had dismissed the offer with a double-edged laugh, as if it wasn’t genuine or, if it was, it was insulting. In the usual upside-down morality of things, Hut, the rejected benefactor, was made to feel worse than Nayce, the cold-hearted repudiator. These convoluted transactions, over what Hut felt should have been a simple and heart-warming gesture, were the downside in still being friends with your schoolmates when you were forty.

Hut bleated on that the problem wasn’t money. The problem was *division*. They were coming on this trip as a team, they’d trained as a team, they were doing the race as a team: the Fast Set, the Dirty Half-Dozen. The Economy Three were splitting the team.

‘You want to be a team?’ Nayce countered. ‘Come and enjoy Economy.’ Nayce didn’t necessarily like the team congealing around him. Now that they were airborne over the Pacific he ventured to say that, though he could not quite will the 747 to go down, while Justin Pongrass and Andrew Blackman were aboard at least some good would come of it if it did.

As if seeking like minds, Nayce canted himself against his tray table to inspect row 58; he eyed two pubescent girls playing Grand Theft Auto. They were dressed in the fashionable retro Suzi Quatro style: denim jackets, tight jeans tucked into tooled leather boots, Zorro-masks of eye-shadow, feathery salt-and-pepper hair. The problem with that style, he thought, was that for a man of his age, born in the 1960s, it did not bring to mind Suzi Quatro but mature women whose best years had been spent aping Suzi Quatro and were now clinging to the memory. So these thirteen-year-olds made him think: *Lamb done up as mutton done up as lamb*.

But then, the real problem was that these girls weren't there for a man of his age and opinions. If his opinions had any point for such girls, it was that they be violated, offended, scorched from the earth.

Which was why he wanted them to smile at him, nothing more than to notice him, so badly he could have wept.

'Anyway. You're looking good,' Nayce said, giving his armrests a subject-changing slap, feeling a jolt of guilt for giving poor Hut the usual rough ride.

'Thanks, mate.' Hut's eyes glistened. The big lump turned on and off like a tap, and it was getting worse as he grew older.

'You think you can do the race?'

'It's all under control,' Hut said richly, as if pacifying doubts was all in a day's work.

'So how much have you been swimming?'

'Don't worry your pretty little head about that, my boy.'

'Where have you been training?'

'Never you mind, just look and learn. But thanks, mate, I'm feeling great.'

'You look a million bucks.'

Hut was about to pounce eagerly. 'Do I? Say something more!' But Nayce, alert to the kind of back-slapping session that came from nothing and went nowhere, said: 'Hey, I want to get some zeds before LA. You should too.'

'Sure, pal.' Hut's palm was again flat on Nayce's thigh: indulgent, like a father enjoying the cuteness of his son telling him to take care of his health.

'Just one thing,' Nayce said.

Suddenly conscious of the speed at which they were moving (almost the speed of sound in a tin bubble: poke your face out the window to enjoy the air and your brain-mist will drizzle over a whole island nation down there), Nayce hesitated before his

friend's bright blue eyes. Hut palmed a hank of still-brilliant red hair off his forehead. Hut's sons had red hair too. Adults found kids with red hair cute, adorable even, unless they'd had to grow up with it themselves. You hate this thing your parents have given you, and they, having hated it in themselves, adore it in you. What's that all about? It was hard to feel ambivalent about redheads. Hut's mother about? It was hard to feel ambivalent about redheads. Hut's mother Ines was red as well, though she dyed her hair that parodic platinum.

Nayce's stomach rose and fluttered, a helicopter beneath his ribs. How could Hut ever trust him? Wasn't that it? How could he ever trust Hut to trust *him*?

Nayce swallowed. 'Don't swim.'

'Don't swim?'

'Don't swim in the race. Come along, only . . . don't swim.'

Hut looked set to laugh, but something in Nayce's expression stopped him. A smokiness skidded across Hut's eyes.

'Eh, good one, mate.' Hut tapped Nayce on the cheek as he got up and straddled him to get to the aisle. Nayce made as if to knee Hut in the groin. Hut stopped, legs forked either side of Nayce's, and bent to his ear.

'Dave. Here's a deal. I won't swim,' he growled, movie-melodramatically, 'if you start telling the truth about yourself.'

Nayce suffered a flicker of confusion. The ironic mimicry of strong emotion was so habitual among his friends, the self-mockery so automatic, rooted in the friendships' histories, that it was almost impossible—and perhaps undesirable—to identify those moments when the play-acted emotion happened also to be real.

Hut straightened and thrust his pelvis into Nayce's forehead. Nayce flinched. They were locked in this coupling like a pair of ice dancers whose routine finishes with one's face in the other's

crotch. *Freeze there and smile!*

'You know you want to,' Hut bowed to his ear again and purred. 'Just give in, Dave.'

Nayce gave him a push, and Hut stumbled into the aisle towards the curtain and commenced his odyssey through the sections before the sections before First. Nayce couldn't see his face, but knew that Hut would be grinning all the way to the nose.

The jumbo landed, disgorged, reloaded, upped, offed, made earth again. A thunderstorm delayed the landing in Miami, where the aircraft coughed out its human phlegm, some haggardly to a final destination, others to the unexpectedly skinny margins of their connecting flights. The men of First-Class made the shuttle flight to Kingston. Drunk and hungover at the same time, they eased their way through the purgatory of reclaim, clearance, transit and transfer to new boarding passes, new lounges, new bain-maries, newborn drooling jugs of orange juice.

As they boarded the Miami–Kingston shuttle, Blackman was asking Pongrass: 'So who would you write a letter to if the plane was going down?'

'Is it a rule that the plane can't crash until I've finished writing?'

'Sure,' Blackman tugged down the corners of his mouth, workshopping the idea. 'Whatever you like.'

'Right then,' Pongrass smacked his lips. 'I'd write a little thank-you note to every bunny I've knobbed. *Thanks for the lovin*. I'd be writing so long, we'd have to find an airport eventually!'

A titter escaped from Hut and floated above them like a curvaceous but slightly crass blimp.

'Um, who would you write to?' Hut asked Blackman.

'My soon-to-be-ex-wife,' Blackman nodded with compressed lips. He mimed a scrawl in the air: '*Dearest Maria. Wish you were here.*'

Pongrass laughed so hard he needed to go to the toilet. Hut laughed along but was internally restrained, trying to think up something funnier than the truth, which was that he'd write the kind of letter to Pen that he already wrote her every day, at least in his head. But the boys didn't want the truth. Or his contribution.

The Economy Three, meanwhile, met blockage. During the thunderstorm an elderly woman had vomited her teeth into her sick bag, and by the time she had conveyed this to her daughter, the sick bags had been thrown away. The feisty daughter, a mid-forties corporate blonde in a tomato-red pantsuit, was insisting that the flight attendants 'Go throw them awl'.

The crew members were seeking a satisfactory customer service response which didn't involve any of them angling in the swamp where sick bags went to die. In other words, Americans were passing the buck until somebody found a Guatemalan.

The blockage, like a colonic twist, was finally cleared, but then the carousel was reluctant to give up their bags. Nayce, Bookalil and Janey ran like rats through the maze of terminals for their Kingston flight, but were minutes late.

'Brilliant,' Janey said as they fetched up at the service desk. 'Ninety minutes till the next one?'

'The others probably waited for us,' Bookalil offered, looking around.

'Yeah right,' Nayce said.

'But the team . . .' Bookalil's natural optimism was sufficient to start but not complete his thought.

The team, Nayce thought but did not say. Any team involving Justin Pongrass and Andrew Blackman was unworthy of the name. Life was a race: this was a race, beating a traffic light was a race. He didn't hold it against them for rushing ahead to Jamaica. Why would they wait? They were born with the wind in their hair; it was their nature to seek out advantage. Nayce tried not to mind

too much. The warmer air of Miami, his over-tiredness and the savage comedy of their missed connection put him in a temporary state of giddy loving-kindness. *After all*, he said to himself, *after all, you've got to admire them, they are what they are.*

'Janey? Can you wake me up when they call us to board?'

Nayce knelt beside his carry-on bag, plumping it up as his pillow, then lay on his back with his arms folded across his chest. He couldn't help thinking about the way Hut had behaved on the plane. His absolute predictability, his overflowing *life*, warmed Nayce, as it always had. He annoyed the shit out of you, but—it was like your children—when you were with him you stopped thinking about death. Hut stood, in some indefinable way, for the opposite of mortality, the opposite of death. It wasn't immortality—they were no longer children, though they could still act childishly with each other. It was death's other opposite. Love. That's what it was. Love. Or life. Whatever it was, Hut had always had more of it than Nayce.

Nayce lay on the floor of the gate lounge, drugged with Hut and love, keeping at bay the other thing, the thing that had opened up right out of the blue.