

THE PASSAGE

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Weep, child

As you see your mother weep . . .

Seneca *The Trojan Women*

THE SMALL ROUGH STONE WILL NOT be skimmed. Even when thrown artfully, it catches the water's surface and submerges momentarily, before bobbing back up as if for air. Riddled with tiny vesicles, where bubbles of gas were trapped in the suddenly cooled lava, it is lightweight, porous and abrasive: the rock that floats. The ancient Egyptians, who Herodotus tells us only tolerated bodily hair during periods of mourning, used it to depilate and, perhaps more importantly, to polish the fibrous pith of papyrus in preparation for the scribe. When papyrus gave way to sturdier, animal-skin parchment, the rock doubled as an eraser, enabling medieval writers to sand back the ancient vellum, giving us the palimpsest, or 'twice prepared' manuscript of scrubbed text whose trace remains visible (the sole means of survival for some ancient

works). Of course, in the age of the word processor, whose delete key rather terrifyingly leaves *no* trace, this usage is obsolete; yet the rock is still used for exfoliating the skin, and for removing ink stains from the fingers of those who persist with older methods. It has a more recent use too: as part of a compound for acoustic tiling, to soundproof rooms for music practice.

In summer the sand islands in Moreton Bay, of which this is the northernmost, bask in a subtropical lassitude. Dune grasses bend in the coastal breeze, the tide pushes its barrow. The stretch of water separating us from the mainland is the Pumicestone Passage, which speculates its way north towards the Sunshine Coast through a shifting maze of salt-marsh islets and sandy shoals. In the final days of 2001, I find myself returning here, to Banksia Beach, on the calm side. The majestic Glasshouse Mountains loom on the western horizon, a cluster of massive trachyte cores, remnants of an ancient family of volcanoes. Behind me rises a set of fibreglass replicas, to scale, of the three major peaks: the brooding, heavy-shouldered father, Tibrogargan; Beerwah, the capacious mother; and the delinquent child, Coonowrin, or ‘Crookneck’, eldest of eight, with his broken neck. Every child schooled in the Caboolture Shire knows the indigenous Dreamtime story that tells how Tibrogargan belted the young Coonowrin for neglecting his pregnant mother, Beerwah, during the great flood; domestic violence, it seems, was not only a trope of Greek mythology. As a child I scaled the miniature replicas in a deluge of peach and magenta at sunset, as my young siblings do now.

I have come here to forget. Or is it to remember? Perhaps the two are indistinguishable. To forget, certainly, my mum’s

incomprehensible suffering; her face, sucked to a pitiful husk at forty-two, as though by a golden orb spider, after months cocooned in death's web, feeding it. Yes, death grew fat on my mum. Ravaged to within a kiss of recognition by a one-way journey through a nightmarish wilderness of morphine, the dose rising as inexorably as the tide, until the twin darknesses of sleep and death finally washed over. I am here to erase *this* memory, so that I might remember her instead in life, vivacious, high-spirited. But I am naive. The pumice will not do. The waters of the passage will not do. Only the slow rub of years might one day smooth away the imprint left by her suffering, her heaving up of each final breath, almost a minute apart, as I clutched her skeletal hand. Across the bed, my stepfather, whom I've called 'Dad' since the age of seven, wrecked with exhaustion. The last, rasping exhalation, which will accompany me until my own.

Here, where the shore meets the scrub, is a host of respiratory tubers piping up through the sand like rubbery snorkels, the breathing apparatus of a stolid grey mangrove—my sanctuary this overcast morning. I try to block out the oxygen mask, and my pathetic attempt to feed her her favourite ice-cream, the stupid mess. With the sodden digits squishing beneath my feet, I come to admire this tree's endeavour and perhaps even envy its success. Committed, more permanent than the knots of spotted mangroves further up the passage, with their stilted roots loosened. For all its seeming resignation, this grey has cheated the limits of its occasion: soaked in salt, it has discovered a way to resurface and to breathe.

All the pumice in the passage could not have soundproofed the beach to my brother's unholy squeal the day he decided to help a dehydrated stingray, victim of the swift ebb tide, back into its element. As recent migrants from the cold south, and from an earlier life I am only just beginning to piece together, we had arrived unschooled in the perils of the shore, unlike my soon-to-be cousins, who could pick up crabs by their back legs before they could talk. Their fathers, seasoned trawlermen, speak soberly of the excruciating pain of the stingray barb, said to occupy the rung of agony below only the deadly stonefish. At the time of his encounter with that gasping prehistoric creature, my brother was four years old.

I was six, a little way along the beach, and turned instantly. It seemed at first that he had been bitten by madness. His little chicken-legs were already blurring with an urgency that would've been comic, were it not for the ear-splitting accompaniment. I spot an approaching sedan. The strange ability memory has of slowing down time in recollection of intense experiences allows me to identify this moment as my earliest experience of fear for a life; the sickening knowledge that nothing will alter the course of his sprint across the beachfront road; the relief in seeing him make it, hearing the car brakes squeal in poor imitation of his own. It was then that I realised my brother was not impelled by a madness at all, but by a kind of inexorable logic. Whatever the nature of his terrible question, the answer was our mother, not a hundred metres away at our friends' beachfront weatherboard. He was not flapping about, as I first thought, like a loose tarpaulin in a storm. No, he was a spring-loaded retractable wire, whizzing back viciously to his source.

Several times during the night before my mother died, her ragged breath snagged on the imminent dark as she stirred in panic. ‘Agitated’ had been the nurse’s word, said warmly enough as she upped the merciful poppy yet again. But the word did not sound right. When I hear the word ‘agitated’, I think of a spectrum of behaviour ranging perhaps from that of a parent hearing of an accident at school camp, to someone who just can’t sit still. Maybe that was it; my mum wouldn’t lie still for death. And she didn’t, either. She was a fighter; everyone knew where my mum stood, from school to church, supermarket to beach. Having had me at nineteen in Sydney, my brother two years later, then moving as a single mother of two half-Indonesian children to an island in Queensland, had honed her flinty maternal intelligence to something remarkable. My mother wasn’t ‘agitated’; she was Prometheus, cursed to have her organs pecked each day by a razor-beaked crow, only they weren’t growing back.

But who was I to hold the poor nurse to account for the terrifying inadequacy of language? Besides, I had heard the pure, spare lyrics my mum had mouthed as she started from death’s embrace during that unforgettable night: my younger siblings’ names. I could tell by the syllables. The labour of each utterance made it almost as though she were giving birth to each of us again: my four youngest siblings to our new dad, an earthy tradesman with an eye for timber; then my brother, and finally myself. And as her son, I knew what she was doing: *she* was grieving for *us*. That the high-tensile wire of blood connecting a mother to her children would be severed prematurely, with no source to spring back to, just as it was most needed for the twins,

both ten, my brother of eleven and sister of thirteen. When the nurse touched my wrist, saying gently, ‘I think it’s time,’ I rose to the edge and felt as if I were plummeting from a wall, unable to grip the spinning earth. It was her, grieving for us.

Astyanax was a boy at the time of the Trojan War. He was thrown from the walls of Troy to his death by the victorious Greeks, to prevent him avenging his father, the great warrior and crown prince Hector, firstborn to King Priam and Queen Hecuba. His death receives a passing mention in Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The mourning of his mother, Andromache, and paternal grandmother, the widowed Queen Hecuba and others, are the subject of Euripides’ *The Women of Troy*, which to my mind approximates the wailing of mothers, wives and daughters we see on the news from Syria or the West Bank. But it is only in Seneca’s version of the story that young Astyanax’s separation from his mother is dramatised. Seneca even gives the boy two rare words, his only utterance in the classical sources mentioned—‘*Miserere, mater*’ (‘Have mercy, Mother!’, sometimes translated as ‘No! Mother!’)—spoken in the ‘few more moments’ grace’ granted by the impatient Greek warrior Ulysses, before the boy is ripped from his mother’s bosom. Later, a messenger relates the boy’s death to his mother in grotesque detail: ‘From that sheer fall / What body can remain? [. . .]/ The brains spilled from the shattered skull. He lies / a shapeless corpse.’

This scene of the separation of the boy Astyanax from his mother became a cipher for my own loss in the years following

my mother's death. There is evidence for this in one of several poems concerning my grief that appear in my first book, *Latecomers*, which is dedicated to her. It begins:

In hindsight her backache
Was the suffering of Andromache.

Dawn bludgeons its hegemonic pax.
I over-balance, an everyday Astyanax

With the distance of a decade, I realise now what should have been obvious at the time: that in conscripting the story of Astyanax's tragic separation from his mother, I was in fact reversing the roles. For in the Greek myth, it is of course the *son* who dies, leaving the mother, Andromache, to mourn *him*—precisely the opposite of my own experience. Of course, Greek mythology—like pop music, so devastating in its banality, for griever and jilted lovers alike—is nothing if not a narrative prism through which people have refracted the searching, sometimes sputtering light of their own personalities. Yet there is also a kind of epistemological panic to be endured by a poet who feels acutely the discrepancy between cold matters of fact and the slippery, metaphorical nature of language; the very reason Plato would have poets banished from his ideal state. Thankfully, the poetic impulse sometimes turns out to have been a step ahead of the rational mind, and this, I think, was one such example. For my conscription of the Greek myth was not primarily, it seems clear to me, to identify myself with Astyanax, but to come to a deeper understanding of my mother's own

loss—which I could only liken to Andromache’s, whose grief is bottomless.

My mum knew for years that she was not well, but had not been believed. Eighteen months before she died she was given paracetamol and told to rest; she had been experiencing debilitating pain in her lower back for much of her last five years. Too late they diagnosed it, and in a rearguard move chose to operate, but it had metastasised beyond abeyance. This left her unable to recover from the surgery in time to undergo chemotherapy. It occurred to me that there must have been many women throughout history who had not been believed when telling the story of their bodies to men. I had some idea, from reading Caryl Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom*, that this refusal to believe a woman’s knowledge of her body had a long history, stemming back at least to the witch trials of the seventeenth century—the Western medical profession having defined itself in opposition to witchcraft, which could include healing—and before that to the Greek concept of *hysteria*, or the travelling womb, deemed the *bête noire* behind most female ailments. Misogyny was at the heart of Western medicine, I concluded with youthful conviction. There was a name for this affliction: the Cassandra Complex, after the priestess of Troy (and Astyanax’s aunt) who foresaw the fall of her city to the Greeks, but was cursed so as not to be believed.

My general animus for doctors, which would last for years, was also due in part to the very real possibility, as I saw it then,

that an accurate diagnosis (let alone a successful operation) might depend on whether a doctor's personal life was or wasn't going haywire. Negligence, according to the results of a newspaper competition to redefine familiar English words, might be a woman answering the door in her underwear. I later realised that what I thought I hated about doctors, rather unfairly, was that they were human. I've also accepted that pancreatic cancer remains very difficult to detect, and is one of the few cancers not to have been alleviated in any real way by scientific advancements of recent decades. Worse, however, was the suspicion, much later, that I too may've been complicit in the Cassandra Complex; that I too may have participated in this disbelief, and passed it off romantically as my denial. For denial is forgivable, unlike disbelief.

It is a minor triumph of humanity that sees even the most redoubtable atheist invoke the afterlife, out of sheer empathy, to comfort a grieving friend: 'I know she'd be looking out for you.' Perhaps the subjunctive mood suggests here, rather: 'She *would* be looking out for you, *if* you believe that stuff.' And it is surely at least as remarkable when one who considers himself an atheist condescends to prayer; which is what I did, for almost two years, beginning in the months before my mum died. Admittedly, every prayer began in the fashion of Pascal's wager, with an 'If (you are there . . .)'.

I say this as someone who, at the age of twenty-three, referred to Nietzsche (not that I'm proud to admit it) in my mother's eulogy. To be fair, as an unsubtle dig at the church it

was in a way after her own heart, and I said much else besides. All the same, it happened. ‘Nietzsche had foreseen a time’, I said, casting him, I realise now, as an alternative prophet, ‘when people had to choose how to act in the knowledge that God was dead. My mother was of this time, and taught us how to think of something spiritually larger than ourselves, in a non-theistic way ...’ I can only imagine how mortified Sister Veronica and Sister Hilda must have felt as, through my mother’s death tract, I attempted to smuggle revolution into the tiny Orthodox church I’d sung in as a child—though this was probably partly the point.

And yet, in spite of German philosophy, in spite of the Camus-cool of indifference to dying mothers, or Stephen Dedalus’ refusal to kneel before his, still I prayed. Simply that she might be taken care of. Even as I did so each night in my rented flat over at the surfside, in Woorim, where I’d moved to be closer to Dad and my younger siblings, I knew that my addressee was a projection; that prayer had for centuries been an institutionalised excuse to talk to oneself, providing absolution from insanity on a technicality. Kierkegaard suggested that faith is precisely belief without reason; but this was prayer without faith. Embracing the contradiction, I felt I had a right to my strange form of secular prayer, my moments of faithless religiosity. I guess I was having my cake and eating it; I could not have been the first. It was around this time that I wrote ‘Intercession’, which would become the final poem in *Latecomers*. The poem contains what I consider to be the single hardest-won line in the book, forged in those months and years of grief, tempered with sporadic, passionate and earnest Pascalian

entreaty: 'Prayer remains the cheapest psychoanalysis.' And still I prayed.

Occasionally we borrow one of our uncles' dinghies, a twelve-footer with an eight-horsepower outboard. One summer we cut across the crests to Gilligan's, a large sandbar several hundred metres off the south-western tip of the island, Skirmish Point, where the passage meets the bay proper. Gilligan's surfaces only on the lowest of ebb tides, and is hazardous enough to be marked by a cardinal buoy.

It has taken me the best part of twenty minutes to reel her in, to break her will, the rod bending until I thought it would snap, my adolescent arms aching. But when Dad lifts the thing into the boat, I don't even recognise it: part flathead, part ray, part fish, some evolutionary throwback. 'Shovelnose shark,' he says. The wave of pride that engulfs me on hearing that second word makes me oblivious to the reasons he gives for why we should release it: first, that it is on the small side, at seventy or eighty centimetres; second, there is virtually no chance that we will be eating it; third, it is female. But I am adamant. There is no way am I returning to Uncle Greg's without it. I insist, tyrannically, on my trophy, my proof.

Scooting back up the passage towards the canal at Banksia, the salt spray stinging our faces, I peer into the bucket. Upside down and bent in a semicircle around the inside edge so as to fit on top of several whiting in a couple of inches of water, lies the shovelnose shark. Its gasping has become intermittent; like some slow-motion origami fortune teller, its gills flare open and

shut once or twice a minute. Its slimy belly, exposed to the air, begins to twitch, then palpitate, as I notice something start to protrude from the slit near the base of its tail. I thought it was shitting. A sudden gush as a sandy bloody stream jets out over the rest of the fish in the bucket.

Wriggling in the light ochre fluid are the distinct shapes of two miniature shovel-noses, each smaller than my little finger and almost entirely translucent. I can see right through to their spines. Only their eyes are opaque, two minuscule black dots each no larger than a grain of sugar. At first they nose about, as if in search of something. By the time the boat slows at the entrance to the canal, they have stopped moving. As have the mother's gills.

Two decades later, I am holding my partner's hand in room seven of the Daphne ward at the Rosie Hospital, England. We have chosen the least invasive of the options available to us, a dose of misoprostol, chemical key to a medically assisted miscarriage. We are shown to a bed by a window that looks down onto a loading bay, a cold industrial alley the sun cannot reach; soon a truck will arrive, and the driver will load up the tubs of hospital refuse, and whatever else does not need to be incinerated.

Three other women lie behind curtains in the remaining corners of the room. Over the course of the day, all will take turns performing the harrowing march up and down the corridor, colluding with gravity. One of the women is violently ill for hours; her partner turns up the volume on a video game he has paid to play on the articulated wall-arm-mounted TV.

For those few minutes, the ward sounds like a casino. Later, the woman opposite begins talking in a louder voice as her neighbour begins her part, the violent nausea a side effect. This raising of voices above a whisper, to natural volume, becomes something we all do, to put each other at ease, to unburden each other of silence. Like military tacticians we are laying down a kind of covering fire, four couples hitherto unknown to each other, bound in solidarity.

My mind catches briefly on the shovelnose. And of course on my mum, who had been in a similar room, and in other kinds too, as a mother of one who didn't make it, and six that did. And if there's anything I know right now, it is this: that of all the things I wish I had been able to share with her, to talk with her about—the ego stuff, the moments of professional success, the publication of my first book, or the scholarship to Cambridge that I hope would've alleviated her well-disguised disappointment at my quitting law—this rates number one. To so many of my friends who knew her, she was a confidante, more like a cool younger aunt or even an older sister, who would know just the right thing to say. But I could only fumblingly parse her inaudible voice, what she *would* say, by periodically reassuring: *It's okay. It's okay.*

In hindsight there should've been no doubting, two nights ago. All week I had been suggesting nausea gravidarum; but by now she had guessed: 'I'm losing it, I know it.' 'Let's not write it off yet; give it a chance,' I'd said pathetically. Then the night before last, I saw it: her face in the lamplight, the strained, waxy pallor, the hint of jaundice, the soft but unmistakable whisper of mortality upon her taut skin. I had seen this before, by the

light of a jaundiced moon. I should've known. I did know. And she had been right all along: the Cassandra Complex, me again. And yet, to be fair, I don't think either of us conceded until the penultimate ultrasound in the consultant's office, the once flickering heartbeat replaced by an inexplicable snowstorm.

The last to leave, we thank the nurses warmly for their kindness; hereafter, we will hold up the Rosie as a beacon of light. As we are let out, I want somehow to explain that my mum would've wholeheartedly approved, which in my book is the best compliment any maternity ward could receive. But it is late. So I hold the nurse's gaze a second longer at the door, hoping to convey something of the ineffable depths of my gratitude in silence.

Valentine's Day, 1985. I am six. After tennis practice we stop in at the chemist by the school. I have a flash of inspiration and ask for two dollars, something I never do. From a display cabinet I choose one of the trinket rings with a plastic gem. My heart races as I do up my seatbelt, turn, and present the ring to my mother.

En route from Siberia to its feeding grounds in New Zealand, the migrating Great Knot likes to pause at a large freshwater lagoon on the south-western shore of the island, known as Buckley's Hole. Several hundred metres inland east from Buckley's, in a clearing amid the cypress pines, there lived a hermit. He had washed up one day in 1953, in his early sixties, like a piece of flotsam after a lifetime adrift, and was content to

eke out an existence in a jerry-built thatched hut until his death twenty years later in 1974 (a decade or so before we arrived). Grandpop recalled selling him fish, and said there had been rumours of ‘old Ian’ causing a ruckus one night during a storm, howling into the wind. Some tried to have him evicted, others excused his eccentricities on account of the fact that he was, it was said, a famous artist. Visitors came from as far away as Melbourne, writers, journalists, critics, to spend a night on the dirt floor. For it was in this studio hut—long since demolished and replaced by a commemorative plaque—that the hermit, Ian Fairweather, produced paintings ‘whose emotional range and sheer breathtaking beauty’, according to Robert Hughes, were ‘surpassed by no other Australian picture’.

The youngest of nine, Fairweather had been left in the care of aunts in Scotland as a six-month-old, when his Surgeon General father was recalled to India in 1891. He did not see his parents or siblings again for nine years. He was a prisoner in World War I, then an art student at The Hague and in London, before becoming truly itinerant. In 1945, the year after his mother died, he bought a condemned lifeboat in Brisbane, and drifted across the bay from Sandgate and into the passage. He would return to the island eight years later, but not before first moving to Darwin, where he famously built a raft out of aircraft fuel tanks he found in a dump and, with a sail made from an old parachute canopy, set off across the Timor Sea with meagre supplies and a compass, ostensibly to visit an old friend in Indonesia. After enduring a tropical monsoon and near-certain death, he miraculously washed up on the remote island of Roti, on the edge of the Timor Sea, sixteen days later—more than a week after his obituary had

been published in Britain and Australia. The following year he returned to Bribie Island and the passage, and built his hut in Bongaree, not far from the favourite watering hole of the migrating Great Knot from Siberia.

His method was to build up layer upon layer of paint—‘layers of attempt, layers of memory’, Murray Bail called them. Under a microscope, the curators of the National Gallery have counted more than seventy in a single work. Broad strokes overlap and all but erase moments of fine, inchoate calligraphy, leaving tips and stems sticking out from the past, two, three, maybe twenty versions ago of the same painting. He worked with what lay to hand, mostly unstable surfaces, thin cardboard, masonite, newspaper, real estate signs, which frustrated curators. Galleries sent him canvases; he used them to repair his hut. His style of the first decade on the island draws heavily on Chinese calligraphy and cubism, with a hint of Matisse and Aboriginal bark painting. He mixed mosquito-coil ash into house paint. His subjects range from the mangroves and the Glasshouse Mountains to scenes from his travels, but as Drusilla Modjeska has observed, his ‘single most common motif’ is that of the mother and child: ‘Children with their lips glued to the lips of the mother; babies held by the breast, sated by the breast; babies threatened by the breast, undone by the breast.’

In *Anak Bayan* (1957), Fairweather’s mother and child motif reaches its apotheosis. A grand three-panelled work, this depiction of a communal celebration of birth was suggested to the artist by his time in Manila (the title means ‘son of the country’ in Tagalog). In it a thin vascular calligraphy outlines a procession of more than a dozen figures, mothers and their

children, all a mixture of dove-grey and seagull-white. Heavy strokes of umber provide shade, wisps of ochre hint at afternoon light, and there is a grounding of Prussian blue. The figures are arranged much as the Apostles are in the *Last Supper*. Two mothers in the central panel face the viewer, each with a child on her lap, like the Madonna and child; they are surrounded by other permutations of maternal intimacy: the child rocking back on the knee, the child with hands in the air, the child walking by the mother's hip. While the motif was evident in his work from the thirties, it was only once the artist had settled on the island, with the raft episode behind him, that it returned to consume him. More often than not, as in *Anak Bayan*, the child's fingers are oddly shaped, like paws or claws, either clinging, digging into his mother's flesh—or longing to.

Two types of scrambling vine clamber along the dunes on the surf side of the island. There is the beach morning glory, whose mauve flowers bear dark pink throats; and the more vigorous climbing guinea flower, or snake vine, which blossoms with five large petals of golden yellow, and whose new leaves look as though they were covered in cotton wool. The seeds of the former come in papery capsules, like individually wrapped gobstoppers, while the red fleshy seeds of the latter are dehiscent, their pods bursting open at the moment of maturity. When a king tide threatens to delete the island overnight, gouging the dunes with dozer-sized scoops, the metres-long runners remain dangling from the overhang, as if waiting to catch new earth.

Playing bedlam in the dunes as a kid, you often trip over them, an ankle snared. On a quieter day you might pick one to trace to its source, charting it through the tangle of hundreds of its fellows. The trick is to pull it up so that each shallow anchor root stapling the runner to the sand pops off in succession; when the vine is taut, you can see more clearly where it is bound. If the dune is steep, it is easy to get distracted by becoming a SWAT soldier: the rugged vines making perfect grappling ropes with which to scale the walls of an enemy sand compound. Then there are the times you think you've traced one of the runners through a maze of spinifex to its source, only to see that it continues again, impossibly this time, through a room-sized bloom of beach primrose. So you run down to join the games in the sea instead, content to leave the mystery of the tough vine's source unresolved.

A bright summer's day, in what must be early 1979. The four of us, at the base of the Opera House steps, not far from where *Anak Bayan* is kept in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. On the right, Nan in a nurse-blue dress has turned her back; Pop in a pale grey collared shirt, sleeves rolled up, tucked smartly into pressed mauve flares (I don't remember him like this!), a trim figure in profile, also turning away. Off-centre, to the left, I am in a pram; my months-old arms reach towards her as she looks at the camera, in a high-waisted ivory pleated skirt, slightly transparent in the sun, and white short-sleeved blouse. Her left hand rests on the hood of the pram, her right by her side, cigarette held casually. Brilliant, open-toed crimson heels,

ankle-strapped, make her as tall as her father; matching red lipstick graces her mouth, her jaw set ever so slightly with . . . is it defiance? I have seen this look more recently, in my younger sister's face.

The photo is one of more than fifty to arrive in the post out of the blue six weeks ago from my biological father who, until last year, I hadn't spoken to since I was four, and could not remember beyond a shadow. One night on a whim eighteen months ago my partner had googled his name, and found a match with the first initial and surname. The match played in a regular poker tournament in Chatswood, one suburb from where my birth certificate says I was born. (Mum had led us to believe that he would likely have moved back to Jakarta; the poker website seemed to suggest that he had not moved at all.)

Several months after this discovery of a possible candidate for the biological father I never imagined I would see again, I happened to be in Sydney on a night the tournament was due to take place. Taking an old school mate along with me for support, I thought we'd arrive early to set up somewhere with a good view and see if we could pick him out. A queue was already forming at the registration desk.

'I'm not living in Australia at the moment,' I explained. 'I'm signing in because I'm hoping to meet an old friend who I haven't seen for years, and who I know plays poker here. The thing is, we haven't seen each other for so long that we might not even recognise each other.' I could have been a debt collector, or worse.

'Sure, what's his name?' came the reply.

I gave the name. The woman repeated it.

‘Yes’, she said slowly, before glancing beyond me, to the queue. ‘Oh! You mean the guy standing behind you?’ she said, pointing.

As I turned, he was already emerging from the middle of the small mass of bodies, like a Pollock blue pole from the surrounding noise. He looked at me, then at the staff, then said in accented English, ‘Someone say my name?’

My plan of arriving early and being in control of the situation suddenly evaporated.

‘Yes. I did. Ah, I’m hoping to ask you a question,’ I said, before adding, ‘but you should sign in first.’

I wandered over to my school mate, who was beaming. ‘He looks like you,’ he said.

I knew it too, but I had to make sure. Moments later I was stepping forward to meet him as he approached from the registration desk. For some reason I began by assuring him that we didn’t know each other, before asking whether he remembered having known a woman with my mother’s name. He looked down for a moment, then up again, this time locking my gaze.

‘Yes.’

I asked him if he was sure. He confirmed that he was. Then I told him my first name.

‘So you’re. You’re . . .!’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re my *son!*’

‘Yes.’

‘You found me! H-h-how you find me? I always wonder if you find me!’

‘The poker tournament.’

‘You play poker!’ he marvelled, before entreating my mate and me to have a drink with him. We found a table, and my mate went to get some beers.

‘I can’t believe it. All this time.’

‘I know!’

‘And how *is* Debbie?’

I feel that in some sense we are even, he and I. I can never know my mum’s life in that photo, though I am in it; and he will never know how she filled her children with awe one day by paddling to the mainland and back on a surf ski, as if it were a cinch, setting out from a small patch of sand to which I would also later return—hoping to forget, so that I might remember.