

There he was as if in a painting. Man on the rock, distinct to the dark as the headlights washed over his arms and legs and face and hands, yellow pyjamas, black leather slippers and white skin. He was sitting in the pose of a thinker, looking out over paddocks lit by the moon and the Milky Way. I killed the engine and the lights and climbed up there after him, finding the way by easy instinct. Up on top, I sat beside him and said nothing.

There are only a handful of moments I can truly say that the whole of my attention was focused, where no stray ounce of feeling was on autopilot, rendered of any distraction. Up there, on the rock, the ticking of all the clocks stopped. A great bubble of calm projected out and made a new country that only I could see. Bulldozers skimmed their blades across the topsoil to make foundations for housing estates rising into the naked sun. An apartment block towered where Brockman's Place once stood. The whole of Septimus was gavelled to developers who'd turn it into a retirement village and a brace of starter homes. Suburbs expanded up the coast from Perth to Geraldton, bobcats felled banksias and grass trees and mulched the saltbush while ditch witches sucked the scum from sewerage pipes, the veins of progress making the soil into weathered skin. And at the source, a great tower rose and put my apartment in Scarborough in shadow, a spear of the Gold Coast planting its roots on a western beach.

'When I was a young man, this was all bush,' Dad said. 'The Hoths hired some Italians to clear the scrub for a few bob a week. To expand their holdings. So they diverted the creek bed and chopped down the big trees for firewood and hacked the rest out with axes and crowbars and chains. Took a good three months to get this paddock into a billiard table. They had to leave the rocks of course. This is just the latest they've revealed.'

He patted the boulder between us. 'What brings you here, mate? You from the harvest crew?'

'I'm a last-minute addition,' I said, knowing to play along.

'I know all about them,' Dad said, smiling at me as if to make a friend. 'My family's been on this land for generations. Right back to the days of John Septimus Roe and the expeditions to map the potential of the state. We're rusted on.'

He checked over his shoulder, then leaned in. 'A mate of mine told me when he went over to France and saw their farm land, blood fair rushed to his head. Then he says he picked up a sod of the black soil and ate a pinch of it. He could chew the minerals in it, you know? Think of all the centuries of death and decay in it. Then the millennia of life all churned into it. What do we have here? Sand. Gravel and drought. God knows what they saw in this place when they clapped eyes on it.'

He put on a posh accent. 'Oh this would make jolly fine farms. All we have to do is run the natives off, cut down all the scrub and find some fools to do all the work for a pittance.'

He paused a while, then stood slowly, turning in a circle. 'If I had my way I'd let it all go fallow. Let the bush reclaim it. We have no business being here.' He looked down at me. 'You got a cigarette, mate?'

I did, and lit two. We smoked in silence, sharing the view, and I kept a hand on the boulder to steady my balance as the world spun faster and faster, louder and louder, till I felt like a rock tumbling through the air.