

The Fatal Dance

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The Sea

Chapter 1

In the morning there is the sea, her first great love. Lori presses her forehead against the cool of the window glass, staring out at the earth's edge, that line where sky and water meet and hold. She could spend eternity watching that shifting horizon, past the streetlights and concrete and cars. She can sense it there, even when she isn't looking. Just as she knows this stretch of road by the brushbox, bloodwood and tuckeroo, knows how close she has come to the sea without needing to look – a deeper knowing, of heart before mind.

Here, the bitumen and earth beneath.

Out there, ever-shifting shadow.

The ocean, in all its moods, has always been Lori's home.

And now she will return to it.

The taxi slows to pull into the carpark, and she pours everything from her purse. She had a fifty folded up in there,

she's sure enough of that, but the driver isn't ready for it and half the change goes clinking between the seatbelt clip and console. Not to worry. She pulls herself out using the handle over the door, and by the time the cabbie lifts his head Lori has already crossed the pavement. She can hear the waves. It's important not to be delayed. As she shambles over the grass she can hear the bloke calling, 'You want your change, love? Hey! You forgot your stuff. Hey lady! *Hey!*' But she doesn't turn and will not turn, his voice dwindling to wind-tossed half words lost in the surf, and by the time the sand is there she hears nothing but the sea.

The clouds have the merest hint of new-day light, all the world's colour freshly minted. A smoothly shadowed lawn leads down to the beach, the white lines of the break stretching headland to headland, dreamlike and slow. She stops for an instant, breathes it all in: the salty, granular air; the endless horizon, firming moment on moment with new light; the cliffs, and how they frame it all.

Her shoes she takes off on the edge of the grass, and walking down the ramp to where the dry sand begins, she places them the way she likes, side by side just so, then plonks herself beside them to wait.

Waiting for the sun.

How many mornings has this spot been hers? It *is* her spot, has been forever. It reminds her of the first place she kissed Mada's father, although that was in Byron, almost a thousand kilometres north. Something about the fall of early shadow taking her back to that other place. They spent the whole summer together, surfing and camping, making love.

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Well, so be it. Lori breathes deep, tasting the salt, just like back then. Faint aromatic wafts come from the bakery past the lights. All that love, and she got pregnant, and he shot off like a startled rabbit, and that was that.

Where is her son now? she wonders. Still sleeping, no doubt, beside that gorgeous girl of his. He will be angry when he finds the note, and afraid. That much is certain. But he, more than anyone, will understand. He saw how things went with her dad.

She sits as still as she is able. One of her arms gives a small jerky leap, and she contemplates it as she pulls off her T-shirt. This body that is her. Looking it over and counting its parts: feet, shins, thighs, wrists. It is her body, but not. Its essence belongs to the universe and must one day be re-joined. The air is brisk and she is not in any hurry, but she would rather have the wind on her skin, to feel that she is alive. It will be better to wait for the light to turn. It's then that she will slip off her jeans. And in she will go.

Easy does it.

Not a care in the world.

The shore break is loud, she can feel it as much as see it. A real whopper, booming pale and diffuse along the dark runway of the beach, saltspray lifting fine mist into the air. Beneath her the sand is dry and cool and smooth. She builds curved mounds on the blue denim covering her legs, letting herself drift into the cadence of surf. The rhythmic suck and boom in the lift and fall of waves.

The whales will be out there this time of year, making a course back to Antarctica with their babies, born swimming, calves trailing along while their mothers sing: singing as only

those viewing the world anew can sing. She imagines their song, how it fills that infinite underspace, the melody and pitch travelling through the deep. Out on the southern point, the headland is a sandstone pillar, falling sharp and certain to the early bright foam. There is something so complete about it, so perfect. The way the swell meets the constancy of rock. Steadfast. Immutable. To how many sunrises has that stone borne witness? To how many storms? Solid and unmoving before the ever-turning world.

It is starting to brighten now, she has timed it just right. Lines of cloud stretch in low purple bands, the sky sprinkled in pink salt. The beach is almost empty: a couple taking an early morning walk, down the far end; a few surfers rising and falling in the slow motion of the swell. The fear is there, but not as much as she'd anticipated. Mostly there's peace, a sense of victory. She will be the one who decides. The breeze is gentle, refreshing but not harsh, and Lori slips off her jeans, folding them on her shoes and shirt with her purse propped on top. With a determined breath, she gets to her feet and makes her way – slow, mostly steady – over the dimpled sand, shivering lightly in her frayed cotton knickers.

The shock of cold is butt-clenching as the water hits her belly, and then she throws herself, flailing just a little, into the fist of the wave. She's always felt more elegant in water than on land. Should have been born a seal, that's what her dad liked to say. Under the next wave she crouches, watching it pass over with all its brash turbulent shadow, then she pushes up from the seafloor to let the next one lift her high, and she is off completely, into the depths, and then she has to swim in earnest.

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She plunges each hand into the water and draws herself onwards, freestyle; it's hard work the way her arms are now, but she gets through a set of waves and then the light is coming up fully and oh but her shoulders are aching. She has come level with the pillar, and she goes under the first wave of the next set, ducking to avoid a big dumper, swimming deep beneath the churning wash and coming up with her lungs on fire and coughing out salt. She has let herself be drawn too close to the rocks and swims with all her strength, cresting the next wave before it breaks.

One of the surfers rises into view and flicks back a wet mane of shaggy long hair, staring in her direction, frowning slightly. His face is chiselled, beautiful. Beside him a girl, still in her teens, rides a crest into vision, glancing over briefly at Lori before she falls away. The water pulls Lori down into the trough then gathers her aloft, and she floats high on the broad back of the next wave, the sun's first brilliance a glinting horizon, and all of it flashing the white and gold of nirvana. Then the swell drops steeply back, drawing her into that shining fire, and Lori flows down into the next wave, into the great Pacific, into her promised sea.

Red's Morning

Chapter 2

Redmond Campbell wakes with something hovering about his head, like a mosquito buzzing his ear, near-insensate vibration. The remnant of a foul dream dims and pales as he comes to. He's on the couch, on his back. Polo shirt, light blue; Y-fronts; white socks. His ankles are scored by the sock elastic, and as he lifts a foot to pull off a sock – *slowly slowly*, must be careful not to upset the equilibrium – he hears that buzz again.

Red shifts his head. Eyes right. No sign of the fucker.

He peels off the first sock, then raises it, stiff armed, and permits its release. Scanning the space above him. Still no mozzie. All the same, his whole system is now thrumming uncomfortably, as if the buzz and the discomfort and fragments of the dream are carried in the same malign air. Maybe it's the intercom, on the fritz and catching some static. His phone battery is dead, he made sure of that last night, so even half-asleep he knows it's not a call.

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Red makes a valiant attempt to sit, but it's beyond him so he stops halfway to vertical and less than halfway in his body, and it's then he remembers about the dog – still in the garage fridge, he's going to have to deal with that – and the weight of the present pushes him heavily back upon the cushions.

Oh god. He needs water.

He raises both hands and presses his knuckles to his forehead, trying to pick the moment that led him here. Not so much here, now, this precise moment of head-bent purgatory on the couch. More the deeper, dispersed movements of fate, which have driven the currents of his life these last ... what? Thirteen months? Somewhere along the way, Red's shit has utterly derailed. What made his luck turn? It isn't just Bea, his wife, going to prison. Like some common crook. It's deeper than that. Personal.

Not that it isn't significant that Red's wife went into the slammer just three days past. Of course that was a lot for him to deal with. Even his shrink says as much. And although he maintains a sense of injustice in this regard, if he's going to be honest, his maudlin funk is more concerned with *him* than her. What did *he* do, in this life or another, to make it go so wrong?

How can it all shift so fast?

Oh, sweet Jesus, but his head aches fiercely.

The world is coming back into focus and the bulk of it is shoddy.

Red closes his eyes, gently, lightly, and attempts to push it all away. Simply breathe through it. In. Out. In. Out. But even as he settles into the rituals of relaxation – there is the beach, warm and gentle, the blue of the ocean, the white of the sand – Red's

body betrays him, and into his consciousness floats the fact that he has a stonking hard-on.

Typical.

He grabs himself through his Y-fronts, just to confirm, get things straight. The thing is, even this bona fide fact leaves Red not so much excited as perplexed. Why does he always wake like this? It's not as if his dreamscape is a desert island harem, full of pussy and white sand. Red's dreams are weird and terrifying. He has the subconscious of an over-burdened morgue attendant, or so Bea, his wife, is fond of saying. *Was* fond, he corrects himself, before it all went to hell, before she got herself locked up. Nope, his dreams are ghastly, at least when he remembers them. Most of the time he wakes with little more than a feeling. A horror in his body as he confronts the corpulent, corporeal world. And a taste, as if death is in his mouth and he can't spit it out.

Dread. Disappointment. And a boner.

Life is weird, he thinks. And bodies, they're weird as fuck.

Red gives a snort. *Weird as fuck*. That's a good one.

He has to move. He has to do something about the volume of blood pulsing through the pressurised brainspace of his skull. Aspirin, paracetamol, ibuprofen. Any port in a storm. But up. Up and to the bathroom. Red scoots his left hand over the floor, trying to locate a solid anchor before the move to vertical. Working by feel, keeping his eyes closed so as not to explode his head. Golf pants, belt still looped. A pocketful of change jingling over the carpet as he pushes the trousers, inch by inch, along the couch front so he can swing his feet down unimpeded, and by the time he's done the coins are clanging church bells against his

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headache and he's beneath the tower. He stops to wait it out, and after a minute or so things begin to steady. Red sighs audibly. Maybe the payback won't be bad as he first thought.

TV's off. That's something.

Now all he has to do is kill that mosquito.

He's sure he can hear it again. Up in a shadowed corner. Yet even as the sound tickles the fine hairs deep inside his ears, Red doubts his senses. It's the residue of the dream, that's what it is. Still fading, even now. That same goddamn melted reality that sucked him in for a stretch of the night. Rats everywhere, walls closing in. He shakes his head, trying to push the vision away. Light explodes in his forehead, sharp and bright as a blade.

Red grips his temples, trying to contain the throb at the soft poles of his skull. He has to get up, there's nothing for it. He sucks in some air, gets ready, and then, in a pocket of silence, the buzz returns. He can almost see it. A mozzie after all. Red brings his hand up, scanning the space cautiously. He hates mosquitos, especially when he's trying to sleep. They can tell the moment your eyes are closed, the moment you're vulnerable. Then *bzzzzzzz*, and before you know it, they've stung you on the fucking eyelid.

Goddamn freeloading bloodsuckers.

Nausea coheres at the edges of things, the objects in the room, then shrinks to a dot on the darkly mirrored television. Still, it's better to be out of that dream, even if it means being woken by a mosquito to a Defcon 3 hangover.

He gives a shudder.

Red's shrink has recommended he keep a dream diary. Even given him a notebook, a nice little Moleskine, to write them all

down in. Madness. Who wants to recall that dross? The endless junk the psyche pukes out in that welcome oblivion of sleep. No thank you. It seemed a nice gift at the time, just before Christmas. But then, Red figures, he's put the bastard's kids through private schools, what with all his sessions this last year, and it's no less than he deserves. So the notebook's pages are empty. And anyway, you wake up, you pick up the pen, you look at the page and go to write something down and half the time all you've got is a feeling. A shapeless horror, fading as the pen hits the paper – thank god – accompanying the hard-on wrought by REM sleep.

Why, he ponders, does the body give you a boner in the midst of a nightmare?

He gives his cock a satisfying bend. God, it's been a while. But even if he had the energy to jerk off, he doesn't think his head could stand it. Red lies back, closes his eyes again, and stretches so his feet butt the armrests of the couch. Practising deep breathing, like the shrink told him. Counting the beats of his inhale: one, two, three, four, five, and out. He's just starting to drift off when the mozzie comes back. Red flicks his eyes open in readiness for the kill. Body still, preparing for the ambush. He'll slap his own face if it means killing those parasitic little pricks. He's done it before, made his own nose bleed. Mosquito was dead, though. Big bastard too. You lose, sucker.

He tenses his arm, so the slap can come in an instant, but the noise has gone. There is only his breathing. And a bus moving off from the kerbside, out on Glebe Point Road. And with the realisation that beyond this room there is the house, the street, the Anzac Bridge and the sky, that there is nothing to slap, for

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now at least, aside from himself, Red is fully awake. He might not have made it off the couch; he might not have moved much at all. He's still unwilling to commit to that. But he's pushed through the swell of nausea, and the objects about him are sliding into focus, rather than swelling and dwindling in the morning glare, as they were doing not five minutes earlier.

Perhaps it's not a hangover and he's coming down with something? There's a lot going around. It would be just his luck to come down with the flu on a day like today. He rests his hand on his forehead, testing for fever. It's hot all right. The shining crown of his head feels clammy and overcooked. Radiant. Then memory hits from the club toilet, him losing the oysters and much of the beer, and the pulse of his headache intensifies.

He thinks briefly about the word *headache* and says it out loud. His voice doesn't sound right. It's reedy. Nasal. Maybe his hearing is going.

'Mosquito,' he says, testing things again.

That was closer, but still weird. Red closes his eyes, squeezing so he feels the pressure in the sockets. His pulse throbs dull achy redness through his vision. And the same thin edge of noise, so he's not sure if it's really there. He keeps his eyes closed this time. It could be far-off machinery. Heavy equipment cutting through concrete, blocks and blocks down the street. A fly buzzing back and forth between the screen and the window glass. Far end of the house. Bouncing from one surface to the next until it finally stills, gives up, waits there to dry to a sun-bleached husk. Or is it, dread thought, the onset of tinnitus, the ringing in the inner ear that near-on drove his father mad, though right now he's not sure if there's a noise at all. But isn't that what they say about

tinnitus? How it comes and goes at first? That you're not sure whether it's real? And right at this particular moment, it's less a noise than a feeling. The sound of a feeling, even, whatever the hell that might mean.

Red gathers his reserves.

He will get up, head to the kitchen and drink a litre of water. That's what he's going to do. Drink a litre of water, neck some pills, and resist the urge to put his head in the freezer. Or the oven. After the aspirin, he will begin the week anew. The day, the month, the year. Hell, the whole damn parade. After the aspirin, everything will be possible. After the aspirin, Redmond Campbell resolves, he *will* change his luck.

Red stands from the couch, legs wide, momentarily a-stagger, caught in a vapour cloud of breath, reeling from it, examining the man reflected in the flat screen of the television. The man in the polo and Y-fronts, the man with the hair, such as it is, on end. His vision wobbles in and out. He cannot make out the entirety of his gut, not in the dark-clouded image on the screen, but can discern a bulk and roundness that is dispiriting enough. His sports jacket is crumpled over the handrail of the stairs, the small flight that leads up from the sunken lounge, and he stumbles forward and grips the rail a minute as he steadies.

Five days have passed since he went into the office. The day before the final day of the trial, the final day, the two days after the trial, and yesterday. He wouldn't have left the house at all after the trial, but for Angelo coming by and dragging him to the golf course.

'No matter how bad things get, you can still play a round,'

Angelo declared. 'In fact, the worse they get, the more important it is.'

Eight thirty in the goddamn morning. Red was sleeping. Naturally. Only Angelo would be so insistent as to holler and buzz at the door until Red, eventually, emerged.

'Get your arse out here, you lazy bastard, the birds are out and the sun is shining!' He was dressed in Thom Browne golf pants, every abundant hair on his head lasered with Brylcreem, grinning like he didn't have a care in the world. They drove to the course in a car Red didn't recognise. Angelo owned a few dealerships, on top of a commercial real estate business, and there was always a different car. Yesterday it was a Lexus. Silver. Two doors. Red felt his bones creak as he folded himself within, and sure enough it was a terrible round. He sliced the first tee, ending up in the sand. Things slid downhill from there, the ball transformed into a hazard-seeking missile, finding the water twice. Still, the seven hours they spent in the clubhouse were a sight better. Angelo was in good form, which was saying a lot for Angelo, whose appetite and capacity for enjoyment were world-beating. He must have had a quiet word with the barmaid, as even Ice-Queen Mary was nice to him.

A bit too nice. His head is a mess. He gets a flash of memory, like a splinter: Angelo rounding on him, a grin to split his face. *He who dies with the most hangovers, wins!* Then dragging Red towards the toilet with the wave of a small white bag, slamming the cubicle door behind them.

God he needs coffee. Coffee and food.

He flicks on the espresso machine in the kitchen and drops a *robusta* cartridge in the slot. While he's waiting for it to warm

up, Red sits a frypan on the stove, pours in a good dollop of oil, and gets out some eggs, bacon and bread. Without his wife at home, he's allowed to eat white bread, and he can use as much oil in his cooking as he wants. He's writing a list, in his head, of the pros and cons of not having his wife around, of having her *in the joint*, as they say.

Do they still say *in the joint* in the joint?

He makes a mental note to ask Bea when he goes in to visit. He hasn't endured that horror show yet, the thought like a gutful of wet cement.

This lining up the pros and cons is cold in the extreme. Red's aware of that: it's for this reason the list exists only in his head. The coffee machine lights green. He hits the button for a shot, dark juice spurts into the cup, and Red ladles three teaspoons of sugar into the mug.

In the frypan the bacon spits and pops and smells like a salt-meat heaven. He breaks three eggs into the oil and takes a sip of coffee, and it's then, as the coffee starts to go to work, that he feels the deeper activations of digestion commence. This is not the usual 8am post-coffee impulse. This is something far more urgent. Depth charges, with hydrostatic pressure fuses of varying offset timings, are erupting in muffled explosions along the full length of his intestines.

The better part of a bottle of Johnny Walker Black's down there; whatever remains of the oysters, calamari and wine, plus Christ knows how many beers. He'd started to think he'd got away with it – not exactly top of the Wazir, but not so foul he'd floored himself. But this elevation of mood, he realises, in the precise moment his digestive system announces its diligence,

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is due not to his iron constitution, the training getting piss-fit he's devoted himself to these last weeks and months, but to the persistent presence of alcohol bubbling in his blood. There will be a price to pay, that much is certain, and right now the price is the previous evening's repast, and maybe a few others to boot, or at least that's how it feels: the point being that all of it, *all of it*, needs to exit his body immediately.

Red rushes out of the kitchen, a painting shifting skew-whiff from his shoulder in the hall, and he makes the throne without a second to spare. There's an abundance of relief after the first wave, and he feels his body relax into the seat, basking in the commingled sense of revulsion and release.

God, that's better.

Should he have a shower right up? It might help. He casts a real estate agent's eye over the silver chrome of the taps, the huge freestanding bathtub that Bea loves so much. Not a bad bathroom, if he says so himself. Black marble right up the walls. Even if there *are* scratches on the marble tiles, he and Bea having renovated this bathroom together, their first significant project in the house. The old room had buckling walls and moisture problems. It was rotting at the timbers, a deep decay spreading throughout. Indeed, this was the reason he'd managed to convince the owner, an elderly woman recently bereaved, to let it go so cheap.

No one wants a house that's falling down, Red had told her.

She was gone not long after that. He'd seen it in the paper, some ten years ago now, how she'd come through the war and outlived her children. Bea planned the renovation meticulously, and he even helped with her decisions on taps

and towel rails. They both wanted black marble floors. Marble stood for opulence. For old money, which he wasn't, but aspired to. And the black, well, that was because they were modern people, and as Lori had said when Bea brought it up, *Il faut être absolument moderne*, which even Red knew meant that you really should keep up with the times. The tiler did a magnificent job, and it looked like success, those first two days. But then the builders came back with the sinks and bath and cabinetry, and they put the boxes and woodwork straight down on those tiles, and they walked through with their steel-capped boots, and by the time he had his first shower, still dripping, he noticed the drag marks of boxes, cabinets, white smears etched in the soft black perfection. After a quick Google of how to get scratches out of marble he got down on his hands and knees to buff them out with fine sandpaper, close enough, or so it seemed, to what they were using on YouTube, and it looked pretty good in the low light, but his mistake was apparent when the sun came up, a mess which, as far as the builders were concerned, absolved them of all responsibility in the matter. So now the entire bathroom is a resplendent symbol of disappointment, of the fact that no matter how hard you try, it all turns to shit regardless.

It is this thought – the speedy and inevitable decay of all things – that he is turning over in his head when some goddamn awful noise squeals urgently from the kitchen.

Jesus! The cooking!

Red jumps up, makes for the door. It's the smoke alarm, obviously. Then, realising he hasn't completed the processes of ablution, he spins about to speed-reel a wad of loo-roll. He makes

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a quick swipe and exits the bathroom pulling up his undies, grimacing as he hobbles cowboy-legged down the hall.

Black smoke is curling against the ceiling, billowing into the lounge, swirling where the barred windows open to the front courtyard. In the kitchen, the entire stove is on fire. The plastic bread bag has melted and bubbled, and now the bread itself is burning, actually fucking on fire, where he's left it too close to the hob. There's a tea towel smoking where the plastic has melted onto it, and the eggs and bacon are an orange-black flaming mass.

Thinking fast – he congratulates himself even as he's going through the motion; this is why he's the best bloody agent in the Sydney market, this gut instinct is why he gets the big commissions – he grabs the vase of half-dead chrysanthemums that he purchased for Bea the previous week and upends it over the stove. A searing tongue of flame shoots from the pan to consume the rangehood in a ball of Armageddon. Burning grease splatters Red's face. For a moment he's sure that his eyeballs are on fire.

Headfirst, he runs into the lounge room and throws himself at the sofa, frantically patting his skull. It feels like half the skin is gone and it hurts like almighty buggery, but at least there are no flames. Through stinging eyes, he stares back towards the kitchen.

The black smoke's so thick he can scarcely make out the doorway, let alone the blaze within. There's a fire extinguisher in the garage. Down the stairs and out to the garage and he's got the extinguisher, and it's one of those ones with a funnel on the hose-end that means it's good for electrical, doesn't it? Back

at the kitchen entrance he pushes down hard on the lever and there's nothing, so he pushes harder, the metal cutting into his hand. Still nothing.

The pin! Jesus, pull the fucking pin.

Red yanks hard and the pin comes loose and he points the funnel and forces down the lever with all he's got, taking a deep breath as the white cloud erupts, filling the room entirely. Red steps towards the hob, or where he imagines it to be, and waves the extinguisher about before backing away. He keeps on blasting out CO₂ until he needs another breath and collapses to the floor, leaving the extinguisher and crawling to the lounge room, coughing his lungs out, gas following him through the door and turning the air white.

The fire alarm screams from the ceiling above.

Red gets up. His head is ringing. He drags a chair over to the alarm and yanks the plastic disc from the ceiling. The alarm goes silent. He can't tell if the fire is still burning or if it's out. There's nothing around him but smoke and whiteness. He steps back to the kitchen, grabs the extinguisher, and from the safety of the doorway gives another spurt. It's like staring through a storm. A glimpse of the oven door, a tea towel smouldering over the handle. No flames, though.

Red treads carefully across the kitchen floor. He opens the windows wide, turns the range hood fan up to full, and goes to switch off the stove. The steel knob is scalding hot. There's a tea towel that hasn't caught fire, and he grabs it and switches off the gas, then uses the towel to fan away the smoke.

Scorched earth, all right.

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Red stands in the ruins of the kitchen, gingerly touching his face with the tips of his fingers. His eyebrows and lashes feel crumpled, stubby, as though formed in grains of sand. There is scarcely a single hair left on his head, although admittedly there wasn't much there to begin with. Red opens the freezer, twists the contents of an ice tray into a plastic grocery bag and places it soothingly over the left side of his face. Then he drinks a glass of water, picks up his coffee, and walks back to the couch.