Life after Ted

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echo
PUBLISHING

THE EMAIL TRAIL

Friday, 5:16 p.m.
Dear Seb,
Given the scene that confronted you this morning, I thought I should make contact before you leap to too many conclusions. You must have no doubt that I adored your father, that I will never stop loving him.

I'm overwhelmed with grief, as I know you are. I'm not ready to attempt explanations. I can, however, understand your shock and, I imagine, your eagerness for answers. In good time I will be able to tell you things that will give this morning some perspective. They will, I hope, cast me in a less harsh light. I ask you to bear with me.

Love, Mum

5:21 p.m.
Mum,
Need I remind you that Dad's funeral was three days ago?

Sebastian

5:22 p.m.

No, Seb, you needn't.

Connie Blunt slurps her third G & T through crushed ice. It's no better than her first. What was it that Ted did to give them so much zing?

She's alone in his little study under the stairs. The glum, blue glow of her dead husband's computer screen is her only light. It conjures a creepy reflection in the federation window; her silver helmet of hair floats facelessly in the night outside. Her spare stethoscope, strung up on the wall behind her, is out there too, hovering in the night, and it somehow amplifies the unreality of this long, hot Friday.

'Christ it's hot.'

And ridiculously late. It's 11:23 p.m. and still this day is a stinker. Connie goes to the window and opens it but there's not the whiff of a breeze, so she returns to the desk and drains the last of the G & T. She wants it to taste of nostalgia but supposes it can't. Not this soon.

She should go to bed, she really should, but she carries on reviewing this afternoon's email exchange with Seb.

5:24 p.m.

Or need I describe the 'scene' that confronted me barely five hours ago? You use that word as if the scene were a culpable third party.

5:25 p.m.

Please, Seb, I only ask that you give me a little time.

5:27 p.m.
You certainly wasted no time. Spare me the wailing-widow performance. At the very least you might answer me this: who was that?

5:29 p.m.
How dare you question my grief? As I said, I understand your shock, but you have no idea. You can be horribly self-righteous, Seb. I used to blame those Pentecostal pests but, no, I tend to think it's just you.

Connie stops reading. Why go through it all again, the escalating rancour? It doesn't surprise her but it does upset her, this widening gulf – the mutual incomprehension – between her and her only child.

He's hardly a child now, though it's been going on since he was, if she really thinks about it. This time, though, she fears it will be irreconcilable, and Ted would be sad about that. It was only last month that he challenged her about another of her email ping-pong matches with their son.

'Why don't you just walk the five doors and talk to him?' Ted asked.

'Five doors and five million light years.'

'You could shout from here.'

'I'll keep it civil.'

'You know what I mean,' Ted said.

She did, and she does. She's dwelling upon it now, but she can't see a way through it. Their long civil war has been, in the main, *civil*. They've kept a lid on it for the sake of the family, for the grandkids, but after today she anticipates open hostility. It's a pity because today had been going so well. Despite this hellish heatwave, it had been sublime, beyond sublime, until Seb barged in.

Connie looks to the wall and her husband's little photo gallery,

the trio of frames taken over three decades or more. In each Ted is surfing the same red longboard with a child on his shoulders: first Seb at five, then Seb's kids – Gracie and Mack – at the same age. On the facing wall is Ted's favourite picture of Connie, the one he took in Manhattan. She's wearing high boots, a mini, a midriff and mad hair, as she tended to wear it when she was twenty-eight.

Connie grips the computer mouse. It's strange that email remains her main mode of communication with her son, two decades after both became early adopters. Now it seems quaintly formal. Texts or snapchats, as she corresponds with her granddaughter, would be warmer, chattier.

She flicks her forefinger over the mouse's hump and the rest of today's email trail scrolls by in a blur. It bounces at the bottom, at her final exchange with Seb.

6:03 p.m.
WTF, Mum? What the actual f--k? For the love of God, you're 70.

6:04 p.m.
You're almost 40, Seb. Grow the fuck up!

Once she'd sent it, it was too late. There was no retracting an email, she realised. Connie can't understand that – why they haven't invented an email 'dump' button, as for radio, a seven-second delay for the intemperate correspondent. It could have its own key: UNSEND!

1.
ODD SOCKS

It is almost eighteen hours earlier, well before the dawn of the same day, when the widow wakes at 5:17 a.m. Neither the exhaustion of eight days' grief nor benzodiazepines have been able to break this forty-year habit. Connie welcomes the first murmur of the day, the metronomic thrum of the ceiling fan and its breaths of cooling air. It's already too warm outside, though the kookaburras don't seem to mind; they're making their hilarious racket in the gum by her window. Connie listens for the smaller, less bombastic birds and is rewarded with the Morse code soprano of the eastern spinebills that shelter in the low thicket she's cultivated for them.

She has to think: this will be the ninth day? Yes. It's Friday, so yesterday was her eighth complete day alone, if she counts Thursday last week. It was the longest day, after all. That morning, Connie had been stirred from sleep about this time, not by the birds but by the routine departure of her husband of forty-two years, Ted McCall, for nearby Bondi Beach. As always, she felt Ted's lips on her forehead. W*ay down in the Congo land,* he sang, as he had on any given day, *lived a happy chimpanzee. She loved a monkey with a long tail (Lordy, how she loved him!)* Ted was a creature of the chirpiest habits. 'Hooroo,' Connie would sigh, then roll over and occupy his side of their king-size bed, what they liked to call its western suburbs. She'd hear him skipping down the stairs, in fuller voice by now,

singing that dippy show tune, his reveille … *Baba, daba, daba, daba, daba, daba, dab / Said the monkey to the chimp* … Then she'd doze for five minutes – fifteen on drowsier days.

This morning Connie has woken to find herself already on Ted's side, burrowed into his pillow, ingesting his sweet saltiness. Or is it his salty sweetness? She'll change their sheets this morning, once and for all, but she has a little time now. The smell of him is so vital he could walk in from the ensuite bathroom, in his uniform for his morning drill: his Speedos, and not a stitch more than those budgie smugglers. She loiters here to imbibe the last draughts of Ted.

★★★

Seb McCall's eyelids open like cash registers at 5:29 a.m., a matter of heartbeats before his scheduled alarm at 5:30. His God-given body clock has performed this daily synaptic miracle for most of his adult life. Muscle memory propels his left hand to disable the bedside alarm before it chimes. At this ridiculous hour, Amber reasons, he can have his wife as Sleeping Beauty or Waking Ogre.

Last night, though, Seb hadn't set the alarm that never rings. That was because today was meant to be the rarest of days, a sleep-in followed by a weekday off work from Surfside Hardware, the business his father established in 1981. It's two blocks back from the beach – not quite surfside – but nobody quibbles. On any other day, Seb would now alight from his bed, slip on his togs and leave Amber sleeping while he crept downstairs to look in on Mack, their six-year-old son, being careful not to wake him, then head out back with no more cover than thongs on his feet, a towel over his shoulders and swimming goggles around his neck. Until Thursday last week he walked daily from their backyard into the rear lane and, five houses along, met his father – identically attired – at the gate of the house where Seb was raised.

'The son also rises,' Ted often greeted him.

As they'd jaunt off in the pre-dawn, down the old dunny carters' lane dividing the houses of Banksia Avenue and out on to the street and past their front gates, they'd anticipate the daily salutation of old Mrs Visser, who'd be watching from her veranda for their lanky silhouettes.

'You're still taller, Ted,' she announced the last time father and son passed, and Seb happily conceded that his dad, in his eighth decade, had a good inch on him. Mrs Visser has been quieter since. When the shorter silhouette passed yesterday, alone, she'd said only: 'It's too sad, Sebastian.'

Since his father's passing, and more especially because of it, Seb hasn't missed a dawn at the beach with their swimming crew, the Odd Socks. This is what Ted, as their founder, would expect. To soldier on. He christened the Odd Socks thirty-six years ago when he corralled his first pod of ocean swimmers, an informal little club drawn mostly from the ranks of Bondi's volunteer lifesavers, but which, ever since, has welcomed anyone willing to assemble on the beach at dawn to run two laps on the sand as a warm-up, then swim two laps – point to point – seven days a week, if they're keen, winter no exception for the keenest. Ted suggested Odd Socks because anyone silly enough to rise in winter's dark might be unlikely to arrive wearing matching socks, but also to characterise the strange bedfellows who assembled, for most of the year not in socks but in thongs or barefoot. There were tradies, firefighters, police officers, lawyers, a couple of judges, accountants, schoolteachers, doctors (though never Connie Blunt) and, of course, the hardware merchants. The swimmers have come and gone over the years and the numbers continue to rise and fall, but it's still a reliably miscellaneous mob.

Seb won't be among them today. They won't begrudge him this one day of rest, and nor would Ted. God knows Seb needs it.

It was Simmo, God bless him, who recognised Seb was struggling.

'Take a breather,' he told Seb yesterday.

'Simmo' is Tommy Sim, founding member of the Odd Socks, co-owner of Surfside Hardware since 1983, and Ted's dearest friend. They were crewing surfboats together when Ted invited Simmo, then just twenty-three years old, eleven years his junior, to take a stake in the business, though not in the real estate. Tommy is fifth-generation Australian–Chinese, and since his first days at the surf club has been known as Dim – as in Dim Sim – to the Bondi lifesavers. He's always copped it sweet but Ted never liked it, so he came up with Simmo, hoping it might catch on. It never did, other than for Ted and his family.

'You need the break,' Simmo told Seb.

'Don't we all,' Seb protested.

Simmo could use some bereavement leave himself. Still, Seb relented. His plan had been to sleep until nine, but his internal clockwork has performed as always and here he is, awake. He's not irritated by this biological curiosity; it's proof of the hand of God and he counts it as a blessing, so much that he wonders whether he might be safe to dispense with the alarm from this day on.

No, it would be arrogant to put his Saviour to that test. God wakes those who wake themselves.

Seb rolls to his left and watches Amber sleep. She is facedown, rag-doll limp. Only children and drunk teenagers sleep as unabashedly as his wife. She has just turned twenty-eight but looks younger this morning. She looks no older than Gracie, Seb's daughter from his first marriage, who is twenty-one. This thought is both gratifying and disconcerting.

Amber snores musically, a bubble of drool inflating and deflating at the corner of her mouth, and she's wondrously pretty. And for all of this Seb gives praise.

★★★

Connie reaches for her phone on the bedside table. The slightest touch of its screen throws an orb of light around her pillow, and she finds this halo vaguely amusing. She goes to her log of videos and scrolls to the recordings of their Christmas Day singalong, just seven weeks ago. There are half a dozen entries from that day, most identified only by Ted freeze-framed at the upright piano in the family room downstairs. She's been playing them randomly. She selects one now and taps play.

Ted tickles the keys and starts to croon: W*hy do I do just as you say* / W*hy must I give you your way* … 'Yes!' someone coos off camera. A few voices fall in behind Ted. Some stumble on the verses but they're all good for the chorus: *It had to be you* … Connie watches to the end.

At the top right of her screen is the outside temperature: it's 25 degrees Celsius in the pre-dawn. It's going to be wretchedly hot. Again.

She plays another Christmas video, the only one featuring her and Ted. They're swing-dancing barefoot to Dean Martin's 'Let It Snow'. Christmas was another heatwave and the phone-cam captures the sweaty backs and summer frocks encircling them while Ted sings it as if pleading.

Connie stops the video. She scrolls instead through her call log. So many callers in the past week, screen after screen, some identified, many not, an unrelenting stream of condolences and expressions of disbelief that Ted McCall – the man behind the counter for four decades at Surfside Hardware and, more notably, stalwart of the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club and legendary sweep of its surfboats – was dead at seventy-three. Ted McCall, the Peter Pan of lifesavers, dead.

He would've surfed until his hundredth year, they said. Yes, Connie agreed, he would have.

Ten or more screens deep, she finally arrives at Ted's phone number. It's the only document of their last call. It came at 6:52 on

the night before his final morning. Ted must have called Connie at the surgery. She must have answered because there's no recorded message. She has no memory of what they discussed. Groceries, most likely. That night's dinner.

Connie's thumb hovers over his number. It twitches there until, magnetically, it makes contact with the glass and summons Ted from the satellites. It rings. Connie raises her thumb over the end-call button.

Stop it, she's thinking.

But she doesn't. She presses the speaker icon and lets it ring and it peals through the room. It rings five times before his voice is delivered from the cosmos: 'You've reached the phone of Ted McCall. Unfortunately, or fortunately if you happen to be Ted – that's me, by the way – well, I'm out of range right now. That no doubt means I'm on the beach and my phone isn't. I find they don't mix. These smart phones, they get between the grains of sand and then the beach doesn't work so well. Anyway – after the beeeeeep! – you know what to do.'

Ted hadn't changed his hokey message in four or five years.

Connie waits for the beep, then takes her cue. 'No, Ted, I don't know what to do.'

She says nothing else for a few seconds, aware of her silence. She's comfortable with long pauses. Her frequent messages for the living Ted, from her general medical practice on Bondi Road, were much the same. He never bothered deleting old messages and only yesterday Connie recharged his phone in the study and listened. 'Hi, Ted. Insane here today. Summer flu. Yes, white fish, now that you're asking. Flathead, if I'm not too late. [Connie's pen drum-rolling on a prescription pad.] Tiring of salmon, must say. [Pen tinging on teacup.] Put that pinot gris in the freezer about six-thirty. [Ting-ting-ting!] Okey-dokey. Hooroo, my lovely.'

'So here I am,' she tells him now, holding her thought awhile, 'lying in our dirty sheets.' She hums to fill space. 'You'd be horrified.

You'd have changed them a week ago but, you know, housekeeping was your department. Never my thing.' Connie bunches the top sheet and presses it to her face. 'Always loved the smell of you.' She inhales deeply. 'Sandalwood.' Another whiff. 'And salted caramel.'

She laughs aloud. 'I haven't lost the plot, Ted. I know you're not listening.' She runs the sheet's silky trim between her fingers. 'It's just that it's a bit of a thing, apparently: women calling their dead husbands. I've obviously got far too much time on my hands, all this googling around, but they reckon it can help. It's hardly peer-reviewed stuff but, y'know, what have I got to lose? As long as we keep this between you and me.' Connie laughs blackly. 'I'm banking on your incapacity in that regard.'

The trim tickles the V between her fingers. 'There's this one woman, an artificial-intelligence geek. *Bereavement in the Digital Age.* I think that was the headline. Anyway, she's taken all her dead husband's text and voice messages over the years and she's programmed them. Truly, she's built this algorithm to create a neural network. And now she's turned him into a chatbot – that's what they call it – and he talks back to her. She swears it's just like him. It's just text messages for now but one day it'll do voice and they could even make an avatar of him from their home videos and she'd have him as a hologram, y'know, hovering there in their lounge room. Hooley dooley! I won't do that to you, Ted. It was spooky enough seeing you sing at your own funeral.'

★★★

Amber drools on Seb's pillow. He could lie here for an hour, just watching her sleep. Perhaps he will.

He makes a mental note: reschedule her birthday bash for Saturday week. That's tomorrow week, just eight days away. It's tight, but do-able. The party had been planned for last Saturday, an evening gathering of thirty in their backyard. Seb and his father had practised a surprise. They were to perform 'It Had to be You'

and 'Gimme a Little Kiss (Will Ya, Huh?)' under the stars. Ted had coached Seb to deliver the latter more like the jovial original by Whispering Jack Smith, less like Dean Martin's lecherous pining. Amber wouldn't have known one from the other, but she would have loved it. It never happened, in any case. Her party became instead a pre-funeral send-off for Ted.

She deserves a celebration. She'll say there's no need but Seb will insist and it will do them good. Or perhaps he'll surprise her. And he'll still sing for her, without his father, though this worries him. Seb can hold a tune but his dad was the real singer. Ted's harmonies made anyone sound good, with the exception of Seb's mother. They all agreed, even Connie, that she couldn't carry a note in a bucket. Gracie, too, poor thing, struggles. She's inherited her grandmother's flat pitch. That and her sharp tongue.

These hard feelings about his mother and her partner in crime, his daughter, have kept resurfacing since their antics at the funeral. Seb wishes they wouldn't because, even without their input, it's been eight days of hell and a succession of sleep-deprived nights since his father's … accident. The first five days, the funeral preparations, allowed Seb no time to stop and grieve, not even on the nights when he shuddered awake at one or two in the morning and lay thinking until dawn. On the first night he woke with wet cheeks and realised he'd been crying in his sleep. What an odd comfort that was. He wanted to go on crying quietly to himself and relive his water-coloured days with his dad: surf-club days, kick-the-footy days, back-lane-cricket days, church-choir and music-hall days, hymn book and Handel, Gilbert and Sullivan, Rodgers and Hammerstein, father and son, Ted and Seb. A sob might have done him good.

Once awake, however, Seb had been incapable of tears, consumed instead by his duty to worry his father's funeral – Ted McCall's final production – into being: the death notice, the choice of funeral director, the newspaper obituary, the selection

of hymns and readings, the artwork, the scouring of photo albums for images, the soliciting of condolences from politicians – local, state and federal – and the invitations and service booklets, the commissioning of a professional printer and the choice of fonts, the photographer, the videographer, the mustering of Ted's choirs, not one but two – church and secular – and the guards of honour, not one but two – the lifesavers and the choristers – and the highly sensitive decisions about who should stand where in the hierarchy, and who should be the pallbearers.

Seb found archived film and video of Ted's glory days at the helm of the Bondi surfboats and arranged for their urgent conversion to digital format. Thank God for Robbie Watson, Seb's brother in Christ. Robbie shoots and edits corporate videos for a living, and Seb oversaw his artful editing of this footage so it could be shown at the funeral service and the wake, requiring the hiring of two giant screens, one for the church, another for the surf club.

Then came the choosing of caterers, the options for canapes, the selection of beers, wines and spirits, the recruiting of waiters. Seb budgeted for three to four hundred mourners but could never have reckoned on the seven hundred who rolled up and spilled from the church and club.

'Your father would've been happy with a sausage sizzle,' his mother said.

That was her contribution. That and her intervention concerning the coffin and hearse. Given the paucity of choices, she complained, both would have to be white – coffin and hearse.

'I quite liked the rosewood for the coffin,' Seb told her.

'It's morose,' she said.

'It's a funeral,' he reasoned.

'It doesn't have to be drab. He'll haunt you if you make it drab.'

'You don't even believe that,' Seb said.

'What?'

'That he'll enter an afterlife from which he might haunt me.'

'No, Seb, I don't, but you do, and that's how he'll haunt you. It'll all be in your head.'

His mother's only other efforts were to ad-lib a eulogy to white-ant Seb's – after insisting she wouldn't give one – and to conspire with Gracie to convince Ted's secular choir, the Surfside Singers, to sneak 'Aba Daba Honeymoon' into the church service. There was no consultation, none with Seb or the church choir or the rector. It was no excuse that his father sang it daily or that he'd sung it with the Surfside Singers or that he would perform it with them, as it turned out, at his own funeral. A video of Ted in action with his choir played on the big screen as a backdrop to the live choristers and their hedonistic chant – *Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab.* It was never meant for a church. They could have saved that party trick for the surf club but, oh no, that wouldn't have done for Gracie and her grandmother. That would have been no fun at all.

How they relished their little rebellion. Outside the church, Seb seethed. While accepting condolences from queues of mourners, he quietly told them that their stunt had been an act of sacrilege and, if that meant nothing to them, of sabotage. They've been giving him the silent treatment since.

Which hasn't helped with Seb's sleep.

He turns his thoughts to the big paddle-out, which he has scheduled for Sunday week. That's the day after Amber's party. It'll be fine – an action-packed weekend. On the Sunday morning, he is expecting a hundred or more locals to assemble with their surfboards on the Bondi shore, from where they will paddle out the back and form a ring around a surfboat for the last of Ted's hurrahs as Seb – taking his father's position as sweep – dispenses with his ashes.

Seb will need to prevail again upon Robbie Watson to cover the spectacle with two or three cameras. The drone shots will be

spectacular. So might be the budget. These events are exhausting in the conception, let alone the execution.

But having today off is a huge help. God bless you, Simmo.

★★★

The sheet's trim triggers a memory from Connie's infancy, when she'd suck her thumb while caressing a silk blanket between the splayed fingers of the same hand. The fingers of her other hand twirled her hair into curls. Connie wonders whether she really remembers this or merely her mother Valentina's recollections of it. Val's death-bed recollections, when Connie was thirteen years old, were desperately vivid. They've been coming back to Connie since Ted's sudden exit.

Exit? Don't you start, Connie. It was his death. Sudden *death*. She supposes *exit* is at least less equivocal, less mealy-mouthed, than *passed away* or, worse, *passed*. Why can't people just say the thing? When you're alive one minute and not the next, it's hardly a passing. It's a wrenching.

'I know you're just dead,' she tells Ted's phone now. 'Plain old dead.'

She sings a bar of his morning gibber, *Aba daba daba …*

'I told Penny she'd have to mind the fort for a month, but I'm already thinking I need to get back to work. All this googling will do my head in otherwise. Yesterday I fact-checked your crazy story about kangaroos. Turns out you're right: they really do kill more people than sharks. But you neglected to mention that almost every person killed by a kangaroo was in a car at the time and the poor old roo ended up as roadkill, too.'

Connie checks the time and hardly fifteen minutes have passed since she woke. Days are longer now. Minutes are longer. She spreads her arms and legs – starfish. 'This bed is ridiculously huge for one.'

Minutes are becoming bloated with concerns that her workday

routine has never accommodated. Routine is good like that. Connie thinks of her schedule for today. Dawn will come at 5:59, a minute before the pool gates open. She'll be poolside well before that. Apart from her swim, she has only one real commitment – back here at 10:15 for Simmo. It strikes her as curious that she hasn't mentioned this in her voicemail to Ted's phone. Not that he's listening, but she registers it as a conscious omission.

'You know what, Ted? I'm yet to shed a single tear. In the past eight days, not one. Do you reckon that's a bit off?'

She leaves that thought to float.

'I'm absolutely shattered – of course I am – but I don't know about the tears. I asked Penny and she said it was okay, that this bereavement thing is different for everyone. I know that, of course. It's not like I haven't seen a few in my time. Deaths. Kind of an occupational hazard. Still, the way some of the old clubbies carried on bawling at the funeral, it was like no one had ever done it before. As if you'd invented it. That's your line, I know, or a variation of it. Seriously, though, it was as if Ted McCall invented death and you scared them shitless. If you could die, they all could. You were fitter than the lot of 'em put together.'

Connie repositions her head and Ted's pillow exhales him. Sandalwood, yes, but also, bizarrely, horse saddle. Ted last rode a horse in his late thirties, when he took young Seb for a gallop on Burrabogie, the McCall family's sheep, wheat and barley property just outside Tocumwal, on the Murray River. It's hard to even picture Ted on a horse now. Connie sees him as he was the last time she saw him, dressed, or undressed, as he had been for much of the past four decades.

'I wanted them to put you in the coffin in your budgies. You always looked so lovely in them. I thought Seb might back me up, but he went with the funeral directors. They put you in your suit and tie. I felt claustrophobic for you.' She snorts. 'Imagine if

they heard me now. I'd be struck off. They'd schedule me, lock me up.'

Seriously, she's thinking. She lies here attempting to summon an ordinary, sane thought.

'My neck's playing up again. I could use one of your massages. That woman around the corner is too hard. Tried her the other day and she triggered a migraine. Won't go back.' Connie bumps the phone screen. 'Oh, look, your time's up, Ted.'

She ends the call to her dead husband. She gets up and strips the top sheet. It billows towards the fan. She strips the fitted bottom sheet, then the pillow slips, then bundles the dirty linen into a pile on the floor. She'll see to it when she returns from the pool.

Connie defaults to her morning drill. She collects her phone and ambles to the bathroom, shedding her nightie as she goes. It falls as lightly as ever. Grief has made things strangely leaden, so she takes comfort from its familiar drift to the floor. A-tisket a-tasket.

Naked, she places her phone on the bathroom vanity and grabs her toothbrush from the old tea mug that still holds Ted's as well – his and hers – and she squeezes a glob of toothpaste onto the worn bristles and with her free hand takes her one-piece navy swimmers from the shower rail and suspends them at an angle that invites one leg at a time, and she slithers into them like a second skin. She's foaming toothpaste into the basin by the time the Lycra straps clasp her shoulders. She takes a pair of belted white shorts from a hook on the back of the bathroom door, slips into them and fastens the buckle.

It's been this way for most of her married life, one seamless movement, here and beyond, a daily glide from bedroom to bathroom to stairwell – headphones swept from the bannister at the foot of the stairs – and through to the open-plan kitchen and family room and out the sliding door to the back garden where she scoops her goggles and towel from their hooks, and wires

herself for sound before she walks to the rear lane and along the old dunny-carter's path to Banksia Avenue, past the front of their home and Seb's place, and across the street to wave to Mrs Visser, then up to Bondi Road for the march seaward.

Except this morning Connie has paused before the bathroom mirror to inspect the woman behind the glass. Every day is a new day in Ted's absence, but she knows today will be the newest. In preparation, yesterday, she took herself into town where, for the first time in her life, she had her legs waxed and her eyebrows tinted. She's quite happy with the legs but not so sure about the tint. Too dark. Connie had suggested Annie Lennox as a guide but the beautician was too young to know who that was.

Connie steps in close to the mirror to study her darkened brow. More like Vampira. She takes a step back to consider the whole package. She attempts to regard her reflection with detachment. How does the woman behind the glass shape up? Willowy? Lissom? Sun-glazed? Oh, Connie wishes, but she is grateful that this is how her contemporaries see her, and envy her. They've told her so. She's the lithest of them all, they say. And sexy. *For seventy*, they mean.

Still, they mean well.

Connie also knows how her granddaughter's contemporaries see her, and admire her. Gracie's university friends tell her, if not Connie directly, what they reckon, and Gracie passes it all on. Jaunty, they say, as if it's a compliment. Jaunty, nimble, perky and – *kill me now*, Connie's thinking – sprightly. One of them said handsome. Truly, whoever calls a woman handsome except as consolation for her being old?

The patronising little witches.

Connie adores these kids, she really does, but she could spank them when they *ooh* and *ah* about her bone density and muscle mass, for fuck's sake. They marvel, too, at her vinyl collection – her Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, Television, Stones, Iggy Pop,

Bowie, Ramones – as if they can't possibly be of a grandmother's vintage.

'I'm younger than all of them,' Connie told the girls. 'Especially the dead ones.'

When was that? Barely two weeks ago. And the kids loved it: Gracie's foul-mouthed gran with the awesome soundtrack telling them, ever-so-nicely, to go fuck themselves.

It was four days before Ted's last, now Connie thinks of it. She and Ted watched as Gracie and friends spent that hilarious Sunday afternoon in their living room, choosing tracks alternately from his and her polar-opposite vinyl collections, which are demarcated by a kitsch ornamental monkey – hear no evil – on a six-metre shelf that runs the length of the living room. The girls played one tune from Connie's collection, east of the monkey, then the next from Ted's to the west, and so on … Ted's choristers and crooners and Broadway showstoppers in mortal combat with Connie's rockers and punks and protopunks. Sinatra's 'Drinking Again' versus The Ramones' 'I Wanna Be Sedated'.

'Patti's "Piss Factory" shits all over the rest,' Gracie declared.

Ted was only three years older than Connie yet aeons separated their musical appetites. Connie explained their filing system to Gracie's mates. The nearer an album to the monkey – Nina Simone, some Bowie, Springsteen and Dylan – the more likely that both she and Ted liked it.

Connie has so much time for the kids, but this morning – before this unforgiving mirror – she hears only glib condescension in *perky* and *handsome*. She can't abide it, not today. Time will have its way with them, just watch. It will catch up and ravage them, gouge crows' feet and laughter lines into their peachy skins and daub them with age spots.

Connie touches an evolving spot as big as a twenty-cent coin on her upper left chest. It brings her eye to the craggy crevasse in her shoulder. She pans from here to a chasm of chest bones

that once paraded as décolletage. Gravity has pilfered the once-ample bosom that provided cover for that pronounced breastbone. Wherever did her boobs go?

She wishes she wasn't feeling so crotchety, so insecure. She's spent much of her adult life counselling women to repel apparitions of beauty – the female patients who account for almost two-thirds of her practice, her small network of local friends, particularly Miranda, Simmo's wife, when she was alive, and now Jean Amos, and Gracie and her gang, a generation both blessed and afflicted by its perpetual connectedness, emergent women with the world in the screens in the palms of their hands, group-selfies streaming in to assure them they are imperishably young yet confirming they are not always so beautiful as the next girl. Connie worries for them. Be yourselves. Be happy with your *selves*.

And yet she's not sure she can do the same today. Today Connie wants to be beautiful, or as near beautiful as she once was. She peers into the mirror. Might she be desired?

The woman behind the glass twirls and looks over her shoulder and inspects Connie's backside. That's where your boobs went, Concetta Blunt. To your arse.

Only her Italian mother called her Concetta, sometimes as a reprimand, usually to poke fun.

When Connie was young she had wanted a rump instead of the scrawny, hollow-cheeked spare ribs that passed for her buttocks. She supposes she should be grateful at last for the extra heft. In any case, she can do nothing about it. And it's too late for stage fright. Today is the day. It's decided. And her bum is indeed better for the ballast.

She picks up her phone, leaves the bathroom, rollicks down the stairs and collects her headphones. She passes a melee of wilting funeral flowers in the living room, so ripe they're rancid. She'll need to turf them and open up the house for a good airing when she returns from the pool.

The sliding door, never locked, is slightly ajar. She opens it wide and steps barefoot into the back garden, her lovingly neglected native tangle. It's still dark out here. She's running later than usual but she should arrive at the pool before first light.

Her husband's beach towel hangs from its hook to the right of the door. She takes a whiff for another blast of Ted. Some details are lost in the blur, though. Did she return the towel to its place or was it Seb? Likewise Ted's swimming goggles, which hang from the next hook, and his size-twelve rubber thongs, which are back by the potted lime tree that bore the fruit of his famous G & Ts.

Connie takes her towel and goggles from their hooks. She puts on her headphones and thumbs the face of her phone for playlists until she arrives at 'Gracie's kick-arse mix for Yeah-Yeah'. That's what her grandkids call Connie – *Yeah-Yeah*. Gracie might have been fifteen when she curated this mix. She's made many more since but, as Connie recalls, this one's a cracker.

It's 5:43 a.m. Connie hits play and is instantly accosted by a ruckus between her ears, and she succumbs to the erratic pulse of drums and a dirty walking bass. A punk diva wails above the mix. Connie checks her screen. The track is listed as 'Holy Sick' by WAAX. It launches Connie into a canter down the dunny-carter's lane to Banksia Avenue, past a smiling Mrs Visser, who seems vicariously animated this morning by the music streaming through her doctor's ears. It propels Connie down Bondi Road and through Hunter Park and down the steps to Knotts Avenue, where the Icebergs Club teeters prettily on the southern headland over Bondi Beach. Painted white, the club descends four storeys from street level, like a stack of ice cubes over the pool deck. The fifty-metre ocean pool is somehow luminous before the first peep of sunlight.

The music spurs her down yet more stairs to the club's locked rear gate. She grips its vertical steel bars, plants and secures a

toehold on its waist-high horizontal rung and hoists herself up, then presses her palms into the top of the gate, a fulcrum for her full body weight. She throws her left leg over, swivels to bring her right leg with her, then leaps to the ground. Connie is a paid-up swimming member but the daily thrill of this illegal entry is its own reward. She sails down yet more steps to the pool and goes to its deep end. It's 5:57, later than usual, but she's still beaten the hordes who'll start coming through the turnstiles in three minutes. They've given up asking how she got in.

Anyhow, Connie won't rush into the water this morning. She'll watch the dawn. As advertised, it arrives at 5:59, reticent golds bleeding magenta. The Cowboy Junkies then the Stones seem perfectly scored for the lightshow. The dawn arrives well before the sun rears its head. Twenty-five minutes pass before the dome squints over the horizon and its violet figments give the sea a blue-velvet sheen. If Connie snapchats it, nobody will believe she hasn't photoshopped it. Nevertheless, she climbs back up the stairs to get some perspective. The pool by now is reliably turquoise in the foreground. She snaps the panorama and posts it – too good to be true – knowing Gracie will wake soon and it will make her happy and Connie's friends envious, which is the whole point of Snapchat, isn't it?

★★★

Amber sighs and nuzzles the edge of Seb's pillow. The distance between his wife and his daughter, despite their closeness in age, saddens Seb. When he met Amber, she was a year younger than Gracie is now. His and Amber's first meeting was virtual, an online prayer group. Even with a dodgy Skype link, the connection between them was instant and incandescent. Their laptop screens were split into eight panels, one for each brother and sister in the conference call. While the others prayed, eyes shut, Amber caught Seb peeking at her. He supposed she was peeking at him, too.

Soon they met face to face at the Praise Symposium in Sydney, for which Amber flew down from the Gold Coast where she worked for her father, a residential property prospector. Seb caught sight of her on the other side of the auditorium. She lit up the place. Their greetings were blushing and she repeatedly said 'awesome' and Seb echoed that adolescent refrain. They joined worshippers in a chain of hands and, upon this first touch, an electrical charge passed between them.

Later, Seb drove Amber to her hotel. The motor idling, she began to open the car door when she turned to farewell him. He kissed her. It was inappropriate, and kinetic. Seb explained, between their kissing, that – technically – he was still married, but it was over, he was sure it was, because Kimberley, the mother of his child – oh yes, he had a daughter – anyway, Kimberley had confessed to a fling with their carpenter – his name was Parvis Husseini, another member of their Christian fellowship – and while Seb had wanted to give Kimberley a second chance, he had come to believe she could not put Parvis out of her mind and, frankly, Seb told Amber: 'I don't think I'll be able to put you out of mine.'

'We've just met,' she pointed out. 'You have a daughter?'

'Yes – Gracie. Did I mention Gracie? She's thirteen.'

'Thirteen? Already?'

Yes, already. He'd become a father at eighteen, Kimberley a mother at sixteen. He'd been seventeen – and Kimberley fifteen – when he got her pregnant.

'That's illegal,' Amber noted.

'Nobody wanted to involve the police. Her parents were Christians, born-again. They encouraged us to have the baby, to keep her, to raise her together.'

Kimberley Wyman's parents also introduced Seb to their church, the Congress of God in inner-city Waterloo.

'They left it long ago,' Seb told Amber. 'They stopped believing,

just like that, but I'm still there, thank God. Otherwise I'd never have met you.'

Amber was overwhelmed. She was twenty, single. Seb was thirty-one, almost thirty-two, and almost single. His marriage – he could suddenly rationalise it – was floundering at best. Until now he had fretted that its collapse would offend God. Certainly it would be an affront to his and Kimberley's church community. He had told no one of her infidelity because he did not want the humiliation, not for himself nor for Kimberley. She, however, had stopped attending church services, as had Parvis Husseini. Seb attended alone and the faithful noticed. He found their concern for Kimberley – Is anything the matter? – excessively solicitous.

What might they have made of Seb and Amber? He followed her upstairs to her hotel room. Afterwards, both were confused, elated but guilty. Seb went home to Kimberley and announced the marriage was over, after all.

She took it well, remarkably well.

★★★

At the pool's edge, Connie adjusts the volume to slightly above her pain threshold. She unbuckles her belt and unzips her shorts and they drop to her feet. There's an odour of damp. She must remember tonight to launder her togs. But for now she refocuses on the noise between her ears, the gorgeous delirium. She headbangs, four emphatic nods, then removes the headphones.

And silence.

The silence is searing. Connie loves this part, her daily rush into the void. It's her transcendence, this divine *nothing*. The trick is to make the music, whatever it is, extremely loud. Her ritual emerged from an accidental discovery in 1968 when Connie was fifteen and home from boarding school, bored rigid during a hot, dry spell in small-town Tocumwal. Her father, Mick Blunt, the local stock and station agent, was on the road. Her brother, Clem, was away

droving. Her mother, Val, was two years in her grave. Connie was home alone, minding the phone for her dad's business.

There were few escapes from the heat. There was, however, her father's magnificent Magnavox record player. The stereo was the widower's refuge, and on this day his daughter's. She put on her dad's big-eared headphones and surrendered to his collection of swing, blues and rockabilly, and she stripped down to her bra and undies and lay on her back on the coolest surface in the house, the linoleum floor by the fridge. She played Lead Belly, Little Walter and Gene Vincent. Soon she became fixated on Vincent's 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' and she played it over and again, rocking on her bare back.

She didn't hear the knocking on the front door or the tapping on the window. She didn't hear the fly-screen door whining open and banging shut. She didn't hear the footsteps in the hall or the hollered inquiries: 'Anybody home?'

He found her soon enough, near naked and fitting in silence on the kitchen floor, her head wrapped in a strange vice, her eyes shut. She kept writhing and he kept watching. He followed the wire that snaked from her head to the record player in the next room, and gathered this was the source of her convulsions.

Ted McCall, then eighteen, had come with a message from his father to hers, but he couldn't bring himself to disturb her. He turned to leave.

Connie felt movement beneath the lino, the floorboards rippling sticky against her back. She opened her eyes and saw the back of him. Tall, broad, he filled the door frame, sweat drenching his blue work shirt. His thatch of straw-blond hair brushed the architrave. On so many Sundays he'd been a beacon, head and shoulders above the faithful at St Peter's Catholic Church, a dozen pews ahead of the Blunts. As townies, the Blunts knew their place. The squatters occupied the pews closest to God.

Mick Blunt knew all the graziers and grain farmers well enough,

and he knew the McCalls better than most, but Connie had never uttered a word to the taller and more princely of the McCall twins. They were nominally identical, Ted and Lochie, but not to Connie. Ted was aloof, yet by all accounts sweet. Lochie was stockier and, although technically as handsome, was conceited and cocky, and his breath had stunk of beer and tobacco and peanuts when, a year earlier, on the riverbank, he'd attempted to kiss Connie. He'd been seventeen to her fourteen. She'd fled into the water, which had made his friends laugh. Lochie, humiliated, had declared her a scrawny little scrag.

She would have been happy for the attention of Lochie's twin. Ted had been among her first memories. He might have been six years old to her three the day he kicked the footy into the sun and she had squinted to watch for the ball to come down. It never did. The infant Connie was convinced it never did.

And now he was in her home. He was majestic. But he was leaving and she was incapable of calling his name or saying a word to stop him. She couldn't breathe.

She removed the headphones, just so she could. Breathe. She inhaled the silence and it was immense. She remained paralysed in that crescendo of silence. How long had he been watching her in her underwear?

For a while, she hoped.

She would die there wondering, sweating on the lino, incapable of moving. She listened for the sounds of his exit – the banging of the fly-screen door, the ignition of his starter motor, the opening and shutting of the gate, tyres whirring on the cattle grid – but mainly she heard the relative silence that had displaced Gene Vincent.

For the rest of the afternoon it spun on the turntable at forty-five revolutions per minute. On each completion the automatic arm returned the needle to the start. It would play forever, or until Connie intervened. For hours she didn't. Rather, she put on the

headphones, took them off, put them on, took them off. It became a relentless fugue of counterpoint: glorious noise, staggering silence, glorious noise, staggering silence, until she didn't know herself. Or perhaps she was just coming to know herself. She couldn't be sure, but she liked the feeling.

Fifty-five years on, she still likes the feeling. At the Icebergs now, silence subsumes glorious noise and it's a happily dissociative state. Before the hard light of day arrives and flattens all in its path, the morning begins with these curves of a softer lustre and sonic immersion. Every day can have this lovely warp.

Connie stretches her goggles over her skull until they rest on her forehead. She walks to her perch over the swimming lane closest to the surf. She peers over the pool's edge. Waves lap the rock shelf that abuts the bottom of the pool wall. It's low tide, unlike Ted's last morning. She looks across the bay to the horizon, over which the sun levitates and ripens to apricot. The sky is lightening to lavender and shapes are emerging from the ocean's surface – a pod of swimmers. A few hundred metres away, they're ploughing a path towards Connie. The Odd Socks.

At this time eight days ago, Ted was among them. From this same perch, following her twenty laps in the pool, Connie watched him leave the surf with Seb and Simmo and their fellow Odd Socks. Then she watched Ted re-enter the water on his stand-up paddle board. Though he'd retired from the surfboats, he was still the awesome oarsman.

On any other day, Seb – preferring a regular surfboard, whether long or short, conditions dictating – might have paddled out with his father before work, but this time he was called home. The tiler had arrived and Amber required Seb's urgent decision regarding the feature tile for the kitchen renovation. So Connie watched Ted paddle out, alone, standing tall on his bulk carrier, hoeing his plot of ocean, up and over its lumpy swells. The country boy had spent more than half his life, the better part, at this city beach.

Connie's toes are suspended over the pool's edge. She replays her final visions of her husband: Ted, directly across the bay from her, perhaps a pool's length away, advancing effortlessly through the breakers and towards the line-up, until he turned and paddled to catch a fat, glassy, two-metre swell and scrawl his cursive signature on that long last wave.

Connie watched it all from the Bergs while waves crashed over the edge and rolled across the pool. High tide. She kept watching as Ted's wave chugged past her vantage point and swept him towards the beach, as he disappeared then reappeared, head and shoulders above the crest, and carved from trough to curling lip, trough to curling lip. She watched him gather pace as that wave churned into the shallows. With each bounce off the lip, he disappeared then reappeared, disappeared then …

The board darted into the air without him. She watched it recoil on its legrope and spear back into the whitewash.

She kept watching. Ted didn't reappear.

Something was wrong, horribly wrong, but she couldn't see what was happening. She ran along the pool's edge, ignoring the incursion of waves, skidding on the slime, to get a closer look. Still she couldn't see him, but she could see there was no one in the surrounding surf and no one on that stretch of beach to help Ted. No lifesaver for the lifesaver.

Connie estimated it might be a beeline swim of one hundred and fifty metres to reach Ted, should she dive in from the pool wall. She almost did. Connie, however, had never put a toe in the ocean. She'd always stuck to the pool. While she'd swum the Murray all her childhood, and it could be treacherous, the river contained no sharks. She knew Ted was right about the ocean, that her shark phobia – given the statistics – was irrational. She'd watched often enough as the Bondi shark alarm emptied the bay of its bathers yet she'd never witnessed an attack.

Sharks, in any case, were not at the front of her mind then.

Connie calculated she'd be quicker to reach Ted by running the few hundred metres, up the stairs and out of the Icebergs, up Notts Avenue, down the steps to the beach park and to the promenade, and down the ramp to the sand and onwards to the shore. First she had to dash back along the pool's edge to collect her phone and dial triple-0. Swimmers arriving at the Icebergs sidestepped from her path as Dr Connie Blunt barked into her phone for an ambulance. 'Man likely drowning, Bondi Beach, south end.'

She'll never know if she might have reached him sooner by water. She can only console herself that it would have made no difference. By the time she got to Ted a surfer had found him facedown in the shallow water and was detaching his legrope and hauling him to the sand. Blood eddied in the swash. Connie dropped to her knees and inspected Ted's wound. His skull had been caved in by his board. She shook him and cried 'Ted', but got no response.

She tossed her phone to the surfer – 'Call the ambulance again. Where are they?' – while she rolled Ted on his side and watched too much of the ocean drain from his mouth. She rolled him to his back and started pumping his chest – thirty compressions – then two ventilations, mouth to mouth. Thirty and two, thirty and two … until the ambos arrived and zapped him with a defibrillator, and again, and still no response, until they all agreed – Dr Blunt included – there was no use.

Ted was gone.

She had woken at 5:16, his wife. At 6:58 she was his widow. That was the time they agreed for the coronial report. Ted was no doubt dead before that, Connie keeps telling herself. Whatever, he was taken from her in a relative instant amid the irresistible routine of their fortunate lives. Not by a shark, as she had fretted, nor a kangaroo, nor a bus, nor a falling branch from their backyard gum. The widowmaker, Ted had called it.

But the widowmaker had been his paddle board. A fucking

surfboard. Absurd. What were the chances? Google holds few clues about 'death by surfboard'. Connie has found anecdotes – of concussions, of the odd death – but no hard stats. What can anyone do or say about this kind of random, shit-happens death? A slow decline, a cancer, a creeping, painful death, might at least yield some meaning. Death-bed confessions, apologies, affirmations. But not this way. Not with this pointless liquidation by happenstance.

Connie checks her watch. It's 6:22 and the Odd Socks are closing in, perhaps fifty metres off. The sun casts them in a corridor of silvered light that distorts their forms and gives them watery mass. She often fancies them as amniotic sacs on the tide, limbs thrashing to break free of the brine. She can't place Seb or Simmo yet, but they'll be among them. Then there'll be Brad Wiseman, Meg Richards, Marty Ratcliffe and Bertie van de Boor. They're the core of the Odd Socks. One by one, Connie identifies them, until she realises they're a man down this morning. Her son is not among them. It's most unusual.

The swimmers make their turns ten metres before the rock shelf, but Marty Ratcliffe stops and wades and raises a flabby arm to salute Connie.

He hollers: 'Glorious morning, *Mzzz* Blunt.' He beams, bald and goggle-eyed. Marty is another veteran boatie, same vintage as Ted, though he's let himself go. He's never tired of his *Mzzz* joke since discovering twenty-nine years ago, when Connie put up her shingle on Bondi Road – Dr Connie Blunt – that she hadn't taken her husband's name. Marty has called her Mzzz Blunt ever since. Never Dr Blunt. Never Connie. He means no harm, but she never tires of finding him tiresome.

She nods in greeting. He waves and proceeds to swim back, if it can be called swimming. He waddles as might a punctured floaty. This thought amuses Connie. Her crueller diversions have not abandoned her in this period of grief, and for this she is grateful.

What might have waylaid Seb, though?

She does worry about her son, more than he'll ever suspect. Mainly she worries about his worrying, about his constant need to *help*. It's some kind of saviour complex and it all amounts, Connie is sure, to his desperation for accomplishment.

To accomplish what? Something. Anything.

It's anxiety – diagnosable anxiety.

The Oddest Sock, she once called Seb. She wishes she hadn't. It was a long while ago, twenty or more years. It was a private joke between mother and father, an aside to Ted when he'd become concerned that Seb, at nineteen, was singing songs of praise while walking the aisles with customers at Surfside Hardware. Ted and Simmo considered having a quiet word to him but they let him be. Connie's wisecrack – the Oddest Sock – was an expression of sympathy with her husband, gently mocking of their son, but never meant for his ears. Ted, however, was so amused he burst into the shop and shared it with Simmo, not realising Seb was crouching under the counter. To Seb it had sounded savage, he'd later told her. It had hurt that his father had found it funny, but the savagery was his mother's.

Connie pulls the goggles over her eyes. She positions herself over the line on the pool floor. This black line will convey her for a kilometre, twenty laps in as many minutes, during which she'll think of nothing but her next stroke. And the next. To propel herself forward she must pull water backwards, and these simple mechanics will require so much of her bodily attention that all other thoughts will be flushed. Swimming becomes an inertia of the mind. It was Miranda Stanhope who'd explained it to her in the early 1980s, who'd made it sound so alluring, and Connie had repaid her by introducing her to her future husband – Simmo.

Connie rolls her shoulders back and forth. *Here we go, Ted.*

★★★

Sunlight plays mosaics on the bedroom wall and it dawns on Seb that he's been lying here for an hour, perhaps longer. Time seems to have no shape today and this, he supposes, is a welcome change. Duty and schedule form the contours of his days: the burdens of family, business and church. He is thankful, of course, that he's a man who is relied upon by the people he loves. Seb can think of no worse curse than to be a man free of obligation, a man such as Brad Wiseman, his fellow Odd Sock. Wiseman is an independently wealthy stock-market speculator, a bachelor in his early middle age who eats and drinks and fucks what he pleases, but whose every day, following their sunrise laps of Bondi Beach, is surely a marathon of diminishing purpose.

Surely.

Seb offers a small prayer of thanks for his blessed burdens.

Amber, without waking, lifts her head from the wet patch she has left at the corner of his pillow and nestles into hers. Her pink summer nightie is hitched in such an awkward twist it's barely a ribbon for her exposed rump, which moons her husband. It's quite something.

The years since their first meeting have not treated them equally. Seb is keenly aware of this. Soon he will be forty and Amber will remain stubbornly in her twenties. Yet God wanted this for Seb – and for Amber. So Seb makes a prayer of beholding his wife. The sun catches the natural highlights of chestnut in her brunette hair, which flops over her cheek and curls under her chin. The fine line of her neck merges with the curve of her shoulder and her extended arm, which rotates gradually until her inverted hand is propped on her backside. Her fingers curl upwards, sculpturally, as if mounted on a plinth. Seb dwells at last on the curve of her thighs.

He's tempted to rouse her, to wrestle with the ogre. It's a lovely thought, but he'll leave her sleeping. Is it a perversion, he wonders, to be a voyeur of your wife while she sleeps?

A noise downstairs – *tharump, tharump* – interrupts Seb's self-interrogation. It's the new day calling Action Man to duty. Seb knows his son's drill. Mack is trampolining on his bed. Soon he commando-rolls from the bed with a thud and opens fire on the snipers roosting atop his cupboard. *Kerpow!* Seb has been caught in the crossfire, so he knows the sound effects. Action Man scampers out of his room and down the hall and hurls a grenade – *pkworrrhhh!* – into the stairwell, accounting for more snipers. He advances to the kitchen and dispenses with still more of the enemy.

Seb can hear Mack heaving open the pantry door, climbing on the stepladder, shaking the Cheerios box for proof of contents, climbing down and pouring the cereal – mostly, hopefully – into a bowl. The fridge door opens. Mack is getting the milk and pouring it – mostly, hopefully – into the bowl. Seb can hear him carrying his breakfast down the two wide steps to the open-plan family room, no doubt losing more Cheerios and milk overboard. He'll be sprawling on the Monet rug in front of their new television with its two-metre concave screen. It devours Mack, who wants to be consumed. The TV comes on loud and Seb is impressed by the oomph of the surround sound. Amber's snoring changes tune momentarily, but she doesn't stir.

Cartoon villains go *mwahaha*. They always sound more fiendish when Seb can't put faces to the voices. Should he really be leaving them to babysit his six-year-old? Seb hears Mack mimicking them. It's remarkable the way he drops an octave to malevolent, flicks the switch to dastardly. He has a great set of pipes, like his pop.

Seb takes his phone from the bedside table, inserts the earplugs and scrolls to one of the videos from Christmas Day. It's his father, Mack and himself singing 'The Marvellous Toy'. Ted reckoned the smartest thing a smartphone ever did was resurrect Val Doonican doing 'The Marvellous Toy' on YouTube. He and his grandson could watch it all day. Somewhere on the high shelf in Ted's study,

where he kept all his reel-to-reels and old videos, there's footage of Seb as a lad singing the same song with his dad. 'Two Little Boys' was always their favourite, though. It distresses Seb to think Rolf Harris was jailed for molesting four little girls. He wishes he could play that reel for Mack, but it would seem icky.

Seb becomes aware of a faint beeping downstairs. Mack has left the fridge door open. This is probably his cue to go down and *mwahaha* with his son, yet something keeps Seb in bed. He's on a roll of thought. His song for Amber's party …

He scrolls through his phone and finds another file, Gracie's hand-held video of his and Ted's only practice session for the event. Ted is seated at the piano, Seb standing at his shoulder. Ted plays it by ear, feeling his way through the chords, humming until he divines the melody through the fingertips of his right hand. Then he sings – *It had to be you* – and Seb falls in, a third higher. Not too shabby, he realises now. In the second verse, Seb takes the lead while Ted switches to the harmony. They alternate lead and harmony throughout. Seb is overwhelmed by the resonance of his dead father's voice via the puny device in his palm. Ted's phrasing is so assured. It adds some drama and heartbreak to the sweetest of melancholy melodies. No matter the song, Ted is a bit Frank Sinatra, a bit Ray Charles, and he borrows a little fragility from Billie Holiday. But so what? It's all Ted.

Seb has an idea, an audacious idea. Why not another posthumous performance by his father? Beyond the grave, ladies and gentlemen, the late, great Ted McCall. If Seb's mother and Gracie got away with it at his funeral, why not for Amber's party? Seb decides he'll rehire the big screen and speakers. He and his dad will sing their duet, after all.

He climbs out of bed and collects his shorts and T-shirt from his chair, and steps into the hall and pulls them on. He treads quietly on the stairs. He wants to surprise Mack. In the kitchen he finds a trail of Cheerios and spilt milk. He leaves the fridge door open for

now. He stands at the precipice of the family room and watches his son spread-eagled on the rug, absorbed in the cartoon, unaware of his entrance. Mack contorts his body to the shape of a raptor on the screen. He caws and rasps.

Now Seb caws and rasps with him. Mack looks up. He finds his father balanced on one leg, making a grotesque face and clawing at the air with talons. Mack smiles, almost sympathetically.

'That's silly, Dad.'

'Why?'

'You look like a stork.'

'Oh, I thought I was doing a raven.'

'It's an eagle.'

'Eagle? How can you tell the difference?'

'Eagles are deadlier.'

'Pardon me. You really know your raptors.' Seb lowers his right leg. 'I stand corrected,' he says. In case Mack missed it, he adds: 'That was a little joke. I *stand* corrected.'

Mack rolls his eyes. Seb joins him on the rug. He lies on his back, yawns and looks wistfully at the ceiling. Mack studies his father's face, then picks up the remote control and turns off the television.

'You're not swimming,' Mack observes.

'No, not today.'

'Are you too sad?'

'No,' Seb says, then finds himself conceding. 'A bit sad, yeah.'

'Me too.'

'Come here, Mack Mac.'

It was Ted who first called him Mack Mac, his diminutive for Mack McCall. It's stuck. Mack crawls on top of his father and lies facedown on his chest. He adjusts his position for optimum comfort and burrows his head into Seb's unshaven neck.

'You're prickly.'

'I'm a porcupine.'

Mack burrows deeper and cuddles his father. 'It's okay to be sad,' he says.

And this does it. His boy's innate compassion taps the source of Seb's un-cried tears. Suddenly he is weeping a flood. Mack, with his face still in his dad's neck, hasn't noticed. Seb can see that Mack is looking to the wall and the dual portraits of his pop: Ted, in his budgies, strikes an identical pose in the side-by-side vertical frames, hugging the same longboard, the first shot in 1985, the second in 2015. Two metres along the wall is a cluster of three photos: Ted riding the same longboard, first with a young Seb on his shoulders, then Gracie, then Mack last year. Seb had them all framed as a matching set and ordered a second set for his father.

'Dad?' Mack asks.

'Mmmmm?'

'Could Pop ...' But Mack is distracted by the moisture slithering between his face and his father's prickly neck. He props himself up on Seb's chest to investigate. His dad's tear ducts are geysers. Plump pearls cascade down his father's cheeks. Seb can feel the itchy rivers in his stubble. He tastes the saline at the corner of his mouth and through a blurry film of tears he watches his son watching him cry. Mack uses the back of his hand to wipe his father's face. 'It's okay to cry, Dad.'

'Thanks, mate.'

'Mum said.' Mack burrows back into Seb's neck, into its dampness.

Father and son carry on for minutes in silence, except for their breathing. Mack rises and falls with the filling and expiration of Seb's lungs. They could be a single organism. Seb becomes giddy with the intimacy.

'Dad?'

'Mmmmm?'

'Could Pop rise today?'

'What?'

'Like Jesus?'

'No.'

'It's the third day.'

Seb attempts an explanation. 'But that was only for Jesus.'

'Why?'

'Jesus is the son of God.'

Mack rests with that answer for a moment. 'We're all God's children,' he says. 'You always say that.'

'I know, but …'

'God shouldn't have favourites.'

What is Seb to tell him? He blunders instead into the arithmetic of the third day. 'I suppose this is the fourth day, anyway.'

Mack doesn't get it. 'What?'

'Well, if Easter Sunday was the third day, counting from Good Friday, then the Friday must have been inclusive, like' – Seb counts the days on his fingers – 'Friday, Saturday, Sunday. See? Now, if we include Tuesday for Pop's funeral, then count forward to today, Friday' – he counts them again on his fingers – 'we get Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Four days.'

'Oh yeah.' Mack whimpers.

'And, technically, Good Friday was the day Jesus died, not the day of his funeral, so this would be the ninth day for Pop, not even the fourth.'

Mack looks hugely disappointed. 'It's too late.'

Seb feels his pain. He wishes he hadn't gone and done the sums. 'Don't worry,' he assures Mack. 'Pop will live forever – in Heaven.'

'But I can't see him in Heaven.'

'You will. One day.'

Mack holds this thought, then says: 'When I'm dead.'

Seb flinches. 'Yes,' he answers at last, 'but that'll be a long, long time away.'

'That's what I mean, Dad. I don't want to wait a long, long time.'

'Me neither, mate, but we have to. We have to be patient. And then we'll see Pop in Heaven, where we'll all live together forever because Jesus died for our sins.'

Seb can almost hear his boy processing it all, until he asks: 'Yours too, Dad?'

'What?'

'He died for your sins, too?'

'Yes, mine too.'

Mack takes it on board. 'Dad?'

'Mmmmm?'

'I've never seen you sin.'

Seb smiles meekly. *Oh yes you have, Mack Mac.* But he can't possibly discuss his sins with a blameless child. How might he speak of the banal venalities, the new Range Rover Sport outside, the false gods in surround sound on these very walls, the adulterous thoughts and, let's face it, the downright adulterous act that led to Mack? Seb still struggles with that one.

'It's God's will,' Seb told his parents at the time, just as he had following the conception of Gracie fifteen years earlier.

His mother reacted sarcastically. 'Blessed are the fornicators!' – precisely as she had when Seb broke the news regarding the pregnancy that resulted in her granddaughter.

How can he forget? Her ridicule. She apologised, and she said it came from a loving despair, but he remembers it as one of her incidental brutalities.

He's expecting Mack to grill him about the details of his sins, but his son lets him off the hook with a less curly question.

'Will I sin one day?'

It hurts Seb to even think about it, but at last he sighs and confirms: 'Yes, mate, you will. We all sin. We're only human.'