

THE LEAP

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THE LEAP

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for Joe Daley

Part I

This was not the city of his memory. From the air it was another place entirely – unsettling, uninviting. When he'd last seen it from a plane he was a backpacker crammed into the middle seat, straining over Lucy to snatch a first glimpse of that fabled harbour. Its totemic bridge. The Opera House. Everything had been so radiant then, the sky and water the most vivid blue, a luminosity he'd never known. It had all been there. Waiting for him. Just as it had on the TV travel shows he'd savoured in Oxford's winter gloom. Just like in the brochures: the only place, besides Santorini, that the advertising pictures did justice to. The city had been Ben's to uncover. A new now.

But tonight, close to dusk, the view from the window of Seat 2A in Business Class was malevolent. Banks of crimson-edged

dark cloud and sheets of thick black smoke obscured so much of what he'd been yearning for, although occasionally the sea would snag a bolt of eerie yellow light on its inky surface. There was a dystopian, though quite spectacular, end-of-days unearthliness about the scene. Then, as the plane banked it offered a gun-barrel view of the red glow of uncontrolled bushfires south of the city. They looked like the fleshy, gaping mouth of an active volcano. He used his phone to snap a few photographs.

Should he be worried? Ben wondered. He well knew the havoc airborne soot could pose to aircraft mechanics. Indeed, the pilot had warned that the plane might divert if there was too much ash in the air – to avoid potential engine interference.

Engine interference? Ben had a pilot's licence himself, and a good appreciation of aerophysics. Learning to fly in his forties had been a matter of doing something that he could fully control. An assertion of doing over being done to. As pilot, he would be responsible for every decision – each instrument reading, control execution, and aircraft movement – on-ground and in the air. The pre-take-off checks of fuel and rudders and hydraulics; the constant in-air gauging of wind speed versus pressure, altitude and thrust – it all assuaged his desire for control after a period of being subjected to the vagaries of circumstance. In the cockpit he alone set the course. If something were to go wrong it would be on him.

As the aircraft banked again, and bounced and shook on the updrafts, the chatter of the crew strapped in their seats was dulled by whining hydraulics. Ben pressed his face to the window as the plane arced deeply into a descending turn over the Pacific, black and shimmering now, immediately below. That glorious ocean. He'd dreamt for decades of being back in it. And so he had planned a quick dip in the Bondi surf if he got out of the

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airport in time, but the dusky light and the smoke and the grimy air would probably cheat him of that.

Despite the turbulence, it was a light, tiptoe landing. He smiled. The wonder of flight. He turned his phone on. Global roaming quickly connected to 4G. He chose his most dystopic shot of daunting fire and smoke, strobing yellow light and ash. He posted it on Instagram.

Ben shivered from a little dopamine spike as the likes – ♡♡♡ – dashed in. They included one from his eldest daughter Suze, preceding the comment *Ewww! Looks like Armageddon!!* He thought it unusual she was awake so early in London. They always had to drag her out of bed for school. And was she never offline, day or night?

But she was spot-on. Armageddon seemed to be right outside the aircraft.

It was dark by the time he was green-lighted through Immigration and Customs, even though the process was quick thanks to his diplomatic passport. He lugged his big red Samsonite off the conveyor and wheeled it to the taxi rank, breaking into a sweat in the sticky, malodorous night, its air a damp, dark blanket of smoke and humidity. By the clock it should still have been a midsummer dusk – that radiant, glowing hour he'd sentimentalised, when the southern light softens and melds with the cooling air of imminent evening and a gentle southerly. But the smoke and the soot had smudged out the day's remains.

Something feather-light landed in Ben's hair. With his fingers he combed out a whisper of scorched gum-leaf. He observed it on his palm. It was still warm, not too far from its escaped fire.

His new boss, the high commissioner, Sir Gordon, had offered to drive – or rather, be chauffeured – to Sydney to meet Ben and take him to Canberra, his home city for the next three years. But Ben wanted a weekend in Sydney. In Bondi, his old stomping ground, where he and Lucy had spent three of their six months in Australia during their gap year. Languorously carefree times of sunshine, sex and ocean, free of the strictures of endless study, parental expectations, and those interminably oppressive bleak British days. Months not yet encumbered by the future's onerous freight of adult responsibility: a career, marriage and kids, the mortgage, school fees and vet bills.

There'd been five of them in the group back then, all mates from Oxford. He and Lucy hadn't been especially close at university, but something about that Sydney summer – the damp heat, the constant proximity to each other's near-naked bodies on the beach and in the cafes and beer gardens, all the bronzed flesh and the pheromones in the air – had brought them newly alive and physically attuned to one another.

New Year's Day was the beginning of their ever since. Bondi Beach, packed with bathers. The sand hard to see for all the tanned bodies. Foreign accents – English, Scots, Irish, Israeli, Nordic, Canadian, German – challenging the barely dominant voices of the Australians and Kiwis. The sky that impossibly vivid, flawless, Whiteley-esque blue – clichéd yet somehow true. A gentle swell cascading into a foamy shore break, just a hint of off-shore breeze puffing the diamantés of spray oceanward from the crests. A near-still day of intense, unseasonably dry heat. Post-swim, Ben and Lucy lay on their stomachs on towels facing each other. Her skin was goosey from the cool Pacific, droplets bejewelling her thighs, firm shoulders and the hollow of her tanned back. A fine patina of salt and sand crusting

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her cheek. They were so close he could see the barely discernible fuzz of blond down tracing her jawline as the light snared it. Her eyes held his. He returned her smile.

Now, all these decades later, they'd soon be back together under the southern light where it began. As a family now, with three children, a dog, and the travails and joys of twenty-something years of marriage trailing them. This time, though, he wouldn't be sleeping in a thirty-dollar-a-night bunk in a back-packers'; he'd booked a room at the five-star hotel opposite the beach, where he planned to sleep the slumber of the jet-lagged dead. First thing in the morning, a Saturday, he'd throw himself into the Pacific and laze on the sand in the sun for the day, before taking a leisurely Sunday-morning flight to Canberra.

The plan was that Lucy and the kids would come just before the Australian school year began. Ben would have a few weeks – plenty of time – to get his feet under the desk at the high commission, to navigate the city and arrange the children's schools. He'd find the perfect house and set it up for their arrival. There was nothing too onerous ahead of him. Aside from his acute mindfulness of Lucy's anxiety at packing up in London, taking the kids out of school, leaving their friends and her aging parents, and travelling across the world to follow Ben yet again, it was all cake and icing in his mind.

He had reconciled himself to the professional truth that Canberra wasn't exactly Washington. But the peaks and troughs of his working life, its dark challenges and small triumphs, had given him a clear perspective on ambition and prospects. And for a mid-to-late-career diplomat like Ben, Canberra was a comfortable and sought-after posting in a sentimental corner of the old empire, associated, in the service, with lifestyle and comfort. As Counsellor assigned mainly to cultural duties, he had no need

really to anticipate anything too left-field. There would be plenty of travel across the so-called wide brown land, lots of theatre opening nights, and entertaining of British dignitaries, sporting identities and soap stars and musicians when they passed through. The most pressing consular work in Australia for British diplomats usually amounted to looking in on banged-up members of the Barmy Army during the Ashes, or waiting for news on some English tourist who'd gone bushwalking underprepared.

Ben told himself that he deserved this appointment after all he'd endured – everything he'd sacrificed – for the service. The hardship posts he'd done – Thailand and Cambodia – had exacted a heavy toll.

Cambodia, from which he'd returned four years earlier, had from the very start carried some unique challenges, mostly to do with hygiene (Lucy had been hospitalised with sepsis after cutting her foot) and personal security. They had both been plagued with anxiety over the inability of their eldest to settle at boarding school back home while they'd been in Phnom Penh with the younger two. These were the sorts of things that service families routinely withstood, however – part and parcel of the job. Hiccups and challenges that you found a way around. It was the unexpected that still reverberated – the freak accident towards the end of the Cambodia posting that almost took Ben's life, and which also threatened, briefly, his sanity and career.

The past couple of years had been a period of grinding inertia back at Whitehall. So much of the work – treaty, trade and policing cooperation post the 2016 Brexit vote – he found mind-numbingly dull, but he endured it stoically, Britishly, in the hope of being rewarded with one last, cushier posting. While there was never any certainty about the events, dangerous or otherwise, that a posting could present, he knew the office would

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avoid placing him anywhere he might see too much too soon. Lucy would have been pleased had he been content to see out his days at Whitehall, with its generous pay and benefits, for she also feared that Ben was never much further than a few emotional stress fractures away from a potential relapse. She didn't want to take the gamble of allowing misfortune to invade their family's wellbeing again.

But in the end, after months of discussion and gentle argument, of weighing up pros and cons and what-ifs, which was the way of their always civil marital negotiation, Lucy had softened. No less nostalgic about Australia's space and warmth and good living, thanks to her own memories of that magical half-year in their twenties, she agreed, as Ben had been confident she would.

At his last appraisal, when he'd sat through numerous interviews and psychological evaluations, he'd apparently failed to overly impress. He was not, his superiors candidly told him, ever likely to make a head of mission, largely due, they said cryptically in their opaque bureaucratised, to his 'potential susceptibility to the detriments of extreme stress'. In other words, they didn't think he was tough enough after what had happened.

Still, it was also acknowledgement that he'd done the 'very hard yards' – as one superior had put it, with such characteristic Englishness as to evoke postwar queuing for rations and a hardy anticipation of unending adversity. Yes, he'd endured alright, and bloody well recovered – with the help of dozens of counselling sessions, with which he'd fully engaged, and medication he'd eventually weaned himself off. Endured courtesy of stringent personal routines that became, at times, obsessive: daily swimming, running or cycling, a strict diet, mindfulness, disciplined sleep. And of course, learning to fly during that initial recovery year – gardening leave. He had rebuilt himself to the point where he could fly.

And now here he was. About to begin what could be a dream posting. Counsellor at the high commission to Australia was as good as it might get for Benedict Fotheringham-Gaskill, MA Philosophy and Theology (Oxon). But as good as it got was pretty damn good as far as he was concerned. And not a bad way at all to go out. He would make the most of these few precious years back in Australia. They would be the reward Lucy and the kids were due. Witnessing his pain and recovery had been hard on everyone. Who knew – maybe Canberra would even become a glorious, career-advancing triumph? At worst it could be the leisurely victory lap before an early retirement on his generous Foreign Office pension in Surrey – or maybe Majorca or Brittany.

It's all in front of us, again, he thought as the cab delivered him into the Bondi night.

When the driver stopped it was all garish light – red, yellow, green and blue – from the takeaways, cafes, bars and ice-cream shops. Groups of young men and women jostled and linked arms, five-deep on the footpaths. They ate from grease-stained paper bags, glugged down booze from cans. The air, already rank with the smoke, had a noxious, sickly-sweet fug of vape emissions – cherry, bubblegum, grape and musk – along with tobacco fumes.

Campbell Parade was lined with muscle cars – double-cab urban utes and big-engined, twin-exhaust, hotted-up sedans – emitting nondescript music, doof-doofing and distorted. From the cars protruded tattooed limbs and heads wolf-whistling and yelling.

As Ben wrestled his bag from the boot, he experienced a swift wave of nausea. He surveyed the street between the cab and the hotel door as if through a veil of grime, saw a gap in

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the crowd and went to negotiate his way through it. A young bloke, dyed-blond mullet, shirtless, Southern Cross tattoo on his chest, crashed into him. A cigarette flew from the man's mouth onto the ground. The man stumbled and fell heavily, trailing his smoke to the footpath.

'I'm sorry,' Ben said, stopping and extending a hand to help him up. 'I didn't —'

His hand got slapped away. 'Piss off, mate, 'fore I punch your fucken lights out.'

Ben hurried across to the hotel and through the revolving door, Hogarthian realism eclipsing his idyll.

He checked in. Went to his room and shaved and showered, pulled on a clean T-shirt and boxers.

He stretched out on the plump, king-size plus bed, sinking into the luxurious white softness, and FaceTimed home. He wanted to celebrate his arrival with Lucy and the kids. But Lucy was perfunctory with him. Not terribly so, but her slight impatience immediately deflated him. Didn't he know what time it was in London? She reminded him that it was a work day for her and that she was doing more than her usual share of the juggle in his absence. She sounded frazzled as she explained how she was trying to herd the two younger kids out the door to her parents' place, where they'd go daily until school returned the following week. Fourteen-year-old Jerome, who thought he should be able

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to stay home alone with the eldest, Suze, sixteen, was pushing back and arguing every step of the way. Surely Ben recalled?

Jerome and Amy, meanwhile, were determined to attend school right up until they left for Australia in late January, in order to be with their friends. This had been another source of simmering tension around the move. Before he'd eventually flown on alone, Ben had suggested it would be better for them to pack up the house in Putney, go to Australia as a family, and choose and set up a place in Canberra together. That way the kids could have an Australian summer holiday before starting school in February, get to know their new city and make neighbourhood friends. Lucy had been firm but polite: Ben was to go and do his job and she would finesse the parenting. He had conceded for harmony's sake.

'Say hello to your father,' Lucy said to the kids, her morning made-up face zoning in and out of focus on the screen. He could see that they were in the hallway, the front door open to a bleak, wet, midwinter street behind them.

Amy, ten-year-old familial afterthought, smiled into the phone. 'I miss you, Daddy. We saw the Australian fires on telly. Are you sure you're safe down there?'

'Yes, baby girl,' he assured her. 'I'm really quite safe, love. I miss you too.' And he did. Her affection was always so raw and urgent, without the emotional guile of adolescence. What he'd do for a cuddle from his baby right now.

'Bye, Daddy.'

Lucy again: 'Quick, Jerome, say hi to your dad – then get your bag. We're going to be late. And yeah, take your football. Grandad might be up for a kick.'

Jerome, with a fourteen-year-old's weary surliness, said from off-screen in a deliberately monotone voice, 'Hi-bye old man.'

Lucy's face reappeared. 'Ben – maybe call later? We really have to fly, darling. I'm late already.'

'Sure. Is everything okay?'

'Yes of course, Benny. We're managing just so. But you know, when it's only the one of us . . . It's the morning, you know?'

'Yes. I know. But Luce – it's great to be back here. You'll love it. I know. It's —'

'I'm sure. But the fires do look dreadful, Ben. Listen, can we talk later? Tonight our time? Take care, darling.'

And they were gone. Vanished into 17,000 kilometres of distance.

For a moment the call rankled. How adept, he thought, Lucy had become over the years at derailing his emotional overtures by tossing the prosaic in their way. True, weekday mornings were a juggle, and he also realised, thanks to their counselling sessions, that such emotional evasion was, while intrinsic to Lucy's reserve, partly a defence mechanism – the consequence of walking on eggshells during the unpredictable worst of his post-Cambodia oscillating moods. It had become something of a learnt pattern for her even when he was calm and travelling well, and overtly inviting her in. He also understood the stress she was under ahead of the move. Solo-parenting three kids, including two sullen teenagers, was bloody hard – thankless, really – at the best of times. Still, she did seem very harried and distant.

He further knew, all too well, that it was quite normal for the trailing spouse to be anxious before a posting. Would the kids settle in and make friends? There was the disruption of having to put on hold her career as a pharmacist. Again. Finding work in the new host country was always a challenge. Repatriating was no less difficult. Former colleagues – once career juniors or equals – had invariably left her behind professionally. She'd have

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lost touch with friends. And this time there was concern about her elderly parents. Would Charles and Sybil be alive in three years' time? Regardless, they would, in old age, be denied their only grandchildren.

Ben was also mindful of Lucy's unspoken anxiety: would he cope with the pressure, the unknown potential challenges? Was he strong enough? Or might the job push him to the brink again?

Then there was the endless diplomatic entertaining which Lucy, as the assumed homemaker, was expected to oversee. She mostly did this with patience and good humour; an accomplished mimic, she would have Ben and the kids in stitches as she impersonated the sleazy Israeli military attaché or the liposuctioned, botoxed, toxically boring, social X-ray wife of some visiting British Tory MP at a dinner they'd attended or hosted. Publicly, of course, she was always dutifully charming and generous.

On the other hand, at least Lucy knew what she'd signed up for with this posting. She too was nostalgic about Australia. Her and Ben's shared love, their quarter-century together, was intimately tied to the place. He hoped their time here would strengthen their love still more as they moved deeper into middle age, and provide an adventure – likely a safe one – for them all.

But for now, these next few weeks were all his. He had this weekend by the beach before getting to know his new city (always a wondrous and fun experience), meeting his colleagues, figuring out the job and finding the perfect family home. Time was a matter of constant negotiation in their marriage, as for most working couples. In the midst of family and work commitments, they both frequently longed for personal space. Thinking time. Alone time. Yet so often he ran from it when it arrived. But given

that Lucy had insisted on staying in London with the kids for a few more weeks, he was determined to indulge the luxury of all this me-time.

Ben closed his eyes, tried to find that state of weightlessness and thoughtlessness that preceded sleep, the way one of his cognitive behavioural therapists had taught him. He tried circular breathing: in one-two-three-four, hold, out one-two-three-four . . . But there was no way he could possibly sleep. His mind was weary but his body told him it was 8 am in London, that he ought to be returning from a run or a swim or a cycle or a session at the gym about now, ahead of a light breakfast. He contemplated hitting the hotel gym. But the sounds of the night from the street below beckoned, despite an inner voice of better judgement whispering room service and rest. He gave in, decided to head out for a while and wander Campbell Parade. Perhaps get an ice cream. Or sit somewhere on a drink and people-watch. After all, how often was he back in Bondi?

He donned an old pair of Levi's, cleaned his teeth and combed his thinning salt-and-pepper hair. He slid on his new brown R.M. Williams boots. Well, not quite actually the iconic Australian boots. But close to. They were a thoughtful gift from Charles and Sybil, who were inordinately proud of their son-in-law, for all he'd recovered from and for being rewarded finally with the Canberra posting. Lucy's parents had priced the genuine article at Harrods, balked at the £600-plus price tag, and sought a less expensive and near-identical pair of mail-order Turkish knock-offs made from buffalo hide. Brand name M.R. Willston. They'd had Lucy covertly trace Ben's runners to get the correct fit.

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Just so as to look the part, Charles and Sybil had written on a card accompanying the boots. *Everyone from the prime minister to the dustman seems to wear them down there.*

The leather of the M.R.s was unyieldingly stiff, the insoles hard and unpadded, unlike the genuine boot. But what the heck, he thought, no pain no gain. And they looked pretty much the same. Nobody would know the difference.

Down on the street the smoke seemed more acrid than when he'd arrived. People were coughing, rubbing their eyes and complaining. Still, they were four-deep outside the fish-and-chip, burger, ice-cream and kebab shops. The bars and pubs were pumping. Across the road Ben could see backpackers lounging all over the park by the beach, scoffing chicken and chips, souvlakis, gelato, and drinking tinnies of beer and pre-mixes. He was struck by how white it was. Even in Anglo-Saxon ground zero, Putney, there were more non-Anglo faces.

The crowds felt overwhelming. He was suddenly repelled by the rubbish on the footpath, the yelling, the drunkenness. The beggars outside the convenience stores. It was as if his idyll, clung to for decades, had been overrun, soiled and sullied by his own countrymen and others. Subsumed into this unseemly, sordid reality. Of course, places always seem new, relatively undiscovered, when your horizons are as narrow as Ben's had been back then. Experience had also taught him that a revisited beloved place rarely lives up to the memory of it. And anyway Bondi had, after all, been a magnet for tourists since before federation. But that mattered little to Ben, who could only think that right now his Bondi was extinct. A memorial, if subtropical, Pompeii.

At the pub, he had to queue to get in. His boots were rubbing on his heels. Nobody had told him that M.R.s were such a bastard

to break in. The bouncer looked him over, nodded approval. ‘In ya go, mate.’

He ordered a pint of Foster’s. It was what he’d drunk during his Australian months – still did in London sometimes, where it was often on tap. *Foster’s – Australian for Lager*. He remembered the TV ad from when he was a little boy. Paul Hogan standing in the drizzle outside some dreary, mouldering West End watering hole, selling an unrealisable antipodean dream to people like Ben’s dad, who really preferred room-temperature Boddingtons.

The barman laughed. ‘Foster’s! Maaaate. It hasn’t been on tap round here for twenty years. Where’ve you been? We send that cat’s piss straight to England.’

He thanked the barman and ordered a boutique lager.

Nearby, a bunch of twenty-something hens in short skirts and low-cut blouses were drinking red stuff from schooners through glass straws shaped like penises. The bride had a blue veil topped with a pair of devil’s horns. Wobbly pegs. A pack of Irish blokes, their ankle-length chinos and white cotton shirts skin-tight over frames honed on construction sites, sniffed about predatorily.

He caught a little of the hens’ conversation.

‘He had the hugest cock I’d ever seen and I just said, “Stop waving that thing at me or I’m gonna need fanny surgery.”’

Ben’s eyes were stinging and red from the smoky air. He sculled his beer. It hardly touched the sides. It was icy and refreshing. The alcohol gave him an instant frontal cortex buzz, warm and accommodating. He wrestled his way to the bar for another. He would allow himself two. He tended to carefully monitor his intake. A bald guy with blond dreads and a dagger tattooed on his forearm tried to sell him drugs: GBH, coke, smack . . . bud? No thanks.

The scent of the morass of steamy humanity juggling drinks and balancing on uncertain legs was a fusion of body odour,

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perfume and after-shave, stale cigarette smoke and booze. Ben had long been a social smoker and relished the airborne smell, though he hated it on his clothes and hair. Especially when he drank in pubs. Lucy called him a secret smoker, alluding to the fact that he would occasionally buy a pack or cadge a few during a night on the tiles with the boys, then try to cover the smell with mouthwash and mints. He could go for months without a smoke. So she didn't – and he didn't – see it as a problem. In any event, Lucy was hardly one to throw stones, given her partiality to a vape when she was out with friends.

He took his beer and stood by the window. Surveyed the street. It was getting busier and noisier. Two men, maybe in their fifties – shorts, rugby guernseys, tasselled loafers, no socks – had another fellow suspended between them, one of his arms around each of their necks. His feet dragged limply behind him as they walked. They stopped abruptly on the other side of the open window, where the man in the middle convulsed and threw up on the footpath.

'Gaz, you arsehole – it's all over my shoes. Time to chuck you in a taxi, pack you off home to the missus.'

Suddenly several bodies collided into Ben. He dropped his beer. The glass exploded as the beer fizzed and frothed across the polished concrete floor. He let out a groan and stumbled, but kept his feet and stepped quickly aside. The bouncer had the Irishman who'd been hassling the bride pinned around the shoulders from behind. One of the other Irish lads, meanwhile, had crash-tackled the bouncer and was on his back, one arm around his throat. With his free hand he was punching the bouncer in the head. A tangle of twisted bodies fell to the ground on top of the shattered glass as more security men tore at the pile of people, trying to break up the fight.

Ben bolted for the door of the pub, every flight sensor in his body and brain urging him out. He walked back to the hotel, his heart racing, breath short and uneven, hands trembling. He knew he was quite safe, largely inconspicuous amid the hectic hubbub of the street, yet panic was beginning to take hold of him, slowly tightening its grip on his arms and chest. This spectre clutching him was as familiar as it was frightening, though it had been a couple of years since their last serious encounter. What he needed most right now was to call home. If he spoke to Lucy and the family, everything would be fine. Recalibrated. Calm and measured. He looked at his watch. Lucy and the kids wouldn't be anywhere near home yet. That call would have to wait.

He stepped up his pace as he neared the hotel, his strides meeting the rhythm of his consciously regulated deep inhalations and exhalations, learnt and assiduously practised to combat anxiety and its malicious twin, panic.

Sighing with relief, he sat on the bed and slid the boots off. There were raw blisters on both heels and one of his big toes. At the minibar he unscrewed both miniatures of Johnnie Walker, poured them and topped the glass with cola.

His hand still shook with adrenaline as he put the drink to his mouth. He gulped it down like medicine. His heart slowed. His breathing regulated. He checked the time in London again: midday. Still hours too early to call. He turned on the TV. Ether News – the national, private-subscription service he'd read about in his cultural briefing notes. What the notes had tactfully, diplomatically avoided saying was that 'Night-time Ether', including the current show, was manned by a loony cabal of sensationalist right-wing nut jobs for whom the most rampant, bovine populism was an aspirational KPI and who regarded no conspiracy as too outrageous to broadcast.

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The coverage was wall-to-wall fires on the south coast. Reporters in protective gear doing live crosses from smoke-filled beaches where entire summer populations of tourist towns were seeking safety. In the studio the agitated anchors carried on about all the fires, every single one, being either deliberately lit or the result of ‘native fire-stick back-burning’. So-called global warming and extreme continental temperatures had nothing at all to do with it. Ben just couldn’t remain engaged with this insanity. His eyes lost focus and he fell into a fitful jet-lagged sleep propped on the bed. The bellicose sounds of Ether filtered in and out of his consciousness, invading his dreams.

He and Lucy were out the back of Bondi beyond the break, the deep azure water hugging them as they trod water, arms wrapped around each other, eye to eye, nose to nose. The shark siren sounded. But they didn’t panic. Both knew they would be fine, safe as long as they stayed in each other’s arms. Still holding one another, they gingerly paddled towards the shore. The shark suddenly surfaced in front of them, fleshy jaws yawning open, ready to swallow them whole like Jonah’s whale. This was no typical shark, it was a Disney version – blue-skinned, red-gummed, its neat, pointed teeth glinting in the sun. Ben raised his fists and the great fish cowered and danced a retreat across the water and all the way up the golden beach.