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MORTON  
Homecoming



'A big twisty turny yarn.

It is fantastic'

GRAHAM NORTON

## PROLOGUE

ADELAIDE HILLS, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

1959

*New Year's Day*

And, of course, there was to be a lunch party to mark the new year. A small affair, just family, but Thomas would require all the trimmings. Unthinkable that they would do otherwise: the Turners were big on tradition, and with Nora and Richard visiting from Sydney, neither frippery nor fanfare was to be skipped.

Isabel had decided to set up in a different part of the garden this year. Usually they sat beneath the walnut tree on the eastern lawn, but today she'd been drawn to the stretch of grass in the shade of Mr Wentworth's cedar. She'd walked across it when she was cutting flowers for the table earlier and been struck by the pretty westward view towards the mountains. *Yes*, she'd said to herself. *This will do very well.* The arrival of the thought, her own decisiveness, had been intoxicating.

She told herself it was all part of her New Year's resolution—to approach 1959 with a fresh pair of eyes and expectations; but there was a small internal voice that wondered whether she wasn't rather tormenting her husband just a little with the sudden breach of protocol. Ever since they'd discovered the sepia photograph of Mr Wentworth and his similarly bearded Victorian friends arranged in elegant wooden recliners on the eastern lawn, Thomas had been immovable in his conviction that it represented the superior entertaining spot.

It was unclear to Isabel exactly when she'd first started taking guilty pleasure in causing that small vertical frown line to appear between her husband's brows.

A gust of wind threatened to rip the string of bunting from her hands, and she held tight to the highest rung of the wooden ladder. She'd carried the ladder down from the gardening shed herself that morning, quite enjoying the struggle of it. When she first climbed to the top, a childhood memory had come to her—a daytrip to Hampstead Heath with her mother and father, where she'd scrambled up one of the giant sequoia trees and looked south towards the city of London. 'I can see St Paul's!' she'd called down to her parents when she spotted the familiar dome through the smog.

'Don't let go,' her father had called back.

It wasn't until the moment he said it that Isabel had felt a perverse urge to do just that. The desire had taken her breath away.

A clutch of galahs shot from the top of the thickest banksia tree, a panic of pink and grey feathers, and Isabel froze. Someone was there. She'd always had a powerfully developed instinct for danger. 'You must have a guilty conscience,' Thomas used to say to her back in London, when they were new to one another and still entranced. 'Nonsense,' she'd said, 'I'm just unusually perceptive.' Isabel stayed motionless at the top of the ladder and listened.

'There now, look!' came the stage whisper. 'Hurry up and kill it with the stick.'

'I can't!'

'You can—you must—you took an oath.'

It was only the children, Matilda and John! A relief, Isabel supposed. Nonetheless, she remained quiet so as not to give herself away.

'Just snap its neck and get it over with.' That was Evie, her youngest, at nine.

'I *can't*.'

'Oh, John,' said Matilda, fourteen going on twenty-four. 'Give it here. Stop being such a pill.'

Isabel recognised the game. They'd been playing Snake Hunt on and off for years. It had been inspired by a book initially, an anthology of bush poetry that Nora had sent, Isabel had read aloud, and the children had loved with a passion. Like so many of the stories here, it was a tale of warning. It seemed there was an awful lot to fear in this place: snakes and sunsets and thunderstorms and droughts and pregnancy and fever and bushfires and floods and mad bullocks and crows and eagles and strangers—'gallows-faced swagmen' who emerged from the bush with murder in mind.

Isabel found the sheer number of deadly threats overwhelming at times, but the children were proper little Australians and delighted in such tales, relishing the game: it was one of the few activities that could be counted on to engage them all despite their different ages and inclinations.

'Got it!'

'Well done.'

A peal of exultant laughter.

'Now let's get moving.'

She loved to hear them gleeful and rambunctious; all the same, she held her breath and waited for the game to take them away. Sometimes—though she never would have dared admit it out loud—Isabel caught herself imagining what it might be like if she could make them all disappear. Only for a little while, of course; she'd miss them dreadfully if it were any longer than that. Say an hour, maybe a day—a week at most. Just long enough for her to have some time to think. There was never enough of it, and certainly not sufficient to follow a thought through to its logical conclusion.

Thomas looked at her like she was mad if she ever said as much. He had quite fixed ideas about motherhood. And wifedom. In Australia wives were frequently left alone to deal with snakes and fires and wild dogs, apparently. Thomas would get that faraway glint in his eye when he expounded on the subject, the romantic sentimentalist's fascination with the folklore of his country. He liked to picture her a

frontier wife, enduring hardship and keeping the home fires burning as he gallivanted around the world making merry.

The idea had amused her once. It had been funnier when she'd thought that he was joking. But he was right when he reminded her that she'd agreed to his grand plan—had leapt, in fact, at the opportunity to embrace something different. The war had been long and grim, and London was despicably mean and milk-washed when it ended. Isabel had been tired. Thomas was right, too, when he pointed out that life in their grand house was not anything like a frontier existence. Why, she had a telephone and electric lights and a lock on every door.

Which wasn't to say it didn't get lonely sometimes, and so very dark, when the children had gone to bed. Even reading, which had long been a source of solace for her, had started to feel like a rather isolating endeavour.

Without losing her grip on the ladder, Isabel craned to see whether the curve of the swag was going to fall high enough to accommodate the table beneath. Getting it just so was a trickier task than she'd imagined. Henrik always made it look easy. She could have—should have—asked him to do it before he'd finished work the previous day. There'd been no rain predicted; the bunting would have been fine to hang out overnight. But she couldn't. Things had changed between them recently, ever since she'd come upon him in the office that afternoon, working late when Thomas was in Sydney. She felt embarrassed now when she asked him to do menial jobs around the place, self-conscious and exposed.

She was simply going to have to do it herself. Really, though, the wind was a menace. She'd made the decision about the western lawn before it started up; she'd forgotten this was the less sheltered side of the garden. But Isabel had a stubborn streak: she'd been like it all her life. A sage friend once told her that people didn't change as they aged, they merely became older and sadder. The first, she'd figured, she couldn't do much about, but Isabel had been determined not to

permit the latter. Thankfully, she was, by nature, a very positive person.

It was only that the windy days brought with them agitation. They did lately, anyway. She was sure she hadn't always felt this turbulence within her belly. Once, in a different lifetime, she'd been known for having nerves of steel. Now, she was as likely to be overtaken with a sudden surge of alarm from nowhere. A sense that she was standing alone on the surface of life and it felt as fragile as glass. Breathing helped. She wondered whether she needed a tincture or tea. Something to settle her thoughts so she could at least sleep. She'd even considered a doctor, but not Maud McKendry's husband in the main street. God forbid.

However she did it, Isabel was going to put things right. That was the other New Year's resolution she'd made, although she'd kept it to herself. She was giving herself one more year to regain her equilibrium. People were depending on her, and it was time.

She would turn thirty-eight at her next birthday. Practically forty! A greater age than either her father or mother ever reached. Perhaps that was why she had been overcome lately with memories from her childhood. It was as if sufficient time had passed that she could turn around and see it with clarity across the vast ocean of time. She could barely remember crossing that ocean.

It was ridiculous to feel lonely. She had lived in this house for fourteen years. She was surrounded by more family than she'd ever had—God knew, she couldn't escape the children if she tried. And yet, there were times when she felt terror at her own desolation, the gnawing sensation of having lost something she could not name and therefore could not hope to find.

Down on the curve of the driveway, something moved. She strained to see. Yes, someone was coming, it wasn't her imagination. A stranger? A bushranger sweeping up the driveway on his horse, straight out of a Banjo Paterson poem?

It was the postman, she realised, as the brown paper-wrapped



parcel he was carrying came into focus. On New Year's Day! One of the virtues of living in a small country town where everyone knew each other's business was service outside usual hours, but this was exceptional. A flame of excitement flared inside her and her fingers turned to thumbs as she tried to tie the bunting so she could get down in time to intercept the delivery. She hoped it was the order she'd written away for some weeks ago. Her liberation! She hadn't expected it to arrive so soon.

But it was maddening. The string was tangled, and the wind was teasing it around the flags. Isabel struggled and cursed beneath her breath, glancing over her shoulder to observe the postman's progress.

She didn't want her package delivered to the house.

As he reached the nearest bend of the driveway, Isabel knew she would have to let go of the string if she were to scramble down the ladder in time. She vacillated for a moment and then called out, 'Hello!', and waved. 'I'm over here.'

He looked up, surprised, and as another gust of wind made her grip the ladder tight, Isabel saw she'd been mistaken. For although he carried a parcel, the stranger on the driveway was not the postman at all.

ADELAIDE HILLS, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

1959

*Christmas Eve*

Later, when he was asked about it, as he would be many times over the course of his long, long life, Percy Summers would say truthfully that he'd thought they were asleep. The weather had been hot enough for it. Throughout December, the heat had pushed in from the west, crossing the desert centre before driving south; there it had gathered, hanging unseen above them and refusing to budge. Each night they listened to the weather report on the wireless, waiting to hear that it was due to break; but relief never came. In the long afternoons they leaned over one another's fences, squinting in the golden light as the shimmering sun melted into the horizon beyond the edge of town, shaking their heads and lamenting the heat, the blasted heat, asking one another, without expectation of an answer, when it would finally end.

Meanwhile, tall and slender on the upsweep of hills that surrounded their river-run valley, the blue gums stood silent, streaky skins glinting metallic. They were old and had seen it all before. Long before the houses of stone and timber and iron; before the roads and cars and fences; before the rows of grapevines and apple trees and the cattle in the paddocks. The gums had been there first, weathering the blistering heat and, in turn, the cold wet of winter. This was an ancient place, a land of vast extremes.

Even by usual standards, though, the summer of 1959 was hot. Records were falling in the place where scores were kept, and the people of Tambilla were feeling every bit of it. Percy's wife Meg had taken to rising with the dawn to get the day's milk delivery inside the shop before it had a chance to spoil; Jimmy Riley said that even his aunts and uncles couldn't remember it so dry; and in everyone's mind, especially with the memories of 1955 so fresh, was the risk of fire.

'Black Sunday' the papers had taken to calling it. The worst fires



seen since the colony had been formed. Second of January had dawned four years ago, heavy with a sense of disaster brewing. A dust storm had rolled in overnight, gathered from the dry plains to the north; scorching wind gusts of a hundred kilometres per hour. Trees bowed and leaves hurtled along the ravines; sheets of corrugated iron were wrenched from the tops of farm buildings. Electric power lines broke free, sparking multiple blazes that raged and grew and finally met to form a great hungry wall of fire.

Hour by hour, the locals had fought it hard with wet sacks and shovels and whatever else they could find until at last, miraculously, in the evening, the rain had started to fall and the wind had changed direction—but not before forty or so properties had been lost, along with the lives of two poor souls. They'd been calling for a proper emergency fire service ever since, but the decision-makers down in the city had been too slow to act; this year, in the face of eerily similar conditions, the local branch had taken matters into their own hands.

Jimmy Riley, who worked as a tracker for some of the Hills farmers, had been talking about land clearing for ages. For thousands of years, he said, his ancestors had conducted regular slow burns, reducing the fuel load when the weather was still cool, so there wasn't enough left to start a fire when the earth was baking and the north-westers howling, and the merest spark was all it took. It seemed to Percy that men like Jimmy Riley, who knew this country from the inside out, weren't listened to anywhere near as often as they should be.

The most recent call had come through from Angus McNamara down near Meadows the week before. The mild, wet years since '55 had resulted in rich growth and the forest of Kuitpo was thick with foliage. One stray lightning bolt, one dropped match, and the whole lot would go up. They'd been at it all week and had finished slashing in time for Christmas. Just as well—storms were forecast over the weekend, but there was every chance the rain would pass them by and they'd be left with dry strikes instead. Meg had been less than thrilled when Percy told her he'd be gone during the busiest time

of year, but she knew it had to be done and that Percy wasn't one to shirk. Their boys had been drafted in as proxies at the shop and Meg had grudgingly agreed that it was no bad thing for the lads to have some real responsibilities. Percy had left them the Ford utility and taken Blaze on the run down to Meadows.

Truth be told, Percy preferred to go on horseback. He'd hated putting the ute up on blocks during the war, but you couldn't get petrol for love nor money—what little there was had been requisitioned by the army and other essential services—and by the time they were able to pull the motor down again, he'd got out of the habit of driving. They'd kept the ute for bigger deliveries, but whenever he could, Percy saddled up Blaze for the ride. She was an old girl now, not the fearsome young filly who'd come to them back in '41, but she still loved a run.

The McNamara place was a big cattle property this side of Meadows that most people referred to simply as 'the Station'. The house was large and flat with a wide verandah running all the way around and a deep iron awning keeping the heat at bay. Percy had been offered a spot in the shed to sleep, but he'd been happy to take his swag out under the stars. He didn't get much chance to camp these days, what with the shop keeping them so busy and the boys growing up. Sixteen and fourteen they were now, both taller than him and with boots as big; each preferring to spend time with friends rather than camp with the old man. Percy didn't begrudge his boys their independence, but he missed them. Some of his best memories were of sitting around the campfire telling stories and making each other laugh, counting the stars in the night sky, and teaching them real skills, like how to find fresh water and catch their own food.

He was giving them each a new fishing rod for Christmas. Meg had accused him of extravagance when he brought the presents home from town, but she'd said it with a smile. She knew he'd been looking for something to soften the terrible blow of losing old Buddy-dog in the spring. Percy had justified the cost by reminding her that Marcus,

in particular, was becoming a fine angler; he could do worse than to take it up full-time. Kurt, the elder of the two, would be heading to the university when he finished school. He'd be the first in their family to go, and although Percy tried not to make too much of a fuss over his glowing school reports, especially not in front of Marcus, he was proud as punch—Meg was too. Even with the recent distraction of Matilda Turner, Kurt had managed to keep his grades from slipping. Percy just wished his own mother were still alive to read the things Kurt's teachers wrote.

Heat ticked in the underbrush and bone-dry twigs snapped beneath Blaze's hooves. They had left the Station first thing and been traveling all day. Percy steered the old girl along the track, slow and steady, sticking to the dappled shade where he could. Ahead was the edge of Hahndorf; not much longer and they'd be home.

With the day's warmth on his back and the monotonous drone of hidden insects buzzing in his ears, a somnolence had come over Percy. The dry summer air brought back memories of being a boy. Of lying in his bed in the small back room of the house he'd shared with his mother and father, training his ears on the noises outside; closing his eyes so that he could better imagine himself into life beyond the window.

Percy had spent most of his twelfth year in that bed. It hadn't been easy for a lad who was used to roaming free to be struck down. He could hear his friends out in the street, calling to one another, laughing and jeering as they kicked a ball, and he'd longed to join them, to feel the blood pumping in his legs, his heart punching *one-two* at his rib cage. He'd felt himself shrinking, fading away to nothing.

But his mother came from strong Anglican stock and wasn't the sort to stand by while her son's self-pity turned him to stone. 'Doesn't matter if your body's grounded,' she'd said, in that firm, no-nonsense way of hers. 'There's other ways to travel.'

She'd started with a children's book about a koala with a walking stick, and a sailor and a penguin, and a pudding that miraculously reformed each time it was eaten. The experience was a revelation: even as a small child, Percy had never been read to. He'd seen books on his teacher's desk at school, but—influenced by his father, perhaps—had assumed them objects of punishment and toil. He hadn't realised that inside their covers were whole wide worlds, filled with people and places and hijinks and humour, just waiting for him to join them.

When Percy had heard the children's stories enough times that he could recite each one under his breath, he dared to ask his mother whether maybe there were others. She'd paused, and at first he thought he'd crossed an unseen line; that the stories were going to disappear, and he'd be left alone again with only his broken body for company. But then his mother had murmured, 'I wonder?', and disappeared deep into the coach house in the back corner of the garden, the place where his father didn't go.

Strange to think that if he hadn't been stricken with polio, he might never have met Jane Austen. 'My favourite,' his mother said quietly, as if confessing a secret. 'From before I met your father.' She hadn't the time to read it to him, she said—"The whole town will starve if I'm not there to sell them their milk and eggs!"—but she'd placed the book in his hands and given him a silent, serious nod. Percy understood. They were co-conspirators now.

It had taken Percy a while to get used to the language, and some of the words were new, but he hadn't anywhere else to be, and once he was inside there was no turning back. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*; they'd seemed at first to describe a world quite unlike his own, but the more he read, the more he came to recognise the people of his town in Austen's characters, the self-importance and ambitions, misunderstandings and missed opportunities, secrets and simmering resentments. He'd laughed with them, and wept quietly into his pillowcase when they suffered, and cheered them on when finally they saw the light. He had come to love them, he realised;

somehow, he had come to care for them—figments of a faraway author's imagination—with the same wholeheartedness he felt for his parents and his very best friends.

When he had exhausted the small stock of books his mother kept in her secret box in the shed, Percy convinced her to borrow new ones for him, three at a time, from the travelling library. He would read with his back to the door, ready to tuck the illicit novel away beneath the sheets at the sound of his father's footsteps in the hall. His dad would come upstairs after work each night to stand by Percy's bedside, a big man rendered helpless, frowning with impotent frustration as he asked whether Percy was feeling any better and silently willed his son's useless legs to recover.

And perhaps all that willing worked, because Percy was one of the lucky ones. He wasn't much good with a football anymore, and he was too slow on the cricket pitch, but with the help of a pair of splints, he slowly regained the use of his legs and, in the years to follow, an observer would've been hard-pressed to guess that the boy offering himself up as umpire was any less physically able than the other lads.

Percy didn't give up his reading, but neither did he shout about it. Fiction, non-fiction and, as he got older, and his changing feelings made him a stranger to himself, poetry, too. He devoured Emily Dickinson, marvelled at Wordsworth and found a friend in Keats. How was it, he wondered, that T.S. Eliot, a man born in America who'd made a life for himself in London—city of history, of Englishness; foreign to Percy, mysterious and grey-stoned—could look inside Percy's own heart and see there so clearly his own considerations about time and memory and what it meant to be a person in the world.

These thoughts he kept to himself. It wasn't that his secret was guilty; rather that he knew already that the other boys in Tambilla didn't share his interest. Even Meg had looked at him uncertainly when, during their courtship, he'd ventured to ask after her favourite book. She'd hesitated before answering, 'Why, the Bible, of course.'

At the time, he'd taken the response for piety—which was unexpected, and a bit surprising given some of the other things they'd said to one another. Later, though, when they'd been married for a year or two, he'd brought it up again and she'd looked confused before dissolving into laughter. 'I thought you were checking on my virtue,' she'd said. 'I hadn't wanted to disappoint you.'

By then she knew about his own reading habit and tolerated it as a benign quirk, sometimes even an unexpected benefit. She liked it especially on winter nights, as rain lashed the windows and the fire glowed orange inside, when he would read to her the adventures of Robinson Crusoe or David Copperfield. He knew better than to push it, though. An attempt to share Shakespeare's sonnets had been met with a confused smile. 'You've lost me there, love,' she'd said, running a hand across his back on her way to the kitchen. 'The words sound nice enough, I suppose, but why doesn't he just say whatever it is he means?'

Blaze was lathered with sweat, so Percy stopped at the trough in Hahndorf's main street to let her have a drink and a rest. He climbed down from the saddle and looped the horse's reins over a post.

It was after three, and the street was in shade, courtesy of the hundreds of giant chestnuts, elms and plane trees running down each side, planted more than half a century before. Some of the businesses were still open, and Percy was drawn to the window of a nearby woodturner's workshop, where a couple of shelves displayed an assortment of handmade items: bowls and utensils, some decorative carvings.

Percy went inside. 'There's a little wren,' he said to the girl behind the counter. The sound of his own voice was a surprise; it was the first time he'd spoken to anyone all day. 'May I have a closer look?'

The girl went to take it down, bringing the miniature figure back to Percy.

Percy marvelled as he turned it this way and that. He held it up to



the light, admiring the fragile set of the bird's neck, the jaunty sweep of its tail feathers. The likeness was remarkable, the workmanship fine.

'Is it a gift?' said the girl.

He placed the carving back on the counter with a nod. 'She collects them.'

The shopgirl offered to wrap the wren. She had a little piece of Christmas paper and a length of fine silver ribbon in the backroom where she'd been readying her own gifts, she said; it was as well to use the rest today. 'Won't be much call for it tomorrow, will there?'

After he had paid, Percy tucked the tiny wrapped present in his pocket and wished the girl a Merry Christmas.

'To you, too, Mr Summers,' she said. 'And give my best to Mrs Summers.' He must have looked surprised because she laughed. 'We're in the CWA together. Mrs Summers is going to love that little wren. She told me once that she has a special fondness for birds, that she's loved them ever since she was a child.'

Percy couldn't recollect the first time he'd laid eyes on Meg. In truth, she'd always been around. For a long while, she was just one of several younger kids making up the gang of them that used to gather in the dusty paddocks or on the edge of the river after rain looking for what passed as sport. She'd been a dirty little thing, but he hadn't judged her for that; they were all country kids who didn't have much use for spit and polish, unless it was to front up to church on Sunday, and even then only under threat of a thrashing from their mothers.

But he'd come across her one day when he was out by the disused copper mine, not far from where the trains ran through from Balhannah to Mount Pleasant. He went there when he wanted to escape his father's attempts to 'toughen him up'. She was sitting on the windowsill of the old stone crusher house, her face a hot mess of tears and snot and dirt. At the time, he'd wondered how on earth she'd got

herself up there, a tiny scrap of a girl like that. It was only later, when he got to know her, that he realised the angelic face belied a tough-as-nails survivor's spirit.

Percy had called out to ask her what was wrong, and at first she'd refused to tell him anything. He hadn't pushed it; he'd simply got on with his business, reading for a time in the shade of the big circular chimney before giving his legs a stretch, then poking about in the overgrown spear grass, searching for flat stones to skim across the dam. He could feel her watching him, but he made no further overtures. It must have looked like fun, what he was doing, though, because without a word she appeared at his side and began searching for her own skimmers.

They continued in a companionable silence, broken only on occasion when he whistled his appreciation at a bouncer she'd tossed along the water's surface. At lunchtime he split his sandwich with her. They ate without talking, but for the updates he gave when he spotted a bird of interest.

'Sacred kingfisher,' he said, pointing at the stout puffed-up chest in the lowest branch of a nearby she-oak.

'Is not. It's a kookaburra.'

He shook his head. 'Same family, but see how her darker feathers are turquoise? Just watch—she'll dart out when a lizard or beetle catches her fancy, and you'll see how they glisten in the sunlight.'

'What's that one then?'

'A red wattle.'

'And that one over there?'

Percy spotted the black-and-white bird with its bright yellow beak. 'Noisy miner. Can't you tell? She doesn't stop calling.'

'What about that one?' The girl pointed up at a small bird with a vibrant blue breast and long, straight tail feathers that jutted skyward.

'That's a blue wren—a superb blue wren, to be precise.'

'I like her best.'

'She's a he.'

'How can you tell?'

'The male birds are prettier. The female is brown, with only the tiniest bit of green on her tail.'

'Like that one over there?'

Percy strained to see where she was pointing. 'Yes, just like that.'

'You know a lot of things,' she observed.

'Some,' he agreed.

When it was time to leave, he asked Meg if she wanted to go with him. He could give her a lift back to town, he said. It was getting dark, and he could smell rain on the way. She hesitated a second before telling him that she wasn't going back at all: she had run away from home, that's what she was doing out here.

Percy realised then how little she was; her face was defiant, her arms wrapped tightly across her body, and yet there was a part of her, he could tell, that hoped he'd force her to return with him. Her vulnerability filled him with a sudden sense of deep sadness. Of anger, too. It was common knowledge that her daddy couldn't keep his fists to himself when he was raging. He'd had a bad war, was all Percy's mother would say about him. 'But show me a man who had a good one.'

Percy understood what she meant: that generation of men had learned that the only way to forget the things they'd seen and done, the mates they'd lost to the mud and the guns, was to drink themselves numb and take their nightmares out on those at home. Percy was luckier than most. His father was strict, but he wasn't violent. Violence would have required him to be present and he was far too distant for that.

The first big splats of rain began to fall. 'All right,' Percy said. 'But it's going to be cold out here tonight.'

'I have a blanket.'

'Clever girl. And I suppose you're right for dinner?'

'I brought some bread.'

He tucked his book back inside his backpack. 'Sounds like you've thought of everything.' He checked Prince's saddle, tugging on the stirrups. 'Only they said on the wireless that it's going to storm tonight. And bread isn't much chop on a cold, wet night.'

A cloud of uncertainty darkened her brow.

'You know,' he continued, 'my mum had a stew on the stove when I left this morning. She cooks it all day, just like my nana used to, and she always makes too much.'

'What sort of stew?'

'Lamb scouse.'

The girl shifted from one foot to the other. Her hair was quite wet now, her braids forming two limp ropes over her shoulders.

'I don't suppose you'd like to come and have a bowl or two? I can bring you back here afterwards.'

She hadn't stopped at two bowls; she'd had three, Percy's mother watching on with quiet pleasure. Susan Summers took the duties of Christian charity seriously and to have a waif arrive on her doorstep on a wild, wet winter's night was a welcome opportunity. She'd insisted on giving the girl a bath and, after the stew had been served and the dishes cleaned, tucked her up on the daybed near the crackling fire where she promptly fell into a deep sleep.

'Poor little pet,' Percy's mother said, observing the sleeping girl over her half-glasses. 'To think she planned to spend the night out there alone.'

'Are you going to tell her parents where she is?'

'I have to,' she said with a firm but troubled sigh. 'But before we let her go, we'll make sure she knows she's always welcome here.'

Percy had resolved to keep an eye out for her after that, and he hadn't had to look too far to find her. She started spending afternoons in the shop, talking to Percy's mum, and before he knew it, she was working behind the counter on weekends.

'The daughter I never had,' his mum would say, smiling fondly at Meg as she totalled up the accounts and made a list of reorders. 'Kind

and capable and not at all unfriendly on the eye.' Later, as Meg grew from a child into a woman: 'She's going to make someone a very good wife one day.' More pointedly, but not unkindly, her glance darting to Percy's stiff leg: 'A fellow with limited options would be fortunate to marry a girl like that.'

Hahndorf was behind them now and they'd entered the familiar territory of undulating hills that rolled towards the rise of Mount Lofty. Rows of leafy grapevines basked in the late afternoon sun and the warm air carried with it the faint scent of lavender from Kretschmer's flower farm.

Blaze picked up her pace as they neared the Onkaparinga Valley Road. Apple orchards gave way to olive groves, and when they crossed the Balhannah bridge she began to toss her mane, pulling gently towards the water. Percy tightened his grip on the reins, pressing a palm against the horse's neck. 'I hear you, old girl.'

Meg would have a lot for him to do when he got back. There were always last-minute orders to go out on Christmas Eve and attendance at Reverend Lawson's 6.30 pm church service was not negotiable. But it had been ten hours since they'd left the Station, with only a couple of short breaks. No matter how keen he was to get home, it didn't seem right not to take Blaze for a swim.

He continued west into the afternoon sun, but on the outskirts of Tambilla encouraged Blaze away from the street and down a steep grassy gully. The creek was narrow here, a tributary of the Onkaparinga River that rose in the foothills of Mount Lofty and wound its way through the valley. Blaze met the water gladly, nosing the reeds as she continued downstream. She reached the gap where the wire-and-wood fence had pulled away from its post and Percy hesitated briefly before giving her a small prod of consent. He was on Turner land now, but the house itself was still some distance away.

It was from this very direction that he'd approached the house the

first time he saw it. Funny—he hadn't thought back to that day in years. He'd been thirteen years old, returning to the shop after making a delivery. The polio might have taken away his speed on the cricket pitch, but up on Prince, his father's horse, he was no different from anyone else. His father had approved wholeheartedly—anything was better than finding his son inside with a book in hand—and took it a step further by offering Percy after-school work.

On horseback he could cover all of Hahndorf, out as far as Nairne, and then back towards Balhannah and Verdun. Piccadilly Valley strained things a bit, but his father was never one to turn down an order, so Percy just learned to ride faster. He was supposed to take the most direct route, but Percy always went cross-country. This was his place, these hills his home, and he loved them.

There were hardly any houses on Willner Road, and never any deliveries to make, but he went out of his way to ride along it because he liked the smell of wattle, and the road was lined with large, silvery-green bushes that erupted with yellow pompoms each August. It was late in the season, but on this particular day, in this particular year, there was still an abundance. Percy had taken a deep breath, savouring the sensation of the sun on his shirt and the pleasant earthy fragrance of eucalyptus and soil and sun-warmed flowers, and he'd leaned forward to lie across Prince's broad back, letting the rhythm of the horse's gait lull him like a baby in its mother's arms. In such a way he travelled for some time, until a call overhead drew his attention.

He blinked up towards the sheer, bright sky, where a couple of wedge-tailed eagles were turning lazy wheels together on the warm thermal currents. He followed them with his eyes before encouraging Prince onto the verge, through the gap in the fence, and onward in the direction of the pair. The top of the hill above which they were circling was covered with dense foliage. Percy began to wonder whether he might discover their nest. He'd heard that there'd been eagles sighted up near Cudlee Creek, but he'd never known them to settle this far south.



As Prince proceeded boldly uphill through the lank lean gums, Percy scanned their highest limbs. He was looking for a platform made from sticks and covered with leaves. Glancing between the lattice of branches and the sky—determined not to lose the eagles themselves—he didn't initially realise that he had crossed an invisible line into a different type of terrain. It was the altered sound that caught his attention first, as if a domed lid had been lowered and the canopy had suddenly drawn closer.

There had been a profound shift in the foliage around him, too, he now noticed. The run of gums and long yellowing grass had been infiltrated by other vegetation, so that silver trunks mingled with thick woody oaks, textured elms and cedars. Tangled brambles covered the ground and leafy creepers scrambled upwards, stretching between the trees so that it was difficult to find a large enough break through which to glimpse the sky.

The temperature had dropped by degrees within the shaded world. Birds were chattering to one another above him, silvereyes and lorikeets, swallows and honeyeaters and wrens. The whole place was teeming with life, but there was little chance, he realised, of spotting his eagles' nest.

He was turning Prince around to head back into town when a light caught his eye. The afternoon sun had hit something beyond the trees, causing it to shine like a torch through a gap. Curious, Percy urged Prince onwards up the dense, wooded slope. He felt like the character in a book. He thought of Mary Lennox as she discovered her secret garden.

The blackberry bushes had become too thick to ride through and Percy dismounted, leaving Prince beneath the shade of a thick-trunked oak tree. He chose a strong whip of wood and started carving his way through the knotted vines. He was no longer a boy whose legs didn't always do as he wished; he was Sir Gawain on the lookout for the Green Knight, Lord Byron on his way to fight a duel, Beowulf leading an army upon Grendel. So keen was his focus on his sword-

play that he didn't realise at first that he'd emerged from the forested area and was standing now on what must once have been the top of a gravel driveway.

Looming above him was not so much a house as a castle. Two enormous floors, with mammoth rectangular windows along each face and an elaborate stone balustrade of Corinthian columns running around all four sides of its flat roof. He thought at once of Pemberley, and half-expected to see Mr Darcy come striding through the big double doors, riding crop tucked beneath his arm as he jogged down the stone steps that widened in an elegant sweep as they reached the turning circle where he stood.

He knew then what this place was. This was the house that Mr Wentworth had built. It was a ridiculous folly, most people said, a grand stone hall like that, out here in the middle of nowhere. Only love or madness, they said, or perhaps a good dose of each, could have inspired a man to envisage—let alone build—such a house. There was no shortage of impressive stone dwellings in the Hills; from the earliest days of the South Australian settlement, the wealthy gentry had snapped up land on which to build country residences where they could wait out the summer in a kinder climate. But this house was like nothing Percy had seen before.

Mr Wentworth had had the plans drawn up in London and tradesmen shipped all the way from England. The cost had been astronomical—forty times the price of the next best house in South Australia. Imagine spending all of that money, people whispered incredulously, only to end up rattling around alone in an enormous monstrosity.

Percy agreed that the house was enormous—no one with eyes could argue against that—but he didn't think it a monster. On the contrary. It reminded him of the illustration on the frontispiece of his favourite book.

After that first day, he returned whenever he could. He didn't tell his friends about the house. Not at first. A strange, possessive feeling

came over him whenever he thought about it. The house had chosen to show itself to *him*. But being the sole keeper of such a tremendous secret soon became a burden, and he grew tired of being alone, and the value of the news was irresistible and got the better of him. He regretted the disclosure as soon as it was made. His friends wanted to race up to the house immediately. They wanted to see it for themselves, to go inside. When they smashed the window to gain entry, Percy felt the breakage like a wound.

Once or twice, he'd followed his mates inside. Most of the furniture that Wentworth had ordered and shipped from England was still there, covered with dust sheets. A large portrait of the old man hung on the wall above the stairs. Percy had sensed the eyes of the painting upon him—accusatory, betrayed—and he'd felt ashamed. Later, when he learned the story of Edward Wentworth, he realised why. The house had been built for love, but the young woman who'd inspired it had died from sunstroke on the sea voyage out to Australia. Mr Wentworth, who'd been waiting for her on the dock in Adelaide when the news arrived, never regained himself, bolting the doors so as to remain alone with his grief. The house became a shrine to his broken heart.

Eventually, Percy's friends grew tired of the place and moved on to new adventures. Percy, too, became busier: he married Meg, they took over the shop, and then there was the war. Next thing he heard about the house was that a fellow from Sydney had bought it. Turner was his name, and once the war ended, word spread around the town that he and his English wife would be moving in that spring.

That had been fourteen years ago now. There'd been a lot of changes to the place since then. The land had been cleared and the bones of Wentworth's garden discovered within the wildness and restored. Tradesmen, local and otherwise, had been engaged, and a great deal

of money spent (or so the local rumour mill went) to bring the house itself back to order.

Percy had been up there many times with groceries, and never failed to marvel, as he made his way around the graceful curves of the restored driveway, at the transformation. Sometimes, when he stopped to let Blaze catch her breath at the westernmost point of the climb, he would gaze up through the formal gardens towards the house and admire the verdant sweep of lawn and stone walls, the crabapples and camellias, and for a split second, if he let his eyes glaze, he would glimpse instead—as if through a veil—the overgrown, primordial approach as it had been for so long before the Turners had come . . .

But he wasn't going near the house today. Blaze had no interest in the climb up Wentworth Hill and Percy hadn't the time. He loosened the horse's reins and followed her lead. He knew where she was going. The old girl was making her way north to a place she loved, where the willow-lined banks widened, and the riverbed grew deep enough to form a waterhole, perfect for swimming.

The first thing he saw that was out of the ordinary was the jaunty flag suspended from a branch of the largest willow tree.

Percy pulled Blaze up short and lifted his hand against the sun. The scene came into focus. Several folks were lying beneath the tree, he realised, on blankets, and with baskets nearby. They were having a picnic. In the tree, along with the flag, someone had threaded a paper Christmas chain from branch to branch.

Percy was mildly surprised. In the middle of summer, at that point in the waxing afternoon, most sensible people were inside, doing their best to escape the heat; he hadn't expected to come across anyone out here. He stroked Blaze's warm neck, deliberating. He was trespassing, and although he knew they wouldn't mind—Mrs Turner herself

had invited him to cut across the paddocks whenever he was running deliveries—he didn't want to be seen to be overstepping the mark, taking advantage of her kindness. Like any man in town, he'd been made nervous by Mrs Turner when she first arrived. New people rarely moved to Tambilla, let alone to take up residence at the Wentworth place, and she was refined, dignified, very English.

He ought to turn around and leave. But if she were to wake and see him slinking away—well, wouldn't that be worse? More incriminating somehow?

Later—and he would be asked many times over the days, weeks and years ahead, including in the coming hours by the policemen in their interviews—he would say that a sixth sense had told him things were not quite as they seemed. Privately, he would wonder whether that was right; whether the scene had really seemed eerie or he simply remembered it that way because of what came next.

All he knew for sure was that, faced with the choice, he had given Blaze a gentle nudge and started towards the Turner family beneath the willow tree.

The sleeping children, he remembered thinking, looked like the etchings in his mother's precious family Bible, brought with her grandparents when they emigrated from Liverpool. Beautiful children they were, all of them, even the boy, John. Blond curls, like their father must have had when he was a child, and striking sea-blue eyes—all except the eldest girl, Matilda, whose dark hair and green eyes made her the spitting image of her mother. He knew Matilda a little. She had been in Kurt's class at school since they were small and lately the two had become sweet on one another. She was lying in the shade nearest the tree trunk, her straw hat on the ground beside her. The warm wind ruffled the hem of her skirt. Her feet were bare.

The other two children were on the blanket with their mother, wearing trunks with towels wrapped around their middles as if to

dry off. John was on his back, while the girl, Evie, was curled up on her side, her right arm outstretched. Percy was reminded of the many times he'd taken his boys swimming—in the creeks and lakes of the Hills, but also down at the beach, to Port Willunga and Goolwa and the other places that his own father had taken him when he was a boy, to fish and hunt for pipis. He could almost feel the happy post-swim drowsiness that came from having sun-dried skin.

An old-fashioned wicker crib hung from the straightest bough of the willow. It was Meg who'd told him that Mrs Turner had finally been delivered. They'd just come in from church a month or two before and she'd stopped at the hall mirror to unpin her hat and straighten her hair.

'Did you hear that Mrs Turner's had her baby?' she'd called after Percy, who was by then in the kitchen filling the kettle. 'Tiny little thing with a serious face. Five is that now?'

'Four,' Percy had answered.

'Well, better her than me,' Meg had said with a laugh. 'Never let yourself get outnumbered. That's my motto.'

He'd since seen Mrs Turner in town. A couple of weeks ago, she'd been carrying the babe in her arms, and he'd nearly knocked them over on his way out of the shop. He'd coloured with embarrassment, but she'd smiled at him as if it were no inconvenience at all to be trampled.

Percy had been carrying a large sack of flour for delivery so he couldn't lift his hat in greeting and had settled instead for a nod. 'Mrs Turner, how are you?'

'I'm well, thank you—we're both very well.'

His eyes had followed hers then to the small face in the blanket she held. A pair of ink-blue eyes stared up at him, pale brow knitted in that attitude of false wisdom that all newborn babies share and then shed with their first smile.

'So tiny,' he said.

'It's true what they say. One forgets.'



Meg joined them on the footpath then and started cooing over the baby, making elaborate apologies to Mrs Turner meanwhile. 'Not usually forgetful, my Percy, but when he does make a mistake, he's always sure to make it worthwhile. I trust you were happy with the fish paste I sent over?'

'It was delicious, Mrs Summers, and far too generous. I was coming to see you, to ensure you add the charge to my account. I've been meaning to telephone, but my mind hasn't been my own lately.'

'I don't wonder why,' Meg said, reaching up to rub the tip of her finger against the baby's cheek. Her ease was so contrary to Percy's own discomfort that he felt even more oafish by comparison. 'These little ones have a way of taking over, don't they? And what a lovely babe she is, too: so pretty.'

*She.* Percy hadn't realised Meg knew. He'd made a quick study of her face, searching for signs of grief or envy or anything else of note. But she was only smiling at the slumbering child.

To see Mrs Turner lying there on the blanket now made Percy's cheeks burn, as if he'd crept up on purpose. There was an intimacy to the set-up beneath the willow, a vulnerability: here was a family asleep together, evidence of their lunch still laid out haphazardly on the blanket between them—plates and cups, sandwich crusts and crumbs of cake.

The stillness of the scene struck him then. It was almost unnatural.

He took his hat from his head. Afterwards, he would wonder what it was, precisely, that made him do so. He was aware of the sound of his own breath: in and out, in and out.

Something was moving on the younger girl's wrist, he noticed. He took a careful step closer. And that's when he saw the line of ants crawling straight across her body, over her arm, and on towards what was left of the picnic food.

Everything else was static, silent. No one's features twitched in sleep. No one yawned and readjusted as the breeze grazed their skin. Not a single chest lifted or lowered.

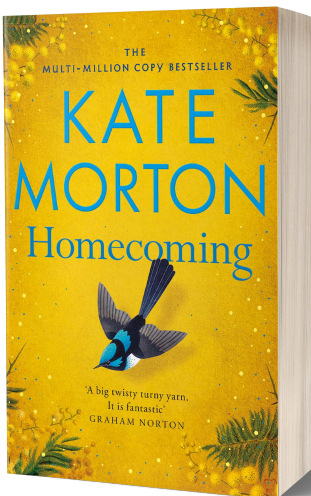
He went to Mrs Turner and knelt beside her head. Dampening his finger, he held it near her nose, willing it to cool with an exhalation. He realised that his finger was shaking. He looked away into the middle distance, as if that might somehow help him, as if by concentrating his senses he could force her to breathe.

Nothing. There was nothing.

Percy backed away. He stumbled over the lunch basket, flinching at the jarring noise of cutlery and crockery clanking together. Still no one stirred. Not one of them so much as moved a muscle.

With trembling hands, Percy jammed his hat back on his head. He tried to stop his thoughts from racing, tumbling, colliding with one another. Realisation, shock, fear—he tried to clear his head of the lot of them so he could work out what should happen next.

Blaze was nearby, and without another moment's hesitation Percy grabbed her reins and found his way into the saddle, urging her onwards in search of help.



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