

Lost in our weekend

For years I have felt I don't belong amongst others. I would be readily classified as a loner, and I'm happy to be thought of as one. While I was gregarious as a child, always surrounded by friends and family, I now prefer solitude and long, quiet moments of reflection. Even in these latter days of adulthood, I stand in the background, against a wall or in a corner, while my wife throws one of her noisy and chaotic parties. When others are out on the town, carousing, roistering, I'm at home reading a book, or staring at the stars through a window, wondering if there's something transcendent waiting at the end of the lifelong struggle.

And right now, life does come across as an unwelcome struggle. Though not wholly estranged from my wife Wendy, there's the sensation that we're in our last days, the last days of *chez nous*, as it were. We don't go fishing any longer, our trips to the cinema have ended, and something simple like a shared coffee at a café doesn't seem to happen. Our home, our domesticity, the shared life and obligations, they're all burdensome for both of us now, and I don't know how to bring us back to the happy stasis of before. Perhaps I'm beyond caring as it's comfortable to think sometimes, but I know I'm kidding myself. I do care and I have to admit that my cares are more concerned with the weight of the feelings thrust upon me more than anything else. Those feelings are primarily distrust and doubt. Distrust from a loved one is something I don't want to get used to. I don't like the gnawing, endless feeling that I'm walking on shaky ground, waiting to be toppled over. It destroys my everyday confidence, and the desire to do anything well. Mostly, I just want to drift through life unobserved and untroubled, which I suspect are ambitions shared by many.

Yet wherever I go, that consuming feeling is there, clinging like a canker, or the remnants of a bad dream that persists through the day. It's nauseating, enervating, and it is like being on a roller-coaster that never stops. Driving away from the crowds and noise on my day off was supposed to be cathartic and soothing for the mind, but the emptiness and the quiet of the country have done nothing but amplify my troubled state of mind.

Just after the T-junction with Naughtons Gap Road, I pulled over, noting the old dark hill to my right, the local prominence. It's something out of my childhood, a prominence I could see every morning when I rose at dawn on my uncle's farm just a little bit farther down the road. Muckleewe Mountain it's grandly called, clad in ancient dry eucalyptus forest that the colonisers of this rolling hilly land left alone. An old farm road skirts a creek that runs along the foot of the mountain, and behind that, there's a valley with erstwhile logging camps now given over to backpackers and other

outdoor adventurers. It's been years since I was up that way, up a narrow windy little track that barely deserved the label of road. Four-wheel drive territory back then, but it was a cinch in my uncle's old Land Cruiser. I doubted anything had changed about that track since I'd last been there. Back then, the trees had overhung the road, forming a gloomy avenue that was dark even in the middle of a summer's day. I used to think it was a tunnel of doom, leading to some nefarious realm where terror and darkness reigned. Of course, I experienced nothing worse than leeches or getting scraped by branches and twigs. No yowies, no bunyips, no alien invasions or anything of the sort. No demons, no devils, nothing bargaining for my soul or happiness.

Today, the noon sun hung halfway up the winter sky, which was cloudless and still. I could smell nothing but automotive scents wafting from my car as I pulled over to the side of the road. There was little sound as well; what breeze there was drifting along silently. It was an opportune moment for reflection, to attune with nature or simply soak up the warmish sun. I was doing all three in my own way, standing beside my car, with the dark green loom of Muckleewee Mountain above.

The scenery beyond the road reminded me that things moved slowly in this part of the world, except when the gas companies came to town. Then events quickened, people got motivated, banners were drawn up and causes hotly espoused. But the gas people and their opponents were gone now, and the humid, stillness of the short autumn period had passed. The winter quiet had returned to Bentley, New South Wales but I needed to make noise, and break into the still symphony of nature. There was something I had to do.

The mobile tower perched on top of nearby Naughtons Gap gave my phone a strong signal and I speed-dialled the most-used number.

My wife answered in her crisp, office professional voice.

'Wendy?' I asked, not that it could be anyone else, but it was as good a gambit as any other.

Her voice altered from manufactured politeness to something querulous and it was a poignant reminder that we'd argued earlier that morning. 'What the hell are you doing calling me now?'

Whenever nerves got to me, I tried to insert some levity into things. Almost always, it was awkward and strange-sounding. 'It's Wendy time,' was what I came up with, knowing she'd think me ridiculous.

'What?'

I sighed inwardly and I had to explain. 'It's a song, Wendy Time.'

No, she didn't get it, and it seemed I only made her angrier. 'I'm at work, and I can't talk for long. You know my boss doesn't like personal calls.'

'I figured out where we can go for a few days,' I said, hoping desperation wasn't evident in my voice. 'It's a small campsite west of Lismore in Bentley, nestled in a valley behind this big hill. Just

forest and creeks with nothing really there except solitude and nature, the sorts of things we'd be after in a weekend.'

'Solitude, nature and leeches!' she said emphatically.

'Funny that's the first thing you thought of. Leeches got me all the time as a kid but they're easy to deal with. So what do you say? It'd be a great couple of days.'

'A great couple of days to do what exactly?'

'Well...recharge. Clear the air.'

There was an uncomfortable pause while she thought that over, then, 'Why some camp in whoop-whoop? Why not Shaw's Bay or Lennox? We could even head south to Evans or Iluka.'

'We could, but I wanted to give this place a go.'

'Some forlorn place in the middle of nowhere.'

'Not quite the middle of nowhere. It's a twenty minute drive, if that. It's quiet and it's pleasant. Just what we're after.'

Wendy chuckled mirthlessly. 'You know what I'm after, do you?' My shoulders slumped as I thought I'd blown it, but she added, 'Sure, I'm in. I'll see you when you get home.'

'OK. Are you going to cancel the laser treatment?'

She seemed amused but in my current state of mind, I couldn't be sure. 'I suppose. It'd save a few hundred dollars.'

Among many other things it'd save, I thought. Before I could say anything else to her, she hung up. In the short space after that, the dark dirtiness of mistrust returned and I scowled at the asphalt of the road. What was I meant to do? There was only so much verbal reassurance I could give. Wendy remained convinced that I was having an affair with her sister, Melissa. Totally convinced I had cheated, and she was even about to have my tattooed name removed from her shoulder, ergo the question about the laser surgery. Before the call, it seemed like there was nothing I could do or say, but her agreement to go camping this weekend was a putatively positive breakthrough. In a few moments, the optimism lessened and the doubts returned. Perhaps this weekend had the potential to solve nothing, and could even exacerbate things irreparably.

I turned my gaze to the hulk of Mucklewee Mountain and a strange foreboding came over me. I'd always thought the hill had looked impressively salient against the sky, but now there was something disquieting about it, almost like it was out of place amongst the nearby hills of the region, as if it were a dire interloper amidst the natural runs and folds of the landscape. As a kid, I imagined all sorts of bizarre things about the hill: a landing place for aliens, the abode of gods and demons, a fantasy realm where naiads and fauns danced by moonlight. It set my young imagination

on fire back then and now I had a fancy that it was all of what I depicted and more. As I stared at it, the sky seemed to dim and the blue transmogrified into a dirty grey at the edges of my vision. Mucklewee Mountain was siphoning the warmth and vigour from the air and soon I'd be drawn into it from my vantage on the roadside.

A car sped past along Bentley Road and the illusion was shattered. Mucklewee Mountain returned to being a grandly named hill, cloaked in old growth bushland.

I drove down Back Creek Road and found the way into the valley. It had improved since my jaunt as a kid in the Land Cruiser. The road was graded now and wasn't too much drama for a car to get to the top, though there were a couple of rattling bridges and overflows to keep things interesting from an attentive driving point of view. The road ended at a small turnaround and there was a fence leading to an intermittently maintained campsite. No toilets, no barbecue facilities and not much else. This was only a nature reserve, not a national park, so it didn't get the attention the more popular locales in the region received.

I got out and was struck by the intense stillness of the bush. I could only hear the sounds of nature if I stopped and concentrated. A sleepy sugar glider watched me from a branch, sitting comfortably next to the hollow which I assumed was its home. With a final sniff of the air, it retreated into the hollow.

I pushed open the gate to the campsite, and went beyond it down a steep path to a narrow defile between two folds of the mountain. A small creek ran noisily away from the campsite through the dense scrub and I followed it down for a bit, shoving my way through the tangle. At a bend in the creek, there was a small glade with the old remains of a camp. Glazed over bottles and squashed beer cans were strewn about and some of the grass had still not grown back. I took a seat there and idly threw sticks into the creek. Did an ancestor of this country's original inhabitants laze here for a spell musing like I was doing? Had their significant other accused them of sleeping with their sister or brother? I imagined that was as much a sin and a destruction of family trust in Indigenous Australian culture as it was to those of European descent. Some things about humans are universal, no matter what the cultural veneer may suggest.

Despite the camp seeming as if it hadn't been used in months, I could still smell old smoke. The strewn about mess was a blight on the natural green of the bush and I began to gather up the bottles and cans in a small pile, with an eye to collecting them in a bag later on for disposal. Near the edge of the fire, there were a couple of burned page fragments, from a book judging by the texture of the undamaged paper. I knew I'd read it before, but the name of it wasn't coming to mind. Another fragment said, *I believe there is a theory that men and women emerge finer and stronger after suffering*. It was tugging at the fringes of consciousness and I berated myself for not remembering

where I'd read those words. None of the other fragments jogged the memory as I put them with the rest of the rubbish. Strange that someone would find a book so convenient to use as fuel for a fire.

The glade returned to some kind of natural normalcy with the garbage piled up. There were lots of shades of green, probably a hundred different hues of it in the glade. Green with growing life and chlorophyll. I loved that eucalyptus smell and I'd waggled school with Wendy in a bush much like this one. The first time I ever realised that maybe, a girl liked me. She showed it in a funny way, naturally. I was taking a piss discreetly when she came up behind and sent me arse over tea-kettle. Wet myself like a little kid and I had to take an unplanned swim in a farmer's dam to wash my shorts out. Wendy thought it was hilarious and she has this American sitcom style sense of humour where physicality was the thing. Jokes barely raise a smile with her, but if you slip over or walk into a wall, she'd double up and giggle.

I was fifteen that day and so was Wendy and where I was a boy, she was as much woman as she was now. Sometimes I think not letting her go back then is the biggest regret in my life. We dated young, we married young and after ten years, we're still relatively young, and childless through choice. We were childhood sweethearts who married a month after I turned eighteen. Where could we have been had we not stayed together in school and instead played the field? Was that why Wendy was so quick to accuse me of infidelity? I think she knew my mind wandered down the paths of alternative reality and wishful thinking. In fairness, I think her mind travelled the same road. I couldn't blame her if it did as these thoughts can come totally unbidden.

The crux of it all is that I don't truly know if I did have an affair or not. I'd been high as twenty kites on some of a friend's home-grown weed and I woke up the next morning in bed, with Melissa lying on the bedroom floor, naked save for a pair of undies. Wendy had woken up, saw her sister and put two and two together, and unfortunately came up with three not four. From that moment hence, I was an adulterer to Wendy. Melissa, perversely, wouldn't say yea or nay to whether anything had happened either, settling for conspiratorial smiles and winks. That kind of perverse reticence exiled her from Wendy's life. She was sent packing that very morning, and I genuinely thought I'd be asked to find new accommodations too.

Melissa lived in Tweed Heads and only occasionally came down to Lismore to visit her big sister. There had been a tremendous amount of sibling rivalry and that had only eased slightly as both girls entered adulthood. Whatever Wendy could do, Melissa had to do better, or faster. Strangely, for most of our acquaintance she had hated me, believing I wasn't the right one for her big sister, calling me a creep and so on. There was something about me she didn't like, she told her sister, and what that was she wasn't apparently able to define.

Like us, Melissa also married early, to a fellow named Kenny. Unlike us, they hadn't lasted, with both of them separating less than two years after they'd married. Since that time, Melissa had tried hard to find some kind of stability in life and love, and hadn't found it to date. My belief was that she envied our relationship and its apparent constancy, and so she was transferring that childhood sisterly rivalry into the realm of adult jealousy. I never asked her if that were the case; it was not a subject I wanted to broach with Melissa, predominantly as I wanted to keep the peace with both sisters, and not stir up waters best left still.

The air chilled slightly. I wondered if I'd lingered too long wallowing in my thoughts, the day slipping away to late afternoon. The shadows behind the trees and shrubs were darker now, their edges more defined. The air was thicker too, and I took great gulps of it in as I left the creek side. Odd scents drifted by, things I couldn't classify or ascribe to any tree or flower. At first I thought it was the lingering smoke from the little camp, but it wasn't that. It wasn't that kind of smell at all, as once I stopped, I recognised it with a slow dread. I stopped and sniffed the air like some curious bloodhound. It was attar, an incense Hindu Indians often burned at their funerals. Essential oil of roses...not what one would expect to smell out in the Australian bush. After a while I lost the scent, as what happens when you try to catch one for too long. It wasn't long before I began to doubt I'd smelled anything at all. Things hadn't changed; the creek still trickled along, the trees still stood tall and sentinel-like and the ground was solid under my feet.

At that moment I thought I heard a car. I imagined Wendy driving up here at full speed, zooming up the old dirt road, heedless of potholes or half-decrepit bridges. That's what it was becoming; a series of fancies and mental wanderings where the good will and love I had for her were succeeded by visions of her wanting to get even, or worse. I couldn't even picture her smile. All I could envision was her reddened, angry face, and how loud she could get when she shouted. I wondered why it was such a struggle to see the positives and the wonderful through all the darkness. Perhaps negative energy was self-perpetuating and I was feeding off this malaise in some way. My mind began to descend further into a bleak pit thinking that it had all been for nothing, a complete waste of more than half of our lives. Years past, shortly after we were married, my job was threatened by possible redundancy. Wendy had told me then if I lost my job that our marriage would not be worth having, and although she has since claimed she was exaggerating, it filled me with a coarse fear that I have never been able to fully put behind me. Intermittently, I feel our marriage hangs on some kind of portentous thread, waiting for a calamity to sever it. Maybe the calamity had finally arrived in our lives.

I stood by the small, rushing creek feeling the afternoon coalesce into something solid. The air itself was congealing into some sort of matter that shouldn't exist and possibly didn't outside of my mind. I couldn't tell though. If I reached out to it, it'd recede and I'd find only air between my

fingers. Was I imagining this? I had glimpses of philosophical insight, visions of Cartesian demons, brains in vats, and living knee-deep in a computer simulation. Was this creek and the bushland especially made for me? Did things exist because my eyes said they did? Could I blink rapidly, and get rid of every trouble bedevilling me?

Get a grip, I said to myself. It was too pleasant a day to let one's mind slip into the abyss. I laughed to myself and took in some fresh air – normal clean air – and knelt by the creek, enjoying the cool, wet touch as it played over my hand. Birds and insects carried on with their lives in the branches above me and there was the distinct burbling of a frog from somewhere. Yet there seemed to be human voices underneath the chorus of arboreal creatures, an avid yet indistinct muttering. I paused to listen but they were elusive. Was I even hearing them? I rose from the creek bank and tried to put it aside as yet another fancy. Naturally, the impressions and feelings stayed with me as I climbed back out of the little valley, haunting the path where I'd walked.

I hurried back to my car. As I did, the bush seemed to close in again, the scents and the chirps and the suffused green surrounding me took on a slightly more profound measure. Like someone entranced, I stopped and stared at the trees running up the slope, listening to the chorus of bell miners dinging away in the canopy. There was nothing beyond bare nature I could see or hear, and yet...there was that singular disquiet you get when it seems you have an invisible audience, like something or someone has you in their sights. But I was alone as far as I knew. There were no other cars in the little parking bay and apart from the birds flitting above, I was the only animate thing. The sugar glider had disappeared.

After pondering the stillness for a bit, I opened the car door and got in, then headed back to Lismore.

I pulled into our driveway, stopped the engine and got my phone out. I'd retrieved Melissa's number from Wendy's phone that morning. There were the nerves you have when you deal with a beautiful and forceful personality that actively dislikes you, and I was grateful I did not have to deal with her face to face. I dialled her number, fairly sure she wouldn't know who it would be calling.

She answered on the second ring, sprightly and snappy. 'Yep?'

I could nearly hear the whirring of gears and sprockets as she waited for me to say something more. 'I really need you to tell Wendy one way or the other what happened. If anything did.'

'One way or the other, huh?'

'She's hell-bent in believing we did something.'

'I don't know.'

'How could you not know?' I protested.

'How could *you* not know?'

'I'm sure nothing went on,' I said, not too convincingly. 'In my gut, I'm positive nothing did.'

'Then that's all Wendy needs, hey?'

'Obviously not. Could you just tell her that nothing happened, please?'

'You want me to lie to her?'

It wouldn't be the first time, I felt like saying. 'No, I just want you to say that to the best of your knowledge, nothing happened.'

'You still want me to lie to her. Listen, you're a nutcase and she's better off without you. If we did have sex, then I'm mighty friggin' glad I don't remember it, because I'd be disgusted otherwise. If she boots your arse out, then oh well. Deal with it. And yeah, I'm going to tell her you rang too, trying to coddle me into saying something for your benefit. I hope you become the ex-brother-in-law soon.'

That was that. I decided to beat Melissa to the punch and called Wendy myself, who didn't sound particularly surprised I had contacted her sister. Gratefully, she didn't sound aggrieved either so that was one consolation. When she got home later that evening, I was subjected to a long, penetrating stare, but little else. Ordinarily a man might have a friend to talk this situation over with, but I was a loner and any attempts I had made to make friends had inexplicably come to a sudden end.

We spent the evening in different parts of the house and I preceded her to bed, determined that all would be resolved one way or the other on Muckleewe Mountain.

Saturday morning was cool and crisp, and a thin fog clung to the sides of Muckleewe Mountain as we drove up the narrow road. It swirled and eddied at the passing of the car, with me imagining strange shapes and phantasmal things. It was quiet when we got to the campsite, almost if the chill and fog had laid some sort of silencing effect upon the wildlife. Even the wind itself had quietened.

'Great day for an execution,' Wendy commented, as we unpacked our things from the car. 'Didn't Marie Antoinette lose her head on a day like this, cold and foggy?' We had watched a History Channel documentary on the French Revolution, though at the time I only paid tangential attention to the show, being more interested in a book I was reading.

Apropos of losing one's head, I stood a very good chance of being homeless at the cessation of this weekend. I could beat a miserable retreat to my parents' home but I would be subjected to endless, sapping questions about why my marriage failed. Then I'd be labelled a failure; condemned to be some kind of spurned prodigal son. I wasn't a prideful man, but that option wasn't one at all. No, I could see myself living in my car or at the cheapest hotel I could find until alternatives were arranged. This was to say nothing of the remorseless separation that Wendy and I would have to

undertake, the division of property and what was worst of all, I would see her as something in the past tense. She *was* my wife, not *is*. I glanced at where she sat on a log, staring blankly at the fog beyond the campsite. I have heard it described as a knife in the guts kind of feeling, knowing that your relationship is coming to an end, the inchoate heartbreak, but it felt more like a multitude of tiny needles pressing all over. It was nauseating in a way too, and though I never threw up, there was disquiet in my stomach all of that morning.

I set up the tent and lit the burner to provide some kind of heat to warm hands. We made for a desolate sight amidst a quiet winter morning in the Northern Rivers, we two alone among the greyness of the fog and the variegated greens beyond it. There was none of the humidity or the moistness so characteristic of this region...no, instead it was European in its still bleakness, an Impressionist painting relocated to the Australian hinterland. I had a notion that the parochial were trooping off to church through the mist somewhere, the faithful stodgily putting one boot before the other on their way to purported salvation. All we needed were the tolling of bells, and maybe Quasimodo swinging through the ropes.

‘What planet are you on?’

The sudden sound of her voice startled me. ‘Huh? Just thinking.’

‘No shit. What about?’

‘Stuff for later,’ I temporised.

‘All right, but don’t let it put a damper on this weekend, right? I’m going to check this creek out you were talking about.’

‘Just along that path there,’ I said, pointing the way. ‘Don’t get lost in the fog.’

‘I’ll scream and you’ll come,’ she said, grinning while filling her vaporiser up with gear she’d bought yesterday from her favourite dealer. She moved away and called out, ‘I see the path.’

‘Great,’ I answered. I was enlivened by her smile for a brief period but the melancholia swallowed it just as easily. I watched her lithe form disappear into the fog and I set my eyes back on the small flickering flame of the gas burner. So I was alone with my thoughts again. It was arguably marijuana that had led us down this unpaved track and there was Wendy off to disorganise her mind even more. For my part, I was totally turned off the stuff.

One dark and dire thought passed through my head as I sat there. Did I have the will to remain with Wendy even if she didn’t walk out on me this weekend. After a bit of analysis, I came to the conclusion that the loving togetherness of our early years had deteriorated into some kind of cohabiting tedium. Did I seriously think this weekend would reinvigorate that? Give a new spark to a jaded relationship? Was my relationship with Wendy really worth saving? They were questions I had no answers for yet. I am a firm believer in the theory that things naturally sort themselves out, a

fatalistic pseudo-philosophy that so far has worked out for me the majority of times. Yet my hunches let me know that this weekend was to be an exception and I was going places I had never been.

To keep myself from wallowing in a slew of negativity, I gathered fallen branches and sticks and made a pile near the campsite. I chopped the larger pieces into more manageable sizes. At least tonight, we would have a warm fire, perhaps proving conducive to a meeting of the minds.

After that was done, I followed Wendy down the creek to the small glade. She was lighting up as I came along, her feet splashing the tinkling creek water. She inhaled and handed me the vaporiser, though I declined it. I took a seat nearby and rearranged the little pile of rubbish I'd made the day before.

'Do you expect other campers?' she asked, her voice husky from the smoke.

'I wouldn't have a clue. This place isn't on the tourist trail.'

Her eyes traced out various overhanging branches. 'Not sure what the great attraction is here. It's bush like you'd get anywhere else in the country. There's no toilets and this creek isn't much to swim in.'

'We can be alone here.'

It might have been the way I said it, but Wendy turned to stare at me, one of her trimmed eyebrows raised. 'Oh really? Ha-ha wow.' She lay back on the blanket she'd brought with her, legs dangling in the water. 'Melissa knows I'm here.'

'I'm happy for her,' I said petulantly. Right then, I didn't particularly want to hear her name. 'It's just a pleasant jaunt away from it all. From everyone.'

'Maybe other people will turn up. Families that can't think of anywhere else better to go.'

'Give this camp a chance please,' I said. 'We've only been here an hour, if that.'

'Hmm,' Wendy kicked out and sent the water splashing into the trees. 'You can be a weird guy at times with your moods and the off-kilter things you say. It's funny the way you drove up here, hunched over the wheel, mind intent on something. What were you thinking?'

'The right things to say to you.'

'The right things or the true things?'

'They're identical from where I sit.'

I heard her suck in on the vaporiser. With a held-in voice, she said, 'This is our make-it-up weekend?'

‘I guess so,’ I conceded. There was a bit of consideration of what to say next, then I came out with it. ‘I get the impression I only need to blink the wrong way and you’d end it with me. Like you need an excuse to carry out what you had in mind.’

For sure that got her attention wholly. ‘You think I was waiting for some kind of cock up on your part to kick you out?’

‘Seems that way to me, Wendy. I think you’re feeding off the antagonism or the high moral ground you’re inhabiting right now so if you want to end it with me, go ahead. I’m not going to kiss your arse any longer.’

‘Is that what you were doing?’ she asked. Then she gave her trademark fluttery laugh. ‘Why even come up here then? Why didn’t you just get your shit together and leave?’

‘That’d seal it with you that I did something. Tacit proof.’

‘No, when you take up with Melissa is when I start believing that.’

‘That won’t happen. She hates the ground under my feet. Look Wendy, it bothers me that you’re ready to ditch ten years on something you thought went on. Not fact, not reality, but supposition, so don’t blame me if I think you’re looking for a way out.’

‘I think you’re the one who wants out,’ she said. ‘I know you’ve hemmed and hawed about it. You want kids and you know I don’t.’

‘I don’t want kids,’ I said. It was true, I didn’t. I have never pictured myself as father material.

‘Well, a seven year itch that’s stretched out to ten. Don’t accuse me of wanting to break up with you on a whim. I think nothing would make you happier in the wash-up.’ I felt her eyes on me, and I turned about to meet them. ‘Strange thing is, I don’t think you know how to be happy any more. You brood like some old crotchety guy in the nursing home.’ A flicker of annoyance passed across her face, and she looked away. ‘So why this little out of the way joint? Why here?’

‘It appealed to me.’

She threw a twig at me in disgust.

‘You want a better one?’ I asked. ‘OK, so I came up here as a kid and it’s one of those feral little places hidden away that nobody knows about. We’ll probably be the only ones here this weekend. Solitude, Wendy, it’s all about being alone. Alone with you, that is.’

‘Bullshit, we could’ve been alone in Byron or Evans. Somewhere sunnier and less out of the way.’ She took another lungful of smoke and lifted her gaze up to the trees again. ‘This fog. It’s creepy. Horror film stuff.’

‘A camp in this bush is creepy?’ I was just making conversation with Wendy by then. Honestly, I found the cloying fog to be just as eerie as she did.

‘Yeah, anything could be hiding in the fog. Mass murderers, Boston Stranglers, who knows?’ She slipped off her trackpants and went in the water. Despite of the winter ambience, she sat waist-deep in the creek, holding the vaporiser above her head. ‘The water’s not that cold.’

‘The marvellous things marijuana does,’ I said to myself, shaking my head. There was no way I was going to get in the water. The weather was far too chilly for that kind of thing.

‘I’ve always found forests and the bush unsettling,’ Wendy went on. ‘I think Australian forests are among the most impenetrable in the world. People get lost in these places without trying, and even Aborigines have been lost and they’d know the bush better than most.’

‘There’s nothing in the bush to really spook you,’ I said. ‘We don’t have tigers and lions. The scariest thing around here would be the spiders, or the snakes, and they both run away if a human comes close.’

‘It’s not the animals.’ Her vaporiser was out of weed and making a face, she threw it on the bank. ‘It’s the bush itself...its history. The place.’

I was going to make a joke about stalkers and stranglers, but I could tell it wasn’t humans she was talking about. It was the forest itself and it was strange hearing Wendy have these kinds of misgivings. I’d thought she was too strait-laced for this, but there she was, surprising me with something new, even in this, in what could be our last day.

‘I had a bad experience in Dorrigo as a kid,’ she said. ‘I got lost in the national park there behind our house. We’d gone out exploring when I was about eleven and Melissa was eight or so. Of course, she found her way home after we separated. They had to send the SES out looking for me and it was after midnight when the searchers found me. I was barely two hundred metres off the main road, and though I could hear cars, I was too scared to move.’

I’d known the sisters were from Dorrigo but little else apart from that. Here was something else new I was just learning about her.

‘Why couldn’t you move?’

‘Once it got dark, I just stayed put,’ she said. ‘You seen the size of the national park down that way on a map? It extends halfway to Armidale and it’s not a place you want to go wandering in unless you know what you’re doing. I didn’t know any better as a kid, and Melissa called me a coward for not wanting to go bush that day. I still think she wanted me to get lost.’

Dripping water, Wendy got to her feet and held on to a branch to stave off the wobbles. After getting out of the creek, she knelt and pulled her trackpants on and wandered away towards our campsite. ‘I’m going to grab the Aerogard out of the car,’ she called out. ‘These flies are giving me the shits.’

The smell of marijuana still lingered. Years ago, I smoked as avidly as the next guy. My flatmates at the time before I started living with Wendy grew plants hydroponically in a walk-in cupboard with these LED lights bought cheap from China. So the stuff was plentiful and cheap, sometimes free. But I'm not going to touch it any more. It's only a source of unsolvable trouble.

I pondered then if I'd said the wrong things to Wendy. I'd definitely said factual things to her, but I wasn't sure if I was mentally prepared for separation. The house we shared was a hand me down from her father, and it remained in his name. So I'd be the one who would leave. Now I was gutted. Inside, I knew I'd just blown ten years of marriage and fifteen or so of relationship.

I was deep in contemplation, perhaps finally relaxing, then I thought I saw the figure of a woman.

Slightly to the side of a giant brush box tree, a shadow moved into the light. In an instant she stepped out from behind a tree, strands of her hair hanging loosely across her face. Our eyes met, and there was the flash of a smile. Then she was gone as quickly as she'd appeared. The first thing I thought was that I'd imagined her as there was no Melissa behind the tree, or anywhere else around, but it sure as hell looked like her. There was nobody at all. The bush was quiet save for the constant chiming of the bell miners. Ding, ding, ding, a natural dissonance from high above.

I got a whiff of incense again. Kneeling by the rubbish pile, I rifled through it, looking for burnt incense sticks or cones. There was nothing. At this point, I hadn't seriously expected to find anything, but I needed to ground myself in reality, keep in touch with the everyday.

I arrived at the conclusion that I'd seen things, hallucinated. Melissa was not up here with us, and that was final. She was far away, living that vibrant life of hers. For my own peace of mind, I pushed through the bush past where I had seen her. The ground fell away quickly down a steep wooded slope. If Melissa had climbed that, it would have been an impressive feat of endurance.

No, there was nobody, and there never had been. Only the bell-birds and their tinkling.

Khaki coloured birds could not be seen among the blur of the foliage, yet their soft and insistent pinging took on an ominous tone, almost minatory, with their endless ringing in the branches above. After one last nervous look around, I went back to the campsite. Walking wasn't good enough and after a few frantic seconds, I began to jog, expecting Melissa to be on my heels, swiping with a huge butcher's knife, delivering me the absolution of the purported sinner and adulterer.

I stopped after a short while. Melissa wasn't following me – of course she wasn't following me. There was nothing there but the bush itself. Yet part of me wished Melissa was here, just for the sake of justification, so I could pin on her the troubles her sister and I were going through. Melissa, the intensely beautiful little sister, the woman to be in awe of, who carried herself with a steely self-assurance that clung to her like an aura. I was reduced to an awkward, stammering mess whenever I

spoke to her, indicative of that fear some men feel in the presence of shimmering beauty. I was a lesser being, some variety of untouchable that dared to sully her sister with his presence, and that was unforgivable. At least that's how I saw it. And fear her I did. My heart raced whenever she was in sight, but at times I felt it was the allure of the succubus.

At the campsite, the car was there. The tent was there. But Wendy was not. Her thongs lay outside the tent flaps, and I ducked in to see if she was inside. 'Wendy!' My voice shot through the forest, and the bell miners became quiet for a few seconds. But my intrusion wasn't enough to quell their chorus and they soon resumed their tuneless singing.

'Wendy!' The birds didn't stop this time, like they were mocking my fear, finding some kind of primeval mirth in the panicked antics of the humans.

'What?' came a faint cry. Wendy pushed through the scrub, adjusting the hem of her trackpants. She had a toilet roll in one hand. 'You missed me already?'

'Just making sure you hadn't vanished and the ground hadn't swallowed you up.'

'Perish that thought, right?' She glanced at me on the way past and threw the toilet roll into the tent. 'You can cook.'

The mention of prosaic things like food brought back a mildly comforting dose of reality, and I happily pulled the cooking tripod out of the boot. I set everything up and shortly, I had some frozen vegetables on the boil and a couple of thin steaks sizzling. Wendy handed me a drink from the esky and sat cross-legged across from the food. She noticed my hands shaking and pestered to know why I seemed so shaken.

'You won't believe it but I thought I saw Melissa back there,' I said. 'I was seeing thing, of course.'

'Oh, of course!' I got a gale of sarcastic laughter. 'Well I know where she is right now. Meeting some dude for lunch at the Ballina RSL. Nowhere near here. You wish you'd seen her.'

'Don't go there,' I muttered. 'I don't even like her.'

'You brought her up, thinking that you saw her, and guess what, we're here because of Melissa. This entire weekend at this god-forsaken nothingness of a camp is because of my sister. And you're telling me you don't care if I break up with you.'

'Yeah well...' I thought my mood would improve with the simple actions of cooking food, but the scream of the real had to intrude.

'What is that endless noise?' she broke in, staring upward.

'The belling?' I asked, happy to be talking about something else. 'Bell-birds or bell miners.'

'Weird call for a bird, like a chorus of wind-chimes going off.'

‘Bell miners are territorial and they’ll chase out any other birds in their area,’ I explained. ‘They live off the shellac these little insects make, sap-sucking insects. Psyllids. You ever seen scales on lilly pilly leaves? These insects cause them.’

‘Their call is haunting, isn’t it?’ Wendy commented.

I could only nod.

‘Hopefully they don’t make that racket at night,’ she said.

‘I don’t think they do.’

We were quiet again for a space, and I could sense her eyes on me, and my hands started shaking again. I turned in her direction and gave her my best smile. She was watching me, meeting my eyes. ‘Straight up answer,’ she said. ‘Do you want to break up or not?’

There was silence as I gathered my thoughts. ‘If you aren’t willing to trust me, I don’t see how our marriage can continue.’

‘That’s not a straight up answer,’ she said.

‘We’d have to go on with you thinking I did something. It’d always be there to colour our relationship, and it’d be a poisonous thing between us. Can you live with that?’

Wendy rubbed at her temples. ‘Good God, why did we even come up here? It’d would’ve been easier to have this talk at home, then you could’ve packed your shit and left. I can’t believe you talked me into coming up here to this nowhere dump.’

I was back-peddalling, trying gamely to recover solid ground. It wasn’t working. ‘I talked you into nothing. I asked you nicely.’

She made some sort of incoherent sound and got to her feet. She threw the vaporiser in the general direction of the tent and stormed off. ‘You saw Melissa! Jesus Christ, mate.’

It hurt to say what I said next, almost like a physical stab with a blade. ‘Then we’re done.’

‘Yep,’ was the curt answer. ‘I’m going for a walk and when I get back, I want to be taken home, if you’re good enough to manage that.’ I heard her stop, and her voice came clear across the campsite. ‘You really are pathetic.’

I sat beside the gas burner for uncounted minutes, doing little else but breathe. What I’d feared the most – and probably wanted the most – had come to pass. Not since I was an early teenager had I been single, and there I was, most likely thrust into that status again, courtesy of circumstances I had minimal control over.

At that moment there seemed to be a rise in the volume of the bird calling. The car park was in a steep-sided hollow, with thick bush running up the slopes around us. Even though it was noon, it

was shaded and somewhat dark. A cool breeze filtered through the trees and set the burner's fire fluttering.

Everything went almost black and white, a kind of monochromatic. Maybe it was a trick of the sun passing behind a cloud. The bush seemed to seep out its colour and leave only a stark remnant behind. Minutes passed with only the rushing brown-blue of the creek and the pervasive greens of the bush. Though dim at ground level, the sun was high through the canopy and I couldn't see any clouds. I tried to find rational explanations for it, imagining that I was stoned from Wendy's smoke.

The source of this latest bout of misgiving remained uncertain. The old adage goes that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Was all of this I'd experienced a symptom of the fear I'd brought here with me? Like with H. G. Wells and his story I'd read years ago, about the so-called haunted room where there was no haunting but only what you took in there with you. I had brought many things up here with me and now I was sitting there bereft of wife and love, finally labelled a pathetic thing after all these years of marital familiarity.

There was nothing to regret about our spent years. Mostly, they had been fun and productive. We'd genuinely enjoyed each other's company, rarely calling each other by our given names in the heyday of our time together. It was "love" not Wendy. Yet it was a telling sign of the times that I hadn't called her that since the purported episode with Melissa. Stone cold first name basis.

It was going to feel strange thinking about her in the past tense.

I studied her vaporiser lying a short distance away, debating whether to load it up and addle myself. I picked it up and rotated the small metal thing in my hands. Wendy had bought it online for ten dollars, postage free from China. Cheap, trashy and functional. The burned marijuana smell of it got to me and I hunted about, looking for Wendy's stash. After a cursory search in the tent, I gave up on the idea of deranging myself. I didn't need to take a break from reality, as I was painfully aware that it was not going away.

It must have been for some time, several hours at least, as the sun was clearly west when I began to wonder where Wendy had gone. In my brooding, I had spent most of the morning and a good deal of the afternoon just sitting there thinking about my new life of solitude.

Wendy's absence finally registered with me through the haze of chaotic thoughts. I called out her name, my voice sounding lost and hollow. Only the bell-birds and a few insects answered my call. I rose and stretched, wondering if I'd been asleep at all. Try as I may, I couldn't account for the lost hours. It was clearly mid-afternoon, and Wendy had left the campsite in the morning, an hour after we'd arrived here, if that. Again, I had the unnerving impression that I was losing my mind. The last few days had been surreal ones, and that dreamlike quality had not gone away. I was seeing the world with a veil over my eyes. The sense of displacement was not only off-putting but it jolted

me to the core. I stared into the green and blue of the forest like it was an enemy challenging me to step across a line of no return. Just looking out at that dappled forest, I wanted to believe the world was against me, that I was being judged harshly every step of the way, but that would be admitting defeat, giving in to a misery I didn't feel.

It wasn't heartbreak I was feeling, but a tragic sense of loss.

At the surface, the loss was a carnal one. There was a lament from the baser part of myself that already missed intimacy with Wendy. It was a little lamb lost sensation, almost enough to make me shrivel and surrender life. No more could I touch her and soon she'd be someone else's. There was no jealousy, only a bitter regret. When I delved deeper into it, my time with her was one great waste, a vacuous hole in our lives that could never be repaired. Time we would not get back. Really, I wanted to be happy for myself, and Wendy, not let it all devolve into some kind of morbid moping or sad reflection, and the calm, scented air of the forest should have been mollifying but all it did was remind of time lost.

Wendy hadn't brought her phone with her, for reasons only she knew, otherwise her being lost could've been rendered academic but it was strange that she had disappeared for so long. My concern soon turned to panic. I debated whether to call Melissa, but as I stared down at my phone, my will to make that call dissipated. There was no need to involve anyone else. I was trying to reassure myself Wendy was all right, probably just down at the creek, maybe thinking along the same lines I was. Slowly, almost reluctantly, I went down the defile. My little rubbish heap was still there, as was that odd scent, but there was no Wendy. I called her name again, this time as loud as I could. All I did was silence the bell-birds for a few seconds.

I turned to the tree where the vision of Melissa had appeared, only to trip on something and knock myself out. The first thing I did when I regained consciousness was tumble forward, falling into a bush redolent of tea-tree oil. After extricating myself, my eyes became adjusted to the light of the waning sun. It was late afternoon. The sky through the trees was the colour of dirty lilac. Long afternoon shadows cut through the bush. I was on the steep slope behind what I'd come to think of as "Melissa's tree", the pale sunlight streaming down wanly. With my head throbbing, I set off up the slope, only to realise I'd lost my phone, the one thing apart from my car that linked me to the workaday world and some kind of normality. That's how it felt too. Without Wendy, there was disconnection from the world, almost like I'd stepped outside of it into some darkling realm. I'd lost so much time. It was only just morning before, now the sun was an hour away from setting, maybe less. It'd be night soon, and although we were prepared for it with torches, there was no expecting this. Somewhat fitfully, I searched for the phone but it was lost among the undergrowth. It may as well never have existed. I had to find it, and I got on my knees and swept through the scrub like

some crazed animal in search of it. Same result; it was gone. I yelled in frustration, and retreated back to the creek side with its pile of bottles.

The loss of my phone signalled a profound defeat and I sat miserably, with chin on my knees. Even Melissa's arms would have been welcoming then, something to ease the carnival of dour thoughts. It's strange how the landscape itself took on an inimical aspect as well. I could understand the sentiments of the European colonisers, and how they found this country to be feared and conquered, and ready to be remade in their image. This remnant had either resisted that or had been overlooked. As I'd thought earlier, I suspected it was bypassed due to the steep hills and general difficulty of getting there. It was a shame the remainder of the country had been so amenable to axe and saw.

With the sun disappearing through the trees, I went back to the campsite. Wendy was not there, not that I'd expected her to be. I'd forgotten I had left the gas burner on and now it was empty, the food on the griller a charcoaled mess. I piled some of the wood up, added some kindling and soon got a fire going. Among all my miseries and doubts, there was at least a warm, happy fire.

But where was Wendy?

The birds had mostly quietened with the advent of dusk, and the insects had taken their place. I checked the car, thinking that she may have crawled into the back seat to sleep, but she wasn't in there. And to compound matters, I didn't have the keys. They weren't inside the tent either. Had I had the dumb luck to lose them too? No, I think Wendy had them...wherever she was. So she was lost and I was stuck here. It was a good six or seven kilometres to the Bentley Road, down a very narrow and steep dirt road, surrounded by heavy bush for most of the way.

I wanted to take a torch and start searching for Wendy properly, but either cowardice or inertia kept me at the campsite. I sat close to the fire peering at the blackening forest as if it were a spectral thing closing in on me. The fear of the onrushing dark got to me and I unzipped the tent, and crawled inside. Inside the sleeping bag, I shut my eyes tightly and tried to keep the world out. It must have worked, as I fell asleep not long after.

When I woke up it was dark and I was standing upright. I let out an inarticulate cry of panic and collapsed to one knee, my arms flailing in the blackness before me. I felt rough bark and something crunched underfoot. With my hands outstretched, I inched myself to my feet and stood still, gathering my thoughts and wits. Then I went through a phase of denial and pseudo-explanation. I was dreaming. No, I couldn't be dreaming. I was sleepwalking. No, I'm imagining all this. It alternated between one denial and the next.

But really, there was no imagination involved. I was standing on the slope of a forested hill fully dressed at some unknown time in the night. I had gone to sleep with only my shorts on and like

everything else, I had no recollection of getting dressed. I wasn't cold but I definitely felt the night air drift over me. There were no sounds except the nocturnal music of the insects, and the occasional sighing of the wind through high branches.

OK, so I had sleepwalked. For whatever reason, I had decided to leave the tent and go for a somnolent stroll to somewhere. Up a steep hill too, for all that. Somewhere in the heights above the campsite. Eventually, I felt no panic, no fear, just confusion. What the hell was I doing out here?

There was a wavering glow down the foot of the hill, like the light from a small fire. Relief washed over me; it was the campsite and my fire was still going. Then I was gripped by a sense of strange shame. What if other campers had arrived and I blundered amidst them in this terrified state? Truly, it shouldn't have mattered, but oddly it did. I was more preoccupied with embarrassment at being seen as a whimpering coward than the inexplicableness of why I was on this hillside at all. Rather than go look for my wife and companion, I'd slithered into bed like a recreant, having a toddler's fear of the dark and its bogeymen.

The question of how I got up here hit home again the moment after I took my first step. I trod on something, probably the broken end of a twig, and I gasped in mixed pain and annoyance. I was dressed, but without shoes of any kind. Whatever presence of mind had led me up here neglected proper footwear. The next few steps were hardly any better as I careered into one fallen branch or small shrub after the other. So I managed to get up there without tripping up and that was no mean feat while asleep. Through all the perplexity and incipient alarm, I felt a bizarre sense of pride that I'd accomplished something like hill-climbing through undergrowth while asleep.

That gave me a little humorous comfort as I wound and tottered my way down the slope, but that evaporated when I got to the source of the light. It wasn't the campsite but a gully between two folds of a hill. Within that, there was a small clearing and the fire I'd seen was there, a compact thing crackling away in the night. I hardly noticed any of this though as my attention was drawn immediately to the person sitting reclined on a folding chair, their back to me. I could make out little else about them, as they wore a black beanie and their hands were in shadow.

'Melissa?' I ventured, my voice coming out as a caught-in-the-throat croak.

The head turned a little to one side and I could hear an intake of breath. 'No, hardly.'

'Wendy!'

'Thank you for bothering to come and look for me.'

I came around the fire and stood beside her. She was reclined on a camp chair, a blanket drawn up over her legs and a book was placed page down on her lap. She was watching me askance, her mouth compressed and still. There was a strange, erotic allure to her face, perhaps enhanced by the wavering light of the fire, I don't know. It was both disconcerting and heartening to view her under

different conditions, and I couldn't pin down the reason for that unease. It was just one of many troubling things going on right then.

'It's funny that I'm out here,' I said, sitting beside her, and pointing the soles of my feet at the fire.

'You hoped I was Melissa.'

'No, I thought you would be. I'd already imagined seeing her once and with everything that's going on, it wouldn't be much of a surprise if she was camped here, wherever here is.'

Wendy pointed over her right shoulder. 'Just over that ridge is the campsite.' She startled me by ruffling my hair, almost playfully. 'What's going on?'

Our eyes met and I understood, happily I must add, that they weren't the eyes of a stranger. I knew well those eyes and greeted them with a smile. 'Just one dark thing after the other.'

'Dark? Do you mean like things going on in your head?'

'Correct.'

'Tell me about them.'

'Can we just go back to the campsite? At least we can sleep well there, sleeping bags and bedrolls.'

'I'm not really tired,' she said. She leaned forward and stirred the fire, sending little sparks in the air, where they quickly faded. 'I like it here. I can read my book and listen to whatever it is making that noise.'

'Grasshoppers, cicadas, and maybe psyllids if they make any noise. They're loud here...I didn't know you'd brought a book with you.' It was Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and Wendy was about halfway through it. I'd read it years ago, and I asked her opinion of it, trying to return to the mundane.

'Yes, it's gripping stuff,' she answered. 'Poor chick can't get out of the shadow of her old man's first wife. I'd hate to be second best like that, forever competing with a ghost or a memory. That'd suck.'

'Her ghost dominates the lives of everyone, not just Mrs de Winter,' I said. 'You're not seeing parallels between the second wife and yourself? There aren't any.'

'I do wonder,' Wendy said. 'I may not be second best to another woman, but I'm definitely second best to something. What is it? Do you need to get out of our marriage? Do you want freedom or some such. Are you happy to live life on your own?'

'I'm pathetic according to you,' I pointed out. 'That seems to me like you have nothing but regret for the fact we ever met.'

'You'd be wrong.'

What was the name of that expression? Yes, leading one down the garden path, only this time we were both dancing some kind of frenzied fandango down that track. For reasons unknown, I'd sleepwalked and been guided down to this gully where Wendy had made her small camp. That was the theory anyhow, for lack of a more rational explanation. Still, since we'd arrived yesterday, there was little that could be described as rational. Relationship-wise, it had been a confused jumble and as for me losing time, that played darkly in my mind too. Sensing my silence, Wendy picked up the novel and began to read. I studied her bright face, lit by the fire light, my mind going back to the mischievous times of early high school, where she'd demonstrate her liking of me by hitting me over the head with an exercise book. Not the type to get shy, or wring her hands and stare from under her lashes. No, her way was to push me around, or pinch me, and generally play the pest. It'd endeared itself for here we were, married and together.

'When life is serene,' I said, 'it's the trivial that destroys us.'

'What?' she asked, looking up. 'What do you mean?'

'I was just thinking how we've never had any real issues in our lives before now, yet Melissa getting wasted with us and crashing in our bedroom has brought us to the brink. One little incident.'

'I wouldn't call her waking up in our room half-naked trivial. She's cagey about whether something happened, so what am I supposed to think?'

'Believe me? Have faith in me that nothing went on.'

Wendy was staring at me, moving her lips without speaking. Apparently lost for words, she sighed and went back to her book.

'Why is it so easy to think the worst?' I asked.

'Human nature,' was her curt response.

'I've never thought the worst of you, about anything.'

'Are you trying to give me a guilty conscience?'

'Maybe I am,' I admitted. 'Look, this weekend has been a bust. I think we should just go home and forget it happened. Reason things out in a more civilised place.'

'You're finally admitting this wasn't an ideal weekend spot?'

'Wendy, I'm lost here,' I said. 'I have no points of reference. I mean...I woke up and found myself up the hill there. And you're here, camped out in a bush you claim to be wary of. You've been gone all day. With the car keys too, I may add.'

'Didn't want you to leave without me.'

'Like I'd do that!' I protested. 'Wendy, I'm not a stranger to you. Don't you know me by now?'

‘I’m not leery of the bush,’ she said. ‘It’s funny how familiar things become if you give them a chance. I’ve been here for a while now, and to begin with, my eyes were everywhere, expecting the worse. But there’s been nothing, only the sounds of insects and things. It’s romantic in a lonely kind of way. I can see why you brought us up here.’

‘We could have spent the day together,’ I said.

‘We could have done a lot of things. The advantages of hindsight. Well, it’s whatever the time is now. I didn’t bring my phone with me so what is the time?’

I felt a fool telling her I’d lost my phone. Just more justification for me being pathetic to her, that’s how it was to me. Wendy rolled her eyes theatrically and let out a great sigh. ‘You’re going to have to find it before we leave. Do you remember where you lost it?’

‘Right now isn’t about my phone, Wendy, it’s about us. You asked me why I didn’t come looking for you. I lost track of time – literally. Time out of joint, to quote Shakespeare. You got up and left in the morning, and hey presto, it was the afternoon for me. Then I knocked myself out.’

‘I guess it is the bush, then,’ Wendy said. ‘It has it in for you.’

‘That’s a glib and silly explanation.’

‘Something has it in for you if you can’t keep track of time. Were you missing me that bad?’ Her grin was broad, and her eyes in shadow. ‘You didn’t bring my vaporiser with you by any chance?’

I was wasting my time. I drew that conclusion pretty quickly during this conversation with Wendy. The overarching issue was the continuance of our marriage, yet it was something that couldn’t be brought to resolution. I did not want to avoid it, and I am sure neither did Wendy, but we could not clamp down on it. The sidestepping and the irrelevances were too great, too strong to cast aside and deal with it.

‘No, it’s by the tent. Listen, I’m going back to bed, and with any luck I’ll actually stay there for the rest of the night.’

She was surprisingly easy with that. ‘All right, just over that ridge, as I said.’

Nothing else I wanted to say came out, so I made my way through the trees toward the ridge in question, Wendy’s camp at my back. With that wan light for guidance, I struggled up a steep hill, using smaller trees as supports to get myself up. Panting, I crested the ridge and it became absolutely dark as I crossed to the far side. I stood catching my breath, with nothing for company but the discordant chirping of insects. Then it occurred to me what book those fragments were from. They were from *Rebecca*, and behind me, there was Wendy reading it, and a good way through it to boot. Was this some sort of bizarre coincidence or something else? What else it could be was too mortifying to give much thought to out in the cold and dark of the hillside. The only reality I wanted to face was the one I was used to all these years and none other. More than ever, I wanted to hide

somewhere safe and not be a part of whatever was happening. I regretted the mere idea of wanting to come up to Mucklewee Mountain in the first place, and I cursed the impulse that brought me there yesterday. Futile gestures, but they came anyway.

When my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw a diffuse patch of red light down away from me. I figured that had to be the campsite, with the fire I made still going in some almost burned-out way. It made my task at getting down there infinitely easier though, and I scurried down the hill, dodging trees and bush clumps along the way. I saw the red gleam of the fire reflected in my car's brake lights as I got to the campsite. The fire had largely burned down, but a pile of embers still smouldered, giving off a welcoming dim light. I threw a few more branches on to it before climbing into the tent.

Inside I found Wendy fast asleep in her sleeping bag. It was such an incongruous thing that I got down beside her and thought nothing of it, only grateful that the two of us were safe and together. Her breathing was regular, and I could sense the rising and falling of her chest through her sleeping bag. So elated was I that she was there, nothing else mattered until that lucid moment where I understood her simple presence to be undeniably strange. It almost gave me a heart attack. I sat up abruptly and stared at her slumbering form in disbelief. The light cast by the ebbing fire was not much, but it was sufficient to see Wendy...then I wondered if it was really her. Gingerly, as to not wake her up, I felt about her neck, probing for the necklace I had given her for her twenty-first birthday, a distinctive silver thing shaped like an Egyptian ankh.

I found it and that gave me a fair deal of reassurance. I must have tickled her with my searching, as she shivered when my hand brushed her neck. So it was Wendy and not somebody or something else. Now I was torn between two options. The first idea was to wake her and ask if she had been down in that gully quietly reading. The second, and the least favourable, was to grab a torch, put some shoes on, and go and find out exactly *what* was in the gully. I decided on the second choice.

I put on the hiking boots I'd brought and with the torch lighting up the bush before me, I started to head up the hill to the ridge. I got about halfway before I was knackered, so I sat on the cold uneven slope of the hill and caught my breath. How the hell did I even make it up there in the first place? Did sleepwalkers draw upon some unknown cache of energy when they were out and about of a night? Nonetheless, I had to keep going. I needed to find out if Wendy or something very much like her was still on the far side of the ridge, sitting there reading a book I never knew she had. She wasn't a reader of books or magazines in the main, preferring to get her written words from the internet, or text messages on her phone.

It would not be that unusual for her to have brought a book. There were few better ways to while away idle time of an evening out in a remote location, even if the campsite had decent mobile

reception. That was my thinking. I was sure I knew what she'd brought with her as I'd helped her get together our things for the weekend.

I rose and trudged uphill some more before giving up, despite the chill night air filling my lungs. In my wearied state, even the cold thrill of these strange times wasn't enough to see me farther. Once more, I marvelled how I managed to climb this blasted slope in my sleep. It was another mystery was no closer to being answered. Yet I was feeling like a sleuth out on an investigation as I clambered down the hill, piecing together what my mind was describing as anomalies. Through all the madness and dire wonder, I was attempting to find rationality. Only natural I suppose. When one is faced with the unknown, it is logical to put a known mask on it, a point of reference. But this new-found modicum of reason was shattered and blown away when I got back to the campsite.

Wendy was awake and outside of the tent when I got to the campsite, her small keychain torch thrust out in front like a weapon. Upon seeing me, she ran over and frantically took one of my hands, her skin deathly cold. Her face was alive with fear and she shook me, almost so hard that we nearly fell. 'Where have you been?'

I didn't know what to say to her that would not come across as deranged or fantastic. 'I thought I heard something,' I lied. 'I checked out what it was, but it was nothing.'

'I just woke up,' she hissed, her face inches from mine. I had to push her back gently so I could hear her properly. 'You were next to me. I reached out to touch you, put an arm around you, and there was nothing. You vanished.'

The frightening absurdity of it all struck me again. The sensation that I'd stepped outside of my own reality into something else's was overpowering. 'I... vanished?'

'I put an arm over an empty sleeping bag, but you were there just seconds before. You literally went poof!' She fell into my arms and I hugged her back, hoping it wasn't an empty gesture like everything else I'd done for her this weekend.

I said, 'Either we're both having some very vivid dreams or...'

'Or what?' she finished for me, her head buried in a shoulder.

'I don't know.' I led her back to the tent, and we hurriedly got in. Wendy showed a primal reluctance to let me go, and the grip of her hands was strong and vital. My sleeping bag felt uncommonly warm as if slept in, something I was not of a mind to puzzle out then. Wendy had turned on every torch we'd brought with us, casting garish beams of white light in the tent, illuminating the tent fabric in an uncomfortable dazzle. She was sitting up, one hand gripping the front of my shirt, the other on her little torch. 'What's going on?'

'That's the question, isn't it?'

'Oh don't give me that! Let's get our shit together and go home.'

‘You’ve got the car keys.’

‘What?’ she cried. ‘Why would I have your keys? They should be in your jeans pocket. Over there, feel for them.’

‘When I saw you in the gully, you said you had them on you so I wouldn’t leave.’

‘What?’ she repeated, a tinge of terror in her voice. ‘What gully? Oh for Christ’s sake, what are you talking about? I don’t have the damned keys.’ Violently, she lurched forward and almost ripped my jeans apart looking for them. ‘Where are they? They should be in here in your pocket. What have you done with them?’

‘Maybe I lost them with my phone.’

She held up something to my face. ‘Here’s your phone! It was under my sleeping bag.’

So it was. I pressed it and it lit up, showing me that we had a good strength 3G signal ‘I thought I’d lost it.’

‘Well, you haven’t. Don’t just sit there like a stunned mullet, help me look for the keys.’

‘Wait Wendy, what did we spend today doing?’

There was her wide-eyed, disbelieving face again. ‘We spent...my God, why are you asking me that?’

‘Because I don’t remember much. It’s a jumble. I lost track of time.’

‘We were in the creek yonder, playing and smoking. Where did you think we were? Seriously, when we get home – *if* we get home – you need to go on pills or something. You’ve been a space cadet all weekend.’

‘You know there’s something strange going on as well,’ I said, bristling at her accusatory tone. ‘My questions aren’t that bizarre, if you think about the context we’re in.’

‘That’s why I want to find the keys and get out of here. I knew there was something weird about this place when we got up here. It’s like the trees have eyes or something. It was that fog yesterday morning wasn’t it? There was something in that.’

‘Fog is fog, Wendy, ground-level clouds. There’s no harm in fog.’

‘Says the guy who can’t remember yesterday at all.’

‘Says the lady who’s apparently in two different places at once.’

Her incredulous expression sobered. ‘You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?’

‘No, put some shoes on and we’ll go look.’

‘We need to find these keys! I’m not traipsing about this place, not with what’s out there.’

‘I’ll take my phone with me,’ I said. ‘If something goes on, I’ll call the police. I have a good signal and the phone has lots of charge left. I want to get to the bottom of this. We must find out what’s going on.’

She threw up her hands and sat down huffily. While I watched, she put her hoodie and boots on, and with decided poor grace, followed me out of the tent. Outside, the night was still and the insects had all but stopped their music. According to my phone it was 4 am on a Sunday, but I had to doubt it was telling me the truth. With the other displacements of reality we had experienced, there was little that was trustworthy. Maybe even the ground under our feet wasn’t solid either.

‘Where’s this fabled gully?’ Wendy asked, her voice strident in the quiet night air.

I shone the torch up the slope. ‘Far side of that. We have a climb ahead of us.’

‘And you reckon you saw me over there. No way in the friggin’ world would I have climbed that hill. You’re joking, right?’

‘I wish it was a joke, but it isn’t. Come on, you’ve seen this weirdness for yourself. The least we can do is confront it, and see what’s behind it and why.’

She scowled at me. ‘Why do we have to do that? Find your damned car keys and let’s go home.’

I was obstinate about it and wouldn’t budge. Wendy stood there four-square, angry and unmoving. ‘We need to find out,’ I urged.

‘Spiders and leeches.’

‘I encountered neither coming down here. We have torches and we’ll be able to see their webs.’

‘All right then,’ she sighed. She stared at the slope in distaste. ‘I bet we’ll be stuffed after climbing that.’

Taking her hand, we started up the hillside. I tried to find a route that would lead around the slope to the ridge, but encountered thick bush that wouldn’t yield, and Wendy was of no mind to go blundering through the undergrowth. After a few false leads and dead ends, we managed to get around the hillside to a gentler sloped gully. We crossed above that and down to the far side, my heart thumping with trepidation as to what we’d find at the bottom.

There was no fire, no alternative Wendy, and no camp chair. There were the remains of a camp, similar to the one up at the creek; old charred bottles, sticks of charcoal and as I knelt to get a better look, more burned pages. The font and the paper texture was the same as the other ones I’d found. I held up one for Wendy’s view. ‘You were reading this. It’s *Rebecca*, a famous novel.’

‘I’ve never heard of it,’ my wife said, staring at the yellowed piece of paper. ‘I didn’t bring any books with me.’

‘Yes, I know. But you were here, right on this spot, wearing a black hat I’ve never seen you in.’ I pointed off to the right. ‘I woke up from my sleepwalk up there. This is where I saw you.’

‘That’s not possible,’ she said.

‘Me vanishing inside my sleeping bag isn’t possible either.’

‘Don’t say that!’ She shivered and stood closer to me. ‘What does it all mean? Why are we in this...twilight zone? What’s that smell?’ Wendy took a few steps and sniffed the air experimentally.

‘Old smoke,’ I answered. I couldn’t smell anything other than the bush around us. ‘The gum out of the leaves.’

‘No, it’s nothing like that. It’s like perfume sort of, roses, jasmine, mock orange, it’s hard to tell, it keeps changing. A fruity, flowery smell. Maybe there is jasmine growing around here.’

‘It’s attar,’ I said. ‘Incense.’

Wendy grunted dubiously. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I just do. I can’t smell it though, not here. Where’s it coming from?’

‘Everywhere, though it’s fading. Who’d be burning incense out here in whoop-whoop?’

‘I don’t think we want to know. My courage for this entire situation has gone. I think we should head back to the campsite, find those keys and skedaddle.’

‘Which was my idea to begin with.’ Wendy took my hand again, meeting my eyes. ‘Lead on, hero.’

‘I wonder if I hallucinated it all,’ I said, musing aloud. ‘It’s hard to know what’s real.’

‘Just...be quiet,’ Wendy exhorted, as we returned the way we came. ‘Don’t jinx anything. I want us to quietly find your keys and leave this place just as quietly.’

To stave off the oppressive clamour of fear that was starting to descend on me, the last I wanted to do was be quiet. ‘So we’re good again?’

Wendy hesitated for a moment. ‘What?’

‘The incident with Melissa,’ I said.

‘You’re still on about that? It’s the last time I invite her wine-sodden arse over for anything. She can stay in Tweed from here on out.’

‘Then you don’t think I slept with her?’

Now Wendy stopped in her tracks, the bubbling beginnings of terror gone from her face. Her expression was darkly amused. ‘Melissa sleep with you, are you serious? She hates your guts.’

‘Okay.’ I said, confused. ‘I thought that’s why we came up here, to repair the damage between us.’

‘What damage? You’re nuts.’

‘You were ready to ditch me because you thought I’d slept with her.’

Wendy stared at me bemused. ‘Oh, I get it. This is part of the weirdness that’s going on, right? Or are you just having a crazy episode?’

I shrugged and gazed at the bush before us, starkly limned by the torch light. Ever since I caught sight of Mucklewee Mountain, there had been some uncanny stepping outside of time or reality, I wasn’t sure. It was obvious that Wendy and I had spent two very different weekends here...or was it obvious? Regardless, the whole experience had left me with a shaky belief in the power of the natural world. ‘I’ll be glad when we get home,’ I finally said.

‘You and me both.’

We came around the side of the gully to the campsite. There was our tent, our car and the fire was burning brighter now that I’d added wood to it. It looked homely, a place of welcome, some kind of subtle reassurance that no matter what strangeness was assailing, there was at least one point of sanctuary we could retreat to.

My car keys were in my jeans pocket.

We drove home, with the light of dawn breaking on the eastern horizon. The pale glow gave me a renewed mental strength, and I squeezed one of Wendy’s hands. Neither of us were willing to talk about what had gone on back there, and in time, we would probably write it off as a “drugs thing” never to be mentioned again. Yet I wondered if finding that burned excerpt from *Rebecca* was providential. In a way, we had passed through fire and emerged on the far side a whole couple again. The doubts and the mistrusts I thought Wendy had for me and our marriage never existed, or so it seemed. It was like Mucklewee Mountain had righted some kind of wrong with us, leaving us to live our lives in the fairly contented manner we’d enjoyed before the doubt crept in.

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