

# 1

Why at the beginning of things is there always light? Dorrigo Evans' earliest memories were of sun flooding a church hall in which he sat with his mother and grandmother. A wooden church hall. Blinding light and him toddling back and forth, in and out of its transcendent welcome, into the arms of women. Women who loved him. Like entering the sea and returning to the beach. Over and over.

Bless you, his mother says as she holds him and lets him go. Bless you, boy.

That must have been 1915 or 1916. He would have been one or two. Shadows came later in the form of a forearm rising up, its black outline leaping in the greasy light of a kerosene lantern. Jackie Maguire was sitting in the Evanses' small dark kitchen, crying. No one cried then, except babies. Jackie Maguire was an old man, maybe forty, perhaps older, and he was trying to brush the tears away from his pockmarked face with the back of his hand. Or was it with his fingers?

Only his crying was in Dorrigo Evans' memory fixed. It was a sound like something breaking. Its slowing rhythm reminded him of a rabbit's hind legs thumping the ground as it is strangled by a snare, the only sound he had ever heard that was similar. He was nine, had come inside to have his mother look at a blood blister on his thumb, and had little else to compare it to. He had seen a grown man cry only once before, a scene of astonishment when his brother Tom returned from the Great War in France and got off the train. He had swung his kitbag onto the hot dust of the siding and abruptly burst into tears.

Watching his brother, Dorrigo Evans had wondered what it was that would make a grown man cry. Later, crying became simply affirmation of feeling, and feeling the only compass in life. Feeling became fashionable and emotion became a theatre in which people were players who no longer knew who they were off the stage. Dorrigo Evans would live long enough to see all these changes. And he would remember a time when people were ashamed of crying. When they feared the weakness it bespoke. The trouble to which it led. He would live to see people praised for things that were not worthy of praise, simply because truth was seen to be bad for their feelings.

That night Tom came home they burnt the Kaiser on a bonfire. Tom said nothing of the war, of the Germans, of the gas and the tanks and the trenches they had heard about. He said nothing at all. One man's feeling is not always equal to all life is. Sometimes it's not equal to anything much at all. He just stared into the flames.

## 2

A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else. In his old age Dorrigo Evans never knew if he had read this or had himself made it up. Made up, mixed up, and broken down. Relentlessly broken down. Rock to gravel to dust to mud to rock and so the world goes, as his mother used to say when he demanded reasons or explanation as to how the world got to be this way or that. The world is, she would say. It just *is*, boy. He had been trying to wrest the rock free from an outcrop to build a fort for a game he was playing when another, larger rock dropped onto his thumb, causing a large and throbbing blood blister beneath the nail.

His mother swung Dorrigo up onto the kitchen table where the lamp light fell strongest and, avoiding Jackie Maguire's strange gaze, lifted her son's thumb into the light. Between his sobs Jackie Maguire said a few things. His wife had the week previously taken the train with their youngest child to Launceston, and not returned.

Dorrigo's mother picked up her carving knife. Along the blade's edge ran a cream smear of congealed mutton fat. She placed its tip into the coals of the kitchen range. A small wreath of smoke leapt up and infused the kitchen with the odour of charred mutton. She pulled the knife out, its glowing red tip glittering with sparkles of brilliant white-hot dust, a sight Dorrigo found at once magical and terrifying.

Hold still, she said, taking hold of his hand with such a strong grip it shocked him.

Jackie Maguire was telling how he had taken the mail train to Launceston and gone looking for her, but he

could find her nowhere. As Dorrigo Evans watched, the red-hot tip touched his nail and it began to smoke as his mother burnt a hole through the cuticle. He heard Jackie Maguire say—

She's vanished off the face of the earth, Mrs Evans.

And the smoke gave way to a small gush of dark blood from his thumb, and the pain of his blood blister and the terror of the red-hot carving knife were gone.

Scram, Dorrigo's mother said, nudging him off the table. Scram now, boy.

Vanished! Jackie Maguire said.

All this was in the days when the world was wide and the island of Tasmania was still the world. And of its many remote and forgotten outposts, few were more forgotten and remote than Cleveland, the hamlet of forty or so souls where Dorrigo Evans lived. An old convict coaching village fallen on hard times and out of memory, it now survived as a railway siding, a handful of crumbling Georgian buildings and scattered verandah-browed wooden cottages, shelter for those who had endured a century of exile and loss.

Backdropped by woodlands of writhing peppermint gums and silver wattle that waved and danced in the heat, it was hot and hard in summer, and hard, simply hard, in winter. Electricity and radio were yet to arrive, and were it not that it was the 1920s, it could have been the 1880s or the 1850s. Many years later Tom, a man not given to allegory but perhaps prompted, or so Dorrigo had thought at the time, by his own impending death and the accompanying terror of the old—that all life is only allegory and the real story is not here—said it was like the long autumn of a dying world.

Their father was a railway fettler, and his family lived

in a Tasmanian Government Railways weatherboard cottage by the side of the line. Of a summer, when the water ran out, they would bucket water from the tank set up for the steam locomotives. They slept under skins of possums they snared, and they lived mostly on the rabbits they trapped and the wallabies they shot and the potatoes they grew and the bread they baked. Their father, who had survived the depression of the 1890s and watched men die of starvation on the streets of Hobart, couldn't believe his luck at having ended up living in such a workers' paradise. In his less sanguine moments he would also say, 'You live like a dog and you die like a dog.'

Dorrigo Evans knew Jackie Maguire from the holidays he sometimes took with Tom. To get to Tom's he would catch a ride on the back of Joe Pike's dray from Cleveland to the Fingal Valley turnoff. As the old draught horse Joe Pike called Gracie amiably trotted along, Dorrigo would sway back and forth and imagine himself shaping into one of the boughs of the wildly snaking peppermint gums that fingered and flew through the great blue sky overhead. He would smell damp bark and drying leaves and watch the clans of green and red musk lorikeets chortling far above. He would drink in the birdsong of the wrens and the honeyeaters, the whipcrack call of the jo-wittys, punctuated by Gracie's steady clop and the creak and clink of the cart's leather traces and wood shafts and iron chains, a universe of sensation that returned in dreams.

They would make their way along the old coach road, past the coaching hotel the railway had put out of business, now a dilapidated near ruin in which lived several impoverished families, including the Jackie Maguires. Once every few days a cloud of dust would announce

the coming of a motorcar, and the kids would appear out of the bush and the coach-house and chase the noisy cloud till their lungs were afire and their legs lead.

At the Fingal Valley turnoff Dorrigo Evans would slide off, wave Joe and Gracie goodbye, and begin the walk to Llewellyn, a town distinguished chiefly by being even smaller than Cleveland. Once at Llewellyn, he would strike north-east through the paddocks and, taking his bearings from the great snow-covered massif of Ben Lomond, head through the bush towards the snow country back of the Ben, where Tom worked two weeks on, one week off as a possum snarer. Mid-afternoon he would arrive at Tom's home, a cave that nestled in a sheltered dogleg below a ridgeline. The cave was slightly smaller than the size of their skillion kitchen, and at its highest Tom could stand with his head bowed. It narrowed like an egg at each end, and its opening was sheltered by an overhang which meant that a fire could burn there all night, warming the cave.

Sometimes Tom, now in his early twenties, would have Jackie Maguire working with him. Tom, who had a good voice, would often sing a song or two of a night. And after, by firelight, Dorrigo would read aloud from some old *Bulletins* and *Smith's Weeklys* that formed the library of the two possum snarers, to Jackie Maguire, who could not read, and to Tom, who said he could. They liked it when Dorrigo read from Auntie Rose's advice column, or the bush ballads that they regarded as *clever* or sometimes even *very clever*. After a time, Dorrigo began to memorise other poems for them from a book at his school called *The English Parnassus*. Their favourite was Tennyson's 'Ulysses'.

Pockmarked face smiling in the firelight, gleaming bright

as a freshly turned out plum pudding, Jackie Maguire would say, Oh, them old timers! They can string them words together tighter than a brass snare strangling a rabbit!

And Dorrigo didn't say to Tom what he had seen a week before Mrs Jackie Maguire vanished: his brother with his hand reaching up inside her skirt, as she—a small, intense woman of exotic darkness—leaned up against the chicken shed behind the coaching house. Tom's face was turned in on her neck. He knew his brother was kissing her.

For many years, Dorrigo often thought about Mrs Jackie Maguire, whose real name he never knew, whose real name was like the food he dreamt of every day in the POW camps—there and not there, pressing up into his skull, a thing that always vanished at the point he reached out towards it. And after a time he thought about her less often; and after a further time, he no longer thought about her at all.

### 3

Dorrigo was the only one of his family to pass the Ability Test at the end of his schooling at the age of twelve and so receive a scholarship to attend Launceston High School. He was old for his year. On his first day, at lunchtime, he ended up at what was called the top yard, a flat area of dead grass and dust, bark and leaves, with several large gum trees at one end. He watched the big boys of third and fourth form, some with sideburns, boys already with men's muscles, line up in two rough rows, jostling, shoving, moving like some tribal dance. Then began the magic of