

THE SLAP

Christos Tsiolkas is the author of three previous novels: *Loaded* (filmed as *Head-On*), *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe*, which won the 2006 *Age* Fiction Prize and the 2006 Melbourne Best Writing Award. *The Slap* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2009, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2010, and was shortlisted for the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary Award and the ALS Gold Medal. Christos Tsiolkas is also a playwright, essayist and screenwriter. He lives in Melbourne.

ALSO BY CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

Loaded

The Jesus Man

Dead Europe

‘Brilliant, beautiful, shockingly lucid and real, this is a novel as big as life built from small, secret, closely observed beats of the human heart. A cool, calm, irresistible masterpiece.’ Chris Cleave

‘Nothing short of a tour de force. Tsiolkas puts a microscope to family life and presents us with a vision both of unflinching honesty and great tenderness. The luminosity of his prose and the brilliance of his characterisation render the ordinary quite extraordinary.’ Colm Toibín

‘Now and again a book comes along that defines a summer. This year that book is *The Slap*, the writing has shades of Martin Amis, Nick Hornby and Anne Tyler... The ideal summer read; escapist, funny and clever.’ *Daily Telegraph*, ‘Book of the Summer’

‘Nothing less than a modern masterpiece’ *The Times*

‘A genuinely important, edgy, urgent book. The novel keeps readers constantly on their toes, pushing boundaries, questioning lazy assumptions, provoking, and above all, smuggling in unease under the guileful blanket of a gripping read.’ Neel Mukherjee, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Riveting from beginning to end. Tsiolkas’s real talent is for exploring the inner lives of his eight primary characters... And each of these characters is a sharp observer of those around him or her, so many more lives are illuminated as well. The novel’s forward energy is unexpectedly overwhelming.’ *Guardian*

‘A tremendously vital book in every sense. Completed at a gallop, it fairly crackles along, juiced up with novelistic license and peeled-eyeball candour, the characters driven by their appetites into a thrilling, vital approximation of what it is to be alive.’ *Sunday Times*

‘This ingenious and passionate book is a wonderful dissection of suburban Australian living, tackling issues of race, class and gender... Tsiolkas writes with a refreshing lack of sentimentality. A beautifully structured and executed examination of the complexity of modern living.’ *Independent on Sunday*

‘Dazzling’ *Independent*

‘Tsiolkas is a hard-edged, powerful writer, but glowing at the heart of all the anger among these feuding families are sparks of understanding, resignation and even love... leaving us exhausted but gasping with admiration.’ Brigitte Weeks, *Washington Post*

‘A layered, briskly paced story about complex people. Think Tom Wolfe meets Philip Roth.’ *Los Angeles Times*

‘*The Slap* is a strikingly tender book... it claws into you with its freshness and truth.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘One of the most astute chroniclers and critics of our age and culture. Tsiolkas is a passionate, poetic, political polemicist, but his critiques take the form of enthralling stories that are peopled with characters that bounce off the page and turn up at your local gym, in the backyard pool, down at the shops or around the barbecue on a Sunday afternoon... A clever, elegantly structured novel.’ *The Advertiser*

‘Christos Tsiolkas’s novel bursts out of one reckless act and rackets away into a dense maze of consequences. Like all Tsiolkas’ work it is wildly energetic and fearless, thrillingly about our lives now.’ Helen Garner, *Independent Weekly*

‘Tsiolkas writes about carnality, relationships, and dark emotions with a stomach-punching brutality... *The Slap* promises to provoke controversy.’ *Sydney Sun Herald*

‘Sprawling, affecting and often wildly comic... Mandatory bedside table reading. It’s a perfect social document... More importantly, it’s also a hell of a read.’ *The Australian*

‘*The Slap* is provocative and profane, throbbing with sex, drugs and loud music, and ultimately, despite its ferocity, exultantly life-affirming.’ *Adelaide Review*

**CHRISTOS
TSIOLKAS**

THE SLAP



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For Jane Palfreyman, who is *sui generis*



HECTOR

His eyes still shut, a dream dissolving and already impossible to recall, Hector's hand sluggishly reached across the bed. Good. Aish was up. He let out a victorious fart, burying his face deep into the pillow to escape the clammy methane stink. I don't want to sleep in a boy's locker room, Aisha would always complain on the rare, inadvertent moments when he forgot himself in front of her. Through the years he had learned to rein his body in, to allow himself to only let go in solitude; farting and pissing in the shower, burping alone in the car, not washing or brushing his teeth all weekend when she was away at conferences. It was not that his wife was a prude, she just seemed to barely tolerate the smells and expressions of the male body. He himself would have no problem falling asleep in a girl's locker room, surrounded by the moist, heady fragrance of sweet young cunt. Afloat, still half-entrapped in sleep's tender clutch, he twisted onto his back and shifted the sheet off his body. Sweet young cunt. He'd spoken out loud.

Connie.

At the thought of her, sleep surrendered its grip on him. Aish would think him a pervert if she had overheard him. But he was definitely not that. He simply loved women. Young, old, those just starting to blossom and those beginning to fade. And sheepishly, almost embarrassed at his own vanity, he knew that women loved him. Women *loved* him.

Get up, Hector, he said to himself. Time for the routine.

The routine was a series of exercises that he executed without fail every morning. At most, it never lasted more than twenty minutes. Occasionally, if he woke with a headache or hangover, or with a combination of both, or simply with an ennui that seemed to issue from deep within what he could only assume to be his soul, he managed to complete it all in under ten minutes. It was not strict adherence to the routine that mattered but simply ensuring its completion—even when he was sick, he would force himself to do it. He would rise, grab a pair of track-pants, throw on the T-shirt he'd worn the previous day, and then perform a series of nine stretches, each of which he would hold to a count of thirty. Then he would lie on the rug in the bedroom and perform one hundred and fifty sit-ups, and fifty push-ups. He'd finish with a final set of three stretches. Then he'd go to the kitchen and switch on the coffee percolator before walking to the milk bar at the end of the street to buy the newspaper and a packet of cigarettes. Back home, he would pour himself a coffee, walk out onto the back verandah, light a smoke, turn to the sports pages, and begin to read. In that moment, with the newspaper spread before him, the whiff of bitter coffee in his nostrils, the first hit of sharp tobacco smoke, whatever the miseries, petty bullshits, stresses and anxieties of the day before or the day ahead, none of it mattered. In that moment, and if only in that moment, he was happy.

Hector had discovered from childhood that the only way to challenge the inert, suffocating joy of sleep was to barrel right through it, to force open his eyes and jump straight out of the bed. But for once, he lay back on his pillow and allowed the sounds of his family to gently bring him to complete wakefulness. Aisha had the kitchen stereo turned to an FM classical music station, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was flooding the house. From the lounge room, he could hear the electronic squeaks and tinny reverb of a computer game. He lay still for a moment, then threw back the sheet and looked down at his naked body. He raised his right foot and watched it crash back on the bed. Today's the day, Hector, he told himself, today's the

day. He leapt out of bed and put on a pair of red Y-fronts, pulled a singlet over his head, took a long, loud piss in the ensuite, and stormed into the kitchen. Aisha was breaking eggs over a frying pan and he kissed her neck. The kitchen smelt of coffee. He switched off the radio in mid-crescendo.

‘Hey, I was listening to that.’

Hector flicked through a nest of CDs stacked clumsily next to the CD player. He pulled a disc out of its case and put it into the machine. He pushed through the numbers till he found the track he wanted, then smiled as the first confident notes of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet began to sound. He kissed his wife’s neck again.

‘It’s got to be Satchmo today,’ he whispered to her. ‘It’s got to be “West End Blues”.’

He performed his exercises slowly, counting up to thirty in slow, measured breaths. Between each set he swayed to the slow-building sensual progression of the jazz music. He made sure that with every sit-up he felt the tightening of the muscles in his belly, and with every push-up, he was conscious of the pull of the muscles on his triceps and pecs. He wanted to be alert to his body today. He wanted to know that it was alive, strong and prepared.

On finishing, he wiped the sweat from his brow, picked his shirt off the floor where he had flung it the night before, and slipped his feet into his sandals.

‘Want anything from the shop?’

Aisha laughed at him. ‘You look like a bum.’

She would never leave the house without make-up or proper clothes on. Not that she used much make-up; she had no need to—it was one of the things that very early on had attracted him to her. He had never been fond of girls who wore thickly applied foundation, powder and lipstick. He thought it was sluttish, and even though he was aware of the ridiculous conservatism of his response, he could not bring himself to admire a heavily painted woman, no matter how objectively beautiful she might be. Aisha didn’t need the assistance

of make-up. Her dark skin was supple, unblemished, and her large, deep-set, obliquely sloping eyes shone in her long, lean, sculptured face.

Hector looked down at his slippers, and smiled. 'So can this bum get you anything from the shop?'

She shook her head. 'Nah. But you're going to the markets this morning, aren't you?'

'I said I would, didn't I?'

She glanced up at the kitchen clock. 'You better hurry.'

He said nothing to her, irritated by her comment. He didn't want to hurry this morning. He wanted to take it slow and easy.

He picked up the Saturday paper and threw a ten-dollar note on the counter. Mr Ling had already reached for the gold packet of Peter Jackson Super Milds but Hector stopped him.

'No, not today. Today I want a packet of Peter Styuvesant Reds. The soft pack. Make it two packs.' Hector took back the ten-dollar note and placed a twenty on the counter.

'You change smoke?'

'My last day, Mr Ling. This is going to be my last day of smoking.'

'Very good.' The old man was smiling at him. 'I smoke three a day only. One in morning, one after dinner and one when I finish in shop.'

'I wish I could do that.' But the last five years had been a carousel of stopping and then starting again, promising himself that he could smoke five a day, why not, five a day would not do much damage; but he could not stop himself rushing through to the end of the pack. Every time. He envied the old Chinese guy. He'd love to be able to smoke three, four, five a day. But he couldn't. Cigarettes were like a malignant lover to him. He would find the resolve, soak his pack under the tap and chuck it in the bin, determined to never smoke again. He had tried cold turkey, hypnotism, patches, gum; maybe, for a few days, a week, once even a month, he could resist all temptations. But then

he would sneak a cigarette at work or at the pub or after a dinner, and immediately he would fall back into the arms of his spurned lover. And her revenge was exacting. He would be back to worshipping her, not able to get through the morning without her. She was irresistible. Then one Sunday morning, when the kids were at his parents' and he and Aisha had a graceful morning of slow, easy, delightful sex, and he'd wrapped his arms around her and whispered, I love you, you are my greatest joy, you are my greatest commitment, she'd turned around with a sardonic smile and replied, No I'm not, cigarettes are your true love, cigarettes are your true commitment.

The fight was cruel and exhausting—they'd screamed at each other for hours. She had wounded him, shattered his pride, especially when he'd been mortified to realise that it was only his feverish sucking on cigarettes that had allowed him any measure of control in the argument. He'd accused her of being self-righteous and a middle-class puritan and she had snapped back with a litany of his weaknesses: he was lazy and vain, passive and selfish, and he lacked any will-power. Her accusations hurt because he knew them to be true.

And so he resolved to quit. To really quit this time. He didn't bother telling her; he couldn't bear her scepticism. But he was going to quit.

The morning was warm and he stripped down to his singlet as he sat down at the verandah table with his coffee. As soon as he had lit the cigarette, Melissa flew out of the back door and ran screaming into his arms.

'Adam won't let me play.' She was howling, and he dropped her onto his lap and stroked her face. He let her cry till she was spent. He didn't need this, didn't want this, not this morning of all mornings. He wanted the cigarette in peace. There was never enough peace. But he played with his daughter's hair, kissed her on her forehead, waited for her tears to end. He stubbed out his cigarette and Melissa watched the smoke extinguish.

‘You shouldn’t smoke, Daddy. It causes cancer.’

She was parroting admonishments she had learnt at school. His kids struggled with their eight times tables but they knew smoking gave you lung cancer and that unprotected sex caused venereal disease. He stopped himself from scolding her. Instead, he picked her up and carried her into the lounge room. Adam was intent on his computer game and did not look up.

Hector drew a breath. He wanted to kick the lazy little bastard but instead he plunked his daughter next to his son and grabbed the game console from the boy.

‘It’s your sister’s turn.’

‘She’s a baby. She’s no good.’

Adam had wrapped his arms tight around himself and glared rebelliously at his father, his soft belly bulging over the waistband of his jeans. Aisha insisted that his puppyfat would disappear in adolescence but Hector wasn’t convinced. The boy was obsessed with screens: with his computer, with television, with his PlayStation. His sluggishness unnerved Hector. He had always taken pride in his own good looks and fit body; as an adolescent he’d been a pretty good footballer and an even better swimmer. He could not help but see his son’s corpulence as a slight. He was sometimes embarrassed to be seen with Adam in public. Aware of the scandalous nature of such thoughts, he’d never revealed them to anyone. But he could not help feeling disappointed, and he seemed always to be telling off his son. Do you have to sit in front of the TV all day? It’s a great day, why don’t you play outside? Adam’s response was to be silent, to sulk, and this only fed Hector’s exasperation. He had to bite his lip to not insult the child. Occasionally Adam would glance up at him with a look of such hurt bewilderment Hector would feel a crushing shame.

‘Come on, mate, give your sister a go.’

‘She’ll wreck it.’

‘Now.’

The boy threw the console onto the floor, rose unsteadily to his feet, and stormed off to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Grabbing her father's hand, Melissa stared after him. 'I want to play.' She was crying again.

'Play by yourself.'

'I want to play with Adam.'

Hector fingered the cigarette pack in his pocket.

'It's fair that you have time to play video games as well. Adam was being unfair. He'll come and play with you in a few minutes, just wait and see.' He was keeping his voice deliberately even, almost making a sing-song childish rhythm of the platitudes. But Melissa would not be pacified.

'I want to play with Adam,' she wailed, and gripped tighter onto his hand. His first instinct was to push her away from him. Guilty, he tenderly stroked the little girl's hair and kissed the top of her head.

'Do you want to come to the market with me?'

The wailing had stopped but Melissa was not yet prepared to concede defeat. She stared miserably at the door that Adam had slammed behind him.

Hector shook his hand free from hers. 'It's your choice, sweetheart. You can stay here and play video games by yourself or you can come with me to the market. Which would you prefer?'

The girl did not answer.

'Right.' Hector shrugged his shoulders and put a cigarette to his lips. '*Your* choice.' He walked out to the kitchen with her renewed cries following him.

Aisha was wiping her hands dry. She indicated the clock.

'I know, I know. I just want one fucking smoke in peace.'

He thought Aisha would also join in the chorus of resentment directed towards him that morning but her face broke into a grin and she kissed his cheek.

'Right, which one of them's to blame?'

'Adam. Definitely Adam.'

He sat on the verandah and had his cigarette. He could hear Aisha talking calmly to his daughter. He knew that she would be on her knees beside Melissa, playing with the console. He also knew in a few minutes Adam would emerge from his room and sit on the couch to watch his sister and mother play. Within moments the children would be sharing the console and Aisha would have slipped back into the kitchen. He marvelled at his wife's patience, felt the lack of his own. Sometimes he wondered how his kids would respect him when they were older—whether they even loved him at all.

Connie loved him. She had told him. He knew that it had almost caused her physical pain to say the words, that she'd almost choked on them. Her agony underlined his own shame. Aisha, of course, often told him that she loved him, but always calmly, nonchalantly; as if from the very beginning of their relationship she had been sure that he loved her in return. Telling someone you loved them should never be dispassionate. Connie had spat out the words in terror, not knowing or trusting their consequences. She hadn't dared look at him as she said it, and immediately flicked a lock of her hair straight into her mouth. He had gently flicked it away and then kissed her on the lips. 'I love you too,' he had answered. And he did, he certainly did. He had been incapable of thinking of much else for months. But he hadn't dared speak the words to Connie. She said them first. She had to say them first.

'Have you got any valium left?'

'No.' He heard the reproach in Aisha's answer and he noticed her quick look at the kitchen clock.

'I've got plenty of time.'

'Why do you need valium?'

'I don't need it. I just want it. It's just to take the edge off the barbecue.'

Aisha suddenly smiled, her eyes glistening and mischievous. He

screwed his cigarette into the ashtray, walked through the glass doors and scooped his wife into his arms. 'I've got plenty of time, I've got plenty of time,' he sang. He kissed the fingers of her left hand, sniffed at the sweet tang of cumin and lime. She kissed him back and then gently pushed him away.

'Do you mind that much?'

'No, of course not.' He certainly would have preferred not to have to give up Saturday evening to play host to a mixture of family, friends and work colleagues; he certainly would have rather spent the last day of his smoking life doing something just for him. But for Aisha, the evening's small party was a way of repaying countless dinner and party invitations. Aisha believed they owed it to their circle. Hector felt no such obligation. But he was a genial host and understood the importance of the evening for his wife. And he had always been proud of the fact that they shared a respect and tolerance for family.

'I don't mind but I'd like some valium. Just in case Mum decides to break my balls tonight.'

'It's not *your* balls she's going to break.' Aisha's eyes darted back to the clock. 'I don't know if I have time to go to work and pick some up.'

'That's okay, I'll drop by and get them after the market.'

In the shower, with the warm jets of water falling onto his head and shoulders, and the steam rising around him, he looked down at his lean body, at his thick limp cock, and cursed himself. You are such a prick, such a fucking lying prick. He was surprised to find himself speaking out loud. A jolt of humiliation flashed through him, and he sharply turned off the hot water tap. The shock of ice-cold water on his head and shoulders could not banish his remorse. Even as a child, Hector had never had time for make-believe or rationalisations. He knew he had no need for the valium and the only reason he was saying he did was so he could see Connie. He could simply choose to drive past Aisha's clinic and not stop for the pills. He could, but he knew he wouldn't. He did not once dare catch his own eyes in

the mirror as he was drying himself with the damp towel that smelt of soap, of himself and his wife. Only in the bedroom, running a small squirt of wax through his hair, did he dare look at his reflection. He saw the grey at his temples and at his unshaven chin, the wrinkles at the edge of his mouth. He also saw that his jaw was still firm, his hair still full, and that he looked younger than his forty-three years.

He was whistling as he kissed his wife. He grabbed the shopping list and his car keys from the kitchen table.

When he started up the car, an appalling bleating pop song assailed his ears. He quickly changed to another radio station, not jazz but comfortable acoustic drone. Aisha had picked up the kids from school the day before and allowed them to choose the station. He never let them dictate what was to be played in the car, and Aisha often mocked his sternness.

‘No,’ he would insist. ‘They can play the music they want when they develop some taste.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Hector, they’re kids, they have no taste.’

‘Well they’re not going to get any listening to crap top-forty shit. I’m doing them a favour.’

This would always make Aisha laugh.

The market carpark was packed and he weaved slowly in and out of the crammed lanes before he managed to find a space. The Commodore—reliable, comfortable and dull—had been a concession. Their previous family cars had included a rusted late-sixties Peugeot that was missing a hand-brake and which they ditched as soon as Adam was born; a sturdy Datsun 200B from the seventies that had given up the ghost somewhere between Coffs Harbour and Byron Bay when Adam was six and Melissa just a baby; and a monstrous late-model Chrysler Valiant that was seemingly indestructible and which had taken the family back and forth across the country a number of times to visit Aisha’s family in Perth. The Valiant was stolen by two young men high on alcohol and petrol who

smashed it into a phone box in Lalor and then poured petrol all over the interior and set it alight. Hector had almost cried when the police told him. Then Aisha had declared that she was no longer interested in any car older than ten years. She wanted something safe and less expensive to run. Reluctantly Hector had agreed. But he still dreamed of another Valiant—or a two-door ute, or an old EJ Holden.

He stretched out in the car seat, rolled down his window, lit a cigarette and pulled out the shopping list. As usual, Aisha was thorough and meticulous, listing the exact quantities of the ingredients she wanted. Twenty-five grams of green cardamom seeds (she never bought spices in bulk because she believed they became stale too quickly). Nine hundred grams of squid (Hector would ask for a kilo; he always rounded up, never down). Four eggplants (then in brackets and underlined, she had indicated European not Asian eggplants). Hector smiled as he read down the list. His wife's orderly habits sometimes made him frustrated, but he admired her efficiency and he respected her calm manner. If left to him, the preparations for the barbecue would have been chaotic and resulting in panic. But Aisha was a marvel at organisation, and for that he was thankful. He knew that without her his life would fall apart. Aisha's steadiness and intelligence had a benign effect on him, he could see it clearly. Her calmness assuaged the danger of his own impulsiveness. Even his mother—who had initially bitterly resented his relationship with an Indian girl—admitted as much.

'You're lucky to have her,' she would remind him in Greek. 'God knows what gypsy you could have ended up with if you hadn't found her. You have no control. You've never had control.'

His mother's words came back to him again after he'd loaded the box of vegetables and fruit into the boot of the car and was strolling back to the delicatessen. The young woman walking in front of him had denim jeans tightly cupping her round, tantalisingly small

buttocks. She had long, swinging straight black hair and Hector guessed she was Vietnamese. He walked slowly behind her. The noise and clamour of the market had fallen away; all that existed was the perfect sashaying arse before him. The woman darted into a bakery and Hector awoke from his fantasy. He needed to piss.

Washing his hands and staring at the grimy mirror, he shook his head at his reflection.

‘You have no control.’

He sat in the car outside the clinic, smoking while he listened to Art Blakey and the Messengers. He always found the sharp discordant horns of ‘A Night in Tunisia’ both sensually charged and calming. When he found himself reaching for a third cigarette, he abruptly switched off the music, jumped out of the car and walked across the street.

The waiting room was full. A thin elderly woman was clutching tightly to a cardboard cat box that emitted regular distressed, pitiful cries. Two young women were sitting on the couch, flicking through magazines as a black Pomeranian sat desolately at their feet. Connie was on the phone. When she saw him walk in, she offered a small, tight smile and then looked away. She placed another caller on hold then resumed her conversation.

‘I’m going through,’ he whispered to her, pointing down the corridor.

She nodded. As he walked past the closed door of the consulting room and into the surgery, he felt breathless. The girl made him anxious. Seeing Connie was always difficult, confusing, as though seeing her peeled away the years of his maturity back to the shy, tongue-tied boy he was at school. But he was also aware of a deep and satisfying pleasure, a warmth that flooded his whole body: when he was with her it was as if he had stepped out of the shade and into the warm invigorating sunshine. The world felt colder to him now when Connie wasn’t around. She made him happy.

‘What are you doing here?’ There was nothing menacing in her question. Her arms were crossed and her blonde hair was tied back in a thick ponytail.

‘It looks busy.’

‘Saturdays always are.’

She moved over to the X-ray table, and started picking pieces of lint off the pale blue sheet that covered the machine. He could hear a dog growling in the consult room.

She was refusing to look at him. She had no idea how to treat him when they were together in public and it always made him acutely aware of her youth: the ridge of pimples below her bottom left lip, the freckles on her nose, the awkward droop of her shoulders. Stand up straight, he wanted to say to her, don’t be ashamed of being tall.

‘Aish asked me to pick up some valium.’

At the mention of his wife’s name, Connie looked at him and sprang into action.

‘They’re in the consult room.’

‘It can wait till Brendan’s finished with the client.’

‘It’s alright, I’ll get them.’ She rushed down the corridor and returned with five tablets in a small plastic bag. ‘Is this enough?’

‘Sure.’ He took the bag and as he did so he rubbed his finger softly across her wrist. The girl looked away, but did not pull back her arm.

‘Can I have a cigarette?’ She was now looking straight at him, her sharp blue eyes daring him with the request. Brendan was notorious for his objections to smoking and he would disapprove of Hector giving a cigarette to a teenager. No, not a teenager, Connie was a young woman. Connie’s dare seemed deliberate, provocative; her insistent stare aroused him. He gave her a cigarette. Connie opened the door to the back verandah and he was about to follow her.

‘Keep an eye out for Brendan, will you? Or if someone comes through the front.’ When she gave instructions she still sounded like a Londoner. He nodded and she slammed the screen door behind her.

Through the surgery window he watched her smoke, drinking in every aspect of her. The thick, fair hair, the plump bottom and long, strong legs in too-tight black jeans. The gracious curve of her neck. The phone rang and she pitched the cigarette onto the ground, stubbed it into the earth, picked up the butt and threw it in the industrial bin. She brushed by him to answer the phone.

‘Good morning, you’ve called the Hogarth Road Vet Clinic, Connie speaking. Do you mind holding?’ She turned back to him. ‘Is there anything else?’

He shook his head. ‘I’ll see you this afternoon.’

A look of confusion shadowed her face and again he was struck by her youth, her adolescence, the naivety she so detested about herself. He wanted to praise her for throwing her cigarette butt into the bin but stopped himself because he knew she would interpret any comment as patronising. Which in part it would be.

‘The barbecue, at our place,’ he reminded her.

Without a word, she turned her back to him.

‘Thank you for holding, what can I do for you?’

Back home he helped Aisha unpack the groceries then went to the toilet and, over the bowl, he masturbated furiously. He was not thinking of Connie. He was picturing the luscious buttocks of the Vietnamese woman he had spied at the market. He came in a minute and he wiped the semen off the seat, chucked the toilet paper in the bowl, pissed, and flushed it all away. He had no need to fantasise about Connie. Connie was inside him. He looked into the bathroom mirror as he was washing his hands, and again he noticed the grey amid the black bristles on his chin. He wanted to smash his fist into the face staring back at him.

Just before the guests were due to arrive, Adam and Melissa started a fight. Aisha had laid out a feast on the kitchen table: a lentil dahl,

samosas and curried eggplant, a potato salad and a salad of dill and black beans. He was standing in front of the stove, waiting to throw calamari into a sizzling pan, when he first heard his daughter's angry scream. He was about to yell out when he heard Aisha running from the bathroom. She started to mediate between the children but Melissa's cries were rising in intensity and he could hear that Adam too had begun to wail. His wife's voice was drowned out in the commotion. Hector threw half of the calamari rings into the pan, lowered the heat, then went to investigate.

Melissa had her arms around her mother's neck and Adam was sitting on his bed, sulking defiantly.

'What happened?'

It was the wrong thing to ask. Both children started shouting at once. Hector raised his hand. 'Shut it!'

Melissa immediately went silent, except for a series of low, sad moans. Tears were still running down her face.

He turned to his son. 'What happened?'

'She called me a fat pig.'

You *are* fat.

'What did you do to her?'

Aisha stepped in. 'Listen, I want both of you to behave this afternoon. I don't care who started it. I want both of you to go and sit in the lounge and watch TV until the guests come. Deal?'

Melissa nodded her head but Adam was still scowling. 'Something's burning,' he muttered.

'Fuck!' Hector raced into the kitchen and quickly began turning the rings. Oil splattered across the front of his shirt. He swore. Aisha was standing in the kitchen doorway and started laughing.

'What's so bloody funny? I just changed into this shirt.'

'Maybe you should have changed after cooking the calamari.'

For a lightning moment, he imagined throwing the frying pan straight at her. She came up and slipped her hand under his shirt, her fingers cool and soothing.

'I'll do it,' she whispered. 'You go change again.'

It tickled where she had touched him.

His parents were the first to arrive. He watched them from the bedroom window as they unloaded bags and boxes from the boot of their car. He went out to greet them.

'Why did you bring all this?' His father was holding a tray of chops and steaks. 'I bought all the meat we need at the market this morning.'

'It's alright, Ecttora,' his mother answered in Greek, kissing him on both cheeks, two large bowls of salad in her hands. 'We're not barbarians or English to bring nothing to a barbecue. What we don't eat today, you and the children can have tomorrow.'

Have tomorrow? They would be eating the leftovers till the following weekend.

His parents put their trays and bowls onto the kitchen bench. His mother gave Aisha a small pet on the cheek then rushed into the lounge to greet the children. His father hugged Aisha warmly.

'I go bring the rest of food from car.'

'There's more?' Aisha's voice was warm and cordial but Hector noticed the tightness around her mouth.

'Just dips and things?' Hector queried.

'Yes,' answered his father. 'Some dips and drinks and some cheese and fruit.'

'There's going to be too much food,' Aisha whispered.

Just leave it, he wanted to say, they have always been this way. They will always be this way. Why are you still surprised by it?

'It's alright,' he whispered back to her. 'What we don't eat today we can have for lunch through the week.'

Within an hour the house was full. His sister, Elizabeth, arrived with her two children, Sava and Angeliki. Aisha popped *Toy Story* into the DVD; the film was a durable favourite. Hector had lots of time for his

nephew Sava, who was only a year younger than Adam, but already seemed more assured and knowledgeable, more daring, than his own son. Sava was lithe, agile, secure in his body. He was sitting close to the screen, mouthing the dialogue off by heart, pretending to be Buzz Lightyear. Adam was sitting cross-legged next to him. The girls, Melissa and Angeliki, were sitting side by side on the couch, watching the movie and whispering to each other.

‘It’s a beautiful day, you should be outside playing.’

The four children ignored their grandmother.

‘It’s alright, Koula, let them watch a movie.’

His mother ignored Aisha and instead turned to Hector, speaking in Greek. ‘They’re always in front of that damn television.’

‘So were we, Mum.’

‘That’s just not true.’ And with that, his mother brushed him aside and went into the kitchen. She took the knife from Aisha’s hands. ‘I’ll do that, love.’

He noticed that his wife’s back had stiffened.

The weather was perfect, a lush late-summer afternoon, with a clear blue sky. His cousin Harry arrived with his wife Sandi and their son, eight-year-old Rocco, and soon after Bilal and Shamira arrived with their two kids. Little Ibbby ran straight into the lounge and plonked himself next to Adam and Sava, barely acknowledging them, his eyes riveted to the screen. The toddler, Sonja, at first refused to join the other children, nervously clutching her mother’s knees, but the laughter from the lounge room slowly enticed her away from the women in the kitchen and she eventually, quietly, went to sit on the floor next to the girls. Aisha placed a tray of party pies and sausage rolls on the coffee table and the kids swooped on them.

Hector went out into the backyard with Bilal, and his father handed them both a beer.

Bilal refused the alcohol with a slight shake of his head.

‘Come on, just one drink.’

‘I don’t drink alcohol anymore, Manoli. You know that.’

Hector’s father laughed. ‘You must be the only Aboriginal in Australia who not want drink.’

‘No, I’m not. I hear there’s also this other guy in Townsville.’

‘I go get you a Coke.’

As his father shuffled slowly to the verandah, Hector pulled his friend aside and apologised.

Bilal raised his hand to stop him. ‘Don’t worry about it. He remembers me from when I was drunk all the time.’

‘We were, weren’t we?’

And as young men they had been. It was the tail end of school, back when Bilal was a bloke called Terry. Hector’s memories of his late adolescence were of seemingly endless nights of parties, clubbing, seeing bands, taking drugs, drinking, chatting up girls. Sometimes there were fights—like the night outside the doors of Inflation in King Street, when a bouncer had taken one look at Terry’s proud black pockmarked face and refused the youth entry. Hector swung at the massive bouncer and punched him square in the nose. The man bellowed and rushed at both of them, throwing Hector against a parked car—he still remembered it was a Jaguar—and with one arm keeping Terry at bay, he kept punching into him, a volley of jabs, into Hector’s back, his face, into his belly, his groin, his jaw. He’d been crippled for a week, and on top of that Terry had been furious with him for starting the incident in the first place. ‘Fucking useless wog, did I ask you to defend me?’

Hector’s mother, of course, had blamed it all on his friend. ‘That Terry is an animal,’ she screamed at him. ‘Why are you friends with that *mavraki*, that blackie, all he knows to do is drink.’ But they had always been good friends, since sitting together in Year Eight in school, a friendship that continued even when Terry left to go to tech to start his sign writing apprenticeship, that flourished even as Hector went off to uni to do his commerce degree. They were still good friends—now in their forties, still living in the same neighbourhood

in which they had grown up and gone to school. It was a continuity they both cherished even though they saw each other rarely. Terry had found Islam, changed his name, and stopped drinking, dedicating himself to his new faith and to protecting his family. Hector watched fondly as his friend took the Coke from Manolis, thanking him for it in the school-yard Greek that Hector had taught him when they were both fourteen. He knew that his friend was happier than at any other moment in his life. Bilal no longer lost himself in destructive rages, no longer hurt himself or dared death. But Hector also missed those nights of drinking and laughing and listening to music and being high. He wished he could split his mate into two: mostly he wanted him to be Bilal, but sometimes he wanted a night with Terry. It had been a long time since such a night.

Hector's work mates from the State Trustees Office arrived. Dedj walked in carrying a carton of stubbies. Leanna was with him, a bottle of wine in her hand. A dark-faced man followed silently behind them. The man was younger than the rest of them—Hector figured he must be thirty—unshaven and sullen. His face was familiar. Hector wondered if he was Dedj's date or Leanna's. Dedj put the stubbies on the lawn and grabbed Manolis, hugging him and kissing him on the cheeks three times in the Balkan way. Dedj gestured to the stranger.

'This is Ari.'

Hector's father started making small talk in Greek but Ari's own Greek was broken and clumsy. Manolis turned away and focused his attention back on the coals.

'Leave it, Dad. We've got plenty of time before dinner.'

'No, Manoli, you look after the barbecue. It will take a couple of hours to fire up.'

'See?' his father responded triumphantly. 'Your wife is smarter than you.' The old man placed an arm around his daughter-in-law and Aisha squeezed his hand.

'Aish, this is Ari.'

Hector noticed the young man's approving stare and felt proud of his beautiful wife.

'You look familiar, Ari. Have we met?'

The man nodded at Hector. 'Yep, we go to the same gym.' Ari pointed westwards. 'Just around the corner.'

'That's right.' Hector recognised him now. He was one of those men who always seemed to be at the bloody gym. Hector's attendance was sporadic at best. His morning routine was the one constant concession to exercise in his life. He'd have to go to the gym this week, to get rid of the night's calories. And then it could be weeks before he'd go again. He figured Ari must be one of those wog guys who seemed to spend all their time at the Northcote gym, making it the centre of their social life.

Aisha's friends arrived next, Rosie and Gary, and their three-year-old, Hugo. Hugo looked like a cherubic, gorgeous child. He had Rosie's straw-coloured blonde hair, and shared the almost ghostly translucent blue of her eyes. He was a delightful-looking kid but Hector was wary of him, having once witnessed the boy's vile temper. As a toddler Hugo had kicked Aisha when they were babysitting him. They had always had a firm bedtime rule with their own children but Hugo knew no such discipline. He had cried and screamed and then started kicking when Aisha picked him up to carry him to bed. He was like a wild animal, lashing out with his feet, and one of his kicks found her funny bone. She had yelled out in pain and nearly dropped the child. Hector had wanted to smash the kid against the wall. Instead he wrenched Hugo from his wife's arms and without a word carried him into their bedroom and chucked him on the bed. He couldn't remember what he said to him, but he had screamed out an order so loud and so close to the little boy's ear that the child had recoiled and started a long, disbelieving sob. Realising he had terrified the boy, Hector scooped him into his arms and rocked him to sleep.

‘So what’s to drink?’ Gary was rubbing his hands and looking expectantly at Hector.

‘I go bring,’ his father answered. ‘You want beer?’

‘Yeah, thanks, Manny, whatever.’

‘It’s alright, Dad, I’ll get it.’

Gary was going to get drunk. Gary always got drunk. It had become a running joke in his family, one Aisha disapproved of because of her loyalty to her friend. Gary and Rosie have been attending their family Christmases on and off for years, and every time, once they had walked out the door, Rosie usually trying to support her staggering husband, Hector’s mother would turn to the other Greeks, raise her eyebrows and exclaim, *Australezi*, what do you expect? It’s in their blood!

Hector took a beer from the mounting pile of bottles sitting in ice in the bathroom tub. From the lounge room he could hear the DVD. He could hear Adam introducing Hugo to his cousins, and smiled. He sounded like Aisha, polite, gentle, welcoming.

Anouk and Rhys had also arrived. Anouk looked like she was dressed for a cocktail party, not a suburban barbecue. Her black denim skirt came to just above her knees, leaving a gash of pearly white flesh visible over the top of her black patent leather boots. She was wearing a see-through dark chocolate silk vest over an intricately patterned lace black bra. Hector noticed that on seeing Anouk, his mother’s lips had tightly drawn together: she started chopping lettuce with fury at the kitchen bench. But her face brightened when she was introduced to Anouk’s boyfriend. Rhys was an actor in the soap opera that Anouk scripted and, although Hector never watched the show Rhys’s face was blandly familiar. He shook the man’s hand. Anouk kissed him on the cheek. Her breath was sweet and her perfume was intoxicating; he could smell honey and something tart and sharp in it. Expensive, no doubt.

Hector was about to put on a Sonny Rollins CD when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Anouk brandishing a disc.

‘No jazz. Aisha’s sick of jazz.’ She spoke firmly and he obediently took the CD. It was burnt and the words Broken Social Scene were scrawled in thick blue slashes of Texta across the disc.

‘Put it on. It’s one of Rhys’s. Let’s listen to what the kids are up to these days.’

He pushed in the disc, pressed play and stood up, grinning at her. ‘The kids, eh. Then it’ll be shite r’n’b, won’t it?’

The smoke was now streaming from the barbecue and he resisted the urge to yell at his father. Instead he circulated, pouring more drinks for the guests while Aish brought out the samosas. The women had gradually come out of the house and everyone was standing on the lawn or the verandah, drinking and biting into the delicate pastries. Hector noticed that Ari had walked away from the main group and was examining the garden. Harry announced that he had enrolled Rocco into a beachside private school and Gary immediately challenged him. Hector stayed silent. Sandi argued that the local school was inadequate for their son, that the facilities were degraded and the class sizes too large. She had wanted to send their child to a government school but there were no decent ones in the local area. Hector knew that this could not possibly be true. Sandi and Harry had left their westie childhood and adolescence far behind them: they now lived in prime blue-ribbon real estate.

‘Look,’ Harry interrupted his wife, and Hector could tell that his cousin was annoyed by Gary’s challenge. ‘You don’t have to tell me about government schools, mate, I went to the local tech. It was fine back then, but I’m not sending Rocco to the fucking local high school. It’s a different time—no government, Liberal or Labor, cares a flying fuck about education. There’s drugs, there’s not enough teachers.’

‘There’s drugs everywhere.’

Harry turned away from Gary and whispered in Greek to Manolis. ‘The Australians don’t give a fuck about their children.’

His father laughed but Hector's mother suddenly spoke up.

'But what if all people send children to private schools. Bad for government schools. Only very very poor people can then go and the government gives no more money. I think this is terrible. I'm happy I send my children to government schools.'

'That was a different time, *Thea*. The world's gone to the dogs now. It's every man for himself. I still support public schools, don't get me wrong, but I'm not risking Rocco's education for my beliefs. Sandi and me both support public education—that won't change.'

'Will that be possible?' Bilal, who had been listening silently, suddenly spoke up. 'You won't know what's going on in the high schools. How are you going to know the issues and stuff my kids are facing?'

'I can still bloody read the papers.'

Bilal smiled and said nothing further. Aisha remained quiet. Hector knew that she disliked the conversation. It was an argument that arose between them with increasingly uncomfortable regularity. She was concerned about Adam's poor academic abilities, and wanted to enrol him in a private school. Hector doubted any school would help; the boy just wasn't that smart. With Melissa it was different. The girl was lazy but she probably would be okay at school. But that was precisely why it wasn't an issue with their daughter. She would be fine at Northcote High, more than fine. He was a reverse snob. He thought private education was no good for a child's character. Private school boys always seemed effete; private school girls were up themselves and cold.

'You don't mind what that school will do to your son?'

It was as if Gary had read his thoughts.

Harry ignored Gary and asked Hector, in Greek, for another beer.

Gary was insistent. 'You don't mind that he'll be with all those rich snobby kids?'

‘Look, mate, Rocco’s grandparents on both sides were factory workers. His old man’s a mechanic. I’m sure he won’t forget where he comes from.’

‘You own your own shop, don’t ya?’

Hector knew that Gary’s questions were not sinister, that the man had a real curiosity for people and their lives, that he was trying to work out where exactly Harry and his family fitted into the social order. But Hector, who knew his cousin detested obtrusive questions into his personal life, thought it best to intervene now.

‘I reckon it’s time for the sausages. What do you think, Dad?’

‘Five minutes.’

Gary went quiet. Harry had turned his back to him and was talking sport with Dedjan. To broker the peace Sandi initiated a discussion with Rosie about children.

At first reluctantly, Gary joined in, but soon became animated, describing the delight he received from watching Hugo grow, from trying to answer the child’s increasingly complex questions. ‘You know what he asked me the other day, when I took him to the swings at the local park? He asked me how his feet knew how to make steps. It bowled me over. It took me a long time to answer that one.’

Yeah, yeah. Whose kid hadn’t asked that bloody question? Hector walked over to where Ari was standing smoking a cigarette, looking over the vegetable garden, at the late-season eggplants, full and black, hanging precariously from their thick pale stalks.

‘Want a drink?’

‘I’m still on this beer.’

‘These are the last of the *melentzanes*, we’ll have to use them over the next couple of weeks.’

‘You’ll have to make a moussaka.’

‘Maybe. Aish uses them a lot. The Indians love them.’

The men stood silent. Hector struggled to make conversation. Ari’s face remained stony, his eyes ungiving.

‘What do you do?’

‘Courier.’ Just the one word, that was all the younger man was going to give. No indication if he worked for himself or for a business or was in a partnership. Come on, man, Hector wanted to plead, help me out a little.

‘You’re a public servant too?’ Ari was gesturing towards Dedj who was still chatting with Harry.

‘I guess so.’ Ridiculous. Why did he always feel embarrassed when he mentioned his job, as if it was somehow not quite legitimate, not real work? Or was it just that he hated that it sounded so dull?

Ari’s demeanour changed. ‘You’re lucky,’ he said, and then grinned wickedly. ‘Good job,’ he added, giving the phrase a deliberately exaggerated wog accent.

Hector had to laugh. ‘Good job,’ he echoed in accent—it was exactly what his parents said about him. Which he did. Fuck being embarrassed. What did he want to be instead? A rock and roll star, a jazz muso? They had been teenage daydreams.

He looked across to where Dedj and Leanna were making his cousin laugh. When he had finished his degree, Hector was twenty-three and idealistic. He had searched for and found work as an accountant for a respected overseas aid agency. He did not last out the year, hating the chaos of the office, the earnestness and antagonism of his colleagues: The books have to balance if you want to feed the world, motherfuckers. And the pay had been lousy. From there he’d gone into an internship for a multinational insurance company. He enjoyed working with numbers, appreciated their order and purity, but he found the people he was working with tediously conservative. Confident, physically capable, he had never found any need to enter into pissing contests or exaggerated jock humour. In the time between Adam and Melissa’s birth he’d drifted in and out of four jobs. Then for a three-month period he worked on a tender with the state government. Dedj had been the public servant liaison on his team and the two men had hit it off from the beginning. Dedjan was a hard drinker, a party animal and a fellow music freak. He was also

disciplined and good-humoured at work. Hector was offered a contract with the service for a year, and though Aisha had queried the opportunities for advancement, she'd reluctantly supported his taking the position. He had discovered that he enjoyed the collegiate environment of the public service office. Twenty years of economic rationalism had sliced out most of the flab. It certainly wasn't rock and roll, it wasn't *sexy*, but he was respected, did meticulous work and was given increasing managerial responsibility. He now sat comfortably on top of the bureaucratic fence negotiating compromise between the old-school bleeding hearts and the capitalist young turks. He had become 'permanent', the Holy Grail, and long-service leave was just around the corner. The most important part for Hector was that Dedj and Leanna, three or four others, they were like family.

'What's that?' The low rumble of the man's voice snapped Hector out of his contemplation. Ari was pointing towards the back fence, at the rain-worn handmade crucifix they had planted over Molly's grave.

'It's where we buried our dog. She was mine, a damn stupid Red Setter I had for years. The kids loved her as well. Aish hated her, blamed me for never training her. But, *entaxi*, you know the Greeks. As if my parents were going to pay money to train a bloody dog.'

'They'd be expensive, Red Setters?'

'A friend of a friend of a friend. I named her after Molly Ringwald. Remember her?'

'*Pretty in Pink*.'

'Yeah, the fucking eighties, man. All shit.'

Ari turned to him now and Hector was startled by the fiery intensity of his jet-black eyes.

'I've got some speed on me. Dedj said you might want some.'

Hector hesitated. It was a long time since he had taken speed. The last time was probably with Dedjan, at a work Christmas party. He was about to refuse when he remembered that he was giving up the cigarettes the next day. He wouldn't be able to go near drugs for a long time after that.

‘Yeah, sure, I’ll have some.’

‘It’s a hundred for a cap.’

‘For a fucking cap? It used to be sixty for a gram.’

‘And that was back in the fucking eighties, wasn’t it, *malaka?*’

They both laughed.

‘It’s good. It’s real good.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘No,’ Ari’s tone was insistent and serious. ‘I promise. It’s good.’

Hector tapped out half the speed onto the toilet lid. The amount suddenly seemed enormous as he cut two thick long lines. He rolled up a twenty-dollar note and snorted the lines quickly. It hit him almost immediately—he couldn’t tell whether it was the amphetamines or just the old unforgotten rush that came from indulging in something illicit—but he was suddenly flushed and he could feel his heart thumping. Rhys’s CD was still playing and he found the music was whiny and jarring. On his way back outside he switched off the CD mid-song and replaced it with Sly and the Family Stone. He turned up the volume. Anouk, in the backyard, turned around and shook her head, mocking him. Beside her, Rhys was nodding to the music.

‘The kids love it,’ he yelled out to her.

The late afternoon sun was soft and low in the sky, sending sheets of incandescent red cloud across the horizon. Hector stood on the verandah and lit a cigarette.

From behind him, inside the house, came the sounds of squabbling, then a child was howling. Rosie rushed past him.

Hugo was in the kitchen, inconsolable. Rosie picked him up and hugged him tightly. The child couldn’t speak, couldn’t get his breaths out.

Hector walked into the lounge where the four boys were sitting mute and fearful on the couch. Melissa had been crying but she was now wiping away her tears. Angeliki spoke first.

‘He didn’t want to watch the DVD.’

Suddenly there was a rush of accusing voices.

‘We wanted to watch *Spiderman*—’

‘He hit me—’

‘We didn’t do anything—’

‘He pinched me—’

‘We didn’t do anything—’

Aisha came into the lounge room. The children immediately fell back to silence.

‘*Spiderman* is rated PG. I don’t want you to watch it today.’

‘Mum!’ Adam was furious.

‘What did I say?’

The boy crossed his arms but he knew better than to protest any further.

‘You let Hugo watch what he wants, that’s an order.’

‘He wants to watch *Pinocchio*.’ Sava’s disgust was clear.

‘Then you’ll all watch *Pinocchio*.’

Hector followed Aisha into the kitchen. Hugo was now quiet and suckling contentedly at Rosie’s breast.

‘Why are you smoking in the house?’ asked Aisha.

Hector looked down at his cigarette. ‘I came in to see what the fuck happened.’

His mother marched up to him, took the cigarette from his mouth and proceeded to drown it under a torrent of water from the kitchen faucet. ‘It’s finish,’ she announced disdainfully, placing the soggy butt into the bin. ‘Children fight for nothing all the time. Nothing to worry about.’ His mother could not take her eyes off the suckling child. He knew she was disgusted that Rosie was still breastfeeding Hugo at his age. He agreed with her.

Brendan arrived next. Connie wasn’t with him. Hector shook the man’s hand and welcomed him to the gathering. He wanted to ask, Where is she? Why hasn’t she come with you?

Brendan kissed Aisha. ‘Connie’s coming later. She went home to change.’

Connie was going to be there. A rush of pure pleasure ran through Hector. He wanted to shout and sing and grab the whole damn backyard, the whole house—yes, even Rosie and that brat Hugo—grab everyone and hold them tight.

‘It is good stuff,’ he whispered to Ari.

‘I’ve always got some if you need it.’

Hector grinned widely and said nothing. He was thinking, not me, I don’t need it after tonight. Not me, mate, I’ve never *needed* it.

Aisha’s brother arrived. Ravi was over from Perth for a few days on a working holiday, staying in a swish hotel in the city. He had lost weight and was wearing a tight-fitting, pale blue short-sleeve shirt that showed off his newly muscled chest and arms. His dark hair was shorn close to his scalp.

‘You look good, man.’

Ravi hugged his brother-in-law and then went straight to Koula and Manolis, hugging them as well and kissing Koula on both cheeks.

‘Nice to see you, Ravi.’

‘Nice to see you as always, Mrs S. When are you going to visit me in Perth? Mum and Dad are always asking after you.’

‘How is your mama and father?’

‘Good, good.’

Whatever issues his mother might have with her daughter-in-law, she adored Aisha’s younger brother. Hector knew that at some point during the evening his mother would sit down next to him and whisper in Greek, That brother-in-law of yours is so handsome. And his skin is so light, not dark at all. She wouldn’t elaborate, but her meaning would be clear. Not like your wife.

Adam and Melissa ran out and fell onto their uncle. He raised his niece to the sky and kept a firm grip on his nephew’s shoulder. ‘Come out to the car with me.’

Ravi spoiled the kids. Hector heard them shouting and laughing as they followed their uncle to his car. They came back each hugging a large box. The other children came out onto the verandah while Adam and Melissa ripped into their presents.

‘What is it?’ Sava knelt down next to Adam. The packaging was thrown away to reveal a new computer game. Melissa, always more patient, was carefully stripping away the pieces of tape and folding the wrapping paper neatly beside her. Ravi had given her a pink and white doll’s house. She hugged her uncle, then grabbed Sonja by one hand and the box by the other. She turned to her cousin.

‘Come on, let’s go to my room and play.’ Angeliki promptly followed her.

The boys whipped round and looked at Hector. He wanted to laugh; their shining faces, their bright expectant eyes. Adam was holding tight to his gift.

‘Can we play with this?’

Hector nodded. With ferocious whoops, the boys rushed into the house.

‘You spoil them.’

‘Shut up, Sis, they’re just kids.’

Aisha wasn’t offended. Hector knew she was overjoyed that her brother was in Melbourne, that he could be at the party. Ravi threw his arm around Hector and they strolled over to the barbecue.

Gary had started another argument, this time with Rhys and Anouk. Manolis nudged Hector, speaking in Greek. ‘Go get the chops.’

‘Is it time yet?’

‘It’s time. That Australian hasn’t stopped drinking since he got here. He needs food.’

Gary’s face was indeed flushed and he was slurring as he fired a volley of questions at Anouk, his finger accusingly jabbing at her chest. ‘It’s just crap. That’s not how real families are.’

‘It’s television, Gary, commercial television.’ Anouk managed to sound cutting and bored all at once. ‘No, it is not how real families are.’

‘But you’re perpetrating bullshit that has an influence on millions of people around the world! Everyone thinks that Australian families are exactly like those on the show. Don’t you want to do something better with your writing?’

‘I do. That’s why I work as a scriptwriter on the show. To make money to pay for the writing I do want to do.’

‘And how much of that are you doing?’

‘Forty thousand words so far.’

Anouk turned to her boyfriend. ‘Shut up, Rhys.’

‘Why? It’s true.’ He turned to Hector. ‘She told me this morning. She’s got forty thousand words down on her novel.’

Gary shook his head and looked mournfully down at his beer. ‘I just don’t know how you can write that shit.’

‘It’s easy, Gazza. You could write that shit.’

‘I don’t want to. I don’t want to be part of that cock-sucking toxic industry.’

Harry winked at Anouk. ‘I like the show.’

‘What do you like about it?’

Harry ignored Gary.

‘What do you like about it?’ Gary raised his voice.

What a whinger. That’s where Hugo got it from. Hector caught his cousin’s wink. ‘It’s good to veg out on. Sometimes that’s all you want, something to entertain you for half an hour.’

Sandi linked her arm through her husband’s. She was smiling at Rhys who smiled back at her. ‘And I think you’re very good in it,’ she added shyly.

Hector stifled an urge to laugh. He looked across to where the others were sitting on the garden chairs, all keenly listening in to the argument. Dedjan caught his eye and Hector mock-wincing. I think you’re very good in it, Dedj mouthed sarcastically. Hector, who genuinely liked his cousin’s wife, made no reply. He turned back to the circle and smiled warmly at Sandi. She was almost as tall as her husband, slim and long-limbed. The combination of a model’s body

and a wog woman's style—the teased, dyed hair, the long painted nails, the too-bright make-up—made people think that she was a bimbo. She wasn't. Sandi might not be a uni graduate but she was smart, warm-hearted and loyal. Harry was damn lucky. She still worked a few days a week behind the counter of one of the garages that Harry owned. She didn't have to do that; Harry was rolling in money, riding the seemingly endless wave of the economic boom. His cousin was one lucky motherfucker.

A flush of excitement ran through Hector, like a jolt of electric current surging from his feet to the tips of his hair. His eyes darted over to the gate that separated the backyard from the driveway. Where was she? She should be here by now.

'Why do you think he's good in it?' Gary was a dog with a bone—he would not let the argument go. He was looking directly at Sandi, who was flustered by the fierceness of the man's stare, unsure if his question was a taunt. Hector thought it was possible that he was genuine. Gary's world was not their universe and it was one reason Hector preferred detachment in his interactions with him, had always avoided conflict with him. There was no small-talk, no frivolity to be had in conversation with Gary; even when they were innocent or harmless, his questions and statements seemed underscored by threat. Gary didn't trust their world, that was very clear.

In her confusion, Sandi was reduced to silence. Hector placed a hand on her shoulder and she suddenly lifted her head. She ignored Gary, she was looking at Rhys.

'I thought you were very good in those scenes last year when they wrongly arrested you for Sioban's murder.' There was a hint of flirtation in her smile now. 'I wasn't sure myself you hadn't done it.'

Jesus F Christ. She *really* watched that shit?

Gary was nodding, seeming to take her words in. He then turned and faced the actor, looked him up and down, taking in the casual but expensive fine cotton cowboy shirt, the black jeans, the confederate flag buckle of his belt.

‘You shot a man in Vermont, eh? Just to watch him die.’

Hector couldn’t stop himself, he laughed out loud. He was pretty sure that Anouk would be trying to suppress an outraged but treacherous grin. Gary was a prick, but he was an astute prick. Hector had only caught snatches of the soap opera, it was only ever background, but he had seen enough to know Rhys was never going to be the real thing. He was a second-rate Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash. He was destined for a lifestyle show flogging holidays or home renovations. Vermont was perfect, Vermont was frigging spot-on. The young actor screamed private schools, nutritious breakfasts as a child, the immense bland spread of the eastern suburbs.

At least Rhys had the decency to blush.

‘I don’t get it.’

‘It’s a line from a Johnny Cash song,’ Hector explained to Sandi.

‘I still don’t get it.’

Gary tilted his beer bottle towards Rhys. ‘I’m just acknowledging the tortured artist in our midst.’

Was it the amphetamines? Hector sensed Anouk’s body ready to spring, to pounce. Fast, dangerous, like a shark.

‘Gary’s a tortured artist as well. One of our most tortured.’

‘I’m just a labourer, Anouk.’ Gary’s voice was a snarl. ‘You know that.’

‘That’s his day job.’ Anouk’s expression was both innocent and lethal. ‘Gary’s not content with being salt of the earth. He’s really a painter, a visual *artiste*.’ She was like Cleopatra and the asp rolled into one, poised and calm, but her words stung. When Rosie first introduced Gary to them all those years ago, he had called himself a painter. Hector doubted Gary had worked on a canvas in years—which was a good thing; he was shit.

Anouk’s words had indeed found their target. Gary was looking like he wanted to explode. Hector surveyed the scene as if from a distance. He waited for the tension to fracture, then to break, for Gary to lose it. It wouldn’t be a party without some kind of verbal

stoush between Gary and Anouk. His father was turning the chops and sausages, ignoring everyone. I am my father's son, Hector thought to himself, I don't want to get involved. I just don't want to get involved.

He crashed to earth. Another burst of hysterical wails came from within the house. Anouk's smile was arctic as she turned away from Gary. 'I think that's your child again.'

Hugo had snatched the game remote and smashed it against the coffee table. The black plastic casing was cracked and there was a milky gash across the red gum surface of the table. Surprisingly, Adam was not crying or in a temper. He just looked genuinely astonished, finding it impossible to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Rosie was hugging Hugo who was pressed into her chest, as if clamouring to escape inside her. He was hiding his face from the world. Rocco was staring at Rosie and Hugo, also incredulous, but his vicious temper—exactly like Harry; they were all their fathers' sons—was about to erupt. The other little boys, terrified of the tension, were looking down at their feet; the girls had come out of Melissa's bedroom and were standing silently in the doorway, Sonja, afraid, uncomprehending, was weeping softly. Hector had come in and was standing behind Aisha and Elizabeth.

His mother, holding a knife in one hand and a souvlaki skewer in the other came up behind him. 'See? Stupid computers games, they cause too much trouble.'

Anger flooded Adam's face. 'That's not true, *Giagia*, we were just playing.' He pointed a challenging finger towards Hugo, who was still hiding in Rosie's arms. 'He just lost it because he can't play very well.'

'Well, he's young,' blurted out Rosie. 'He's impatient to learn, to play with you boys. How about you teach him how to play?'

'Is he going to be punished?'

Hector shook his head in warning to Rocco. The boy ignored him.

‘He bloody broke it. He should be punished.’

‘He didn’t mean to.’

Rocco’s face was flushed with rage. ‘That’s so fucking unfair.’

Hector noticed that Sandi had slipped quietly into the room. She went to discipline Rocco and he fled to his cousin’s bedroom. Adam took one quick look at the adults—father and son locked eyes; Hector’s nod was imperceptible—and scurried after his cousin. Sonja started sobbing and her mother rushed to console her. Aisha and his mother were both trying to get the girls to go back into Melissa’s bedroom, as Sandi continued yelling at her son. Hector turned and walked away. He felt like shaking Rosie, he couldn’t look at her. He was fucking sick of children. Let the women sort it out.

Gary hadn’t moved from his spot next to the barbecue. He’d started on another beer, his face set in a scowl.

‘What happened?’

Hector shrugged his shoulders and didn’t answer Anouk’s question. She turned to Gary. ‘Shouldn’t you go in?’

Hector realised that Gary was exhausted, working at a shit job, not his own boss, raising a family. Anouk had no idea.

‘Let Rosie deal with it. She’s the one who spoils him, so let her fucking deal with it.’ His voice softened; the sadness was unmistakable. ‘You were right, ’Nouks, I shouldn’t have had a child. I’m no good as a father.’

‘You are speaking rubbish. You are a very good father. Your son loves you.’ Manolis took a charred piece of sausage from the barbecue and offered it to Gary. Hector stood next to his father, their bodies touching. He was much taller than his old man. There was a time he had thought of his father as a giant. ‘Do you want some help, Dad?’ he offered in Greek.

‘It’s nearly ready. Tell your mother.’

In the kitchen the women were busy preparing plates and glasses, tossing the salads. Rosie’s face was tear-stained, as was her son’s who was sucking hard on her nipple.

‘Dad says the meat is ready. We can eat.’

In the lounge room the boys were sprawled across the couch and on the floor watching another DVD. It was *Spiderman*. Hector didn’t know how their anger had been defused but he assumed Aisha had something to do with it.

‘Turn it off,’ he ordered. ‘Time to eat,’ and the boys complied. He was suddenly aware of a snatch of rhythm, a sensual roll of bass. A melody from the past, a song he had not heard for years—before children, before the streaks of grey in his hair and on his chest. Neneh Cherry was singing. Someone had changed the CD, probably Anouk. It was the right choice.

It was a feast. Charred lamb chops and juicy fillet steak. There was a stew of eggplant and tomato, drizzled with lumps of creamy melted feta. There was black bean dahl and oven-baked spinach pilaf. There was coleslaw and a bowl of Greek salad with plump cherry tomatoes and thick slices of feta; a potato and coriander salad and a bowl of juicy king prawns. Hector had been completely unaware of the industry in the kitchen. His mother had brought pasticcio, Aisha had made a lamb in a thick cardamom-infused curry, and together they had prepared two roast chickens and lemon-scented roast potatoes. There was tzatziki and onion chutney; there was pink fragrant taromosalata and a platter of grilled red capsicum, the skins delicately removed, swimming in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. The guests lined up for plates and cutlery and the children ate seated around the coffee table. There was hardly any conversation: everyone was too busy eating and drinking, occasionally stopping to praise his wife and his mother for the food.

Hector nibbled at everything but could taste nothing. The amphetamines still rushed through his body and each mouthful he took seemed bland and dry. But he felt proud of what his wife had made possible. He heard the slam of a car door and he eagerly looked up, counted the steps coming up the drive and sprang up

to open the verandah gate. Tasha kissed him on the cheek. There was little resemblance between Connie and her aunt; Tasha was short, with a squat body and dark straight hair. Connie was dressed in a blue sweater that was too big for her; it hid her entire body. When Hector went to kiss her she jumped back, bumping into the timorous teenage boy who had walked in behind them. At first Hector didn't recognise the youth, then realised he was the son of Tracey, the vet nurse at Aisha's practice. He was all acne and shyness, his eyes almost hidden beneath the navy and red baseball cap that he had drawn tight over his skull and forehead. Hector mechanically shook the youth's hand. His eyes were on Connie and she was staring right back at him. The challenge in her eyes shot a jolt of heat through him.

He led the trio into the kitchen. 'There's heaps of food,' he gushed. 'Here, let me get you something to eat.'

'They can do it themselves, you organise the drinks.' Aisha kissed them all by turn. The boy blushed a deep scarlet, his rash of pimples flaring.

'Where's your mum, Richie?'

Tasha answered for him. 'Trace can't make it. Her sister's across from Adelaide.'

'But I told Tracey to bring her along. There's certainly enough food and drink. Hector's parents have made sure of that.'

Richie mumbled inaudibly and there was an awkward silence. Clearing his throat the boy began again. His sentences were short, confused, a rapid jumble.

'Only one night. Then friends, going to Lakes Entrance. Only has one night. She and Mum have to catch up.'

Aisha was amused by the almost incoherent statements, but didn't show it, smiling sweetly at the youth who suddenly beamed back at her.

'Well, I'm glad you came.' Aisha turned to Hector. 'How about some drinks?'

Richie asked for fruit juice and Connie diffidently asked for a beer. Hector glanced over at the girl's aunt but Tasha seemed oblivious. He looked back at Connie and he couldn't help but register a hint of disappointment behind the stiff smile on her lips. He had made a mistake in seeking her aunt's permission.

His eyes followed Connie. He watched her fill her plate, observed the fine ripples on her pale long throat as she swigged at the beer. She ate delicately, slowly, but with obvious relish, enjoying the rich food. She wiped at her mouth, casually, unconcerned. The boy ate with gusto; in minutes, his lips and chin were shining. Jealousy suddenly erupted in Hector. Connie and Richie had moved to the back of the garden, sitting on the bluestone bricks which bordered the vegetable patch. They ate and drank in silence under the giant fig tree. As quickly as it had occurred, his jealousy was gone. There was no reason to be threatened by the nurse's son. The boy was still trapped in the awful confusion of adolescence; it was clear in everything he did. The boy had his mother's fair colouring and freckled skin. One day he would be a striking man. He had strong, fine features, high cheekbones and attractive, kindly eyes. But the poor kid had no inkling of such a possibility. Hector put a cigarette to his mouth. Ari was smoking as well. He, too, had only grazed at the meal. Leanna had little appetite as well. Hector smiled at her and she made a grimace of apology.

'It's amazing food,' she whispered. 'But I'm just not hungry.'

He sat down beside her on the blanket. Her eyes, with the delicate hint of her Burmese ancestry, were glistening, mischievous.

He tapped her nose. 'I know why you're not hungry.'

She chuckled and looked across at Dedjan who had gone and filled his plate with a second serve. 'Nothing stops Dedj.'

Dedjan was wolfing down his food. It was a running joke at work how much the man ate and how he managed to stay slim. Though time was telling on him as well, thought Hector, looking across at his friend. There was more flesh on his jowls, and perhaps the first evidence of a belly?

As Hector lit his cigarette he promised himself, now that he was finally giving up smoking, that he would start swimming again. He knew Connie's eyes must be on him, that she would be wanting a cigarette. He deliberately did not look her way.

As his mother began clearing away the plates, Hector saw Ravi get up and walk into the house. He emerged minutes later with the children forming a conga-line behind him. Adam was laughing, first behind his uncle. If Hector had not been speeding, it was possible that his next thought would have hurt: he loves his uncle unconditionally, in a way he will never love me. In a way I will never love him.

'We don't have any wickets, Uncle Raf.'

'Use your imagination, amigo. Where's a bucket?'

Sava and Adam immediately ran to the garage, Adam emerging triumphant with a green bucket. Sava followed with an old scarred children's cricket bat, its skin now dotted with green patches of mould, the result of too many winters left out in the rain. It had been Hector's cricket bat when he was a boy. Melissa had been scrounging in the undergrowth and emerged with a tennis ball. Ravi expertly and quickly assigned the children into teams. The adults drifted into the house. Hector, his hands full of plates, looked back and saw that Connie and Richie had scrambled up the fig tree and were watching the children take their allotted positions. In the kitchen, Aisha had begun to brew coffee.

'*No! No no no no no!*' It was as if the child had become lost in the very word, as if all the world was contained in the screaming of this one negative syllable. '*No no no no no!*' It was Hugo. All of them by now, Hector figured, must know that it could only be Hugo. It was the men who rushed outside, as if the child's screams were somehow connected to the rules of the game and therefore it was the men who should arbitrate in the dispute. Hugo was awkwardly slamming the bat on the ground; he needed to hold on to it with both hands but his grip was strong, he would not let it go. Ravi was

trying to plead with the little boy. Rocco was frowning behind the wicket.

‘It’s alright, Hugo, you’re not out.’

‘He is.’ Rocco was standing his ground. ‘He got lbw’d.’

Ravi smiled at the older boy. ‘Listen, he doesn’t even know what that means.’

Gary jumped off the verandah and began to walk towards his son. ‘Come on, Hugo, I’ll explain why you’re out.’

‘No!’ The same piercing scream. The boy looked as if he was going to hit his father with the bat.

‘Put the bat down now.’

The boy did not move.

‘Now!’

There was silence. Hector realised he was holding his breath.

‘You’re out, Hugo, you bloody spoil-sport.’ Rocco, at the end of his tether, went to grab the bat from the younger boy. With another scream Hugo evaded the older boy’s hands, and then, leaning back, he lifted the bat. Hector froze. He’s going to hit him. He’s going to belt Rocco with that bat.

In the second that it took Hector to release his breath, he saw Ravi jump towards the boys, he heard Gary’s furious curse and he saw Harry push past all of them and grab at Hugo. He lifted the boy up in the air, and in shock the boy dropped the bat.

‘Let me go,’ Hugo roared.

Harry set him on the ground. The boy’s face had gone dark with fury. He raised his foot and kicked wildly into Harry’s shin. The speed was coursing through Hector’s blood, the hairs on his neck were upright. He saw his cousin’s raised arm, it spliced the air, and then he saw the open palm descend and strike the boy. The slap seemed to echo. It cracked the twilight. The little boy looked up at the man in shock. There was a long silence. It was as if he could not comprehend what had just occurred, how the man’s action and the pain he was beginning to feel coincided. The silence broke, the boy’s

face crumpled, and this time there was no wail: when the tears began to fall, they fell silently.

‘You fucking animal!’ Gary pushed into Harry and nearly knocked him over. There was a scream and Rosie pushed past the men and scooped her child into her arms. She and Gary were shouting and cursing at Harry who had backed against the garage wall and appeared to be in shock himself. The children were watching with clear fascination. Rocco’s face was filled with pride. Hector felt Aisha move beside him, and he knew, as host, there was something he should do. But he didn’t know what—he wanted his wife to intervene, because she would be calm and fair and just. He couldn’t be just. He could not forget the exhilaration he had felt when the sound of the slap slammed through his body. It had been electric, fiery, exciting; it had nearly made him hard. It was the slap he wished he had delivered. He was glad that the boy had been punished, glad he was crying, shocked and terrified. He saw that Connie had dropped from the tree and was moving quickly to the crying mother and child. He could not let her be the one to assume responsibility. He ran in between his cousin and the enraged parents.

‘Come on. We’re all going inside.’

Gary turned to him now. His face was contorted, he was hissing and a spray of spit fell across Hector’s cheek. ‘No, we’re fucking not.’

‘I’m calling the police.’ Rosie had her fists clenched.

Harry’s shock turned into outrage. ‘Go fucking call the police. I fucking dare you.’

‘This is abuse, mate. Fucking child abuse.’

‘Your child deserved it. But I don’t blame him, I blame his bogan parents.’

Connie had come up and touched Rosie’s shoulder. The woman swung around angrily.

‘We should clean him up.’

Rosie nodded. Everyone was now on the verandah and they cleared a path for the three to walk through. Hugo was still sobbing.

Hector turned to his cousin. 'I think you should go.'

Harry was enraged but Hector spoke quickly in Greek. 'He's drunk too much. You can't reason with him.'

'What are you saying to him?'

Gary's face was right in front of him, nose to nose. He could smell the man's acrid perspiration and the stale odour of the alcohol.

'I'm just saying Harry should go home.'

'He's not fucking going anywhere. I'm calling the cops.' Gary took his mobile phone out of his pocket and held it up.

'See? I'm calling the cops. You're all witnesses.'

'You can do that later.' Sandi's voice was shaking as she walked up to Gary. 'I'll give you our details. If you want to make a charge later, then you can. But I think we all need to go home tonight and look after our kids.' She began to cry.

Gary looked mutinous, and sneered, as though he was about to turn his abuse on her, when Rocco silently came up and stood beside his mother. His eyes were defiant as he looked up to the man.

Gary's next words were quiet. 'Why are you with that bastard? Does he hit you too?'

Hector gripped tight on his cousin's shoulder.

'My husband is a good man.'

'He hit a child.'

Sandi said nothing.

'What's your address?'

She shook her head. 'I'll give you our phone number.'

'I want your address.'

Aisha was beside him.

'Gary, I've got all the details. Sandi's right, you should all go home.' She had her hand on the man's shoulder and the small gesture calmed him.

Hector was filled with love for his wife. Aisha knew exactly what to do, she always did. He wanted to kiss her neck, to just hold on to her. Melissa had come up to her mother, she too was crying. Aisha

curled her hand around her daughter's. Adam came and stood beside him. Hector took the boy's hand.

What the fuck am I doing? All that I have, all that I'm blessed with, and I'm putting it at *risk*? The boy's moist hand felt glued onto his own skin.

Abruptly Hector dropped his son's hand and walked into the house.

As he passed his mother in the kitchen, she whispered to him, in Greek. 'Your cousin was not in the wrong.'

'Shh, Koula,' his father warned. 'Don't make trouble.' His old man looked frightened. Or maybe he was just tired of this new world.

Hector walked into his bedroom and froze. Hugo was suckling on Rosie's breast and Connie was sitting next to her, stroking the child's head.

'I can't believe that monster did that. I've never hit Hugo—neither of us have. Never.'

Hector felt the boy's eyes on him.

Hugo pulled away from Rosie's teat. 'No one is allowed to touch my body without my permission.' His voice was shrill and confident. Hector wondered where he learnt those words. From Rosie? At child care? Were they community announcements on the frigging television?

'That's right, baby, that's right.' Rosie kissed her son's forehead.

How about when he kicks someone or hits out at another kid? Who gives him permission to do that?

'Yes.' Connie was nodding vehemently in agreement. 'That's right, Hugo. No one has a right to do that.'

She was so young. It suddenly repelled him.

'Gary's ready to go home.'

Rosie picked her handbag off the bed, picked up Hugo, and walked past Hector. They did not exchange a word.

Hector closed the door, leaving him alone with Connie. He wanted to be kind but he didn't know how.

‘We can’t see each other again. Not the way we have been. Do you understand?’

The girl looked away, sniffing. ‘I can’t believe he hit him. What kind of asshole hits a child?’

He couldn’t believe what he had risked. It was so clear to him. He wanted her out of this room, out of his house. He wanted her out of his life.

‘Do you understand?’ He softened his tone.

‘Sure.’ She still couldn’t look at him.

‘I think you’re so special, Connie. But I love Aisha, I really do.’

Her response was almost violent. She started shaking. ‘Don’t you know I do as well? I hate what we’re doing to her.’ She took a shuddering breath. ‘It’s . . .’ she was struggling for the word, ‘It’s disgusting.’

She was so young, everything was an exaggeration. He wanted to push her out of the room, out of his life. She wasn’t mature. She was a bloody child.

‘I’m sorry.’

You’ll never tell? It was the terror he had been living with for months, always there, beneath the thrill. He’d imagined the shame for months—cops and divorce and jail and suicide.

She read his thoughts. ‘No one knows.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he repeated.

She wouldn’t look at him. Instead her foot was swinging, she worried at a lock of hair in her mouth. A child, she was a child.

She said something so softly he couldn’t hear it.

‘What?’

This time she looked at him, poisonous. ‘I said your arms are ugly, they’re so hairy. You’re like a gorilla.’

He was shocked. And he wanted to laugh. He sat down next to her on the bed, not daring to let their bodies touch. ‘Connie, nothing really happened between us.’

She flinched. He could smell her cheap perfume; over-ripe,

sugary, it tickled his nose. It was a young girl's perfume. He wished he could touch her, stroke her hair, kiss her one more time. But he couldn't bring himself to show any affection. Any touch between them now would be loathsome. He looked up, into the mirror, at a man and a child sitting on the bed, and in that moment she did the same. Her eyes were pleading, tormented, and almost against his will, not wanting to hurt her anymore, he shook his head.

Connie jumped off the bed, jerked open the door, and bolted. For a moment he sat still, enjoying only the relief. He had done it, he had finished it. He closed the door after her and sat back on the bed. His chest hurt, a cord wrapped tight around his lungs. He tried to breathe but couldn't. He knew he must not panic, this wasn't a heart attack, it couldn't be, it mustn't be, he just had to breathe. His fucking throat, he couldn't open his throat. He was dripping sweat, couldn't see his reflection in the mirror. He wasn't there, where was he? Where the fuck was he?

With a gasp that sent him sprawling to the floor he convulsed and drew sweet life into his throat and lungs. He rocked back and forth, remembering again how to breathe. He wiped his face, his neck, with a handkerchief and found himself in the mirror. His face was pale, his eyes red. He looked bloated, grey and old. He realised he was crying. Snot trickled from his nose, tears marking his cheeks. He didn't cry—he hadn't cried since he was a kid. He massaged his chest. I will change, he promised. I will change.

When Hector came back out of the house, Richie was the only person in the backyard, still sitting on a limb of the fig tree. Gary, Rosie and Hugo had gone. Wordlessly, everyone else was collecting their gear, muttering muted feeble goodbyes. Out on the street Hector asked where Leanna, Dedjan and Ari were going. There was talk of more drinking, a bar in High Street, maybe some dancing. He felt separated from them totally and finitely: cleaved from their childless lives.

Back in the house, he could see that Harry was close to tears himself; to see his cousin so wretched was the worst thing. Fury rose within him. He was glad that Gary and Rosie had left. He couldn't bear to see them, to enact the forced pretences of friendship and compassion. Rocco was standing by his father, close, their bodies touching. Sandi kissed Hector and Aisha goodbye, but it was his parents who walked the family to the car. Hector had gripped tight to his cousin's hand but he was unsure what Aisha expected of him, where her sympathies lay. He knew that as his mother and father walked Harry to the car they would be soothing him in Greek, that their anger would be directed against the bloody Australians. Hector agreed with them, but he had no idea what Aisha was thinking. He dreaded the argument ahead.

In the backyard, Connie was calling up to Richie.

The boy made no move. Hector lit a cigarette and offered one to Tasha.

She put an arm around him. 'I'm really sorry.'

'For what?'

'That it ended so badly.'

Hector shrugged.

Richie was looking behind, down into the alley, across the rooftops. He yelled down to Connie. 'I think I can see your house from here.'

'Come down, Richie.' Tasha ordered patiently.

The boy jumped. Hector closed his eyes; he half-expected to hear the crack of a bone but Richie landed on his feet, stumbled, and righted himself. He had a big grin on his face. He ran up to the verandah and stopped abruptly before Hector. He grasped the man's hand and shook it vigorously.

'That was great. The food was awesome.' Then, just as abruptly, he blushed and stepped back.

Hector couldn't think of a word to say in reply but fortunately Aisha emerged from the doorway. 'Thank you, Richie. But I think the party's over.'

'We'll help you clean up.'

‘No, Tasha, it’s fine. We’ll do it.’

Connie shook his hand limply, without looking at him. But she threw her arms around Aisha and held onto her tight. Hector stared out into the darkness. It was only when he heard Tasha’s car start up that he let out his breath. He pulled Aisha towards him. She said nothing but leaned into him, his arm tight around her waist. Her hair smelt of barbecue smoke and lemon juice. He was glad they could stand together in silence, a peace broken when he went to butt out his cigarette.

She pulled away from him. ‘I’ll put the kids to bed.’

‘It’s still early.’

‘I want them in bed.’

‘It’s Saturday night.’

‘Please, Hector, help me on this one.’

He hesitated, wanting to put off the inevitable conversation, wanting to remain in the blissful, uncomplicated silence. ‘So, what are you thinking?’

‘I’m furious.’

‘With who?’

Her eyes flashed angrily at him. ‘With your cousin, of course.’

‘I’m not.’

‘If that had been your child you would have never stood for it.’

But it hadn’t been their child and it would never have been their child. Not because of him, he knew that, not at all because of him, but because of her. She was a terrific mother. Aisha was watching him warily, he knew she was preparing her arguments. He was suddenly glad for the drugs. He didn’t want to fight—he couldn’t summon either annoyance or self-righteousness. She was already there, he could tell, she was spoiling for a fight. She wanted to insult Harry, to excoriate him because, in part, Harry was his family. He had not even noticed Ravi leaving and it dawned on him, there and then—how could he have been so stupid?—that in part the day’s gathering had been meant to celebrate her brother’s visit.

Aisha's eyes were alive and shining, she was clenching her right fist. All he could think about was how to seduce her.

'It's true,' he said quietly. 'Harry had no right to hit the child.'

She was taken by surprise; he even thought a shadow of disappointment might have crossed her face. She unclenched her fist. 'No, he didn't.' But her response was muted, unconvincing.

'You put the kids to bed. I'll start cleaning up.'

He was stacking the dishwasher and he felt like dancing. He flicked Benny Goodman into the kitchen stereo, feeling like something jaunty but solid. He was whistling as he closed the machine and started clearing the benches.

'How the hell can you be so cheerful?' She was standing with her hands on her hips, her expression unamused.

He danced up to her and kissed her lips. 'Cause I got you, babe.'

And it was true. It was so fucking true. He put his arms around her, lowering his hands to cup her buttocks. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her earlobes. He tightened his grip.

'They're not asleep yet.'

'I don't fucking care,' he whispered. His cock was hard and he took one of her hands and placed it on his crotch. She giggled, and it reminded him of Connie. He closed his eyes, realising that he'd been hoping the girl had faded from his imagination forever. But of course she hadn't. He gave himself over to the fantasy. He was undoing the buckle of his wife's belt, lowering her skirt, stroking her belly, reaching for her breast. With his eyes closed, he was recalling the soft, sparse bristles of Connie's cunt.

'I don't need a rubber, do I?'

Aisha shook her head. 'It shouldn't be a problem,' she whispered close to his ear. He shivered, the sound, her breath, entering and invading his body, waves of euphoria rollicking through him, again and again.

'Let's go into the bedroom.'

He did not reply. Instead he lifted Aisha's arms in the air, and began kissing her neck. He pulled her top up and first cupped, then he began kissing her breasts. She tried to pull away from him but he would not let her. His lips closed over a stiffening, obliging nipple, then he was sucking it, biting it, till Aisha let out a small whimper of pain and reluctantly he stopped. He straightened, faced her, her eyes were sparkling, and then, suddenly, they were both giggling. He wondered, briefly, if the children could hear, then the thought was gone. His zip had lowered, his cock had been released from the cavity of his Y-fronts and he could smell Aisha's desire. He pushed a finger inside her, she moaned, and he pushed his jeans down and his cock was inside her. Like that, standing up, her skirt bunched around her ankles, his jeans pulled down to his knees, moaning into each other, the drug keeping him hard and allowing him to forestall climaxing, they fucked for ages. When he came he could not help crowing out his rapture and Aisha, laughing, placed her hand across his mouth. He left his softening cock inside her, thrusting gently, whispering he loved her, whispering her name. He heard her gasp, then she was kissing him hard, almost biting his lip. His eyes were still closed, he wanted to stay inside her. He had banished all thoughts of Connie—now that he had come. Not before, he couldn't before. He had merged them in the fantasy of his exertions, fucking his wife, fucking the girl, all at the same time, their bodies, their cunts, their skins both one and distinct for him. Aisha shifted and his cock slipped out of her. Still grinning, they pulled up their clothing.

Aisha went to check on the children and came back. 'I think they're asleep.' It was years since he had seen her look so sheepish.

'We were quiet.'

'No, we were not.' She went to the kitchen sink and started clearing the remains of the salads into the compost bin.

He went up behind her and clasped her tight. 'Let me do it. I'll clean up.'

'We'll do it together.'

'I'll do it.' He was firm. The drug, though less relentless now, was still in his blood and he wanted to move, to be active. The sex had re-energised him.

'What am I going to do? It's too early for sleep.'

'Watch TV, read. I'm going to clean up.' He'd pop the valium, enjoy the comedown as he put the house in order.

She twisted around, his grip still tight on her, and she stared into his face. She was calm, a tremor of sweat still lay sheening her top lip. He licked at it.

'What are you going to say to your cousin?'

Nothing.

'I don't know.'

'Hector.' She just said his name. There was an urgency and a potency in it. He wondered if he could manage to fuck her again, like this, her arse against the kitchen bench.

She repeated his name. 'I want you to be kinder to Adam.'

Where the hell had that come from? He let go of her and fumbled for his cigarettes. Opening the sliding door, he stood under the doorway between the kitchen and the verandah. She followed him and pinched the cigarette from his hand. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen her smoke, it was certainly before she was pregnant with Lissie. It was as if that night he was seeing her and their life together in a different way. He wished he could confess, tell her about the last few months, how he had betrayed her, how he had almost come to be indifferent to her. He wanted to confess because he was, at that very minute, assured of his love for her, for all of her, for everything they had together. This house, their children, their garden, the still comfortable queen-size bed that had begun to sag in the middle from years of their bodies linking in sleep, his arms always around hers, shifting only when she, still asleep, nudged him, still asleep, to move and to stop his snoring. He could not bear life without her. His chest tightened, his fists clenching in determination. He would not allow her to see his fear.

'I promise I'll change. I won't be so hard on the boy.'