



Chapter 1

A Happy Day

Professor Dr Grafton Everest looked at his wristwatch surreptitiously, or so he thought. It was the expensive Patek Philippe Swiss given to him fifteen years ago by his wife Janet, who had now left him. That is not to say she had *left* him but just that she was elsewhere, gone, absent, departed, touring the world. He sighed a deep sigh.

‘Christ, I’m lonely,’ he thought, but also unwittingly said out loud. The woman two seats away turned and stared at him as if this might be the opening gambit in a quest for Pity Sex.

Grafton blanched, realising his absent-mindedness might have put him in danger. He was, after all, attending a Writers’ Festival. Conferences in the ‘creative industries’ were held for the purpose of allowing like-minded people a chance to celebrate their interest in the arts by having brief affairs. Long days of tedious keynote addresses followed by break-out sessions, networking lunches, cheap wine at five and dinner at seven culminated in late nights sitting around the hotel lounge drinking and chatting in the hope that someone rendered acceptably attractive by alcohol might wish to ‘continue the conversation’ upstairs.

For Grafton, those nights invariably ended with him being the last to leave, plodding out of the lounge under the resentful eye of weary bar staff, conspicuously alone. This was almost certain given that a flabby middle-aged teetotaller, ‘slumped’ (Grafton’s own portmanteau term for sitting slumped in a rumpled suit) in a too-low armchair, sipping room-temperature mineral water did not present as the ideal candidate for a once-a-year infidelity.

Writers’ Festivals, however, were different. They were talk-fests

where the prospect of a brief encounter with another attendee was not only unlikely but repellent. Grafton was less concerned that the woman who glanced at him had been offended than that she might have been intrigued.

‘I’m sorry but my internal monologue seems to have slipped out,’ Grafton said. ‘Or broken through.’

‘Sssssh,’ she replied crossly, to Grafton’s relief.

Grafton looked at his watch again. Each second felt like an hour and a minute seemed like an eternity. Although he particularly hated Writers’ Festivals, he had agreed to speak at a session entitled ‘Too Many Cooks: How European Explorers Charted the Course to Genocide.’ He knew the gist of the discussion would be that the European explorers who circled the globe mapping previously unknown islands and continents were the equivalent of modern military drones spotting targets as precursor to an attack by ground forces. The science of cartography was now regarded *per se* as the first step towards imperialism and the subjugation of other societies.

The least he could do was show up and defend extraordinary people like Cook who had sailed flimsy wooden vessels around a planet that was three-quarters unknown – to them. Cook’s journey to the South Pacific in a former coal ship was roughly the equivalent of someone today embarking on a mission to Jupiter in an old 707.

Having arrived early, he was sitting in a disturbingly well-attended session on ‘Gender Fluidity’, a topic which presented several challenges, not the least being to avoid dwelling on the connotations of the conjunction of ‘gender’ and ‘fluid.’ There was a row of men and women – though those labels were themselves moribund in the current circumstances – seated on the stage, all of whom, he learned, were now the sex opposite to the one they had originally been, the one exception being an individual who had apparently been born with indeterminate gender and still possessed it. I suppose, thought Grafton, that made them the only one on the panel who was *not* trans, nor could be.

The conversation on the stage seemed to revolved around two seemingly contradictory claims: firstly, that gender did not really

exist but was simply an artificial construct imposed by society and, secondly, strenuous assertions by speakers that they had known very clearly from an early age exactly which gender they were, which was unfortunately not the one suggested by their genitalia. 'If gender doesn't really exist,' mused Grafton, 'How can these people be so certain that they are a particular one?'

This inconsistency, however, did not seem to trouble the panelists who vigorously discussed discrimination against transgender people and their personal struggles to live as they wished. Grafton noticed that, when introducing each speaker, the chairperson, or chair, or stool, or whatever the term for a moderator now was, referred to them as 'they' making them sound like a small crowd rather than just one person. Grafton wondered, somewhat uncharitably, if there was an not ulterior motive behind the use of the pronoun 'they' since, by making each transgender person plural, it gave the impression there were more of them than there actually are.

A large burly truck driver with a bushy beard stepped up to the microphone. He explained that he had been born a man but realised at an early age that he was really a woman. The audience nodded and smiled approvingly. He then went on to explain he was, however, a woman who identified as a *man*. Thus, even though he had been born male, he was really a trans man, being a woman born in a male body now exercising her right to change genders and live as man.

'Well, that saved you a lot of trouble,' said Grafton.

The woman near him glared.

The trans transport driver went to describe how, growing up as a girl in a boy's body, he had dreamed of someday becoming a man. This was something that Grafton could actually identify with and he muttered, just a bit too loudly, 'I know how you feel.'

'What did you say?' the woman sitting nearby said sharply.

'Women aren't the only people who wish they were men,' Grafton replied. 'A lot of men do too.' He thought this was a piquant observation but the woman got up and stormed outside. Moments

later she reappeared with a security guard who leant into towards Grafton.

‘Sorry sir, but this lady ...’

‘Person, thank you!’ interjected the complainant.

‘Yes, this is no lady,’ said Grafton. The woman fumed.

‘This person says you’ve been making transphobic comments,’ said the guard.

‘I’m afraid she was eaves-dropping on a private conversation I was having with myself.’

‘Maybe so but I’ll have to ask you to ...’ began the guard, then stopped and peered at Grafton.

‘Hold on. Aren’t you ...?’ he said.

Grafton smiled and nodded. He was now very used to ellipsis. Every day he was greeted with ‘Hey, are you that ...?’, ‘Isn’t your name ...?’, ‘Weren’t you ...?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I was the President of Australia.’

‘No wonder,’ said the angry non-woman and stormed off again to find another seat.

‘So what was your ...?’ said the guard.

Grafton saw that other people were turning around. ‘Perhaps we should go outside,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes,’ said the guard who had apparently forgotten that he had come to evict Grafton and followed him out into the foyer. Just as Grafton was used to people recognising him, he was equally used to them not remembering his name. It was understandable. Though he had been the first president of the Republic of Australia, he had spent most of his short nine-month term touring the United States and then following the debacle that ensued, gone into hiding.

Once safely away from the auditorium, he turned and completed the guard’s question.

‘Grafton Everest,’ he said.

‘Yes. Yes. Yes,’ said the guard. ‘Grassdon Effedost. You were great. I just couldn’t remember your name.’

Grafton smiled again. ‘It’s okay. Most people can’t name Australia’s first Prime Minister.’

‘Wasn’t it what’s-his-name, Menzies?’ said the guard.

‘Close,’ said Grafton. ‘Anyway, I’ve got to speak at a session in a moment and I need to take a leak first.’

‘Sure, sure, toilets over there,’ said the guard, and Grafton toddled off, thankful that, for once, his brief stint as Head of State had rescued him from, rather than dropping him in, manure.

He found the toilets at the end of the foyer and halted, seeing that the Male and Female signs had been removed leaving unpainted rectangles on the wall. The Disabled Toilet had been renamed the Diversity Toilet. Grafton did a silent Eeny Meeny Miney Mo and opted for the door on the right. He was gratified on entering to see a line of urinals along one wall. God knows what some cis-female attendee would think if she entered and was confronted by them.

He bellied up to a urinal, unzipped and released the tide with relief. One benefit of having his prostate out several years ago was that his flow was strong and unhindered by what had been a perpetually swollen organ. He was in mid-stream when another person came up and stood beside him. The new arrival also fumbled with his fly and then stood waiting for the flow to start. After a while he said, ‘Come on. Come on.’

Grafton started with recognition.

‘Sebastian?’

The man turned. ‘Grafton?’ he said. ‘Fancy meeting you.’

The patron of the parallel pissoir was none other than Sebastian Stowe, a former colleague and lecturer in English Literature at the University of Mangoland. Like Grafton, Sebastian had clashed with the university administration and had been demoted when he refused to substitute graphic novels – AKA comic books – for prose novels which were considered too ‘privileged’ for study.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Grafton who had finished his micturition and was now trying to zip up his trousers without getting the usual constellation of drips on his pants.

‘Have to be, alas. I’m in publishing now. I’m supposed to be scouting for new writing talent though as I might as well be looking for a Faberge egg in the ruins of Hiroshima. The term ‘writers’

now seems to refer mostly to people who are bloggers, vloggers and cheepers.’

‘I know,’ said Grafton, not knowing what bloggers, vloggers and cheepers were but thinking they sounded like types of sexual pervert. ‘Are there any sessions in the program where people actually talk about books?’

‘Not that I know of,’ said Sebastian, still clenching his obstinate organ. ‘Of course, books in the traditional sense are now seen as tools of privileged middle-class Western culture.’

‘Ah yes. The old problem. Too many dead white males,’ said Grafton.

‘In fact,’ countered Sebastian, ‘a lot of people here think there should be *more* dead white males.’

‘It is grim out there,’ agreed Grafton, ‘Like a wet day at Mount Rushmore. So what sort of things do you publish?’ He hoped their conversation wasn’t impeding the relaxation of his former colleague’s sphincter.

‘Mainly self-help books,’ said Sebastian. ‘For which there seems to be an inexhaustible demand. We seem to have bred an entire generation of people who are completely incapable of making even the simplest decisions about their own lives. We publish under the name Snowflake Press,’ He looked down at his groin and muttered, ‘Come on you bastard.’

‘I feel as though I should leave you,’ said Grafton. ‘I don’t think our talking is helping your problem.’

‘Sorry. I’m at that age. How are you doing, down there?’

‘Not bad,’ said Grafton. ‘Actually I had the prostate out and now everything works better.’

‘What about ...?’ said Sebastian.

Again Grafton recognised the ellipsis. It was the main reason men resisted even being tested for prostate cancer: the threat of impotence. ‘No good at first but it eventually came back. But that’s another story.’

It was indeed a story which he did not have time to tell then and there so he made his apologies and left.

'I might see you later,' called Sebastian as Grafton exited the toilet.

'Yes. Good luck,' replied Grafton and checked his watch. It was time for his session on the evils of exploration.

After a short time, with the usual clattering of chairs and setting up of microphones by flustered organisers, Grafton was seated on the stage. His fellow discussers included several academics including one man who was, as they say 'of Aboriginal appearance' – which is to say, Aboriginal – wearing a black t-shirt with the Aboriginal flag on it. Grafton squirmed slightly when he remembered that, during the transition to a republic, that flag had been announced as the official flag of Australia albeit with the yellow sun turned into a smiling emoji. The Aboriginal people had never forgiven the government for the sacrilege.

The moderator was an ABC television journalist renowned for unnerving both politicians and viewers with her penetrating scowl. She sat quietly reading through her questions and practising her frown as the audience took their seats. Once all was ready, she introduced the panel, describing Grafton as 'Australia's most controversial President'. Since there had only been two presidents so far, Grafton felt that this should have been 'Australia's *more* controversial President' but decided to let it ride. It was, in any case, not really what you would call an achievement, nor had it been intended as one. After a brief introduction to the topic, the moderator turned to the Indigenous panellist – Tom Watkins – and asked him to outline the Indigenous attitude to explorers like James Cook. A staging assistant ran in on tip-toe and handed him a hand-held wireless microphone.

Watkins leaned forward in his seat and, summarising what Grafton imagined was probably the subject of his PhD thesis, explained that the whole notion of explorers charting 'unknown' places was imperialist propaganda.

'The concept of discovery is in itself a western fiction,' he said.

‘Cook didn’t discover Australia, the First Nations people did 80,000 years ago.’

The audience nodded sagely. Grafton noted that every time someone quoted the initial occupation of Australia, the date went back a few thousand years. After some elaboration on this theme by Watkins, the moderator turned to Grafton for a response. The humble staging assistant ran in and gave a second microphone to Grafton.

‘Well, your point is a little confusing,’ said Grafton. ‘For example, I opened a drawer the other day and discovered some socks I didn’t know I had. Are you saying, that I didn’t really discover the socks? That the socks already *knew* they were there.’

Tom Watkins almost leapt from his chair. ‘Are you saying the Aboriginal people of Australia are like a pair of socks?’ he said angrily.

The moderator’s frown turned from challenging to concerned. ‘I’m sure Professor Everest was just making a joke.’

Grafton smiled innocently. ‘Well, yes and no. What I’m saying is that Australia’s First Nations may have known Australia was here but there were a billion people in the world who didn’t. So to them it was pretty big news when some Dutch people sailed across the Indian Ocean and found, and there is no other word for it but ‘found’, there was a continent there they didn’t know about.’

Tom Watkins opened his mouth to replay but no sound came out of his microphone. It appeared he had accidentally switched it off with his thumb. Grafton, seeing his opponent momentarily silenced realised he had a chance to develop his argument a bit further.

‘I mean, to be fair, Tom, if the Aboriginal people had rowed across the Tasman, would they not have ‘discovered’ New Zealand? Surely, they would have come back and told everyone about their ‘discovery.’

Two other panellists were now wrestling with Tom Watkin’s microphone trying to turn it on. A lanky academic in a Free The Refugees T-shirt stood up and shouted, ‘That’s not the point. We’re

not talking about the common use of the word. We're talking about its function as part of an imperialist narrative.'

Now, Grafton was not an angry man. He was certainly given to peevishness, irritation, discontent, complaint, dissatisfaction. but rarely anger. But when he heard the phrase 'imperialist narrative', or more specifically the word 'narrative' – a favourite word of the modern academic – somewhere inside, a tiny switch was thrown. It was as if a light that was usually green or at most a sallow amber, suddenly glowed a menacing red. When he had first taken his seat on the stage he had regarded his fellow panellists only with a slight contempt. Now he knew he had to destroy them.

'So, what you're saying,' he said archly, 'is that when an Indigenous person uses the word "discover" it has its normal meaning but when a non-Indigenous person uses it, it's part of an imperialist narrative.' A woman in a green jacket sitting next to Tom Watkins impatiently seized the microphone from him and switched it on forcefully. 'Yes!' she said. 'Because *everything* that white people say is part of an imperialist narrative. The whole English language is a tool of imperialist oppression.'

'And yet,' said Grafton in a with an ironic smile, 'Here we are using. it.'

There was a moment of silence as the panel wondered how to respond to this.

A woman panellist sitting next to Grafton reached out to take his microphone but he quickly evaded her by rising from his seat and stepping forward, putting himself and the microphone, which was now the conch shell of authority, out of reach.

'The reason we blame Cook is that, though his voyage was in fact a scientific expedition, it led to the colonising of Australia by Britain. So the issue is not so much the exploration but the colonisation that followed it.'

The woman behind him was trying to get his attention so she could have a turn of the microphone but Grafton just moved further downstage. He turned his gaze on the audience, ignoring the panel.

'But, had that colonisation not happened, none of us would

be here today,' he said. 'If Britain had not colonised Australia, this Writers' Festival would not be occurring. We are only here today because of the dispossession of Aboriginal land and the destruction of Aboriginal culture. And what is this Festival all about? Ha!' He laughed sardonically. 'Writing!' he exclaimed. 'The very technology that the imperialists used to organise the invasion, to issue the orders to the troops, to claim ownership of the continent, to forge a Constitution that wrote the true owners out of history, out of existence! We are actually here today celebrating the very language used by the oppressor. English! The same language that is still today being used to legitimise dispossession, discrimination and imperialism.'

At this point he gasped, as if overcome with emotion. He looked out at the audience with moist eyes. 'I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed to be here,' he said, almost sobbing. 'I think we should *all* be ashamed to be here. What are we doing right now but validating the colonisation by celebrating the language that brought it about?'

The panel was completely stumped by this. The moderator, realising she had lost control of the conversation started stammering into her microphone.

'Well, that's a very interesting point ... perhaps someone would like to ...'

A balding academic tried to grab the microphone from the woman in green but she wouldn't let go. They wrestled over it for a second before she lost her grip. The mike hit the academic on the forehead, sending a loud thump through the PA.

Grafton drove on, reaching a climax.

'Please. Please. If you are opposed to the genocide of Indigenous people, stand up.'

There was moment of confusion with people looking around at each other. Then someone stood up, and then another, and then of course the whole audience had to stand up. They had no choice. Grafton stood humbly on the stage looking gratified.

'Thank you. Thank you,' he said. 'I am leaving this room now, and I swear, I vow I will not return to this or any other Writers'

Festival until they stop denying the role of the English language, and writing and books in the subjugation of Indigenous people and these festivals are reconstructed as celebrations of Indigenous culture conducted in the true languages of this continent, the languages of the First Nations. If you agree with me, I invite you to do the same. Enough of this sham!

And so saying, he laid the microphone down as if he were laying down a weapon in an armistice and walked with solemn dignity from the stage.

The moderator got as far as saying, 'Well, that's certainly ...' when she realised people were actually leaving the auditorium. Within moments whole rows had filed out and were silently making their way to the exits.

'Before you go,' said the moderator, 'perhaps we should get some comments ...' But then one of the panellists also rose and left, then another, and then another. Eventually, the stage was clear except for her and a rather bewildered Tom Watkins. He looked at her and threw his hands open in confusion.

'What the fuck?' he said.

By this time Grafton was already on his way across the foyer heading for the exit. His work here was done. He was pleased by having accomplished something on a day he had expected to be a total loss. He was halfway across the forecourt when he heard a voice behind him. It was Sebastian.

'Grafton. Have you got a minute?' he said.

Grafton halted.

'I was just thinking,' said Sebastian. 'Have you ever thought about writing your memoirs?'

'No. Not really,' said Grafton. He had, in truth, from time to time entertained the idea but, realising it would entail a degree of effort, quickly banished it.

'You should,' said Sebastian. 'Political memoirs sell quite well and yours ... as Australia's first President ... I think it would do very well.'

Grafton pondered this. 'So, what would I cover?' he said.

‘Obviously a couple of chapters about your early life, family and so forth. Quick account of your early career. You could jump over all the stuff about being a professor at the university, it’s as boring as batshit. Get onto being elected to the Senate and holding the balance of power, expose a few scandals about the Prime Minister, then how you came to be appointed President. All the fuck-ups that happened in the Transition, the National Anthem debacle, the horrible flag, the whole Ministry of Wellbeing disaster. But mainly lots and lots of juicy revelations about other politicians and world leaders. What do you think?’

What Grafton thought was that if he really told the stories behind his unexpected and unwanted ascent to positions of power, no one would ever believe them. Who would ever believe that former Prime Minister Nina Poundstone had been turned into a werewolf by a toxic chemical synthesised in a bikie lab or that his rise to Senator and President had been orchestrated by his former high school science teacher, erstwhile father-in-law, former spy and lifelong mentor, Mr Horton, who had cloned himself into multiple copies, one of whom had turned rogue and kidnapped several politicians and ... well, it was all too impossible. It would be laughed at as total fiction.

‘I mean,’ said Sebastian. ‘It wouldn’t make millions but you could get a few hundred grand out of it.’

On the other hand, thought Grafton, maybe he could skirt around those improbable aspects and churn out some moderately entertaining account of his life.

‘I’ll have a think about it,’ said Grafton. ‘It might be possible.’

‘Great,’ said Sebastian. ‘Let me know what you decide and we’ll discuss an advance.’

He strode off, leaving Grafton to consider how remarkably his day had changed. He had almost been thrown out of the Festival but had unexpectedly ended up shutting it down, possibly permanently. He may even have succeeded in preventing all future Writers’ Festivals in Australia. And now there was the possibility of a financial windfall. Yes, it had turned out to be a happy day.

Chapter 2

The Desolation of Grafton

It did not take long for Grafton's sense of triumph to be clouded by the reality that he was heading back to an empty house to face the challenge of cooking his own tea.

The first step in this daunting task was to go to the local supermarket to buy something to cook. This was, to him, a descent into Hell. Once or twice he had accompanied Janet on her weekly shopping expedition but had soon been dropped from the party. He had made the mistake, often made by spouses, of making suggestions and asking questions which interrupted his wife's efficient workflow. While she fluidly traversed the aisles filling the trolley with necessities, Grafton had become fascinated with the sheer range and variety of foodstuffs on the shelves. How could there be ten metres of shelving devoted just to coffee? When he was younger there were really only two brands – Nestles (then pronounced to rhyme, as you would expect, with 'wrestles' not the Gallic 'ness-lay') and Bushell's which came in a bottle with a rather mischievous looking Turk in a fez on the label. The biscuit aisle was so long it seemed to vanish to the horizon, as did the chocolates and sweets aisle. No wonder there was an obesity epidemic. Grafton had tried to participate in the shopping process but every time he took something off the shelf and put it in the trolley Janet said 'Put it back, we don't need that!'

'But Korean BBQ sauce is supposed to be terrific,' Grafton had said. 'And I love Spam.'

'That's not food,' Janet had said.

When he sighted the cabinets of frozen desserts and started excitedly putting some in the trolley Janet finally suggested he wait

outside. Forlornly, he trudged off to sit amongst the other exiles on the Husband Seat outside the store.

Now he was wishing he had paid more attention to Janet's technique on those expeditions. Wandering along, clutching his plastic basket and gazing at the signs, it seemed that the supermarket sold everything you could ever want, except something to eat. He also wished he'd brought his sunglasses; the lighting was so bright it was like daylight magnified twenty times over. He held his arm up to shield his eyes.

'This is like being on a spaceship heading into the sun,' Grafton said, wondering if this was what it had been like for the passengers on his son-in-law's doomed space tourism venture.

'I beg your pardon sir?' said a young woman in supermarket uniform who was filling a shelf nearby.

'I said isn't this place a lot of fun?' Grafton said.

'If you say so, sir,' she said looking at him as if he were mad.

'I wonder if you could tell me where have you hidden the Cup-A-Soups?' he asked.

'They're right next to you sir,' she said.

'Well bugger me sideways ... I mean ... What luck, they're beside me,' he replied and smiled as she quickly walked away.

Grafton grabbed a handful of packets and put them into his basket, realising as he did so that he had actually picked up two baskets, one inside another. With much effort he prised them apart whereupon the bottom one fell into the middle of the aisle with a loud clatter. He quickly left the scene just managing to get out of sight before the shelf stacker reappeared to investigate the noise.

Grafton moved on quickly and collected a few more things, mostly in cans. At least he could open a can, or at least he assumed he could. And he loved canned spaghetti, lacking in nutrition as it might be. It was a fond memory from childhood and, as fond memories were few and far between, he clung to it.

Having amassed what he thought would be enough carbohydrate and salt for at least a couple days, he headed towards an open checkout. Typically, as he approached, the young man manning it

placed the 'Please let us serve you at another check-out' sign on the counter. Grafton looked around and saw there was only one other check-out operating, which was the '5 items or less Express Aisle.' There was a long line of people waiting at this check-out, most of whom seemed to have trolleys stacked higher than their own heads. Apparently, Grafton observed, a carton with sixteen large bottles of Coke still only counted as one item.

'The automatic check-out is open, sir,' said the young check-out chap as he deserted his post behind the register.

Grafton turned towards the small corral where shoppers were offering items to what looked like squat metallic idols with television screens for faces. This was another mystery he was not keen to unravel. He tentatively ventured across the threshold and the woman supervising the small workhouse, greeted him.

'Card or cash sir?' she asked.

Grafton wasn't sure whether she was offering him a gift or demanding payment. He wondered if somehow the items in his basket had already been scanned upon entering the area.

'Cash over there, cards over here,' she said pointing to the different machines.

Grafton grunted and headed for a line of machines on the far side. He found one that was unattended and confronted it. He looked at the video screen for instructions about how to perform this odd sacrificial ceremony. There was just a message saying 'Please scan your first item.'

Grafton picked up a can of spaghetti and examined it closely, assuming some form of instruction must be printed on the label but there was nothing but a list of unpronounceable ingredients. Looking right and left he saw shoppers holding items out towards the machines as if they were showing flashcards to a six year old. He did the same. The machine beeped and the price of the spaghetti appeared on the screen.

Feeling he had made a major leap forward in mastering technology, he put the can back in the basket and selected another item. But as he took out a soup packet the machine politely but firmly

said 'Please put the item in the bagging area.'

Grafton froze. He looked around the store wondering where the bagging area was and indeed, *what* it was. He half expected to see some burly men in singlets stuffing potatoes or merino fleeces into hessian sacks. Had he inadvertently picked up some such item by mistake. The supervisor noticed he was catatonic and came over.

'Just place it on the tray there,' she said, pointing to the side of the machine. Grafton went to place the soup packet on the tray but the supervisor stopped him.

'No, the spaghetti,' she said.

Grafton then understood. He retrieved the spaghetti and put it on the tray, whereupon the machine reverted to its former state. Grafton wondered how the machine was able to detect his movements and was slightly perturbed by it. He then tried to scan the packet of soup but nothing happened. He stood there holding it out to the machine to no effect. He wiggled it round around a bit and waved it sideways. 'Soup! Packet soup,! he said, hoping he might be able to coach it a bit.

The supervisor came over again, this time with a detectable weariness in her gait.

'You're covering the barcode,' she said, pointing to his fingers.

Grafton looked and saw that under his chubby fingers was a set of black-and-white stripes. He had always wondered what those things were for. He had heard of a 'barcode' but imagined it was some sort of honour system in the liquor trade. The pit boss took the packet from him and held it out to the scanning window. The machine beeped happily as if it was glad to be dealing with someone competent at last and she walked away.

Grafton sighed and continued the ritual. He looked around the enclosure and noted that other people, many his own age, were efficiently swiping their items and wondered how they had managed to adapt so successfully. More to the point, why had he adapted so poorly. He felt like one of those people in science fiction movies who wakes after a century of hibernation to find the world completely changed. His hibernation, however, was not due to being entombed

in some refrigerated capsule but a warm and comfortable domestic situation where Janet did everything.

Fortunately, the rest of the scanning went without incident until he reached the payment option. It gave him the option of paying by cash or card. Damn, why were there so many decisions you had to make? He considered using his card but, not aware that he could just tap it, was not confident he would remember the PIN. In fact he was quite confident that he wouldn't. He also recalled that the last time he used his credit card to buy something, he received an email an hour later asking him to rate his 'shopping experience' and reassuring him that they 'valued his feedback'. As experiences go, he thought, shopping was well down in single figures and, as regards feedback, that was, he recalled, the ear-splitting scream that came from PA systems when inexperienced people tried to use the microphone. If he were to give them any sort of feedback, it would probably be that kind.

On this occasion he decided to seek comfort in the anonymity of cash. He pressed 'Cash' on the screen and a message came up instructing him to insert money. He looked all over the machine and saw that a small chute in the front had lit up like an airport runway. Opening his wallet, he fished out the only note he had which was a fifty and gingerly inserted it into the slot where it was snatched out of his hand so fast he thought his fingers were going to be taken off.

How rude? he thought. No human cashier would grab the money like that.

There was then a long pause during which he wondered when and if he was going to get his change. Then, all of a sudden, a collection of notes shot out of a slot and change began dropping into a small cup as if he'd just scored the jackpot on a slot machine. This was followed by a receipt that was surprisingly long for eight items. Grafton gathered up his groceries, stuffing a couple of cans into his pants' pockets, since there seemed to be no plastic carry bags and shuffled out of the store.

What an ordeal he thought. His childhood memories of grocery shopping were of his mother handing a list to the grocer who then,

or rather his young assistant, darted around the store, even scaling ladders, to find the items while she waited at the counter looking, as she normally did, poised and elegant.

These days you not only had to trek your way around the store, pushing a small tumbrel in front of you, hunting and gathering for your own game, you had to do your own checkout and bagging. Once upon a time, the attendant at the service station came out and filled your tank and wiped your windscreen while you relaxed in the driver's seat. They would even put in oil and water while you waited. Now you leaned against the back of the car suffering cramp in both hands as the litres and dollars rolled up on the pump as slow as the rising moon. Once menswear stores had sales assistants who brought you shoes and trousers to try on. Now you lugged armfuls of clothes into the changing rooms by yourself or sat on a tiny seat in an aisle opening shoe boxes and untangling laces on footwear with sizes that bore no relation to the number printed on the box.

Were we heading, he wondered, to a point where shops would have no staff at all? Would everything in the future be self-service, which is to say *no* service? Would we go to the dentist and fill our own teeth, sit in some automated eye-testing machine at the optometrist while a computerised voice intoned 'Which is better, this or this?' Why was life involving *more* work instead of less? So grumped Grafton as he plodded across the carpark to his car.

When he arrived home, Grafton almost said 'I'm home' but managed to stop himself. The house, however, was not empty. 'Shadow', their new Labradoodle, came trotting down the passageway to meet him. Shadow was in fact a Labradoodloodle being three parts poodle to one part Labrador but that was too hard to say. They had also had the option of a Labradabradoodle, which was the opposite mix, but Grafton thought it sounded like something from *The Flintstones*. He did find it fascinating that, after hundreds of years crafting dogs into distinctly separate breeds, dog breeders

were now intent on deliberately mixing them all up again. It was an insight into consumer psychology that people would pay hundreds of dollars for a mongrel if you renamed it a Shepherspaniel, a CockerSharPei or a Goldhund Rottcollie.

He dumped his groceries, such as they were, on the kitchen bench and addressed Shadow. ‘I better feed you, I suppose,’ he said. Having no reason or wish to disagree, Shadow simply looked at him. He had been so named because Grafton had had a kelpie-collie cross of that name as a child who followed him everywhere. Shadow had been bought because he was black-and-white – the colours of the Collingwood Football team – to which he and his father were dedicated religiously. Shadow II had the same colouring but his light-footed gait was more suggestive of a soccer player.

Grafton led the way out to the laundry where he opened a cupboard. On the shelves were some one hundred cans of dog food Janet had bought to feed Shadow for the thirteen weeks she was to be away. Grafton had remonstrated at the time. ‘You’re putting in supplies for him. What about me?’ Janet had simply and logically replied. ‘You can go the shops every day. He can’t.’ Grafton had doubts about the first half of that statement but remained silent. ‘Besides,’ Janet had added ‘Cans will keep. Your food won’t.’

Grafton was tempted to say that he was perfectly happy to eat out of cans – which was what he was now planning to do – but had thought better of it. He opened a can of dog food and scraped half of it onto a large stainless steel bowl. The meat looked not unlike Spam and he momentarily wished he had something similar for his own dinner.

Returning to the kitchen he addressed the problem of food preparation. The last time he had used a stove-top he had lit it with a match. The shiny black glass of the induction range completely defeated him. As far as he could understand from Janet’s explanation, it heated pots and pans without itself being hot. This, to Grafton, seemed to violate every known law of thermodynamics. The downside of this magic trick was, however, that you could not use anything as commonplace as an aluminium saucepan on it and

all pots and pans had to be made of some sort of Unobtainium from a distant planet.

The microwave oven was also a treacherous device requiring a PhD in Quantum Electrodynamics to know what could and could not be placed in it. The first time Grafton had tried to heat a can of soup in one, it had caused something like a small nuclear reaction. He subsequently discovered you could not put metal in the microwave and even ceramic mugs became 100 degrees hotter than the cocoa inside them. Like the stove top, it seemed the microwave was another part of the conspiracy to make you replace your entire inventory of kitchen utensils with ones made of space-age composites.

As it turned out, his hope for having canned spaghetti for tea was thwarted by the fact he had no idea where the can opener was. He suspected that, due to cans having ring-pull lids, Janet had donated it to a museum. The cans he had bought were of an antediluvian home-brand type that required an opener.

Wearily he turned to the giant Greystoke Guide, a large almanac that Janet had compiled for him before she left. It was large lever arch file divided into sections between labelled dividers containing all the information he might require to manage during her absence. There were sections devoted to all the emergency numbers that might be needed, the daily, weekly and monthly chores and maintenance that were necessary, and instructions on the whereabouts and operations of appliances, remote controls, garden equipment and security systems. The tome was so hefty Grafton felt it should have been chained to a bookstand like a medieval Bible. Its heft was also daunting in that it revealed how much Janet actually did. At least sixty per cent of the tasks it described he had not even been aware of. Alas, as he pored over the kitchen section, he found instructions for equipment variously described as mixers, blenders, processors, juicers, peelers and slicers, making him wonder if Janet was running a juice stall on the side but no information as to the whereabouts, or even the existence of, a can opener.

He thought of ordering Uber Eats for which, according to The

Guide, Janet had installed some sort of ‘app’ on his phone for but he was put off by the Nietzschean overtones of the name plus the fact that he had no idea what an ‘app’ was. It was thus determined that, with the help of the one appliance he knew how to operate, the electric kettle, a cup of dried soup would be his evening meal.

He switched on the kettle and tipped the ingredients of a sachet into a mug. Looking into the mug he noted that the contents amounted to little more than a dessertspoon of powder with some tiny desiccated peas in it. This, he realised, was the amount of food that would actually be in the soup after he added the water. Despite claiming to be a ‘cup of soup’ it was really meagre rations.

He began hunting through the pantry for something that might accompany the soup and was amazed at how many things on the shelves were edible without actually being food. There were sauces, condiments, stock cubes, cooking oils, spreads, spices, dried noodles, several types of flour and a huge variety of sugars – yet nothing to actually eat. There was a container with a handful of stale salted crackers that he was certain would leave his mouth feeling like the Western Sahara but then he found salvation. Hidden behind it was a can of Pringles.

Thus was Grafton able to slump down on the couch with a mug of thin soup and a tin of Pringles and watch the evening news on television. Shadow, now satisfied from being fed, came in and sat beside him, glad of the company. Grafton recalled seeing a documentary on television which showed dogs fretting and howling for hours while their owners were at work. Being social animals they were distraught being separated from the other members of their pack. Grafton could not help but identify. It was exactly how he felt with Janet gone. He could easily see himself sitting, howling inside the front door.

Even though he acknowledged she had every right to some sort of reward after putting up with him for thirty-five years, he could not get over a sense of abandonment. It was perhaps the sheer length of the trip she had undertaken – a tour where she and her friends would visit twenty-six cities, one for every letter of the alphabet,

for a few days each, the whole trip lasting three months. She had naturally asked if he'd like to come and he had, just as naturally, refused. Grafton had no desire to travel anywhere further than the café around the corner, and the thought of being probably the only man in a group of women who called themselves the Wanderladies was Hadean. Yes, she deserved a reward, but why did it have to be at his expense, leaving him to the mercy of his own inadequacies.

The worst part was she had only left a week ago. What would it be like when she had been gone for a month or more?

Grafton sighed with despondency, not only because of his current circumstances, but also because he found he had eaten the last Pringle. He tipped the canister up to his lips hoping there were a few shards left but it was empty. He turned to his soup mug and found that it was also now empty except for what looked like half the original powder lying as a thick paste at the bottom. He had clearly omitted to stir it well and had really just consumed a mug of water. All in all, he had hardly eaten at all.

'Why is everything so hard?' he wondered out loud. Were other men who lost their wives – widowers and divorcees – similarly incapable of feeding themselves, shopping, cooking and cleaning? Was he egregiously afflicted with incompetence or were all men like this? He wondered how men who had never married coped on their own but had to admit he did not know any such men. Was it possible that all men depended on women to keep them alive? Was it a fundamental weakness in the male of the species or – OR – he found himself wondering – did women induce some sort of learned helplessness in men, slowly leaching their initiative and autonomy in order to make them passive and obedient companions who would never think of reorganising the pantry or choosing the curtains in the lounge?

For a moment, this idea had merit. Had Janet, through her competence, lack of neuroses, excess of pragmatism and damned common sense robbed him of his independence and self-sufficiency? The answer was clearly 'No'. He had always been like this.

That led him to start thinking about his childhood and whether

he had been spoilt and over-protected as a child which, in turn, reminded him of the conversation he had had with Sebastian about writing his autobiography. Perhaps he should start thinking about that, he thought. The next thought was to wonder how he might go about thinking about it.

It had always been Grafton's custom that, before making the effort to think about something, he would go through a planning phase where he would work out not only how he was going to think but where and under what circumstances. That would include how he was going to make himself comfortable and what kinds of beverages and snacks he might equip himself with in order to carry out the aforesaid thinking.

He dedicated the next few minutes working out just such a plan and concluded that to maximise the likelihood of a successful outcome from the proposed thinking, he would make himself a cup of tea, perhaps coat some of those stale crackers in the pantry with jam, and retire to his study to start making some notes. So resolved, he hauled himself off the couch and made the necessary preparations.