



A LIFE OF DAYS

Robert Hillman



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ROBERT HILLMAN



To Janet

*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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MacKay.

Factotum of the eschatological.

Dogsbody of heaven.

Enjoying himself, I bet, as the clergy always do a funeral.
Raising his hands now, doing the Orotund Almighty.

Outdoor theatre.

Pah! Lovely lines don't save a rotten actor, Claude, and your thoughts are a million miles from that rigid fellow in his upholstered box, if you would admit it. Whoever it is in the box. I wouldn't know. Perhaps I shook hands with him, spoke with him, or is it a she? God, the loneliness! Nothing to hear down there but the rapid burrowing of rabbits, rumble of trucks on the highway, footfalls, creeping roots of trees, the creak creak creak of the coffin settling. Waiting waiting waiting for one's ghost to form. The task of accommodating oneself to nothingness. Melancholy reflections on the unspeakably distant seventy years of heartbeat and respiration. A moment of panic as you hear the car door slam, the mourners departing, the earth falling like artillery shells on the roof above your nose. Waiting waiting waiting for visitors, for words, language, and the frustration of needing to cry out, Yes! I'm still here, No! nothing changes, any news, any news at all, don't weep please, just talk just talk, any news at all. Then at last in days, years, centuries — who knows? — the metamorphic moment, a lifting sensation, you're floating, flying, the stars blur, maximum warp, homeward bound!

Richard Eliot, sallow, unshaven, having come upon this funeral a hundred metres downhill from his new home, decided to stay

for the duration. He set down the carton of books he'd been holding in both arms, sat on top of it and lit a cigarette. Gallbally, he noticed, was amongst the mourners — very erect and handsome in his blue pinstripe. But the line of chaps in shiny old double breasteds recently pressed? Not sure, unless — is it? Yes. That's the RSL contingent. Who, then, was in the box? Eliot hadn't heard a thing. Some attenuated old stick who on his death turns out to be So-and-So VC, the Tiger of the Somme?

What now? A certain amount of shuffling around the graveside. A line of four on either side. Gallbally? Oh. Is undressing the coffin of the flag, folds it with meticulous care. And (Eliot had worked it out) these chaps from the Imperial League lower the coffin on ropes — no, webbing straps.

What is that? A sort of black box — some peculiar monstrosity?

My God. A cassette player!

The Last Post swelled into the vast, pale-blue emptiness of the autumn day.

A cassette player!

But he was very impressed by the way in which the RSL preserved the dignity of the moment by standing as rigidly at attention as at any live performance. A cassette player. A terrific innovation, opening up the most marvellous possibilities.

Then:

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!”

A slow, loudening howl of lamentation, emanating, Eliot now saw with a shock, from a stooped, female figure in black at Claude MacKay's elbow. Iris Thompson! Iris Thompson. Who now fell to her knees (Eliot jumped to his feet, searching for a clearer line of vision between the wattles which grew up the hill from the cemetery all the way to his side fence), and dug her hands into the pile of dull clay at the head of the grave. Now Claude was ineffectually attempting to raise her to her feet; Gallbally had her — lifted her up, but no sooner had he done

this than she threw back her head, losing her little black bonnet, and cried out once more:

“Nooooooooooooooooo!”

Two women — Eliot thought he recognised Shirley De Salle from the fruit shop in one of them — led her away toward the cemetery gate, supporting her, exhorting her, but failing to stifle her strange, stabbing coughs of grief.

Back at the grave, Claude babbled some concluding benediction, and the mourners began to drift into small groups of two and three, making their way down to the long line of parked cars on the unpaved road that ran down from the highway. They murmured and shrugged and shook their heads, produced packets of cigarettes from inside breastpockets.

Rex, that must be, in the coffin.

Eliot knew him in the town, but more particularly had run into him on the banks of the Howqua nine months earlier, fishing for eels in the lilac dawn. He recalled his carious, wine-sweet breath, his nicotine-stained moustache, the yellow crescents under his eyes, his detailed accounts of buggery, the way in which he gargled his sherry before swallowing it, his gorgeous Welsh bray (exercised on bits and pieces from a ramshackle *Selected Shelley*, picked up at the Wattle Hill tip), and how he had shot a stream of urine halfway across the silken lagoon from an article as thick as a fire hose.

Poor Rex!

When they had parted, the little man had called him to a halt and tearfully offered these lines:

Like clouds in starlight widely spread
Like memory of music fled
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery...

By slouching up and down the filthy and festering alleyways of life and trying the doors he found, he had made himself content enough. Dead now.

"I feel for you, little fellow," Eliot murmured in sorrow.

For to die was a terrible thing. No one knew how terrible, exactly, but Eliot felt he had some inkling. One night in his sleep, the Angel of Death had attempted to strangle him, but he'd woken up before the job was completed. More recently, the massive bough of an ironbark had almost fallen on top of him. Shortly after this incident, in a frothing fever of terror and disgust, he'd made an astounding discovery: *one could decide not to die*. It was a matter of concentration.

All the cars had pulled away, except for Gallbally's, and he was undressing at the back of his station wagon, how extraordinary! Stripping down to a pair of brief, bright red underpants. Eliot was puzzled and amused and a little bit alarmed, because he had once slept in a two-man tent on the Howqua with Gallbally and if he should turn out to be a pervert, then imagine the danger he'd been in. Now climbing into a sleeveless blue boilersuit — very curious. Gumboots. Reaching into the back of the station wagon for — Oh! a long-handled shovel. So. And from the front seat, two cans of beer. Charity in comfort.

Distantly, four electronic chimes sounded — the end of the school day.

"O Christ!" murmured Eliot, and moved to pick up the carton of books and get back to the house and prepare an excuse for Sandra and Sweet Jesus if he hadn't made the place a fraction cleaner her scorn would be something dreadful.

But — would he? First make sure that it was Rex?

He glanced back down to the cemetery. Gallbally, at the graveside, was tilting a can in professional fashion; now sitting it on a neighbouring headstone. He wiped his lips, seized the shovel, and sent the first load of clay into the shaft. Eliot heard the dull report from where he stood, the most melancholy echo in the universe.

He shrugged, left the books, and strode down the hill to pay his last respects.



Sandra Marr did not permit herself to feel the effect of Eliot's slight until the four bells sounded, ending period six at Wattle Hill High School. She did not enjoy her work, and maintained a strict separation of her vital life and her occupational life. This discipline allowed her to think of her hours at school as a bland dream, a mere nothing, and since she made no investment there she needn't think of these hours as wasted.

Leaving behind a roomful of comatose sixteen-year-olds (they were halfway up the river with Marlow and finding him a tedious companion), she walked rapidly across a sunny courtyard into the staffroom, threw down her books, grabbed her shoulder-bag and a folder full of exercises for correction and left without speaking a word to the three teachers sitting around a central cluster of Formica-topped tables trading gossip and wisecracks. Within two minutes of the final bell, she was out on Bridge Street in her little red Honda, her eyes brimming with tears of rage, her hands trembling on the steering wheel.

She knew where to find Eliot only because the principal, a diligent busybody, had made it his business to lean over her shoulder at morning recess and whisper a location in her ear. This was humiliating, as it was meant to be, but at the time she had merely raised her eyebrows and inclined her head, as if to say, "Interesting, useful. . . ." The point was, it would have been so easy for Richard to have spared her this humiliation; a note on her desk would not have cost him more than a sixty second delay. "I've resigned. I'm at Betty Blair's." Those few words!

Leaving Bridge Street and turning up onto the highway, she suddenly found herself flying past a long line of slow-moving cars heading back into the town. She could not imagine why the cars should be crawling along on an open limit stretch of road, and with furious belligerence she put her right wheel on the white line, leaving only a margin of centimetres between her panels and theirs. When she reached the turn-off to the

cemetery, the speedo was touching 130. The danger was exhilarating and tranquillising together, but she could not begin to think of destroying herself before she'd seen to Richard, and so took the turn in a cloud of dust at only a semi-suicidal 75.

Richard's buckled and beaten Holden was parked off the track by the gate to the cottage, packed to the roof with cardboard cartons. On the hood were tied a kitchen table and chairs. Sandra pulled to a rowdy halt beside it, and without allowing any time for the hard, kinetic emotion swinging in her chest to translate itself into dull, fat tears, she leapt from the car, strode through the gateway, up the wooden verandah steps and in through the open front door.

The room which she'd entered was small and square, strewn with packed cartons apparently retrieved from the back of the Wattle Hill Four Square, and with Eliot's furniture from his March Street house: two bulky blue armchairs; a heavy, oak library desk; an upholstered office chair; a long, dark-varnished settle; four tall sets of homemade bookshelves; a squat, green Kelvinator; a chest of drawers; an embossed brass firebox; an embroidered firescreen featuring native mammals. With the exception of two or three items perhaps still packed in the car, these were all his possessions in the world — all very familiar to Sandra, but it was Eliot himself she wanted and he was not in the room. The same nerves and instincts that cue the inspired killer told her he was not in the house at all. She shrieked his name at the top of her voice, the loudest noise she had ever made. And a second time, cathartically. (Tiny children enjoy the same experience, and seem to prosper.)

No response.

She walked straight over to one of the bookshelves, in which a number of volumes unpacked from an Osolite carton were standing, and began ripping out pages in handfuls. Six mutilated volumes lay in a heap on the floor before her fury was overcome by horror. There was a book in her hand that she hadn't yet begun work on; she placed it back gently on the

shelf, then threw back her head and howled. The tears flowed down her face in a flood. She couldn't stop them; they had been building for a year and had been deferred too often. She dropped into an armchair and wept until she was sick and wet and exhausted.

And all the while she was crying, it was as if a sterner version of herself were standing cold and aloof beside her, pointing a finger at the torn books. She dried her face and her nose on the sleeve of her white shirt and pushed her dark curls off her forehead. The initiative she had carried into the room was now absolutely dead and gone. In his worst fit of anger, Richard would never, never have dreamt of tearing up her books. She would pay him twice the value of the six volumes, but that would count for about as much as the extravagant funeral a parent bestows on a child she has thrown down the stairs in a moment of misery and derangement. Sandra slid from the chair and knelt wretchedly beside the massacred heap. Five were hardcover; all were fairly new. She picked them up one by one.

The Portable Jesus

Satori Without Tears

Total Recall: My Life from Two Billion BC

Passion and Society

The Making of the English Working Class

Diet and Immortality

She first considered hiding the books, or possibly taking them with her, ordering new copies and returning them quietly. Then she thought of putting them back on the shelf, veiling the whole affair in a willed amnesia. But in the end, she chose the other extreme; she left the books on the floor where they lay, crumpled pages scattered about them. This decision amounted to hard penance, and went a fair way toward restoring her moral credibility.

Meanwhile, where was Richard? There was nowhere for him to go from here; the cottage was five kilometres from the

town. She glanced about the room and shuddered with disgust at its dereliction. The floor was dusty, bare boards. Dull green flakes of paint were peeling from the walls on all sides; the scarred plaster ceiling was mottled with rainwater stains and evil black mould; the window looking out onto thriving blackberry, dockweed and phalaris was covered with flyspecks and the corpses of mosquitoes; thick, matted cobwebs had grown all around the moulding and window frames. And down the hill, of course, was the cemetery. Richard never did anything for one clear reason, but always to satisfy himself in a number of ways. She knew one of the reasons he had for living here: it was to disgust her. He affected a relish for the hideous and the dismal — and it was an affectation, because if she were capable of looking about a dump like this and merely yawning instead of moaning, he would be terrifically disappointed. He was a child, essentially; a brat — slappable.

Sandra looked into the next room, the bedroom, where Richard had already set up his bed-base and mattress. It was the size of a prison cell, the double bed leaving only a narrow space between itself and the wall on each side. A feeble, mustard-coloured light filtered in through a small, square window high in the wall — too high to see through. The room smelt like a cave in which bats had been breeding for a thousand years.

She saw that he had dumped his sheets and blankets on the mattress, and feeling a need to effect some slight improvement to the room, began making up the bed. Flinging open a sheet, she saw a silhouette in soil of Richard's form and the tea-coloured stains of their most recent lovemaking. She was not quite repelled by Richard's casual attitude to personal hygiene — she more stood in awe of it, perhaps because he had made her ashamed of her own scrupulous standards of cleanliness. He had told her — in this bed, in fact — that at the centre of her soul there sat a sparkling kitchen sink and a little pile of freshly laundered underwear.

Smoothing the pink Madras bedspread over the top of the blankets, Sandra stood back and tried to imagine Richard and herself making love in the room. She could imagine it, but it made her sick.

The second door from the front room took her into the kitchen, and here she felt ready to weep again. The kitchen contained a dirty concrete tub, divided in half; a few ramshackle cupboards, doors missing, and on the floor, a filthy scrap of liver-coloured carpet. A type of back verandah opened off the kitchen and here, unbelievably, sat the bathtub. Weirdly, it was brand new beneath the dust and leaves and twigs and insect corpses. And outside was a new electric water heater, connected to the tub by a gleaming copper tube through the wall. If you didn't mind bathing in the open air, you could keep yourself clean. This was Richard exactly: anything that appeared halfway sensible from a distance became ludicrous close up.

Stepping down two rickety steps into the backyard, Sandra noticed the toilet, a wooden shed against the weathered boards of the back fence. The grass between the house and the structure was knee-high. She was reluctant to walk through the grass in the early March heat, when snakes were about, but she wanted to demonstrate to herself the absolute impossibility of this affair with Richard continuing. She dared to make her way to the ugly little shed, hungry for further horror. Pushing open the door with the tips of her fingers, she was met by the roar of ten thousand blowflies and a fierce stench. Sandra made herself stare down into the feculent bin below the bench until her gorge began to rise, then turned and hurried back to the house, exhilarated by the certainty that she could never, not for any amount of love, take down her trousers in that hole.

“Gallbally, you old sinner!”

The tall, green-eyed man, as assured and handsome as some mature and accomplished screen actor of the thirties,

turned his head nonchalantly. Eliot vaulted the fence of the cemetery and wandered down through the headstones, slipping his hands into his pockets.

“Afternoon, Dick.”

“Afternoon.” Eliot nodded back in the direction from which he’d come. “I’ve been watching.”

“You’ve moved in, then?”

“In the process of. Is this old Rex? I thought I saw Iris.”

“Yep,” said Gallbally, forcing the blade of the shovel into the mound of clay so that it stood upright. He drew a packet of Camel from his bib pocket and shook out two, offering one to Eliot.

“Ta. What did he die of?”

“White Horse,” said Gallbally.

Eliot leaned forward for the offered flame then moved to the lip of the grave and stared down at the gleaming oak lid of the coffin. All of the clay thrown in so far sat piled up in a pyramid.

“Poor Rex,” Eliot murmured. “What’s that water down there?”

“Been a wet summer,” said Gallbally.

“When did it happen?”

“Sunday. He was fishing just down there on the rocks. Vern Palmer found him.”

“With a flask?”

“Naturally.”

“Poor Rex,” said Eliot again, and sighed.

“Yeah,” agreed Gallbally, and he reached for his can of beer from the headstone beside him. “Will you have a drink, Dick?”

“No thanks.”

Gallbally tilted the can deftly, brushed his lips on his wrist and rumbled musically, “Poor old bastard.”

“Did you dig the grave, Andy?”

“Sure did.”

“Free?”

“Yep.”

Eliot grinned at him. “What a nice man you are,” he said. “There’s only just the one or two of us who know what a lying, thieving, lecherous old bastard you are most of the time.”

“Very kind of you to keep it to yourself, Dick. Sure you won’t have a can?”

“Positive, thank you.”

“Had a day off school?”

“Lots of days. I resigned. As of this morning.”

“Why was that?”

“It took up too much time.”

“You can’t eat spare time, Dick, or we all would.”

Eliot flicked the stub of his cigarette into the grave. “That’s not meant to be disrespectful,” he said. “I liked old Rex a lot.”

“You can piss in it for all I care, Dick. He’s not going to complain.”

Eliot gazed down into the grave meditatively. The blade-smoothened walls were lightly wet and running. “Do you know what this is, Gallbally?” he asked, without looking up. “This is a great mouth of the earth about to commence an unbearably slow mastication.”

“A what?”

“Mastication. This grave is going to eat Rex up.”

Gallbally guffawed. “This is philosophy, is it?”

“I was watching MacKay,” said Eliot. “Christ he’s a fool. Throwing out his arms. What was the RSL doing here?”

The tall man drained his can of beer and tossed the empty into the grave. He reached for the second can and tore off its tab.

“Rex was a member,” he said. “He was in the desert somewhere. He shot a German once, he used to reckon — Benghazi, Tripoli, somewhere.”

Eliot nodded and stared down at the empty can and the cigarette butt on the lid of the coffin. The salivary walls of the

shaft impressed him deeply. "This is a huge, ugly maw. It's enough to make you want to be burnt."

Gallbally pointed his can at him. "Knew a bloke once, Dick. Worked in a crem. He said there's good burners and bad burners."

"What does it depend on?"

"Fat. You'd be a bad burner. They'd have to douse you down with a couple of gallons of super."

Eliot snorted. "You know more blokes than there are blokes to know. Every time you say, 'I knew a bloke,' I know I'm going to hear a fiction."

"Why don't you say bullshit instead of fiction, Dick? What sort of idea do you want to give people?"

Just then, distant but clear, Eliot heard a female voice shouting his name. He looked in alarm in the direction of the house. The cry came again.

"Who's that?" asked Gallbally. He was grinning, as he had been ever since Eliot's arrival. His grin used the whole of his face, especially his eyes. His mirth seemed just barely under control.

"Sandra," Eliot replied.

"Ohh! Mrs Marr?"

Eliot nodded.

"Dick, do you know where I'd be now if Mrs Marr was calling out for me? I'd be up there so fast, boy, you'd think I flew."

"Would you, Andy?"

"I saw her tits once, you know."

"Shut up."

"You remember just after Christmas I came round to pick up my fly rod? I went past your kitchen window and she was sitting at the table smoking, nothing on top."

Eliot was not paying attention. He was staring into the grave. A cloud had passed in front of the sun and the coffin was almost lost in darkness. Behind him, Gallbally was silently

reaching forward with his hands, further and further until — “Bang!” he shouted, clapping his hands on Eliot’s shoulders. Eliot jumped back from the grave and turned to Gallbally a face the colour of bone.

“You fucking bastard!” he hissed.

“Sorry, Dick. I’ve got to get back to work.”

He took up the shovel and began flinging in the clay once more. When Eliot remained, hands in pockets, he paused and threw him a wink. “Go up and give her a root,” he said.

“Uh uh,” said Eliot. “I want her to calm down. You fill in old Rex. I’ll just watch for a while.”

“Might be doing this for you one day, Dick.”

And so he would, thought Eliot, and piss on my coffin and throw in his empty cans. Big fucking Irish idiot. But Christ, let me concentrate. I’m not ready, not now or tomorrow or for ten thousand years or for a million years after that or forever. Why is it so dark?

Overhead, the sky had turned from a tender blue to hard, grey flint. It had a bad-tempered, impatient look.

“Just a minute,” he said to Gallbally, and he got down on his haunches and awkwardly lowered himself into the grave, landing with a dull clump on the coffin lid. He tossed the can and the cigarette butt out, kissed the tips of two fingers and touched them to the varnished oak. “Give us a hand,” he said to Gallbally.

Gallbally laughed and lifted one eyebrow. “I’m going to fill you both in, is what,” he said. He sank the shovel and threw down a load of clay.

Eliot ignored him. He knew the teasing would go on long enough to make him properly angry. He sank his fingers into the couch grass under the clay at the lip of the grave and hauled himself up and out.

“I’m staying till it’s done,” he said, heaving. “Don’t you throw any bloody cans in there, okay?”

Gallbally looked at him in an amused-puzzled way for a

moment or two, then threw back his head and laughed loudly. "Christ, you're a case," he said, "but you're bloody good value, Dick, I can tell you that." Still chuckling, he picked up the shovel and went to work.

Sandra found in the envelope of snapshots the picture she was looking for. It showed an exceptionally attractive young girl standing under a leafy tree that was fabulously laden with rich, black fruit. The girl was holding on with both hands to a bough above her head, exposing sweetly the dark little tufts of her armpits. Sunlit chestnut curls, pink lips, her eyes almost closed by her smile. Sandra put the picture on the arm of the chair and sorted through a dozen more until she found the same girl three years later, her hair shorter, thinner in the face, something wary come into her pale eyes. The girl's name was June — Junie — divorced three years earlier by Richard. Sandra loved her — the younger girl in one way, the older girl in another way. She understood perfectly how unhappy Richard must have made her; the very day-to-day manner and expression of her unhappiness, its most trivial aspects, the way in which he would have arrogantly refused to attend the family gatherings of her relatives, refused to buy underwear for himself, spent everything on books and made her feel like a tedious little *hausfrau* when she complained. But at the same time she found it almost impossible to believe that he could not have been happy with the girl in whose eyes and smile there was delight and generosity and love for him. The strange longing Sandra had experienced when she'd first been shown these pictures arose in her again; a longing on behalf of these two, a powerful wish that they had stayed together and made each other happy, found some cure for the intransigent restlessness of the boy, created the life that was promised in the girl's glad eyes and exuberant smile. And then she, Sandra, would not have met Richard, but the idea of her not meeting him did not appal her.