

KATE
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The Idea of Perfection

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FOR TOM

AND

FOR ALICE

WITH LOVE

“An arch is two weaknesses
which together make a strength.”

LEONARDO DA VINCI

CHAPTER I

IN HIS EX-WIFE'S clever decorating magazines Douglas Cheeseman had seen mattress ticking being *amusing*. Marjorie had explained that it was amusing to use mattress ticking for curtains the same way it was amusing to use an old treadle Singer as a table for your maidenhair ferns. But he did not think the amusing aspect of mattress ticking being used as a curtain had made it as far as the Caledonian Hotel in Karakarook, NSW, pop 1374. He could feel the cold dust in the fabric as he held it back to look out the window.

Over the top of the corrugated iron roof next door, he could see nearly all of Karakarook. It looked as if it had just slid down into the bottom of the valley, either side of the river, and stayed there. Where the houses finished straggling up the sides of the hills there were bald curves of paddocks and, further up, the hilltops were dark with bush. Above that was the huge pale sky, bleached with the heat.

From the window he could see part of Parnassus Road, wide and empty as an airport runway, lying stunned under the afternoon sun. Along the strip of shops a few cars were parked diagonally into the gutters like tadpoles nosing up to a rock. A dog lay stretched out lifeless across the doorway of an empty shop. The awnings over the shops made jagged

blocks of black shadow and the great radiance of the sun pressed down out of the sky.

A ute so dusty he could not tell what colour it was drove slowly in and angled itself into the gutter. Out of it got a man with a big round belly straining at a blue shirt, who disappeared under the awning of the shops opposite the Caledonian. Douglas could hear the squeak as a door was pushed open, and the thump as it closed again. GENERAL STORE EST 1905, it said on the facade above the awning, but the shiny awning said MINI-MART.

He went on watching, but nothing else moved. Standing at the window, holding the frame, he could feel the heat of the sun beat back up from the grey corrugated iron roof of the shop below him.

After a long period of stillness an old brown car appeared small at the end of the street, came slowly along and pointed itself tentatively into the gutter outside the General Store. A woman got out and stood looking up and down the street with her hands on her hips. She did not seem to be worried by doing nothing more than standing and looking. She seemed pleased, in a stern way, and interested, as if Parnasus Road, Karakarook, was a diorama in a display provided especially for her pleasure.

She was a big rawboned plain person, tall and unlikely, with a ragged haircut and a white tee-shirt coming unstitched along the shoulder. It was a long time since she'd been young and it was unlikely that she'd ever been lovely. She stood like a man, square-on. Her breasts pushed out the old tee-shirt, but it was clear from the way she stood that she'd forgotten about breasts being sexy. Her breasts made bulges in her shirt the same way her knees made bulges in her black track pants, that was all.

She was not *accessorised*. The tee-shirt hung off her shoulders and came straight up to her neck. There was no collar, no scarf, no beads, no earrings. Her head just came up out of the tee-shirt saying, *Here I am, and who do you think you are?*

Douglas stood with the curtain in his hand, watching her as she looked at Parnassus Road exposed under the sky. A salt of the earth type.

Salt of the earth: that was one of Marjorie's expressions. What she meant by that was, badly dressed.

The way the woman stood with her hands on her hips, looking down the road as if she owned it, he could imagine her life, a proper life anchored solid to the ground. There would be a big cheerful husband, uncomplicated children, fat red-cheeked grandchildren calling her Nanna. He could imagine the kitchen out on the farm, with the radio going on the bench, the big basket of eggs with the chook-poop still on them, the fridge door covered with magnets that said things like *Bless this Mess*.

A dog came along from somewhere and barked at her, making pigeons puff up in a scatter from the awning. She glanced at it, and he saw a frown darken her face.

He let the curtain fall and stepped back from the window. Then he stood in the dim room wondering why he had done that.

He glanced at his watch but it did not tell him anything useful. He sat down on the bed, pulled off his boots. Considered, pulled them on again. He wanted to have another look out the window, but he would not like anyone to catch him. It was only a kind of hunger, but it could be misunderstood.

Douglas Cheeseman was a man no one would look at twice. His eyes were no particular colour, and too close together. His lips and cheeks were made of the same fabric and his nose was big and freckled, even with the caps he always wore. In summer he could always be picked out on the site by the zinc cream. The younger ones laughed. He knew they laughed. On every job there were a couple of young blokes, only there for the week, pick up a bit of cash, move on. They laughed at the engineer standing solemnly with his roll of plans: they tossed bricks to each other and laughed from their brown faces at him, anxious in his zinc cream.

He was fifty-five, but he could have been ten years either side of that. Thin sandy hair, a big awkward mouth. Bad teeth, crooked and dark when he smiled, jug-handle ears. As a self-conscious boy he'd tried different things with those ears. He'd made an elasticised band with elaborate leather flaps to flatten his ears while he slept. He'd tried his hair short. He'd tried it long. He'd tried all kinds of hats. Eventually he'd grown the moustache as a kind of diversionary tactic, and he'd kept it.

Now he'd forgotten about his ears. He'd stopped bothering to wish they were smaller, his hair thicker, his mouth nicer.

He could see now that Room 8 was on the wrong side of the building, where it got the full force of the afternoon sun and the heat bouncing up from the roof of the shop below. It gleamed with lino and sticky yellow furniture and smelled of beer and dust. The bed sagged under its dim chenille cover. Three slow flies circled through the heat in the centre of the room.

He knew he should ask for a different room, but knew he would not.

In spite of its mattress-ticking curtain, the Caledonian was not an amusing hotel. It was just a pub of the old-fashioned kind, the kind that was praised as being *authentic* by city folk. He had seen on the blackboard downstairs that the Set Dinner was *Corned Beef With White Sauce & Three Veg*, and to follow *Jam Roll and Custard*. It was *authentic* country food, food from his childhood, still going strong out here in the bush, but it was not going to be especially amusing actually eating it.

From other Caledonians in other country towns he knew just what the bathroom down the hall would be like: the cream tiles, the unsympathetic fluorescent lights, the green stains under the tap, the cistern that trickled, the shower with the water saver so you hardly got wet.

There was a drought on. He sympathised. Just the same, a decent shower was a comfort in the heat.

Another sort of man, he knew, would be able to make the best of the Caledonian. Another sort of man would nip down to the public bar for a beer, where it would be cooler. He would read the paper, watch the trots on the telly. Would get a conversation going with the man next to him at the bar about the way the country was going to the pack.

He wished he could be such a man.

He got up from the bed. The structure groaned and a spring twanged as if in mockery.

Harley had seen him looking, the man holding back the curtain, with the D of the word CALEDONIAN hanging

upside-down from a screw above his head. She had seen him drop the curtain and move back from the window, but she knew he was still there, perhaps still watching her, as this dog was that had appeared from nowhere.

She had forgotten how empty a country town could be, how blank-windowed, how you could feel looked-at and large.

As she watched, a woman appeared from somewhere and hesitated on the edge of the footpath, looking up and down Parnassus Road as if a stranger like herself. When she glanced along and saw Harley watching she swapped the basket quickly from one hand to the other, pushed her hair behind her ear, and swiftly, purposefully, crossed the road towards Alfred Chang Superior Meats, in deep shadow under its awning. Harley heard the ping of the bell as she pushed the fly-door open and the slap as it closed. Then it was all silent again.

She wondered if she had imagined the woman with the basket.

Further down the street past the Caledonian she could see the old picture theatre. You could tell what it had been from its shape, tall at the front and falling away steeply at the back. The brackets were still screwed on down the front of the building where the sign must have been, *Odeon* or *Starlight*. Now the whole lot was painted utility grey.

There was a piece of masonite screwed up on the wall, with a sign, hand-lettered, hard to read. She squinted towards it. COBWEBBE CRAFT SHOPPE, she read. OPEN WED & THUR, and beside it another one left over from the previous month, with a corner broken off, MERRY XMAS PEACE ON EAR.

She laughed without meaning to and the dog barked. Then it stopped as if to let her have a turn.

Get lost, she said.

Its tail began to swing from side to side. Opening its mouth it panted with its tongue hanging out, pulsing. It went on watching her closely, as if she was about to perform a magic trick.

It showed no sign of being about to *get lost*.

The Cobwebbe Crafte Shoppe still had the old ticket window from the picture theatre, and through the glass she could see two quilts competing like plants for the light.

She glanced back at her car. It was not too late to get back in and drive away. No one would know, except this dog, and someone behind a curtain. As she stood hesitating, a rooster crowed lingeringly from somewhere, and a distant car horn went *dah diddidy dah-dah*. Then the silence pressed back in over the sounds.

She straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat.

Get lost, she told the dog again.

It sounded loud and rude in so much quiet.

The dog watched her as she looked right, looked left, looked right again. Nothing at all was moving anywhere along Parnassus Road. It was just her and her shadow, and the dog and the shadow of the dog, as they crossed the road together. Under the awning of the Caledonian their shadows were swallowed in the larger shadow.

Looking along at the Cobwebbe Crafte Shoppe, not at where she was going, she walked straight into a man coming out of the doorway of the Caledonian. When they collided, he staggered backwards and nearly fell. She grabbed at a handful of his forearm, clutching at the fabric and the arm

beneath, and he flailed out to steady himself, hitting her on the shoulder. Then they were both standing in the beer-smelling current of cool air from the doorway, apologising.

The man had a look of hysteria around the corners of his mouth. He wanted to blame himself.

My fault, he kept saying. Completely my fault. Stupid.

She had a feeling it was the man who had watched her from the window, but with his hat on it was hard to be sure.

Totally stupid. Not thinking at all.

So clumsy, Harley said. Oh, me, I mean.

She did not look at him, but at the ground, where their shoes were arranged on the footpath like ballroom-dancing instructions. His were elastic-sided bushman's boots that looked brand-new.

Did I hurt you? Hitting you?

She looked at him, surprised.

Hurt me?

He pointed but did not touch.

I hit you, he said, humbly. There.

No, no, she said, although now he had mentioned it, she could feel the place hurting.

She looked at her own hand, large and plain, the one that had clutched at him, and wondered if she should ask whether she had hurt him.

Well, he said, and laughed a meaningless laugh.

A moment extended itself into awkwardness.

Well, he said again, and she said it too at the same moment.

Their voices sounded loud together under the awning. She felt as if the whole of Karakarook, behind its windows, must be watching this event that had burst into their silent

afternoon: two bodies hitting together, two people standing apologising.

Sorry, he said again.

He was backing away from her now, making little meaningless movements with his hands. She went on along the footpath, trying to make her mouth less stern, her walk jaunty, casual, as if nothing had happened, but the dog spoiled it, running along beside, looking up anxiously into her face.

She did not want anyone to look up anxiously into her face. She strode out hard, ignoring it.

The same unsteady hand that had done COBWEBBE CRAFT SHOPPE on masonite had done another just inside the door. SOUVENIRS OF KARAKAROOK – GATEWAY TO THE FOOTHILLS! A long wobbly dribble had slid down from the exclamation mark.

There was a smell of pot-pourri and a dense muffled quality to the air, padded around with shelves piled with soft shapeless fabric things. There was a rocking-chair draped with crocheted blankets, and shelves of jams, and face-washers with KARAKAROOK NSW done by hand in cross-stitch in the corner.

It was much hotter in here than out on the street, and stuffy. A fan laboured away in one corner, turning its big face this way and that without effect.

Over behind a table with a cash register a small middle-aged woman was counting a stack of doilies.

Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three.

She raised her voice so she would not be interrupted.

Forty-four, forty-five.

She flipped the last doily on to the pile and looked up.

Help you at all?

Her eyes took in the unravelling shoulder seam, the big unadorned face.

Harley smiled, then remembered too late that when she smiled broadly her eye-teeth looked like fangs.

Hello, she said, and modified the smile.

Her voice was unnecessarily loud for such a quiet shop.

I'm Harley Savage, she said more quietly. From the Applied Arts Museum. In Sydney. You wrote to us.

She went on smiling, but carefully. There was a pause.

Here for your Heritage Museum.

The woman behind the table cried *Oh!* in a long falling sound that started surprised and ended dismayed.

You're Harley Savage!

There was an awkward little moment. Harley went on smiling, but felt that her smile had congealed. The woman behind the counter was small and sharp like a bird, with red glasses and red lipstick that matched the glasses, and hair that had been dyed so black it was almost purple.

It took her a moment, but then she bustled out from behind the table and it looked as though she was going to make up for staring, and the sound of that disappointed *Oh*, by shaking hands.

I'm Coralie, Coralie Henderson. I'm the one wrote the letter.

She gestured vaguely, and Harley got her hand ready to shake, but she was too late, and in the end they did not touch. The gestures hung like a mistake in the space between them.