

**Moss Vale
(1990)**

Over and over again the clouds wafted like nuns above the highway - as though they had the capacity to issue summons and to arrest the old man's motivation forward. Why are police vehicles always full of nuns? It is as though nuns are especially attuned to both speed and the necessity to stop. Perhaps they also enjoy young men with slender prospects.

Anyway, I tried to talk some sense into him. I tried to convince him that good times lay ahead. I pointed past the yellow and white lines to his future. But he would hear nothing of it. All of his plans had been set aside - if not by him then by others. There was no need, he said, to attempt to cheer him up. No need to depress myself with empty words which I would later regret. Better to shut up and close the window a fraction.

And so it goes, like clouds across the sky, nuns and police, depression down the road. Eventually the old man asked me to get out of the car. He had seen a nice big tree ahead and intended to drive into it. I warned him that death would bring no solace, that his problems would persist, that his estate would still be torn apart and sold cheaply. Better to watch this happen, I argued, than to die like a motorist. But he was determined. Reluctantly I climbed out of the car and sat down to watch. Somebody had to watch and remember, not that I had any intention of taking on his suffering or of absolving him from guilt. I simply wished to represent things as they happened, in the manner that a bureaucrat stamps a piece of paper to acknowledge its passing. He backed up and then drove forward as quickly as possible. I noticed as he drove past that he was leaning forward in the seat, willing the car on, willing a darkness beyond the clouds, willing that everything for once could be anticipated. He hit the tree at an appropriate speed.

I was forced to walk back into town.

The nuns skimmed above my head like clouds. Slender was the light between them. Slender were the prospects of the blazing sirens to put out the blaze and save the tree, to drag the old man out of the car and take him off to the dentist for identification. Slender was the road at times. Yet, in passing, I had done my best and perhaps taught the old man a few things.

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In the great divide - that is to say really in it, rather than across or beyond it - it is possible to pause and appreciate the finer things in life, or at least this is what I have been told.

I should stress that I am very pleased with the quality of even the least expensive hotel in this region. Perhaps it is the attention that they all devote to their gardens, or perhaps it is the cleanliness of the bathrooms. However, despite the comfort and general beauty, something about this place troubles me. It is as though some terrible event happened here in the past - something that has left a curious set of inchoate memories. I remember the cleanliness and the gardens. I also remember voices. People speaking to me very quickly, very insistently, and yet I can understand nothing of what they say. The memory of these voices returns to me each morning as I walk about the divide.

None of this matters anymore. I shall soon be leaving. It just seems unfortunate that I cannot appreciate the obvious beauty of this place. As soon as I pass through, or beyond, or across the divide these memories will no doubt disappear. Things may well be more drab, dirty and uncomfortable, but at least they will bear no relation to this awful unknown past. Even now I can

find the strength to say, "I have never been here, never heard these voices. I will pause no here no longer. I will pass away, and all of this will be forgotten."

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The corpulent flowers captivated me as though I were young again, as though I had an empty wallet and plenty of time, as though things no longer returned but began. Would I pick them and place them aside? Perhaps they would like to follow me into the house? Why, I wondered, were they so heavy? Had I worked and saved for all these years only to suddenly succumb to the charms of indolence and luxury? Was it a shame to no longer be ashamed?

Shyness is a virtue best saved for strangers. It can make short people grow tall and tall people grow short. It is bad for the skin. People have told me about people that I might like to meet, but by then I have already heard quite enough. An introduction would add nothing more. After all there is plenty of opportunity to meet people when something awful happens.

And even flowers have faces, even flowers that stink and stand up like the statue of a ghost. Even flowers that shed an alabaster light through the swirling haze of darkness in my room. We have not met. Why can neither of us sleep, or do you never sleep? These are not questions but attempts to disengage my capacity for speech. There are only so many nights when this is possible, and most of them are long past.

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The waves broke upon the shore, but not into many pieces, nor into a shower of fragments, but more into a foaming blanket. The blanket covered her body, though she was dead, not sleeping. I had certainly warned her about leaving home. The world is large and full of evil. Beyond these suburbs lies great danger. You are far too young and attractive. They will rape and then kill you. Please be sensible and remain at school.

So away she went, with long hair cascading down her shoulders and neck. And she never said a word. I had never allowed it, though I had often pretended to listen attentively. In fact I can no longer even remember her face, only the blanket of the sea. For that is where I found her. I could not bear to retrieve her. Better the tide take her away.

But how did she die? That is a question that I cannot adequately answer. I have met her murderer - but it was a social occasion and we had little opportunity to speak. I don't believe that he apologised. After all she had strayed towards him. It wasn't as though he had taken her forcefully from home or school. He seemed a nice man, though a bit heavy in the chin. He had at least shown the consideration to leave her at the beach so that I would find her.

There is a need, even in the most trying circumstances, for understanding and compromise. I am certain that I told her this as well.

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Sometimes I feel like it, in the same way that a woodcutter fells trees. In the forest when there are no other people and no other sounds, feeling the stupid need to assure himself of his task, of his skills, of his limitations. The falling tree is like going for a drive at night - another distraction.

I seem to often turn off the headlights and cruise into the grass verge, very slowly, very safely. The grass brushes up against the side of the car and everything gently rocks on the uneven

ground. There are never any stars, only clouds. Other cars go past - stuck to the road as though no decision were involved. The road drives these cars very quickly far away, toward small towns and distraught families, toward the necessity of commitment.

I have sometimes fallen asleep here beside the road and nothing has happened. Perhaps if I slept longer, or if went to sleep while driving, then maybe some consequences would emerge, like insects from the grass. I can hear them constantly, but have never confronted them. Perhaps I have squashed them. It would appear that consequences prefer not to be approached directly. If I were to return home then they might follow me, but even this seems unlikely.

Once upon a time trees and grass and insects were not so inconsequential. Nor were they nostalgic. Clouds and stars came and went. I know nothing of this time. I hear the wind picking up. There is lightning in the sky. The road is urging me to drive. I have been wrong all along and my mistakes have been a potent force for change.

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The hollow coffins were empty. This should have made things plain enough. The green hills were overcome with spontaneous emotion. We walked and talked until dusk.

He had plenty to say but I can remember none of it. I can only remember the peculiar cut of his gold corduroy trousers. They were cut far too high above the ankle and his style of walking emphasized this fault. I was very glad that we were not blood relations.

I argued that the hollow coffins had to remain empty or they would become absurdities. The cows would die. Flooding would wash all the topsoil away. Dead bodies deserve nothing more than abandonment. What may be unfortunate for their grieving relatives is good for all other living things. Hollow coffins are for the living to contemplate, not the dead to enjoy. This was all quite simple and obvious, but it needed to be said.

The darkness of the sky was profoundly dubious. He was plainly soon to die, ill-fitting corduroys or not. He wandered in increasingly uncertain directions through the garden. I was tempted to take his hand and lead him inside, but he was determined to speak his mind. But, as I say, I can remember nothing of what he said.

I quizzed him about his motives and warned him of the unpleasant consequences of attempting to fill that which was patently empty. Not even the sun dares wear corduroy. He had to realize that nothing was at issue here, that there was no real argument to be had. I warned him to take some time off from dying and get a job. Finally, however, he collapsed lifeless on the ground. No one was about so I aimed a series of savage kicks to his head. Hollow coffins are hollow coffins and corduroy is a very ugly fabric.

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There were times when I spoke gently and other times when I spoke loudly and harshly. Every afternoon the clouds descended as mist or rose up as a storm. Black cockatoos cried out during the transition.

She had legs of wet concrete - soft and abrasive. They left my hands dry and grey. In the end, of course, we had a pretty home. I had contributed to its building, but she had constituted its substance. The evenings had often ended early.

It was always pleasant to find the carpet done and new ornaments about the place. I tended, of course, not to notice, or say something far too late. My conventional sentiments passed quietly into limbo, but still grated on her nerves. I looked at the sloppy concrete and wished it would set. Perhaps a concrete drive or a few garden sculptures. All of this would certainly add value to our home.

As it was, none of my scornful words seemed to touch anything other than my own capacity for innocence. That is why I took so much pleasure in the weather and made an offering to it of silence. I went outside and ate the pebbles on the ground. Concrete birds carried me away and feasted on my flesh, which is to say that I mowed the lawn and cleaned the house. And later prepared dinner and watched the mist fall.

I could say a great deal about all this or I could say nothing.

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Across the stubble of the faded fields a light mist gathered itself up into a fist, as though poised to strike at the setting sun. Only I had seen this. Only I could be so wrong.

She had the eyes of another month. She had the lips of another year. She had the body of another lifetime. I never looked at her. She blinded me. She left me with the memory of darkness.

I felt very ill when she died. I turned to work but could not find it. Idleness made me weary. I lay in the back seat of cars gazing at the sky. The clouds always appeared to me, no matter that I had neglected them in the past. They opened up a space of recognition. They told me that I had nothing to learn. They introduced me to the ambivalence of pain.

She had light blond hair on the nape of her neck, but I never saw it as such.

Archival dust.

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I had never known a place so beautiful. The sky was the upturned eye of a porcelain doll. We passed from surface to surface, our skin as thin as time.

I had warned her to burn them. Memories are sad. Perfect memories are crippling. She assured me that none of them were memories. They were dreams. I warned her especially to destroy the pornographic images. After all, she had changed considerably over the years. None of her family would recognize her. She insisted that this was what she wished. She wished that they should remember her as somebody else.

I had kept a number of the most obscene images myself. When she died I took them to her funeral and taped them to the lid of her coffin. Her family shuffled past, kissing first her and then each of the photographs. The priest spoke at length and then everything went up in flames. It seemed as though we had both been proven correct.

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On a cold night when all the forest seemed to hush and weave, when ancient stars grew new horns and the moon was a silent spectacle, there appeared on the horizon a wicked and evil man, humming to himself:

This is no night for pigs and slaughter.
This is no night for plastic bags.
I have a hammock and a deluxe refrigerator.
Let's stay out all night and watch the big thaw.