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‘Krien has taken a huge leap of creative faith, and from the very first page to the last I was ready to follow her anywhere.’

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‘The wisdom and balance of Krien’s writing captivates.’

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# Act of Grace

Anna Krien



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## The Mouse Plague

Toohy hadn't been one of the rock-throwers, but that didn't mean he hadn't wanted to. A couple of times he'd even grabbed one of the stones Jolley piled up on the floor of the Bushmaster and taken aim as they drove through a pre-teen ambush, homing in on a kid, his hair grey with dust and bare feet hopping angrily as he dodged the soldiers' counterattack. With black caterpillar eyebrows and dark oily eyes, these kids were targets more real than the shadowy enemy.

At the start of the tour, the children had flocked around the men – it was a hazard, but the soldiers only half-heartedly shooed them away. The kids cheered, stretching out their arms for gifts. The men had footballs to give, the Aussie flag printed on fake leather. The footies had been flat-packed, and they had to pump up about twenty each, a bag of them crammed under the cage where the gunner's legs dangled. Whole thing was awkward as fuck, and they joked that some PR princess back home was getting a promotion for this. Still, the gunners enjoyed the rare safe moments when they could handball footies from the tops of their armoured vehicles. It made them feel good – the kids with their impish smiles, clamouring to high-five them. 'No, no, that's American,' they'd say. 'In Australia we do this,' giving the kids a thumbs-up and an 'oi, oi, oi!' Soon children

were running at them with both arms straight out like zombies, thumbs up. Made them laugh. ‘What a bunch of spazzes,’ Jolley said.

Most of the kids were good kicks, and the men couldn’t help but compare them to their own sullen drips, who hid behind their mothers whenever the unit returned from a tour. The kids here practically lit up, flinging aside whatever they were doing, bolting out of houses, often wearing no shoes but sprinting over rocks and thistles. Their children back home didn’t come close to interested, except when a present from duty-free was dangled in front of them. Iraqi kids, they made it all worth it, the soldiers often said, as if this was the reason they’d signed up in the first place, to protect the children, oh, and the women – women and children – but shit, most of them didn’t have a reason for signing up when they did, only that school was finishing and the future lay empty ahead.

Then the kids started throwing rocks. At first it was just one or two of them. ‘Go home,’ they’d shout, their faces hard, ‘you fucking war criminals!’ Words they didn’t know the meaning of, had just heard from the ever-larger groups of young men who stood watching, training their eyes on the convoys. The kids’ pronunciation was never right, and for a while this helped them laugh it off, especially when other children shushed the hecklers. The hecklers often ended up putting their hands out for stuff anyway, and the soldiers took pleasure in looking the other way. But after a month or so, more kids were yelling things. They’d put out their hands, take their pick of the presents, *then* start in. The soldiers began to see deflated footballs everywhere: on the side of the road, stuck up the spindly trees, in the middle of fucking nowhere. Soon they were being treated as potential IEDs and the men were ordered to stop giving them away. Some PR princess back home was getting fired for this.

It all went to shit halfway through the second tour, after a long day spent escorting a food truck through the province. A group of kids

came out of a cluster of houses on the outskirts. It was dusk and the unit was tired, wary of pushing the day's luck, so the convoy only slowed, the gunners squatting to grab tins and sweets to lob. But when they came back up, rocks cracked against their helmets. For a second the unit thought it was an ambush, and the gunners swung their turrets, trying to get a bead. Then more rocks clipped the vehicles, and it clicked. The kids' voices rose up over the engines. 'Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off,' they were screaming, some coughing with the effort – croup they hadn't been able to shake since the sanctions. Their faces were twisted with hate; a few even had tears streaking down their cheeks, snot bubbling from their noses. They stared at the men accusingly, their eyes raw and red. They threw all the rocks they had and scrounged in the dirt for more, still yelling, 'Fuck off, fuck off.' The unit just gaped. Some recognised kids from earlier in the day, who'd been sweet as pie as they collected their family's rations. Eventually an order broke the spell and they accelerated in unison, leaving the children behind, ghostly in the dust, a final rock making a humiliating plonk against the rear vehicle.

Heading back, the men were mostly silent. The commander had changed the route at the last minute. If they had followed the plan, they could have taken the glow of aid back to base, but they had gone a different way and rocks had been thrown.

It kept happening after that, and the unit dropped any guise of parade, of selfless heroism. No more thumbs-up. No more 'Good kick!' They knuckled down. For the best, their corporal reckoned. Back to muscle and bone, eyes scanning the horizon. Counterinsurgency was pissing in the wind. The only skin that mattered now was one another's. Fuck the Iraqis, fuck the politics, fuck the diplomacy.

What happened next was hard to explain. None of the men could say who started it or how, but they began fighting back. Some collected rocks before heading out, piling them on the rubber mats in their

vehicles. The first time they did it, the Iraqi kids were taken by surprise. In such a short time, they'd absorbed the American spin that children were sacred, that they would be protected, no matter what. They stood in the open, not bothering to hide or cover their faces, so when the unit's return fire hit, most didn't move, their mouths open, catching flies. Only when a few were struck did they start to scatter, leaping behind walls and mounds of dirt.

'Fuck you, you midget terrorists,' yelled the soldiers, whooping over their radios as the kids screamed, red-faced and furious. Most soldiers aimed to skim the kids' legs, to get a yelp and a hop out of them, but as the rock war intensified and the real war got murkier, a few of the guys started a competition: *one rock, how many children?* They'd aim for an angle: an elbow, a shoulder, a cheekbone if they were feeling real nasty, ricocheting a rock off one kid to the next. Record was four kids, one rock. Even soldiers dead against the business had to admit that hit by Wedge was pretty amazing. A good hit is all about the rock, was his theory, and he had his ammunition down to an art. He divided the desert rubble into types: the 'cluster fuck' was a chunky nugget that crumbled on impact, the 'ninja star' a sharp jagged quarry stone, and a 'skimmer' a thin, oval-shaped river rock. Wedge had flicked the skimmers at the kids like frisbees. He'd set his record with one, and so they became sought after.

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A skimmer was what Toohey was looking for now. He was in a different desert, one with red dirt that bruised to purple at dusk, where the highway was bloated with kangaroo corpses, cattle too, belly-up, hit by road trains. None a potential IED. A different rock supply, but skimmers, Toohey figured, were universal. Jean was behind him crying, standing at the edge of the bitumen, and the night was pressing in on them. In front of him, the scrub rippled like a huge fish turning.

There was a scurrying on the ground and Toohey saw a mouse dart across his boot. A lone straggler – the plague had petered out hours back. And then he saw it: oval-shaped, flat. He knelt to pick it up. It fit the curve of his index finger perfectly, and with his thumb he rubbed the surface smooth, scanning the bush for Gerry.

\*

Two days earlier, the mice had made them happy. They spilled like marbles over the highway, scampering forwards and then backwards as Toohey fishtailed the car in their direction. ‘There!’ Gerry would scream, leaning forward from the back seat, his arm stretched. ‘There!’ Pointing through the windscreen at the little grey bundles. ‘You got it!’ he would cheer, turning around to glimpse the carnage while Jean made a show of covering her eyes in mock-horror – a performance, because in truth squashing the mice was bringing them together. The flattened strips of fur on the bitumen, guts coming out the mouth and arse like sauce, it was making them feel like a family. The killing relaxed Toohey, and when the cheering got quieter, he sipped slowly on his cigarette, still aiming for the mice but in a graceful kind of way, and the lull, the dance of the car, got everyone dreaming.

Jean lifted herself off the seat to unstick her dress from her thighs. It was hot. The air rushing through the open windows was clammy. She took a tube of moisturiser from her handbag and, propping her feet on the dash, rubbed the cream into her calves. Before they left the bungalow in Kalgoorlie, Jean had shaved her legs and painted her toenails with peach varnish. She felt Toohey glance over at her appreciatively, one hand steady on the wheel. She caught his eye and smiled. She was happy to be going home, though careful not to show it. He’d figure she made it happen, made it all go to shit. He’d twist everything – the pinballing from Melbourne to Perth, briefly bumping inland to Kalgoorlie – until it was all her doing.

In the back, Gerry stared out his window, fingers on the glass. He'd conjured up a cowboy and could see him, riding a chestnut mare in the red dirt alongside the road. There was a fence coming up, a long, dog-proof fence, and Gerry's heart hammered like hooves. *Up*, he thought, *up*, and the cowboy cinched in his heels of his boots, pressing into the horse's belly, and up she leapt, over the fence, the cowboy holding his hat, and Gerry could barely breathe, the galloping felt so real.

It was Miss Munro who'd got him into this. She'd bring all these travel brochures into class for the kids to flick through and cut out pictures to make collages. There were lions, great big turtles floating in blue water, Maasai people wearing bright tartan robes, and so many places to stay: houseboats on old brown rivers, fancy hotel rooms with fridges and minibars, thatched huts on islands. Gerry got hooked on the brochures with cowboy tours in them: Golden Horseshoe ranches and cattle-branding experiences and bandy-legged men with stubble that flecked orange in sunsets. He would go through the box looking for these brochures and sneak them into his schoolbag, rescuing them from the scissors. At night, while his parents watched TV, he'd look at the pictures, carefully stashing the pages under the bed before falling asleep. 'It's not just cowboys in America,' Miss Munro tried to explain to Gerry, when she noticed how he coveted the Midwest brochures. 'There's cities with famous buildings and celebrities. Hollywood.' Gerry nodded, but he didn't care about those things, and while cop shows blared from the television in the living room, sirens and gunshots and men yelling 'Get down, get down!', he'd close his eyes, listening to the *clop-clop-clop* of horses in his head.

Toohey stopped the car suddenly and the cowboy almost got thrown as the mare skidded to a halt. Confused, Gerry and Jean looked at Toohey as he reversed expertly, using just the heel of his

palm on the wheel. When he touched the brakes again, they were at the mouth of a small sandy road coming off the highway.

‘Holy shit,’ Toohey said, shaking his head. ‘I wasn’t sure I’d recognise it.’ He stared down the track, then nodded. ‘Yep, this is definitely it.’ He put the car into gear, the tyres loose on the sand, and drove inland. ‘You’ve got to see this,’ he said to Jean and Gerry, his eyes narrowing.

Slowly the scrub thinned into solitary shrubs, brittle and white against the red sand. The mice petered out too, preferring to stay close to the highway. It made Jean nervous, this unexpected turn, and she balled her hands into tight fists. She kept glancing at Toohey, checking his mood. But his cheeks were flushed, his lips curled up at the corners. ‘I wasn’t sure I’d be able to remember it,’ he kept saying, and she realised he’d been planning this, scanning the highway for a sign, timing it from the dog-proof fence.

‘You sure this is a good idea?’ Jean asked, as the road kept yawning out in front of them, the car bouncing over the corrugations.

Toohey sniffed. ‘It’s a fucking great idea.’

They drove past refrigerators and rusted husks of cars. They passed dead foxes strung up on a fence line, their tails like fiery brushstrokes, and a silver caravan with a satellite dish flattening itself like an ear to the sky. In the side mirror, Jean tried to glimpse Gerry, send him a smile, but his eyes avoided hers. She snuck her arm around the seat and gave his leg a squeeze. Several times the road forked into two and Toohey stopped, thinking, before accelerating again. He seemed to see markers that the other two couldn’t, until finally he let out a low whistle. ‘There it is.’

It was an eerie sight, a rural village in southern Iraq growing out of the Australian desert. Shacks, shops, even a small mosque with a dome-shaped roof made from pressed earth, and there were black electricity cables woven between wooden poles, pulled so tight that

the poles leaned in towards each other. A cyclone fence ran the perimeter, and as they drove closer Jean could see the street signs with Arabic script. Toohey stopped the car at a metal gate on sliding tracks and stared. He shook his head as if impressed. 'Me and the boys thought we'd won the lottery when we saw this place,' he said. 'It was a damn sight better than Kandahar.' Toohey's unit had trained here for their second stint in the Middle East, Jean remembered. There'd been a controversy in the papers, she recalled that too, when it got out that Iraqis on temporary visas were being bussed to a secret location to participate in an army training exercise.

Toohey cracked open his door, dust pooling in the hull of the car. He got out and stretched, beckoning to them to follow. He walked past a sign warning against trespass and found a loose part of the fence, lifting it. Gerry was first, crawling under as thistles stuck to his shorts. Jean hung back. She searched Toohey's face. She pointed at the sign. 'Maybe we shouldn't?'

'C'mon. I'm not gonna hold this forever.'

Jean got down on her hands and knees, ducking her head. As she went under, Toohey playfully kicked her bum. She yelped, crawling faster and laughing as she tried to swipe him away. On the other side, she stood up, brushing the orange dirt off her knees, and shyly held the fence up for him, but Toohey spidered his fingers through the metal diamonds and climbed over, his arms flexing, muscles bulging.

Jean watched and felt an instant wetness between her thighs as he landed beside her. She got a flash of how beautiful he'd been when he came back from his first posting. His eyes had been clear, no demons, at least not of the Iraq kind. His body had been supple and brown. He'd been ripped. All the guys in his unit were. Toohey used to talk about how after training in the mornings most of them mixed up protein drinks in cocktail shakers, keeping a plastic keg of powder beside their beds. It was a point of pride that he didn't touch the stuff.

‘The whole thing was a joke,’ she remembered him telling her brother-in-law when they were living in Melbourne. Toohey and Stuart had been getting along for once. ‘It was as if all we needed was weight, bulk, to crush Iraq,’ he had said. ‘But they ran rings around us. You couldn’t predict a fucking thing about them, and let me tell you, those bastards never had a fucking protein shake in their life.’ Stuart had laughed and laughed.

But this knowledge didn’t deter Toohey from continuing to work out, Jean noticed. For ninety minutes each day he’d lift weights, puffing out his cheeks, neck taut, long spidery veins rising on his arms like welts. He’d adjust the discs on his barbell, skip for twenty and drop his dumbbells onto the carpet when he was done with a routine thud. He did the same regime he had followed when he was enlisted – same lifts, same weight, he boasted. His core strength hadn’t changed. But his enthusiasm had gone. When he was younger, still part of his unit, Jean remembered how he’d approach each exercise session with bravado, often issuing himself an extra challenge. But now, Toohey did his weights like it was a sentence. On the odd occasion she’d been able to observe him, she saw a grim expression on his face as he went through his sets, his body inflating and hardening as if he were filling with cement. Still, he was beautiful.

Jean reached out to Toohey as he walked purposefully towards the village. He paused, letting her drift her hand down his arm before catching her wrist. He smiled, pulling her close. ‘Come on,’ he said, nodding at Gerry. The first street they entered was narrow and adorned with Arabic signs, sun-bleached billboards for Coca-Cola and Baghdad cigarettes. Toohey spun round. ‘It’s exactly the same!’ There were rubber thongs and Velcro sandals left outside hobbit-sized doorways, and shops stacked with pretend boxes of biscuits and salted crackers, watches, belt buckles, refillable cigarette lighters and snow globes. Another stall had bolts, nuts and washers neatly laid

out on a yellowed lace tablecloth alongside old tools that looked like they'd been found in a dig. There were trestle tables piled with books, rugs, hookah pipes, copper bowls, bronze pitchers and lanterns, baskets of spices and polystyrene fruit, the surface pocked by bugs. Gerry ran ahead, yelling excitedly: 'This shop has toys!' His voice had that hopeful whine Toohey hated so much. Jean checked to see if he'd noticed but Toohey was looking around, his eyes shining. 'Still think we shouldn't have come in?' Jean shook her head.

Toohey led them through the tight streets, pointing out sniper holes in the walls where the pretend enemy had rested their pretend gun barrels. They looked inside low buildings, stooping to pass through the doorways. Tattered curtains fluttered like cobwebs over the window frames. There were stained floral mattresses and lumpy couches, rickety chairs pulled up alongside. The rooms stank of piss and time.

Painted on the front of an official-looking building was a portrait of Saddam Hussein, while pasted along its side were posters of the dictator's eldest son, Uday.

'That caused a fuss with the Iraqis,' Toohey said, pointing at Uday. He explained that Saddam's eldest son had been, among other things, chairman of the Iraq Football Association. He was known for torturing the athletes if they missed a penalty kick. 'Every day the Iraqis would come past here and spit on him.' He stopped at a poster and picked at the edges, carefully peeling it off the wall. 'They'd never spit on Saddam, though,' he said. 'Most were too scared to even walk past it. We reckoned the painter had done the bastard's eyes like Mona Lisa's on purpose – he was always watching you.' Rolling up the poster of Uday, he passed it to Jean. 'Souvenir.'

As he stopped to light a cigarette, Toohey spotted a greasy blue diesel generator on the outskirts of the village. 'Let's see if this has any kick left in it,' he said, tucking the smoke in the corner of his lips as

he knelt to fiddle with the switches. There was a short, wet splutter, and Toohey beamed. ‘Fuck me!’ he said. He tried again: nothing. Over and over he flicked the switch, but couldn’t get anything beyond that small rise. Toohey stared at it, thinking and smoking. Then he winked at Gerry. ‘This might do the trick.’ He tossed the cigarette butt and prised the lid off a cloudy-white plastic container sitting among the tubes in the generator, bending it back so it wouldn’t close. He undid his pants and took his penis out, ignoring Jean, who had let out a small gasp. Carefully he aimed at the hole, shooting forth a stream of piss. ‘Radiator fluid,’ he said when he’d finished, giving his dick a little shake.

Gerry’s eyes were popping out of his head; he already had his shorts down and half-ran, half-hopped over. ‘Can I have a go?’

‘No!’ Jean shrieked, just as Toohey nodded and moved aside so that Gerry could get closer to the container. Already Gerry was peeing, squeezing his small penis between his fingers and spraying urine over the generator.

‘Jesus, kid,’ said Toohey. ‘You need to learn some control.’

Gerry reddened and attempted to slow his stream down, getting a trickle in the container. Jean hid a smile, shaking her head, but she had her sister’s voice in her head. ‘Seriously?’ she imagined Bron saying. ‘You seriously think that’s a good idea?’

‘Gerard needs a role model,’ her sister had said to her once, ‘not a fucking idiot.’ Words spoken in the heat of an argument – at least that’s what Bron said later, but it was just her doing the arguing. Jean had sat, head bowed, waiting for the tongue-lashing to end.

‘It’s because you’re so similar,’ Jean had said timidly at one point. It was true, to a degree. Bron and Toohey were both headstrong.

Bron was furious. ‘Don’t pop-psychology me,’ she said viciously. ‘Next you’ll tell me it’s because our star signs aren’t compatible.’

Jean had blushed, and in the desert she blushed again, remembering it. She tried to switch to a different memory, thinking of the

time in her sister's backyard when they had left the men to it and brought in the washing. The sweet-smelling sheets were cool against their faces as they reached up to unpeg them. Cabbage moths fluttered out of the long grass, the sisters performing a kind of waltz as they folded the sheets, stepping towards each other and out again. Jean had replayed the scene so many times in her head in the past six months that she had almost succeeded in erasing their fight and the dinner that caused it.

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It had been their last meal together before they left for Perth. Military security systems, Toohey had explained to Jean about the job an old army mate had lined up for him. He was going to be in charge of data. Vital work, he'd impressed upon her, possibly more important than being on the ground.

Jean hadn't wanted to hold the farewell dinner at their flat, a dreary blond-brick building in Brunswick West. Usually they went to Bron and Stuart's for a barbie. Those two were good at it. They would have nothing organised and be so relaxed, putting out a platter of cheese, nuts rummaged from the pantry, figs from their tree split open with their fingers. Plus their backyard was huge, with a trampoline and a sandpit, so the kids could run around. But Toohey had insisted they come to the flat. 'It's Jean's turn to cook,' he said.

She was unable to eat that day from nerves, while Gerry was wriggling out of his skin with excitement. For hours he had worked on transforming his bedroom into the Midwest, using blocks to make rocks jutting from low plains, setting up torches as campfires and plastic cowboys surveying the land. He placed his animals in miniature scenes: horses drinking from pretend lakes, buffalo migrating in herds, Red Indians climbing out of drawers and fighting for territory.

When there was a shuffling on the step, he opened the door before the guests even had a chance to ring the bell, ready to grab his cousins and drag them into his room. But only his aunt and uncle stood there. Bron gathered him in a hug. 'We got a babysitter,' she said airily to Jean, who had prepared mini sausage rolls and cupcakes for the kids. 'It would be too hard to keep them entertained in such a small space!' She added confidently, 'They're such monsters.'

Gerry was stricken, and it was left to Jean to coax him to show his uncle his bedroom. For a while Stuart played, picking up the plastic Red Indians and making them do a war dance that Gerry didn't like. Then he said he needed to go to the toilet but instead headed to the kitchen to talk with the other adults. Gerry, alone in his room, turned the campfire torch on and off in the dark.

'So,' Bron said, smiling at Stuart as he joined them, 'there was this woman in class this week.' Bron was standing on one leg, her right foot tucked neatly into the small of her back, wearing a tight black top, scooped at the neck and ruffled around her pregnant belly, and light blue leggings with elephants printed on them. Toohey was sitting at the laminate table watching her, his hand curled around a beer while Jean fussed at the stovetop.

'Oh my god, she was so annoying. She complained about every pose.' Bron twisted her right hand behind her to hold her ankle. '*I can't do it, it's too hard*,' she mimicked in a whiny voice. 'She said it for every pose, she didn't even *try*.'

Then, in a supple move, to demonstrate just how easy it was, she stretched her leg up so that her foot curled behind her head. She lifted her left arm to the ceiling. It was startling, and the others held their breath as she pitched forward, her top stretching so tight over her belly that Jean thought she could see the outline of the baby's feet.

'Should you be doing that?' Jean asked nervously. 'With the baby?'

Bron snorted and unfolded herself, slipping her foot back into the canvas shoe on the floor. ‘Of course I should, Jean – if anything, being pregnant is all the more reason to do it. Healthy mum, healthy baby.’

Jean reddened, looking across at Toohey, but he was gazing at her sister.

Stuart grinned. ‘Tell them what you said, Bron.’

Bron smiled secretively and sat back down, eyes glowing. ‘Well, I got sick of it, didn’t I? Everyone did. You could feel it in the room. So towards the end of the class, when she complained about the easiest pose, I couldn’t help myself.’

‘Oh no,’ murmured Jean.

Bron grinned. ‘I turned around and said to her, “You know, if we were in a hostage situation, you’d be the first to be shot.”’

There was a beat, then Toohey roared with laughter, and Stuart joined in, the two exchanging looks of admiration for Bron, while she humbly cupped her glass of soda water in her hands. Jean cracked open the oven door, welcoming the whoosh of heat in her face.

‘Let me guess,’ Toohey said. ‘Everyone avoided you afterwards like the plague.’

‘Yes!’ Bron said, putting her palm down on the table emphatically. ‘How did you know?’

‘Because no one likes the truth,’ Toohey said, shifting in his chair. ‘Even if every fucker in the room was thinking the same thing, no one wants to say it straight up. God forbid you hurt someone’s feelings.’

Bron nodded avidly. ‘It’s true,’ she said. ‘People’s feelings have a lot to answer for.’

Toohey rolled his eyes. ‘Tell me about it. Man, the shit we were told not to do in Iraq because it was “cultural”.’ He clawed his fingers in the air like quotation marks. ‘Shit like don’t expect a straight-up no if you ask an Iraqi whether they can do something and they can’t.’

Instead you have to play this dumb-arse game of “Can you?” and they say, “I will see,” then three weeks later you say, “Can you?” and they say, “I will see.” You play it for months before finally, you get it: the fucker is useless. Apparently that’s cultural.’

Bron sat back, her shoulders stiff. ‘I don’t think it’s the same thing,’ she said, her voice tightening.

Toohey cocked his head at her. ‘No?’ he said. ‘Why not?’

‘Well, you’re talking about an ancient Islamic culture and I’m talking about a bunch of Westerners doing yoga.’

Jean started to set the table, slotting plates and cutlery between Toohey’s and Bron’s elbows. Taking her lead, Stuart went to have a closer look at a small painting on the wall. ‘What’s this of?’ he asked, to change the subject.

Toohey stared at Bron, then looked at the painting, a strip of blue flanked by reeds and hills. ‘It’s a reproduction,’ he said proudly. ‘The Euphrates River.’

‘I didn’t know you went that way,’ Stuart said.

Toohey laughed. ‘I didn’t.’ Ignoring the expression on Jean’s face, he added slyly, ‘Got it from some Iraqi guy’s apartment.’ Bron recoiled. ‘Don’t worry, he *gave* it to me. Was a joke me and the guys had going, from the same army handbook that told us not to expect honesty because, as you know, Bron, Iraq is an ancient Islamic culture.’

Jean couldn’t bear it. She went to the kitchen door to call Gerry to the table.

‘The handbook,’ Toohey continued, ‘went on about how when we were in an Iraqi’s home we were not to go overboard praising one of their possessions, because they’ll feel obliged to give it to you.’ He paused, then added, ‘Red rag to a bull, don’t you reckon?’

An icy silence. ‘So we started to praise the shit out of the dumbest things – soap dishes, you name it. One guy even walked out of one place with a fucking kitchen chair!’