

TRUE WILD LIGHT

A Novel

GEOFFREY
PRICE

*greenhill

*To the one who plays a self, a hidden part,
yet dares to gaze in shadowed deep.*

*I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across
Australia. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and
to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

Many crises in our lives have a long unconscious history. Captive, we move towards them step by step, unaware of the dangers that are accumulating.

JOSEPH L. HENDERSON

The object of all psychology is to give us a completely different idea of the things we know best

PAUL VALERY

AND FASTENED TO A DYING ANIMAL

KNOWING DEATH IS the only certainty, Dylan is lying awake at dawn after his final night of a silent retreat, spent rehearsing in the red velvet of his sea dragon coffin. Hearing a familiar call, he hurries out onto the porch, nestled against the curve of the bay. Just in time to see his sea eagle descending with the poetry of hunger, her talons piercing a mullet in final glittering spasm. Head held high she surveys the placid water fringing Bouddi's treetops. Dylan interprets her gaze as a plea to a world unravelling until he realises it's a projection, no better than the possessiveness of thinking of her as 'his sea eagle'.

Thin orange beams reach the bleached timbers of Dylan's solitary cottage. He runs a weathered hand across the rough grain and memories surface of a tightly knotted rope against the skin of young hands, the panting breaths of boys blindfolded in the bush. He's guiding them in a wild gale on a silvery night up a forbidding mountain. Their test of endurance a rite of passage in their long search for a vision of purpose, identity, and belonging to community. And ultimately, awareness.

Casting off that clever distraction, Dylan comes inside and perches on his favourite old kitchen stool to examine his own awareness. He

refuses to dismiss the question that discovered him before the dawn... whether he became a therapist to avoid self-scrutiny. He encourages himself with his favourite phrase... 'Until you make the shadow conscious it'll direct your life, and you'll believe it fate'.

Grasping the nettle, Dylan stalks barefoot out the back door and meanders up to his labyrinth amidst rustling forest giants. Through its gateless gate, he winds the path to the centre. After listening to his body for an hour, sometimes childlike, he detects in his chest a hidden motivation, admiration. That's progress he thinks, and rescuing others to get it. Remembering Martha, he hopes he's not in over his head. Retracing his way back down, he asks every twisted out of shape angophora if they do the same.

As if rewarding this small surrender, serendipity arrives in the kitchen. Through scratched old readers he reckons the No Caller ID to be a wild-life rescue. Nature joining the joke, he thinks, glad to be yanked from this world of silent words into real life drama. He picks up and waits.

Distress and praise are her game plan, "Was it you rescued the owl from St. Patricks Gosford?"

"It was," he says, feeling the seduction of praise and the early opportunity to let it pass untouched.

She asks, "Where the barn owl got in the organ pipes whenever mass was on and flew all about confused by the organ music?"

Amused, Dylan chuckles, "Yep, a little white owl, gliding back and forth, wing feathers so perfect he was silent. Much to everyone's delight. The kids loved it. Everyone prayed for it. The priest even reckoned it was the Holy Spirit. Problem was he couldn't find his way out, so after mass he flew back into a pipe, thinking it a tree hollow."

"A hallowed hollow then?"

Glad to laugh, he says, "Exactly, I could just see his big eyes through the slot in the bottom of the pipe. Bit tired and hungry by the time I got him out."

TRUE WILD LIGHT

“Dylan Woodward, it said in the paper, right?”

His narrowed eyes want to chew his bottom lip, “Yeess.”

“Well, I’m Carly, Carly Abrams, I’ve found another one.”

“Another organ owl?”

“Nah, not that; molasses. Can you come rescue him?”

“Is it hurt?”

“Might be, hard to tell. The thing is, my husband will come home later, and he’ll kill it, so the sooner the better.”

“Where are you?”

“Our farm, in Western Sydney, at the foot of the mountains. Can you come, please?”

It’s an owl, writing can wait, he thinks, “I’ll be there in a couple of hours, text me the details. Carly it was, right?”

“Yeah, don’t go up to the house, turn down left inside the gate, look for me at the octagon.”

On the drive Dylan pictures the raising boys talk he gave to school parents out here in Western Sydney back in the day. He judged them and misjudged them. A total disaster. Now, after finding the pre-dawn question, he wonders if they saw through him when they called him a do-gooder. Embarrassing.

He soothes himself with prized memories of his long search. Gurus, zendos, heart circles in men’s gatherings, men’s groups, rituals and altered consciousness. There he is, painted up in the Territory with Archie, doing sacred blackfella rituals to honour the Land. Swimming across secret icy, inky desert pools under silent starlit expanse, emerging naked blue to be shown, by firelight, coloured ochre mandalas never seen by whitefellas. Rubbed out after a glimpse. He feels lucky to have felt awakened to the land by ancient ritual before all the elders are gone.

Carly’s fertile valley is snug in the foothills of the dividing range. The only car on the gravel, he cuts corners until the place jumps at him around a heroic bend. It doesn’t seem coincidental that the masses of Sydney

blue gums outside the fence conceal the place and project shadows from the coming dusk. The dust cloud having unfurled, he fiddles the chain off its nib, drives through, and wrestles back the bent steel gate.

There's not a soul on the road or paddocks either side. A few optimistic trees refuse the chainsaw. A handful of unkempt dusty merinos and brushed glossy horses keep the grass down beyond the yards.

The old farmhouse and garden are a few hundred metres up to the right. Down to the left the beaten timber octagonal barn. It's vast understatement to say the place has a run-down feel, yet clearly someone's busy round the place. Scattered beyond the barn in long weedy grass are holey rusted wrecks used for target practice, and serious drag racing boats on trailers. Opposite the barn a monster Cat dozer dominates a high gal iron shed. Open both sides, it shades about a hundred and fifty vehicles, 50/50 utes and sedans, and the same number of motor bikes. All different models and vintages of Fords and Harleys, and Dylan spots a '50s Chevrolet, and a Duesenberg or something like it. All covered with dust and chicken shit. An old Huey military helicopter of Vietnam vintage, and a pre-World War two era Stearman Cloudboy decorate the roof of the shed. Tell-tale, he thinks, mindful that great excess cloaks great unconscious necessity.

Dylan rolls watchfully down towards the barn; a fenced thriving pond is beyond a faithful old sedan waiting with her by the slider entry door. She has a lived in, once was an athlete stance, not entirely a bygone. Kind of classy. Her lined game face so staunch like so many he's sat opposite. Home dyed dark hair and grey roots with a part down the middle to a ponytail. Weather-beaten without the weather. Her arms hang in the long sleeves of a four buttons loose work shirt, hands clasp each other in front of blue jeans and an apron featuring show horses.

With a strained smile, her hands reluctantly let each other go to give him a fleeting wave as he halts. Over her shoulder under the weather awning hangs a large sign comprising a photo of a late middle-aged

TRUE WILD LIGHT

man, overalls, balding, in front of a drag racing boat. His mouth is turned down at the corners despite holding up a victory shield. Imposing letters read... “Abe Abrams. Winner. Water Quarter in White Tiger (open cockpit). 2000. Record Top Speed 158mph”. Screwed to the wall behind it a hand painted gal iron sign says ...

*Abrams Menagerie
Trespassers Beware
Guns and Shovels*

Wary, he climbs out as she country stumps over, her raspy grip and scarred knuckle shake confirm his even in the best of homes guess.

“It’s Carly, thanks for coming all the way.”

“Dylan Woodward. Quite the place.”

Carly weighs him, bush hat and gear, still the soft sharp blue eyes, greyer and wilder hair, goatee, teeth of character rather than perfection, plenty of wear and tear in ten years. He sure hasn’t worn off that look of judgement, so she gets in first, “He loves having something nobody else has; keeps finding objects that fit the bill.”

“You mean Abe, on the wall?”

As if not noticed before, Carly turns to look, shrugs, turns back, and sighs, “Yep Abe,” she waves her hand at the shed, “When he sold his Harley business he had 138 motorcycles, 138 cars, and 138 guns. Truly! He still has. He’ll never sell anything. Grand plans.”

Dylan takes it all in, there’s a bell ringing somewhere, yet he can’t place her. Cautiously he asks, “Is Abe here?”

“No. I wouldn’t have called if he was. Safer if it’s just you and me.”

Not quite sure if that’s a threat or warning, but seeing on the door the Gadsen rattlesnake flag with the words, ‘Don’t Tread on Me’, Dylan is down to business to get away smartly, “Uh huh, where’s the owl?”

With a smile warranting caution, Carly beckons him. He grabs his

gear bag, and she slides the heavy timber door back enough for them to squeeze through. They stand behind a steel screen wall, above it a high exposed timber beam space. She quietly slides the door closed behind them. With the door and every window closed the only light is criss-crossed dusty beams coming through cracks and knots, or maybe bullet holes. They stand in silence waiting for their eyes to adjust. He smells them first, then hears, then feels low growls. They catch eyes. He follows her round the screen, as he adjusts to the gloom cage bars become visible all around the octagon. They're surrounded by about fifty cats. Lions and tigers all. Plus, a brown bear. A macaque screeches somewhere. If there's a line that divides the animal lover from the hoarder, Dylan reckons that at some point someone here's crossed it. This is not love.

Many rush their steel to snarl and roar. Knowing he's centre stage a bored white tiger lashes his tail and noses his bars to stare. Dylan can't help himself, "You got a license to keep them, all like... this?"

Carly nods an exasperated yes, "Abe lives as if there weren't a rule invented that didn't deserve a little bending, but yes, now we're a licensed menagerie. No one ever complains, I mean he's a gun man, so people aren't sure what he'll do. They're all his, except that's Simba, he bought him for my birthday, but he's Abe's favourite. He's neutered, but not the lions, they lose their manes."

He looks at the once alpha white tiger, huge paws, faint fawn stripes, perhaps ringworm where he rubs his coat against the bars, "They're all Abe's?"

"Yep, when he was in Vietnam, he became attached to a little long tailed macaque. He lived in a hardback tent, you know, wood frame and floor, and apparently the macaque kind of befriended him. First and last time he was attached to anything. And it planted the seed of wild animals for the rest of his life. He took care of that macaque most of the time he was over there. It kept him sane ... while he was there anyway. Don't know what happened to it when he was sent home."

TRUE WILD LIGHT

“His sanity or the monkey?”

Carly gives him an it's a toss-up look, “The macaque.”

“So, he loves them then?”

“Abe'd sure say he loves 'em, he has his fun with them anyway, let's say that. He's always said, 'I'm a lover, not a fighter', which on my compassionate days I thought was pretty funny.”

Increasingly wary, Dylan says, “I feel sorry for them, so sorry.”

“The animals, or Abe and me?”

Dylan gives her an it's a toss-up look, “The animals.”

“If you only knew.”

She has put it out there ever so lightly for him.

They look at each other, both wondering what to pick up.

He's staring at her, but all he can see is Martha after 13 days in the boot of her car. In summer. He wrenches himself away and looks for the owl.

“It's over here, first I thought it was a chicken.” says Carly, walking him to a square plastic feed bucket with ‘I Contain Multitudes’ handwritten on it.

At first, he too thinks it's a chicken trapped in a bucket half-full of sticky molasses. As he gets close, it's distressed, trying to flap, hold its head up and escape the new hunter. It's so coated there's no chance it could fly. “Blimey,” says Dylan, pulling his long gloves on. He reaches down to the squirming bird grabbing it firmly in both hands so its wings hold to its body, protecting its feathers which will be crucial if it is to recover. Turning it over, the barn owl has bravely held its feathered face out of the gunk. The rest of him is tarred. Some wing feathers stick through between his fingers. It looks adult. He wraps the exhausted bird in a towel so only his heart shaped face is showing, his wings and talons held tight. Its great eyes are looking up at him, terrified, its face splattered. He swaddles it some more to help it feel secure.

“Done that before Dylan”. Hiding from her lie she asks, “How you reckon it got trapped?”

True to type, Dylan looks around for clues. There are bats hanging right up the top, all on sonar. Spider webs are everywhere, to catch moths and the like by vibration. Night hunters all. There's rustling straw over the dirt floor and scraps of grain and meat for the cats in the cages and outside. There must be rats or mice. He checks the coated lip of the bucket and there's rodent prints. A fridge compressor in the corner switches on and off. Each roar drowns everything out.

Carly is watching, wondering what line will tempt him up to the house.

Dylan lays the owl into his ventilated box to hold it securely, the swaddling stopping it hurting itself by struggle. He closes the top to allow it to settle in the dark, then puts it outside to soften the growls and roars. But also, because humans are terrifying super predators whose very voices are enough to unnerve other hunters.

Pulling his gloves off Dylan turns back to answer, "I'd reckon he's been living in here, someone's cleared all the nesting trees with nice hollows. The climate's making it much hotter at night these days but he's adapted to hunt when it's cooler. Could be there's not enough cool time at night for him to hunt and find enough food. Probably had to spend more time looking for danger and less time looking for food. It's hard to tell with that gunk, but he felt skinny. Yet ending up in the bucket? I'd guess in the end it was the noise."

Carly is staring at him, a know it all, even yet; wondering if this is a mistake.

Her ambivalent look unnoticed, Dylan is working it out aloud, "Some people think owls echolocate like bats, they don't. Yes, owls have large eyes, but they can catch prey in darkness so total that even they can't see. He'd find his prey in here through sound. Rats know the danger and skulk around at glacial pace, so they don't rustle the straw. As soon as they rustle, they're done for. When owls hear the first rustle, they lean forward then swoop headfirst toward the rat, and, at the last

TRUE WILD LIGHT

moment, rotate their body through almost 180 degrees to put their talons where their faces had been. They're so accurate they can not only land on a rat, but along the axis of its body."

She can't help playing with him, "So how come he missed?"

"Ok, ok, I'm getting there. A barn owl's ears are its whole face of feathers that collect the incoming sound waves and funnel them towards his ear holes, enormous openings behind his eyes, hidden amongst feathers. If we could look into his ears, we'd see the back of his eyeballs. I love that. He's a wonder of evolution, marvelous."

To Carly it's déjà vu, an exasperating lecture, just like his school talk.

"His ears work out exactly where the sound is coming from because his left is at two o'clock, the right at eight, so that sound reaches each ear at a tiny different time and loudness. From that he works out the exact source of the sound. The soft feathers on the serrated edges of his wings make his flight so quiet it's below the range that the mouse or rat can hear coming. But I reckon he got a sudden noise in mid-flight. That fridge compressor, or most likely a roar interfered with his listening, he just missed the rat on the edge of the bucket and fell in the dark."

Wanting a decent margin of error before Abe gets back, Carly hugs the cactus, "You don't remember me do you, from that raising boys school talk out here. More men's business rave than talk."

What am I really doing here, thinks Dylan, "No, I don't."

"I had wild mauve hair back then," she laughs, "I was the one Abe yanked out the door when you pissed him off by suggesting he was a narcissist. Not so subtle, but good guess I thought mate, since you'd only just met him."

Dylan racks his brains and tries for a better look as he follows close out the door. Behind her ear are bruises and cuts, the ponytail is so he will see.

Outside Carly turns and says, "I came to listen to you because I had a son back then. I felt like you were talking direct to me when

you said boys think they're immortal and look in all the wrong, risky but thrilling places to belong, when what they need is a community of good men. In effect a better gang to belong to."

At that Dylan remembered locking eyes with the sullen, big bloke next to mauve Carly when he told them that growing into a man's body is compulsory while becoming a man was optional. Abe erupted, calling him an idiot do-gooder and walked out. They all shouted him down, a searing memory still. Now, it dawns on him that Carly was the one waiting for him in the dark as he left, once it became safe to go home. The one pleading for help even then.

Sticking to plan Carly says, "Thanks Dylan. You've come all this way, come up to the house for a quick cuppa."

She sees he's noticed her cuts, is thinking Abe, and is ready to be on his way, so entices him, "C'mon, you changed our lives in this family, bet you won't believe how."

Always mindful what's happening in the shadow, Dylan considers whether the owl is a lure. Looking around again, the whole scene is starting to fit with the vague threat, angry Abe and that chaotic night ten years ago. Making no move to walk with her, he picks up the owl box and goes to his car. She moves to keep him, "You said so many things that meant a lot to me that night ... it changed us. I've never forgotten. True, I thought your man making stuff all theory, right out there, but events ... well in a dark time my eyes began to see, now it's common sense."

"Common sense is not so common. We lie to keep secrets from ourselves. That's why we've got boys in men's bodies."

Carly considers her family, "Yeah true, but what mother knows her son must separate emotionally not me, not any in that hall back then. You do remember my Sandy came to see you?"

Here we go, he thinks. The boy, Sandy, coming the once, the note, swiping his Opinel jackknife when he thought he wasn't looking.

TRUE WILD LIGHT

“Yeah, I remember him.” They still seem alone but he’s wishing he had that knife, even if he’s only ever cut apples with it.

“We couldn’t exactly teach Sandy he wasn’t the centre of the universe, what with animals all around him in cages,” she rolls her eyes over her shoulder at Abe holding the winner’s trophy, “especially that one.”

Dylan gives her an “I get it” smile, for her clever words.

“Dylan, with Abe I know every single day I could die. But Abe won’t even face himself, so how could he teach Sandy he’s not immortal. Kind of proved your point eh. That’s why I sent Sandy to counselling with you.”

Revenge happens in Dylan’s game, a shiver runs his spine as he turns to face the road, alone out here with dark getting there.

“Quite the rave Dylan, remember? All that crazy shit ... buying stuff and progress being unconscious denial. Didn’t land out here in the V8 west mate, we couldn’t bear you saying, ‘the kids are killing themselves, and the grown-ups are violent and killing the planet’.

Dylan calms himself; now sure he’s not here for the owl. But ten years ago, why now?

“Abe ... every chance he gets he still calls you the interfering ‘fool of a do-gooder.’”

Dylan, picturing Abe in his overalls in the front row, makes to go. Carly halts him easily with a step, a hand on his arm, then with a look up into his eyes says, “Outside in the dark you warned me you once had a client who snapped his wife’s neck because she decided to leave to save herself, a man who hit her rather than feel his shame, Martha she was. Reckoned he had a right to follow her round to ‘make sure she was okay’. Kidding himself! It was blame and coercive control, it always bloody is.”

He can’t help picturing Jake snapping Martha’s neck and briefly whips himself again, for being so confident that Jake had changed. He had empowered her, certainly not rescued her, he thinks, before saying defensively, “She didn’t leave as promised, even after we’d uncovered

her hidden reasons not to leave, her parents didn't want her to marry Jake. And Jake, deceiving himself, was overpowered by his own childhood. Killed her six months later."

Testing her power, Carly says pointedly, "Someone needed to call him out, didn't they Dylan."

Her voice, echoing his own self-criticism, fades into silence. Dylan raises his chin to search her eyes for expected judgement. Seeing nothing to fear, nor to soothe, he nods to her perceptiveness.

Carly returns the look, then lowers her voice, "I'm the same, I don't want to be the battlefield for Abe's ancient war but calling him on anything, is dangerous."

Intrigued with her insight, Dylan stays and listens to her work her way around obvious grief to say what she must, "No way Abe would let Sandy go on your camp or see you again. To save myself, and Sandy, I finally caved. Abe gave Sandy back to Hillzy, the guy who gave us Sandy and Isaac in the first place. That was our bargain with him, we could send one back," she tightens her grip on his arm, "look, I'm telling you this because I'm like Martha, I have my reasons. She clung on, stayed, and it cost her life. I'm frightened that will be me. And if Abe knew you were here, well it could be both of us. Come on walk up with me won't you. I've got something you need to see."

Dylan girds himself into professional mode as risk crystallises, to them both. Alert, he walks with her and can't help scoping as they go, "You gave Sandy back? To who?"

"As I said, Abe got him and Isaac from, Hillzy. I chose Sandy to be the one to go back after he wrote the suicide note that you saw. To save him from Abe." She puts her face in her hands and sobs.

Dylan sucks in a big one, thinking of the common fate of children given away. He says gently, "Are you ok?"

Carly wipes her eyes, shakes her head, "He's bashing me and hurting Isaac. I'm scared, for us both. I need to tell someone in case I'm dead,

TRUE WILD LIGHT

I've become so isolated, no one would even know Isaac was here or his fate. Abe has a kill list, all the animals. He's threatened to kill them if I leave. Says he'll kill what I love."

Dylan watches her face, the words do-gooder irritating. He warns himself not to rescue. Owls, fair enough; however, to take the owl and go, or do nothing here, is to risk Martha happening again. He knows he couldn't bear another one, so says, "I'll drive you to a refuge now if that's what you want."

"I can't leave Isaac yet Dylan. He'd be at Abe's mercy. I need to make a beautiful tote bag for him, I don't want to make the same mistake with Isaac as with Sandy, send him off empty handed."

"I'm surprised you remembered the tote."

Carly says, "I knew I'd like to do it. Make a tote, write a poem for him and leave it in the tote. You told us mums ... sleep with a key under your pillow because you play out a story on camp where a boy steals a key from under his mother, the queen's pillow, to symbolise releasing him from a cage of boyhood to uncover his true wild light. Not wild as in savage, wild as in true to his own nature, and place in nature."

"Yep, that sounds like me, I would say exactly that."

They are together, slowly walking in step now, "At first, I thought, if what your suggesting is that you'll teach my son to steal a key from under my very pillow, then I'm not for it and only a wicked stepmother would tell me I'm wrong! I remember jumping up and telling you so, do you remember what you said?"

Dylan shrugs. Carly says, "You said, now don't be breakin' your shin on a stool that's not in your way." I laughed and that got me listening again to what turned out to be your best bit ... when fathers and men honour each boy for his unique gifts, bless the gifts they see, and encourage him to see it and feel pride. When you said pride was the antidote to violence, I imagined the beauty of the process. You said that each boy is given a knife, and the elder explains they're not boys, but young men entrusted

with the knife as an invitation to take responsibility, the essence of manhood. I really, really wanted that for poor Sandy.”

Dylan says, “I can see that.”

“It got harder Dylan when the blackfella stood up. Remember the hush as we all turned to the back row where that old skinny fella stood?”

Dylan can picture Archie standing there, he’d turned up uninvited to listen to how white fellas were doing Dhapi, initiation of boys. Men’s business, in his country the most important business of all, turning boys into healthy men. White hair wild in all directions, silver droopy eyebrows and bristles announced themselves against his dark face, battered bush hat held humbly to his chest by worn veined hands and thin arms. He had waited patiently till he had Dylan’s attention, and the room fell silent. Archie raised his eyes, nodded to Dylan, then in a soft elder’s voice belying his power, asked with a glint in his eye, “The knife. Do you cut ‘em?” Horrified that could even be on the cards, parents whirled their heads back to Dylan.

Dylan could have strangled him for saying that, to this of all mobs. Nodding to his mate, he said, “Thank you uncle, I know you fellas still do that ancient cut in your men’s business up the Territory, brings your boys inside a community of responsible men. But for us, there’d have to be a community who all believe in the cut. And, as you can see, there isn’t, not yet anyway. So no, we don’t, we’d go to jail.”

He can see Archie standing with hat on chest deeply listening, he’s all ‘dadirri’. The silence is deep, then Archie, deadly serious, says, “When men’s business, cut is cut, not ordinary blood. Must be cut, child die, man born, find spirit, know world not belong him.”

Looking at Dylan lost in the memory, Carly says, “For Abe, the blackfella was the final straw.”

“Uh, huh. Look, show me whatever it is quickly. I have a duty to welfare check Isaac before I go, and if you want, I’ll take you both somewhere safe.”

TRUE WILD LIGHT

They have nearly reached the house. Carly knows the risk of showing him but wants no regrets, as with Sandy. She turns and says, "Then come follow me."

Torn between guns and shovels, and his duty of care, Dylan follows, and they silently stride together to the house in the escaping light. At the garden gate Carly leads him around the back to a courtyard revealing a battered long red and yellow circus wagon, paint peeling. They enter, Carly motions to be quiet. The bars appear as they approach the front of the cart which faces the light glowing at the back door. Again, Dylan smells him first, but his eyes widen as Carly says, "Dylan meet Isaac."

He's looking at a huge silverback gorilla, unperturbed by their arrival, sitting slumped against the back wall of his cage with a lead pencil tucked behind his right ear, a newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, in his lap, appearing for all the world as if he's looking up at the sunset for crossword inspiration.

Dylan can but simply stare at him.

Carly says, "He's hard to believe isn't he."

"This is Isaac? A ... a gorilla?"

"He's like a person in ways, he's got soul this one, living outside our back door, listening and watching all these years. All he wants is to be a gorilla, even though Abe and Hillzy have other ideas."

"He's magnificent just as he is. There must be a bit of a story to him being here with a pencil behind his ear?"

Carly, relieved Dylan is admiring of him rather than judgemental of her keeping him in captivity, lets down at the opportunity to share what she has told no one in twenty years.

She smiles at his understatement, "A bit of a story! Romantic tragedy more like. You really want to hear?"

At the tragedy reference, Dylan again realises there's much more to her. His curiosity trumps guns and shovels, "This story is why I'm really here, right?"

Carly blushes, “I need to tell someone Dylan. Someone must know. And I have no one who might understand.”

“A tragedy in itself.”

“I’m a poetry teacher, so this sure won’t be how Abe would tell it, he can’t feel a word, but it’s now or never for my truth.” She glances to Isaac, “Our truth.”

“Righto, this sure is dreamworld. Go on then, put Mary Oliver in the poetic shade then.”

She’s surprised he’s heard of her. To see if he knows more than her name she says, “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination.”

That touches his heart. He can tell he’s underestimated and misread her totally. To recapture credibility and the depth between them, he follows on, “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves, tell me about this despair, yours...”

Never met like that by a man, Carly giggles, “Over and over, announcing your place in the family of things.”

They stare, surprised at each other.

In his cage Carly’s last line races through Isaac like mercury through a wild goose. Seeing them staring at each other like that, Isaac jumps to his feet and bangs his curious face to the bars.

Shivering, she begins, “Ok, my truth. That face is my cue. Isaac, my poor dear Isaac. It began with Hillzy who Abe knew from buying cubs. Hillzy was a poacher, traded thousands of pangolins, cubs and occasionally an infant gorilla. I had never met him, but Abe’s phone rang from Africa one day about twenty years ago and bloody Hillzy talked Abe, who’s a cat guy mind you, into taking Isaac, if he chucked in a child, who, as you might guess, turned out to be Sandy.”

“I wasn’t even there, wasn’t asked, didn’t even know. But Hillzy convinced Abe that because the boy had sandy skin, and blue eyes, that he’d pass as ours. Since we couldn’t have children ... and that’s another

TRUE WILD LIGHT

trigger for Abe's violence because I passed the tests and he refused of course. Maybe Agent Orange, who knows. Anyway, in a rare moment of consideration, Abe thought a surprise would be good for me, us, and hoped I'd stay with him. Hillzy promised we'd get away with it because the boy's father was a priest out there in the Congo, a sinner sent back to Belgium by the church, so we could safely adopt him."

Dylan is listening to family history, but his eyes are glued to the attending huge silverback.

"Not only that, Hillzy also promised Abe that if he did the deal and took them both, it'd solve our troubles. That I'd love him and stay. Can you believe Abe thought that, Dylan? That's it's not about his violence?"

Dylan is tempted by a million questions, but he bites his tongue to simply say, "Men's liberation is even more difficult than women's. Our bars are invisible."

Carly wishes she had Germaine's Female Eunuch to chuck at him. She's tempted to give him a tongue lashing, but steely, she says, "That's insulting rubbish to unequal, intelligent women who suffer all sorts of enduring abuse from their partner, without leaving. It's us who are behind the invisible bars that stop us from making the break that could save our lives."

Dylan replies, "I know, I know Carly. That's what happened to Martha. But look, we all suffer when we don't realise how what we don't know of ourselves determines what we do. It's everyone's hardest problem."

With a snort, for Isaac's sake Carly yanks herself back on purpose, "The clincher for Abe was that Sandy and Isaac were to cost nothing because Hillzy was coming back to Australia to become deputy in some family company, the CEO being his father, like his father before him. The plan was for Hillzy to eventually lead their business and run a research project that, it turned out, needed me to teach them both English. I was the bloody lynch pin, yet, they agreed, between them

mind you, that Sandy would live in the house and Isaac in this cart at our door so they could grow up together and I could teach them English every day.”

Dylan can say nothing except, “Both of them?”

She says, “Yes, I knew teaching them would be a challenge, but I never imagined I’d fall in love. And it’s now been twenty years.”

“And that’s all you knew when you agreed to take them?”

“Are you not listening? I agreed to nothing Dylan. But yeah, the situation offered itself to my imagination and I clung to the hope I could love Abe, and this could hold us together.”

“I feel helpless just listening Carly. Go back a bit, how did they capture Isaac?”

“Well, I wish I never knew, but the details of that got drip fed to me over time as Hillzy boasted to Abe over beer and bloody ego. Hillzy with his poachers, loggers really, found the gorilla family near a Kisangani coltan mine in the Congo, maybe they were bold or curious, or starving. I don’t know, but Hillzy shot the troop silverback first. When he was down, they shot the mothers to get to the infant he really wanted. Soaked in his dying mother’s blood, Isaac clung to her suckling as she fought for breath.”

They stare at each other, both glossy eyed, Isaac is rustling.

“Hillzy kicked her to make sure she was dead, pepper sprayed Isaac’s eyes, tied him hand and foot, dragged him crying to a cage and stuffed him in. Then Isaac watched while they cut the heads, feet, and hands off all his family and sorted them into piles for sale to collectors around the world, and the bushmeat for the local market.”

Dylan is staring in disbelief at the gorilla who is returning the favour, glued to Dylan’s reaction. He’s absently playing with his pencil in enormous fingers and listening for the first time to his story told out loud. He has tears too that he wipes away with his giant hand every so often while hugging a worn mannequin torso tight.

TRUE WILD LIGHT

“It turns out that the poachers were hunting for the baby gorilla to order because Hillzy needed one. However, those locals had an experience cutting up the gorillas. They all stopped work because they felt the trees hold their pumping and the birds stop their singing. They were native men, terrified of what might happen, because they knew the forest was telling them they had broken the natural law, take only what you need.”

Dylan is imagining the little gorilla suckling in the blood. Isaac is certainly listening and watching the rare visitor’s every move, as he has learned is prudent with every human he’s ever met, starting with the bearded first one. He’s figuring out if this one can be trusted.

“On the drive back to Kisangani, calls were made. Isaac in his cage was tossed around and clung on with his little hands. That was where I think his black eyes lost wildness. When they pulled up at the mining shed out the back of the wet markets, Isaac was carried inside whimpering in fear. Frightened like our owl. When the local crowd came to look, Hillzy waved them off. Isaac was put into the back shed with hundreds of caged pangolins, all rolled into little balls. Hillzy couldn’t get enough, twenty or thirty tables held thousands of pangolin scales spread to dry, a few locals turning them over and over.”

“And you trusted this Hillzy sight unseen?”

“I had met him once when he delivered cubs for Abe.”

“What he was like?”

Carly grits her teeth, and continues, “A loner, tall, well-built, early forties, blue eyes, fair skin, dark curly hair, a black bushy beard from chest to cheekbones. He only ever wore a cowboy hat, shorts, muddy boots, and a dark blue singlet to show off pangolin scales inked down his left arm. He talked to me for a while, asked me what I did, eyed me up and down. I felt like he was sizing me up for something. He certainly took a shine to me.”

“I’m getting the picture.”

“Not yet you haven’t. Wait for this. Hillzy went out the back to his office for the child. Meanwhile at the shed door there’s commotion, the men nudged each other and whispered ‘Alice Lakwena’. Women sang out ‘Alice’ because she was the famous Commander of Lakwena’s Holy Mobile Spirit Force, and prophet of God. I’m sure Alice was coming for her child who was being minded there.”

“Gripping the boy ready to put him in with Isaac, Hillzy just wanted to get rid of Alice. He brushed her roughly off and she said, “By the Holy Spirit of God, I want him back.” At her voice the boy reached and cried out for her. Unbelievably, Hillzy gave him a pepper spray too. Alice howled and surged for him. Hillzy shoved her over, then blushing, said down to her, “Alice, he was yours and that Belgian priest’s once, but you pushed him out in a calabash. Gave him away, now he’s mine.”

“Furious, Alice yelled, ‘You idiot, who does he look like? You know the LRA kill babies, grind them up, I ran to the stream to save him’.

“Hillzy had heard it all before, the child soldiers chasing, shooting the sky and whooping as they closed, her getting the baby into the reeds before they arrived. Stripping to distract them from the babe. The scars when they’d all finished.”

They look at each other. Dylan just says, “Terrible wounds, not just her scars.”

“Yes, this next bit is hard to tell Dylan, but Hillzy forced the naked little boy into the cage with the infant gorilla. They were about the same size, two distressed little males in a cage, both harmed at a level they couldn’t comprehend, the whole idea was that they would grow up together in the same family, Sandy and Isaac.”

Their inevitable family secret taking shape in his mind, Dylan can comprehend, he motions her to continue.

“Today, a brazen misogynist known sex offender can be elected President, but in Africa twenty odd years ago, any powerful white man could get away with whatever he liked, when he knew people. And

Hillzy knew everyone and had something on them. But Alice was not going away, she forced past him to the cage, cooing, reached into her bag and poured shea oil over their heads and bodies as protection from bullets. Then she says, word for word Dylan, ‘Never take cover or retreat in battle, and never kill snakes or moths.’ At that, Hillzy went berserk, slapped her, and chucked her out in the mud. Head up she cursed him, “Yes, you should be ashamed. Take a boy attached to his mother?”

Carly waits as they both compose themselves, then goes on, “Cover or retreat! I don’t think she was talking about warfare either.”

“Why?”

“I’m sure because then she hissed to him, “If you think your shadow is your enemy and scorn knowledge of it, it will destroy your soul! Why do you think it follows you everywhere you go and only the glow of light shows those who attend.”

Dylan cringes, unconscious shadow destroying soul being his business as a therapist and apparently his own challenge. He is sure Alice was a wise one, powerful, and really saying, never take cover or retreat from the battle inside yourself. He’s pretty sure Carly is telling him all this so that he sees she understands.

Carly continues, “You might well cringe, even the atrocity and death hardened locals, were rattled by that, of all possible curses. They know that soul makes a person. The whole shed fell silent. Then, and everything felt that curse, a wingbeat departed my boy, my Sandy.”

The three of them exchange tense glances that prompt Carly to recall that you only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. She smiles at them both, and shifts tone, “What happened next has kept me going many a dark day, “Sandy and Isaac slowly relax and inspect each other. They listen and smell for a while in the gloaming, their eyes darting, pangolins everywhere, then back to the cage to look into each other’s eyes. For a long while they sat like this, then their fingers entwined, both called softly for their mothers, until Isaac shed one tear.

They'd been so close that Sandy had Isaac's mother's blood over him. Isaac then picked his own mother's dried blood off Sandy's skin, face and out of his hair, eating each piece, stroking him as he goes, as his mother had always done to him. Sandy laid his head on Isaac's shoulder for a while as the two spoke in their way to comfort each other, Sandy in sighs, Isaac in little wraaghs, barks, and tiny hoots. Finished, Isaac turned his chest to Sandy who returned the favour of getting the blood out of Isaac's matted chest hair, moving up to overhanging eyebrows and the short dark brown bristle hair of his long forehead. His fingers made a kind of comb as he preened and preened, till the hair was ready, then he finger-brushed and palm stroked Isaac's coat all over."

Isaac is nodding gently as if to confirm it happened just like that.

"When they were satisfied with each other, Isaac, a little the bigger, lay down on his side, making a nest of himself, then he pulled Sandy to him and curled himself around his back. Little Sandy sobbed quietly as Isaac folded him in his long arms and patted his face while cooing. Just as his mother had done for him. I like to imagine he got the feeling from her that all he does to others, he does to himself."

Isaac is looking intently at the novelty of Dylan's tears. Dylan manages to say, "Isaac must have a kind nature to do that. It's no wonder he's like a son to you. I'd feel the same I reckon."

At that, Isaac pushes his face hard to the bars, and puts a hand through towards Dylan. He looks to Carly for approval, so does Dylan. When she nods ok, Dylan cautiously steps to the huge, towering creature and touches his index finger to Isaac's. Isaac gives a soft little bark, so Dylan strokes his palm with his fingers. They stand touching, eyes locked. Dylan stares at several long scars and stitches over Isaac's left eyebrow until Isaac slowly withdraws his hand, takes the pencil from behind his ear and hands it through the bars to Dylan.

"He wants you to give him a word Dylan."

"You're kidding! He knows words?"

TRUE WILD LIGHT

"I'm a poetry teacher Dylan, that's why Hillzy chose us to give them to," she smiles, "You'd be amazed what he just understood. He loves words. Friend for life if you give him one, I reckon."

"No, no, he can't."

"Seeing is believing Dylan! Try him."

Dylan turns to the huge creature looking down at him from the bars, "Wow, ok." Isaac is holding the newspaper out, which Dylan takes gingerly. Dylan looks at him for inspiration, then prints TRUST in the margin, and hands it back with the pencil, keen to see what happens next.

Isaac takes it, gives Dylan a look from under his brows, slowly prints AND HOPE, then gives it back to him.

Awestruck by that feat, and heart-struck by his clearly hopeful face, Dylan doesn't know what to do or say, for once.

Carly has slumped down weeping into the crook of her elbow on a table. She says, "That's what makes this so hard. I have to leave Dylan, I can only hope that maybe, somehow, doing so will save us both. If I stay, Abe will kill me sooner rather than later, and then who'd look after Isaac." She sobs and puts her face in her hands.

Remembering the danger behind Abe's great excess, he asks, "Are you sure I can't somehow take you both somewhere?"

"No Dylan, thanks, I've got preparations to make, a poem to write. The government thinks violence is all about gender inequity, I know they, or you, you can't make it stop, I just wanted you to see him and me. Know we're here."

At that Isaac slumps back, downcast with his mannequin held tight.

Dylan looks around in the last light, concerned Abe will step out of Carly's story.

She guesses what he's thinking, and says, "You'd better go Dylan, I don't want you here when Abe gets back. Thank you for the offer, thanks for coming. Now you know. Take the owl and leave me. I've truly got a plan."

Too emotional to make much sense, Dylan says, "I've seen you both, I won't forget. And I won't forget Sandy. You know, he swiped my knife that day. I thought it a sign that he wanted to belong to a man's world, that he'd come back." He's tempted to hug her but notices the impetus to hug is more for his own comfort than hers. He shakes her hand, encouraged at himself. His own evolution chance caught on the wing. His real comfort, once he had noticed, was a new inner freedom to make a choice.

He gives Isaac a last admiring look and strides for his car looking about for Abe's headlights until he is well down the road.



Used to powerlessness, Isaac doesn't rage, wraagh or rattle his bars, he can do nothing but accept him going, but he knows now what the oft sworn about do-gooder looks like. He looks down sadly at the words, TRUST AND HOPE.

Carly walks over to Isaac's wagon door. Isaac lies slumped watching helplessly, clinging to the mannequin, Mummy. Once inside, Carly locks the door behind her and starts talking to the huge silverback, three times her size. Quietly she approaches, cooing and purring to him. He watches her with tired eyes, his mouth agape with yellow incisors. She sits down with him, still cooing. She reaches her hand towards him; the huge creature swats it away. Carly gives him a banana, which he ignores for his mannequin. Carly sits back against the bars on the far side of the cage. Isaac pays her no attention, nuzzling his mannequin, enfolding it in his long arms. After a while entwined, he takes his pencil and writes in his own peculiar way. She looks, he has written PRETEND. Carly reaches and Isaac allows her to take his hand, she says sadly to him, "We're all captured, each in our own way Isaac."

His huge black hands let Carly go to cradle Mummy's torso. He

TRUE WILD LIGHT

smells her fur, then raises his huge head and rests it on Mummy's shoulder. They stay that way for a while until Carly can bear it no longer and says, "What have they done to you Isaac, what have they put in your head."

Both are lost in their own world of despair and sadness. She gives the fur on the top of his head a ruffle, pats his hand then gets out of the cage, locking him in for his own safety.

Isaac rocks back and forth, clutching at himself, then barely moving, then rocking the mannequin, Mummy, forlornly, all worn and torn, wire frame showing through in the places most loved. The symbol in the world that makes him feel most safe from the human chaos.

Inside him an intelligence is forming opinions about who is captured.