

CROOKED VOWS

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WILD
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PRESS 

1

Endings and Beginnings

He wakes again just before dawn. Reaches out for her again, almost feeling the comforting curves of her back and her hips, puzzled for a few seconds by her absence. And remembers. Turning onto his back and staring up at the emptiness of the ceiling, he searches his mind for something less bleak than this overwhelming sense of loss. He tries to distance himself from it, to think with more detachment about the strange tricks of memory: the way his mind at rest seems to pull a consoling blanket over the painful consciousness that, after all those years with her, he is finally alone, so that the awareness emerges to gnaw at him anew, even more painfully, each time he leaves the sanctuary of sleep.

He clammers out of bed, conscious of an awkward stiffness in his legs and a tight feeling at the back of his neck and across his shoulders. Surely that wasn't there ten or fifteen years ago. Is it realistic to think, at seventy-five, of getting back into better physical condition? Perhaps not.

What shape can his life take from this time on? He trawls his memory for a couple of lines that fit his situation rather well.

I have lived long enough. My way of life is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf. Something like that. *Macbeth*, probably. He's not sure. It's a silly habit anyway, dredging up literary fragments to fit situations. And he can't blame it on forty years spent teaching English literature. He can remember doing it before he started teaching. The seed was probably planted at the seminary. Fragments from that course in English literature still leap out from his memory at times to surprise and move him.

The kitchen's a mess. He hasn't seen the point of washing up after every meal since his daughters and grandchildren did a major clean-up the day after the funeral and he stood out on the footpath the following morning watching them drive down the street and disappear around the corner. He looks around the bench tops and the sink, deciding today might have to be the day. After breakfast perhaps.

The funeral. It's odd that he remembers so little about it. He drifted through it surrounded by a mist. He has blurred images of several people standing, speaking, but very little recollection of what they said. Funerals are supposed to help the living to accept the finality of what has happened. Closure—that's the fashionable word—but it didn't seem to work for him. Once during the ceremony he even found himself turning to her to share a smile about something flattering that someone was saying about her, only to find, with a momentary shock, that of course she was not there. She was not anywhere. But it still didn't seem possible.

Older memories push into the foreground. Not those of a couple of weeks ago—images over fifty years old, but sharp and clear. Why does memory work so selectively?

The funeral of a priest—or rather, an ex-priest. Though as he recalls the rules, a priest was held to remain a priest regardless of what he had done or what disgrace loomed over his head. Just one of a multitude of technical details in that former life. It seems so long ago that the memories, in spite of being so clear, feel like someone else's—as if he is looking on from a short distance at scenes in which other people are involved.

He had some misgivings about that funeral, but went in spite of them. It was an awkward occasion with few people there, other clergy most of them, conspicuously avoiding saying anything real about the man they had come to bury. Full of silences and denials and careful detours around what everyone knew: what the man had done, who had exposed him, how he had died, what had driven him to take that way out. Nothing was openly acknowledged; instead, smooth platitudes about a life spent in God's service.

In spite of the circumstances, or perhaps because of them, the diocese had organised a quite impressive farewell. Thomas remembers sitting in a pew behind the rest of the small congregation, looking up at the stained-glass windows above the altar of the cathedral and the carving around the pulpit. The pure voices of the choir boys traced the rising and falling line, like a series of Gothic arches, that opens the Gregorian Requiem. Later in the service when a couple of speakers recounted stages in the life of the departed, and experiences shared with him, Thomas sat listening to the omissions and evasions, going back over his own crucial part in the affair; imagining the expression on that narrow face as Father Kevin had sat on a bollard on the Fremantle wharf

after midnight, tying his ankles together with a few feet of baler twine to make sure, even though he was a non-swimmer. Trying to guess at the level of fear in the priest's mind as he must have stood at the edge of the wharf looking down at the black surface of the water, working up enough courage for the jump.

Sometimes Thomas was inclined to blame himself, but decided ultimately that although he couldn't avoid a sense of pity for the man, and a residual feeling of regret, even a trace of guilt, it had been, all things considered, the right thing to do. But it had not been well received—at least not in that company. He was right to have misgivings about the reception that awaited him where the usual groups formed under the trees at the entrance to the cemetery after the cathedral service, and as people drifted away from the graveside after the burial. It was impossible to exclude him from the occasion, but nobody spoke to him. He moved around trying without success to find a place where he could feel comfortable. Once he thought he overheard a fragment of conversation about how timely Father Kevin's departure was—now the unpleasant affair would not be dragged through the courts and the newspapers. Several times he thought he saw men, priests mostly, brother-priests of the man they were burying, as they would have put it, looking at him out of small groups, turning away when he met their eyes, shutting quiet conversations down as he passed. It was obvious then, though he had really known it already, that his actions had swept him decisively away from nearly everything and everybody that had moulded his life up to the events culminating in that funeral. He would have to find another shape for

his life in another world. What that shape might be was far beyond his imagination.

She came into his life only a few months later, during his first year at the university, looking for a new direction, beginning to discover that the world was much wider and in some ways rather less wicked than he'd been led to believe. Though there's wickedness to be found everywhere.

Someone had introduced them—he can't recall who. It seems now, looking back, that the occasion marked the beginning of his real life, as if what came before was fantasy. She admitted much later that she'd had a speculative eye on him for some time and had engineered the meeting. He himself was totally inept and ignorant in negotiations of that sort; it was unexplored territory. Wilderness. He can still picture the setting quite clearly: the square of lawn, the fish pond, the façade of the university hall with its clock tower. And her.

'Thomas', she had repeated, looking rather dubious. Too formal for her. She'd call him Tom if he didn't mind. He remembers, with a smile. A beginning. There was a great deal more than his name that was destined to be reshaped. At first he was surprised by her directness, almost taken aback. In time he learned to appreciate it, to recognise it as a level of honesty that he hadn't encountered before. They had shaken hands on that occasion. It seemed to him at the time that their hands remained in contact rather longer than a casual introduction required. He recalls the strange combination of sensations he felt during that extended moment of contact: a sudden surge of excitement flooding his whole body, which he hoped was not as obvious as he feared it

might be, combined with tightness in his belly, an insecure feeling that this moment might mark the opening-up of some unpredictable possibilities. As indeed it did.

The kitchen table is strewn with letters and cards of sympathy. Cards for her. No. Cards *about* her. He must do something about organising them as well as the dishes. Wonders what people usually do. Would all those well-wishers expect a response from him?

His mind retreats into the past, to a distant memory of another card. It was for her birthday, only a week before they married. He had written *With all my love forever*, having been feeling his way gradually into territory that he had not explored until the previous couple of years.

She kissed him, then pulled back a little and looked steadily into his eyes. He must not promise her all his love, she said. They will have children, and he must keep some love for them. And *forever* is too much to promise. *Till death do us part* is as much as anyone can sign up for. Nothing lasts forever. It was a long time before he had learned enough honesty from her to look at the facts of life with just a little of the same clear-sighted courage. He remembers her occasional sadness in her last years at the thought, which she expressed with the same honesty, that one of them was sure to go first and the other would be left alone.

He moves out to the back veranda. Ahead of sunrise the eastern sky is streaked with pale pink, repeated at closer range in a profusion of flowers on the massive apple blossom hibiscus against the back fence. It's the only plant he can remember choosing himself; the garden is usually her business. *Was* her business.

She had been puzzled over why he was so definite about wanting that variety when he usually had no views about plants of any sort. And there were so many new varieties; every old garden had an apple blossom hibiscus.

He found it difficult to explain that this was just the point. It stood in his mind for the ordinary world of backyards and back verandas and shared beds and shared lives and children and grandchildren and the normal varieties of innocent human pleasure. And pain. Anyway, there it still stands, grown tall and broad and flowering splendidly more than forty years later.

He wonders whether that other apple blossom hibiscus is still standing. It looked like an old shrub then, fifty years ago and more. Probably by now it's only a memory—an image that pulls back with it a chain of other memories about someone who now seems like a stranger: himself when young. He thinks of Omar Khayyam, a voice from nine hundred years past, speaking thoughts that could be his own. *Myself when young did eagerly frequent Doctor and saint, and heard great argument.*

Himself when young—now a stranger who seems to have lived in another world, seen at a great distance, as if on the far side of a huge expanse of water. But the memories from that distant time and place have remained clear, and now, against the new blankness of his present and his future, they stand out even more sharply.

He sits on one of the two old cane chairs on the veranda, unable to shut out the emptiness of the other chair beside him, remembering the day when he'd painted them, and called her out to see what a strange colour the paint had turned out to be: a peculiar purplish-pink. Not at all what he'd had in mind. It didn't matter, she said, that colour would do.

He tries to push his thoughts in a less painful direction, looking up into the beginning of the new day. Tries to pinpoint the time when the first fine cracks began to appear in the wall enclosing that remote world of the mind where he lived for his first twenty-three years. Perhaps the beginning of the end was that first consultation.