

# 1

No one paid attention to the bent old man wearing navy blue slacks and a dark brown cardigan, walking slowly up the ramp to the main entrance of Balgownie Nursing Home. The man was perfectly unmemorable. Anyone who accidentally glanced in his direction simply saw a bored octogenarian shuffling along aimlessly with little or nothing on his mind. A closer look might have suggested he was actually deep in thought, perhaps regretting an opportunity missed with a loved one long dead. Or perhaps he was trapped in the recurring resentment of bad choices decades old. But more likely he was just bewildered by the new surroundings that confronted his dementia each waking moment. However he appeared to the outside world, he did not look like a man about to commit murder.

The home was in a back street of the affluent suburb of Mosman Bay, built in the nineteen eighties by doctors who foresaw the wave of aged baby boomers now filling Perth nursing homes. It had been refurbished many times and was now known by its more politically correct name of the Balgownie Aged Care Facility. As such it housed wealthy geriatrics unable to look after themselves but rich enough to pay others do it for them. The man had been inside many aged care facilities, but this one was the most upmarket so far.

The cuffs of his cardigan were frayed, and the threadbare material of his trousers was splattered here and there with dark patches smeared with paler crusty blue. It was not an especially cold morning, but the man had his navy blue beanie pulled down over his grey hair to cover his ears, because it would make it that much harder for anyone to describe his face. There were plenty of people around him – a few visitors coming and going; two nurses exchanging notes at shift change; a nun on her mobile phone speaking softly – but he knew that the old were easily ignored, and one who moved slowly, apparently without purpose, was all but invisible to the nurses and carers rushed off their feet helping the genuinely needy. If anyone did happen to look at him, they forgot him instantly. He was unmemorable, just an old man, wearing old clothes in an old folks' home, going nowhere. That was how he wanted everyone to see him – an anonymous geriatric, unimportant and unmemorable. He had looked this way many times before, and he knew it worked. His face was well whiskered and appeared to be creased with age, but his eyes were clear and sharp. Today his eyes were green. They were not always green. Today they were green because of the colour of the contact lenses he had chosen. Even so, he instinctively squinted and bowed his head to conceal them. Eyes gave away too much. To a casual observer he was just any old anonymous man in a nursing home, so much so, that just days later, a visiting couple who remembered seeing him would recount to the police with great certainty that he had a full beard, brown eyes, grey hair and used a walking stick, almost none of which was true.

He shuffled past the unattended reception window to which a sign had been blue-tacked suggesting visitors should try their luck ringing the bell placed alongside it. He ignored the window and instead turned right into the main corridor. As he dragged his feet along the grey and

green carpet tiles, he kept his eyes fixed directly ahead, never once intruding into the privacy of open doors. He used to look inside the open doors when he visited such places, but there were always people inside the rooms looking back at him. Withered people. Hopeless people. Waiting people. It became too depressing to gaze into the staring eyes and hollow faces, so he stopped doing it. His mission was depressing enough. He did not need to add to it. So he looked straight ahead and kept his gait to a slow shuffle.

He passed eleven rooms on the right, ten on the left before reaching the corner he was looking for. When he turned the corner, a carer, a girl in her twenties from Gabon, or perhaps Senegal, with skin as black as night, rushed past him with soiled sheets held at arms length. Her face was turned to one side to avoid the worst of the stench, hardly noticing him. An invisible cloud of ammonia enveloped both of them, then she was gone. The stench lingered and threatened to make him gag. The corridor was wide and empty so he crossed to the opposite side and speeded up a little to move out of the cloud. No one noticed his short burst of speed.

Eventually he reached room 16. The name on the door was written in bold font on a piece of white cardboard which had been slid into in a label holder screwed to the wood. It read *Mr Mikhail Tokasonas*. The man paused and looked slowly around in mock confusion, as he imagined a demented man might when confronted with a confusing problem. It was a good tactic for surveying surroundings without appearing overly inquisitive.

Suddenly a nurse appeared from a nearby storeroom and walked past him quickly holding an aerosol spray can over her head. The can hissed loudly, mixing Alpine fragrance with the pungent reek of geriatric urine. He watched her for the twenty seconds it took her to reach

the far end of the corridor, then she disappeared around the corner, and all was quiet again.

The man stepped into room 16 and closed the door, pushing the stopper wedge under it to jam it shut. A male patient lay on his back in the bed. Stainless steel stands on either side of the bed held clear plastic bags of liquid high above him. Clear tubes allowed the liquids to flow directly into the veins and arteries of his arms, while other clear tubes carrying liquids of various shades of yellow and orange emerged from other parts of his body, hidden under the bed covers, all converging into a white plastic box below the bed. His mouth was open but his eyes were closed. There was no sign of eyeball movement. The only movement was the slow rise and fall of his chest, but even that was barely discernable.

The man in the brown cardigan walked closer. The patient's breathing made a slow wheezy rasp that sent shivers up the man's back. He lifted the patient's wrist to check the identification tag. It too, had the name Mikhail Tokasonas printed on it. The arm felt bony and frail, and the elbow grated as it moved, indicating the joint was almost seized. Mikhail Tokasonas did not open his eyes or turn his head.

Tokasonas was a fisherman and businessman, or once had been, before he passed the business over to his son Michael and his daughter Litsa, soon after he found out he was going to lose his mind, and die. The Tokasonases were a Greek family, well respected in the Perth business community. As well as being financially successful, they supported local community initiatives and contributed thousands of dollars annually to local charities. They also donated much of their time as unpaid directors on the boards of non profit organizations and were pillars of the Fremantle Orthodox Church.

Mikhail himself had once been a man of great physical strength and even stronger will. Orphaned as a one-year-

old during the Great War, he was raised by his grandmother in Greece until it was clear another big war was imminent, whereupon he stowed away on a ship to Australia to start a new life. He was just twenty years old when he arrived in Fremantle, with no money and almost no skills, except that he knew how to catch fish, a skill taught to him by an uncle back in Greece. With no fear of hard work, a strong determination to succeed and a willingness to take risks, Mikhail worked as a deck hand on a leaky snapper boat which fished all along the west coast. He spent his first five years in Australia at sea, making landfall only to bank his wages and take lessons in English. Eventually he saved enough money to buy a fishing licence of his own, and take a one third share in a crayfish boat. The family business now boasted the third largest seafood business in Australia.

Mikhail Tokasonas had been an impressive man, intelligent, honest, decent, likeable and inherently happy within himself. He had also been a strong man, but now he was no longer a man at all. Alzheimer's disease had seen to that. He no longer knew who he was, or even what he was. He recognized no one, not his family nor his friends nor even himself the last time he was able to look into a mirror. He could not walk or speak or read a book or pick his nose or scratch an itch or choose when his body should pass waste. Indeed he did not know when his body soiled itself, because he did not know he had a body. There was really no *he* anymore.

The body that once housed Mikhail had been refusing to eat and drink for weeks. The muscles in the throat which coordinated swallowing no longer received signals from the deteriorating brain, so supposedly well meaning people, such as doctors, nurses and lawyers, arranged for food and water to nourish the body via the plastic tubes in its arms and to remove waste from his bowels. His family had pleaded with the doctors to let the body die. They

knew their father would have been utterly humiliated to think his body might be kept in such an indecent, inhumane and immoral state. They took their case to court, pleading their father should be allowed to die with dignity. But the hospital argued it was duty bound to feed patients in any way possible. They also had experts examine Tokasonas. They testified that technically he was not on a life support system, since his heart, lungs and digestive system were operating autonomously. The family argued that the doctors were keeping the body alive artificially by feeding it with nutrients against its will. The hospital lawyers argued that Mikhail had no will, but if he did, he would surely choose life over death. They never explained how they might know that, but the court agreed with them, so body and indignity remained bedfellows in room 16 of the Balgownie Aged Care Facility.

In reality Mikhail Tokasonas was already dead. He had died weeks earlier, but his body still ran on automatic with the help of lower brain functions. His higher brain, the part which had created the person everyone knew as Mikhail Tokasonas, had gelled into a slowly drying paste over past months, such that no discernible brain structures existed where grey matter should have been. Deeper down, inside his brain, his white matter was also drying up, but much more slowly, so the body twitched on, imitating life. His family knew that their father was dead, without having to see x-rays of his brain, because they had known him thirty-five years – longer than any of the doctors who now decided his fate. But the face still resembled their father and it caused them terrible anguish to see him kept this way.

The man in the brown cardigan stood by the bed, ready to end that anguish for them. This one would be easier than the others he had done. It would be less intrusive. Less demanding. Despite everything he had read and heard about killing another human being, it did not get

any easier. Life was unique and precious in the universe. Ending it required great courage and exceptional commitment. It was not something he found easy to do. Only his deeply held belief that he was doing good work got him through it.

As always, when he was about to kill someone, he paused and thought about his mother and his sister. Then he said to Mikhail, 'you will understand why, when you meet them.'

He placed his left hand under the body's chin and closed its mouth gently and respectfully, squeezing the nostrils together with his thumb and forefinger. He did not really need his right hand for the job, so weak and frail was the body, but he nevertheless placed his other hand gently, palm downwards, over the eyes to hold them closed. Within seconds the chest quivered as it strained to draw breath. The belly, emaciated as it was, barely rippled the sheets, but the head never shook from side to side, nor made any conscious attempt to deflect the man's hands. Neither did the hands move to protect itself. A living man trying to survive would do all those things, but a body whose only remaining job was to pump blood and to breathe, simply executed those motions on autopilot. For a while the diaphragm muscles continued to receive their signals from the brain, contracting and expanding obediently, but no new oxygen entered the lungs, no new oxygen entered the blood, and no new oxygen reached the brain. Then, after two long minutes, when all the old oxygen was used up, the signals stopped going to the heart, and the heart stopped. Mikhail Tokasonas' body finally died.

The man waited another minute to be certain, then took away his hands. He produced a stethoscope from his pocket and checked carefully for a heart beat. When he was certain that the heart was no longer pumping, he pocketed the stethoscope and walked to the door, kicking

the wedge away from under it and opening it a hair to look out. The passage was clear, so he swung the door wide and jammed it open with the wedge before leaving. An open door would attract less attention.

The man continued walking slowly in the same direction that he had been walking when he came in, knowing that the corridor looped back on itself in a square around a central block, and would eventually lead him back to the entrance. When he reached the entrance, he walked past the reception window, where a woman was on the phone, staring at a computer screen, while two couples waited at the counter for attention. He walked past them and out of the building in much the same way as he had come in, as a slow moving, unwashed geriatric who was probably just visiting an old friend. Despite the light drizzling rain, he shuffled slowly across the wet bitumen car park without hurrying. It took him a few minutes to reach a white van parked in a bay, well away from the entrance. When he reached it, he slid open the side door and sat on the van floor with his legs still on the bitumen, pretending to be exhausted. He lifted his head and took deep breaths, all the while looking around for possible witnesses. But no one cared about an old man sitting in a van doorway. When he was sure no one was watching, he swung his legs in and slid the door shut behind him.

He lay on the floor of the van for a few more minutes breathing deeply and quietly to calm his nerves. It was his twelfth killing. After five minutes of deep breathing he felt fully calm again. He removed his beanie and sat up to slip a white lab coat over his clothes. In the pocket was an electric razor, which he used to shave the three day old stubble from his face. Then he peeled off the grey wig to give his bald head some relief from the adhesive that had held it there. He wiped his scalp with a damp cloth to remove the glue, then massaged it gently. After another few minutes he located some adhesive in the lab coat



pocket and dabbed a few spots on his scalp with his fingers. Then he donned a different wig, his regular short cut, light brown one, so when he climbed into the driver's seat and drove out the gate, he was a much younger man. He turned the corner into Solomon Street saying a quiet goodbye to Mikhail Tokasonas, then headed for his George Street office in East Fremantle.

It would be breakfast time the following morning before anyone else went inside room 16.

# 4

Lucas injected himself with the first syringe and dropped it on the bed beside him, the way Krzus requested, so it would look like suicide. Within seconds the look on Lucas's face changed from chronic pain and abject despair to one of pure ecstasy. He moaned with pleasure and smiled, gripping Krzus's arm in thanks. Then he closed his eyes to enjoy the deliciously private experience. He knew it would be short lived. The dose was huge for his sickly body and he would overdose quickly, but he didn't mind. For that single moment he was in heaven. He had never felt so good, so utterly sublime. Not even the best orgasm he had experienced inside Julian came close to the waves of pure pleasure washing through his wrecked body. *La petite mort* was a truly apt description. It was so good, he wanted to die right then and there, cocooned in his perfect womb like a stillborn child.

Within a minute he could feel his mind closing down. Somewhere inside his chest, far, far away, his heart began to race and he vaguely acknowledged that his breathing had shallowed. The peak of pleasure began to fade slowly but it was replaced by a shroud of peaceful darkness wrapping around him from all sides. A point of white light centred in his vision, even though his eyes were closed. It reminded him of a camera's iris, stopping down gradually

from one setting to next. He expected the light to go completely, but it brightened momentarily in response to a slight stinging in his arm. Another wave of pleasure reminded him how good it was going to be to die. Then the light shrank more quickly than before. Just before it went out, he was sure he saw a woman and a young girl holding out their hands for him.

Krzus withdrew the second syringe from exactly the same puncture point in Lucas's arm which had been made by the first injection. Lucas's arm had shown just the barest flicker of sensitivity when the second dose went in, and his breathing had slowed noticeably. Sweat dripped from the long wispy threads of sparse grey-black hair still left on Lucas's head. The sweat was an automatic response to the heat coursing through the veins in his scalp, but his face was as inanimate as a statue's. Finally at peace.

Krzus injected the third syringe. There was no reaction in that arm, but Krzus was surprised to see the other arm lift off the bed as if Lucas was about to grasp an unseen hand. Krzus had never seen that happen before. Then the arm dropped like a lead weight. After that, the only sign of movement was Lucas's chest sinking weakly. Krzus waited for it to rise again, but after waiting more than three minutes he knew that his thirteenth client was dead. He waited five more minutes, checking for a heartbeat from time to time, his stethoscope barely able to find enough soft flesh on the washboard ribs to form an acoustic seal. Lucas's heart remained silent and still.

Krzus put two of the three syringes in his satchel and tidied up any evidence which could indicate a second person had been present when Lucas injected himself. He left the townhouse and climbed into his van, driving it to the end of the street, where he parked and waited. He felt better about Lucas's death than many of the others. It had been quiet and pleasurable for Lucas. He wished he could

use heroin every time, but buying street heroin left a risky trail which police could follow up on if they chose to. He also considered it wiser to use a different method each time, thus minimising the likelihood of police suspecting that only one person was involved. His greatest protection lay in the historical fact that suspicious suicides of the terminally ill were always the work of family or close friends. A lone serial mercy killer should be improbable, even to the most suspicious of policemen.

He opened up his laptop while he waited. There was no wireless internet connection available in the area so he busied himself checking schedules and typing invoices, glancing every minute or so in the side-view mirror. As he worked, it suddenly occurred to him that he did not know Lucas's full name. He had not even bothered to ask, not that it could matter less now. But to help a man to die and not even know his name, seemed wrong. *Am I getting too blasé about this? Was I too quick to act?* It was not the first time he questioned his actions.

Thirty-five minutes later he saw a mauve Hyundai Excel turn the corner and stop outside Lucas's townhouse. A young man whom he assumed was Julian stepped out of the car, struggling with bags of shopping in one hand while holding a bunch of flowers and house keys in the other. Krzus waited until Julian unlocked the door and went inside, then he started the van and drove away. He felt sad for Julian and the hard growing up he was about to do, but he was happy for Lucas that his last moments of life were of contentment and peace, and, more importantly, of his own choosing.

# 5

One week after Mikhail Tokasonas was found dead in the Balgownie Aged Care Facility, a thirty-five-year-old woman with the unusual name of Tequila Travers could not stop her hands shaking. She was watching her general practitioner, Dr Roland Nash, writing two prescriptions for her. Nash was the most recent in a long series of doctors in Tequila's adult life, all of whom, once they got to know her, recommended she check herself into a mental hospital as soon as possible. As each doctor reached that conclusion she stopped seeing them, and moved on to a new one when her prescriptions needed renewing. After years of such doctor-hopping, she had virtually run out of doctors, so going to Roland Nash was an act of desperation. Her decision was not based on Nash's competence. He was an excellent GP by all accounts. But Tequila was an intensely private person, and Nash was the employer of her friend Rhonda, to whom she did not want to expose her emotional and social insecurities. But eventually her addiction overcame her humiliation and she surrendered to it, powerless to resist.

Nash's rooms were located in South Fremantle, not particularly convenient for Tequila who lived in the northern suburbs, but she was willing to make the long

journey just to get her prescriptions filled without being pressured into hospitalisation. Nash had been helping her for almost three months so far without mention of mental hospitals. Rhonda had acted sensitively and professionally about her visits too, and both had gained her trust.

As she waited for Nash to finish writing, her eyes glistened with tears of fear, which never quite formed into drops, but pooled instead in her lower eyelids where they dried as fast as they were replenished. It was her permanent look these days.

'Tequila,' said Nash kindly while he wrote, 'the anti-depressants will last you for another three months, but I'm giving you only one month more of the Xanax.'

Tequila looked up in shock. Her head jerked up so quickly the tears spilled over her swollen red eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Her quivering chin made them drip onto the desk.

'What?' she said, although she had heard him clearly enough. 'Oh no, please doctor. Please. I need more that that. I can't get through the day. Please! Three months at least. Please.'

Her voice pleaded pitifully, unashamedly. She was past all pretence. Nash knew she was addicted, and she knew that he knew, and she didn't care. All she cared about was that she would just die without her tranquillizers. They kept her going, kept her sane. She had been surviving on them for years. They were the only way she could cope with her mother's demands. Without them she lost her grip on sanity. Without them she thought about nothing but suicide.

Tequila reached across the corner of the desk and gripped his arm with both hands.

'Please. Please,' she sobbed.

Nash raised his eyes from the prescription when she grabbed his arm, but said nothing. His first reaction was to pull his arm away but he was too good a doctor to react

without considering the effect on his patient. Her state of mind was much too delicate for authoritative rejection.

When he neither moved his arm nor said anything, she pleaded again. 'Please, Doctor.' Her voice went soft and timid. Then she lowered her eyes again, as a subordinate might to a superior, or a subjugated daughter to a matriarch. Her submissiveness was unmistakable, and it made Nash very uncomfortable.

'I'll do anything you want,' she whispered, looking down at the floor. 'Anything.'

'Tequila,' said Nash, firmly, 'please let go of my arm.'

She released her grip and pulled her arms back. Then she folded them on the desk and hid her face.

'Oh God, I'm so sorry, Doctor,' she sobbed. 'I know I shouldn't have done that. But I don't know what else to do. It's just... It's just that, I can't go on. I can't stop thinking about killing my...'

She stopped speaking and started to shake, crying into her arms. It was the first time she had cried openly in the surgery. Her condition was clearly getting worse, not better. Nash concluded she had reached the stage where he could no longer predict with any certainty what she might do, or what other, uncontrolled drugs she might resort to taking. He pressed a button on his phone. A few moments later Rhonda, his receptionist, came in. It was unusual to be called in during a consultation, but on the few occasions it did happen, she knew why.

Rhonda quickly assessed the scene and pulled a chair over next to Tequila, sitting down next to her with one arm around the distraught woman's shoulders. With the other hand she pressed a few tissues into Tequila's hand. Tequila took the tissues and continued sobbing into them while Nash and Rhonda looked at each other sombrely. Eventually the sobbing stopped and Tequila looked up at Rhonda. Her eyes were those of a broken woman, hollow, staring, with no future.

'Please?' she pleaded again.

'It's all right Tequila,' said Rhonda. 'It's going to be all right.'

Tequila slumped her shoulders even further and shook her head slowly. 'No it's not going to be all right,' she said, her voice now frightened and childlike. 'It will go on and on and on and I can't do it any more, Ronnie. I just can't.'

'Tequila,' said Nash. 'The last couple of times you were here we spoke about seeing a therapist. I really think it is time you did. We are never going to fix you with just tranquilizers. The Xanax is only a temporary fix to give you time to work through your problems without being riddled with fear. Tony Chambers is an excellent therapist with an excellent record. He has helped many, many people with similar problems. Your addiction is not unique, you just think it is. Many people have problems like yours and they have been cured. You can be too.'

'No!' said Tequila. 'I'm not going into a mental hospital. I know what happens inside them and I won't ever go there! Never.'

Rhonda took her hand and pulled her attention away from Nash, who had clearly reached frustration point with his patient's obstinacy.

'Tequila,' she said firmly. 'Listen to me. No one will ever put you in hospital. No one *can* put you in hospital. Only you can do that. Dr Chambers will see you in his rooms, which just happen to be attached to a clinic. But you do not have to go into the clinic if you don't want to. He will never make you do anything you don't want to do. He's a lovely man, and an excellent therapist. I went to him myself when Roy and I were fighting about Roy's children. He's very good. He helped me and I'm sure he can help you. What do you have to lose?'

Tequila shook her head. 'It's just that... It's not like other illnesses. This is mental. It's the stigma. It's so humiliating.'



'Oh darling,' soothed Rhonda. 'Can it be any more humiliating than this? I've known you a long time. Here you are begging doctor to give you drugs, for heaven's sake. That's not the Tequila I remember. Dr Chambers can help with your other problem and he can also help you get off the drugs altogether. But he can't help you if you won't see him. At least talk to him? You don't have to be his patient just yet. Just meet and talk to him. What harm can talking do? Please? Do it for me? Because we're friends?'

Tequila lowered her head again and remained silent for a long time. Then with no strength left to fight she nodded weakly. 'All right. I don't care anymore. I don't care.'

'Good girl,' said Rhonda. 'Good girl. I'll phone though for an appointment now.'

Tequila stood up slowly but did not look at Nash. She could not face him ever again, not after the way she had just behaved. She had virtually prostituted herself in front of him, and tried to undermine his professional integrity. So strong was the grip of her addiction, she would have given herself to him for more tranquilizers. That was how she thought of herself, not as a person, but as a thing, to be used. And abused. And yet after all that, Nash still wanted to help her. She was not used to that kind of decency. It made her feel even more unworthy.

She took the prescriptions from the desk and followed Rhonda into the reception room without looking up. At the counter she stared vacantly at the back of the cashier's computer while the account was settled, barely aware that Rhonda was already making the appointment. There were people waiting in the reception room. She could feel them looking at her, judging her, despising her, thinking she was worthless. She knew they were right.

'See?' said Rhonda with a big smile when she put down the phone. 'You've made the right decision. It was meant to be. Dr Chambers' receptionist is away sick with flu, so he answered the phone himself. His receptionist would

never have changed the schedule for a new client, but he is wonderful. I told him you are a special lady and that you need urgent help. He said he can see you in half an hour. Are you OK to drive?’

Tequila nodded weakly and left the surgery clutching the piece of paper with the address written on it. A light misty rain blew from the north west and sprayed her face with tiny droplets which mingled with her tears. She knew her makeup was running and her eyes were swollen red, but she was beyond caring what she looked like. Her hands shook as she fumbled to open the car door with the key. The remote control had stopped working last summer and she had never bothered to get it fixed. She never bothered to get anything fixed these days. Deep down she knew she did not deserve things to go right in her life.

She got into her car and shut out the rain. It was humid in the car, and it smelled of damp. A seal in one of the windows leaked when it rained, so mould was a permanent passenger. She sat and stared at the wheel, trying to work out what she should do next. Planning anything had become a monumental effort, the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest, and she already felt exhausted by the visit.

She studied the address written on the piece of paper for a full minute before she could concentrate enough to understand it. It said the clinic was attached to one of the larger private hospitals several few kilometres away. It would take her about twenty minutes to drive there, provided the there were not too many trucks coming out from the wharf. Then she stared at her prescriptions, trying to make sense of how she had let herself become so dependent on them. But she already knew the answer. She always knew the answer. She felt it rising up from the pit of her stomach, racing to the surface, like one of those gigantic sharks she had seen on the Nature Channel which exploded out of the water and completely swallowed up

baby seals in one gulp. She was that baby seal drifting aimlessly on the surface, at the mercy of stronger beasts. She knew how it felt. As her own shark swam closer to the surface it took on its human form – that of her own mother – and she felt the panic rise. With all her remaining strength she pushed it down again, denying its power this time but ultimately adding to it, making it stronger for a later ambush.

Nash's session had exhausted her. She took another Xanax and closed her eyes for a few minutes. Drained and powerless, she knew she could not fight her demons and drive her car at the same time, so she took deep breaths and thought about rolling hills and innocent white lambs in lush green pasture, frolicking without a care in the world. It was a fantasy which sometimes helped. This time it did. After several minutes she felt calm enough to drive, so she started the engine and drove off, taking as many side streets as possible until she was forced to use Leach Highway.

She didn't like highways so she hugged the kerb doing forty in a seventy zone. Speeding traffic whizzed past her doing a lot more than seventy. They swirled around her like water past driftwood, blasting their horns at her in protest, raising her anxiety with every blast and reminding her of how inadequate she was. Everyone else in the world seemed so in control, so purposeful. Where were they all going? Why couldn't she be like them? What made her so different, so pathetic? Questions again. Questions were a mistake. She knew why. They demanded answers. The answer came before she could stop it. Her legs turned to jelly.

*Oh God, she's here!*

Her mother's fiercely accusing face appeared in the rain-splattered windscreen. Tequila's neck stiffened and she gripped the steering wheel so strongly she twisted the vinyl cover loose. She screamed at the windscreen.

'GET AWAY FROM ME YOU MONSTER! I HATE YOU! YOU BITCH! BITCH! BITCH! I CAN'T STAND THIS ANY MORE! YOU'RE SENDING ME TO THE MAD HOUSE!'

Her vision tunnelled through her mother's image to the large cotton palm trees growing on the verge at the bottom of the hill. They were close enough to the kerb to smash the car into at speed and end her pathetic excuse for a life.

*Maybe then you'll be happy?*

The largest tree was the one closest to the kerb. It had a massive bulbous trunk with spikes protruding from sharp leaf scars which, in its natural habitat, would be effective protection against predators, but alongside a temperate Fremantle highway, the spikes offered her a sure way to kill herself. The tree beckoned and she imagined accelerating towards it, its trunk looming larger and larger in the windscreen, and she yearned for the blissful point of no return, when hitting the brakes would make no difference on the slick wet road.

It was not the first time she had thought about that tree. She had savoured the moment many times before, the pleasure of it building inexorably through her whole body, like the first hint of an orgasm. She craved that feeling, because she knew from that moment on, she could absolve herself of all responsibility. She could no longer be blamed for what happened. She would not be able to stop, no matter what she did, even if her mother's voice tried to change her mind. The pleasure started to soak into her body. It was a fantasy she had played out before, but this time it would be different. This time it would be for real. The exhilaration was suddenly overpowering. Her heart hammered faster and faster. She felt light-headed at her final decision. In her ecstasy she idly wondered if she would hear the crash, the crunch of the bumper smashing into the tree, the engine ripping from its mountings, exploding through the firewall into the

driver's seat. Would it spear through her body, or would she be splattered against the windscreen before the sound could register in her mind? It was a surreally academic question she would never know the answer to.

Tequila gripped the wheel as she had on two previous occasions and summoned every last shred of courage, aware she had chickened out twice before, but this time it was going to happen. In a few seconds it would all be over. Peace at last. Her muscles tightened as she scowled at her mother's image.

'At least I'll never see you again!' she said, releasing her seatbelt buckle and pressing her foot to the floor. The little Mazda accelerated. 'See how you like this, you bitch!'

She was close to the kerb, too close to mount it at a glancing angle, so she swerved a little to the right to give herself a wider arc so the car would strike the tree head-on. As she swerved, her wheels crossed momentarily into the adjacent lane.

Suddenly an unbelievably loud blast of a trucker's klaxon shattered her focus, frightening the living wits out of her.

'Eeeeeeee,' she screamed in fright as a massive semitrailer veered violently around her, the driver desperately trying to avoid crushing her tiny Mazda under his wheels. The truck's tandem trailers swung past her wildly, first one side then the other and back again, each trailer perilously close to tipping over. Then the rear trailer thundered past like the swish of a giant shark's tail, rocking her tiny car in its wake and flooding her windscreen with road spray from its massive wheels. The spray overwhelmed her windscreen wipers and the glass went completely opaque, revealing nothing but her own terrified face reflected in the glass.

'Eeeeeeee!' she screamed again.

Self preservation took over, forcing her to try to regain control of the car. Then a second truck, this one a triple

trailer road train fully laden with sea containers, roared past in close pursuit of the first, so ridiculously close its driver was surely suicidal too. Tequila swung the car hard left in panic and her wheels hit the high kerb at a glancing angle. The kerb was too high and too slippery for the wheels to climb, and the little car bounced back across the lane toward the massive truck wheels still thundering past her side window like grindstones waiting to crush her to pulp. The tops of the wheels were higher than her car, with the corner of the trailer's chassis even higher. The tray-back sliced through the air just inches away from her head. She screamed a third time, but this time stomped her foot hard down on the brake pedal. The wheels locked and the car slid out of control into the truck's lane just milliseconds after the last set of tires thundered past. For a split second the bonnet of her car was actually underneath the back end of the truck as her car spun a hundred and eighty degrees around, coming to an abrupt halt facing the wrong way up the empty centre lane.

Her engine stalled. Everything seemed to go quiet despite the rain beating on the windscreen and the rapid thud-thud-thud-thud-thud going on inside her chest. She glanced in the mirror. The back of the semitrailer had disappeared into a curtain of spray. The rain continued to bucket down. She saw her terrified face again in the flooded windscreen then the wipers sluiced it away. A hundred metres up the hill, traffic lights changed to green. Oncoming headlights flashed warnings at her to get out the way. Frantically, she re-started the car and did a desperate u-turn across all three lanes to find the nearest side street. As she turned off the highway, she took a last furtive look at the cotton palms then stopped the car. She took another Xanax. It was her sixth for the day.

For five minutes she just sat there with the engine running, shaking like a leaf, her eyes closed, waiting for the drug to work its magic. The image of her smashing

into the palms was gone, but it was replaced by a new, more vivid one of her feeble flesh and bones squashed into the gaping zigzag tire treads of the semitrailer, all bloodied and pink and oozing.

*You're a pathetic failure, Miss Travers-T,* said a voice in her head. It was her mother's voice, using the demeaning nickname she had cursed her with. *You can't even kill yourself properly. You always were a worthless, selfish, ungrateful creature. I rue the day you crawled out of my belly.*

The words echoed in her head until she finally acknowledged them, as always.

'Sorry, Mother,' she whispered. 'I'll try to do better.'

The drug took effect after five more minutes. Her fear subsided and her hands stopped shaking. Only Xanax could do that for her. She drove off slowly, never once thinking about crashing into anything, but the image of pulpy pink mincemeat filling black zigzag tire treads continued to fascinate her until she signalled a turn into the clinic car park.