

Portrait of Kurten

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 8

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Chapter 1

Winter bites at the walls as an icy wind whips down from the mountains, crosses the paddocks and hits hard at the side of the house. This day has been the coldest so far. There might not be much food in the house or money to buy it but thankfully the building has a roof overhead and there is plenty of wood to burn.

The mice that run through the house don't seem to care. They parade along the mildewed skirtings then vanish through cracks and holes. I watch them and smile, how simple their lives, strange creatures without possessions, so unknowing and unworldly.

Sleet skates suddenly across the window. It falls and catches my eye, a mix of ice and water on the sill. The view through the window, through the crazed and yellowed glass is bleak. Winter winds wreak havoc on the remaining scant bushes, the ones that have survived the years without care, and the few bare trees that stand like sentinels await patiently the onset of spring and promised buds of new life.

The room is cool and each new gust from outside sends a breeze below the door. Under my feet the uncovered boards are cold and hard and the high grey walls that surround, bare and stark. Beneath the mantle though there crackles a steady fire. It serves to take away the worst of the chill. I look at my hands. They are thin and bony like those of an old man and yet I am not old. My eye is drawn to them as the sun escapes from behind the clouds and flashes momentarily into the room, illuminating at once the skeletal knuckles and stick-like fingers that so surely hold my brush.

The sleet outside turns steadily to rain and again my attention is drawn to the glass. I rise and move to the window to take in the full view, a view all but gone through the deluge and low hanging clouds. A drip falls on the back of my neck and I look up to see the stained ceiling and the water gathering again above me. It is only during the heaviest and most constant rains that the ageing tin roof fails the house.

I move down the hallway to the kitchen. The tap drips over the steel trough and I turn the handle to fill a glass. The water is surprisingly clear, very cold, and gives me a headache as I drink it. I turn to the refrigerator and open the door. The fridge is very old with a tiny freezer box frosted fully with ice. Inside the fridge is half a loaf of bread, some milk, a tomato and two eggs. For the moment this is all I have left to eat and the weather doesn't look good for tomorrow's open market where I hope to sell a painting or two and so be able to pay my way a little longer.

And yet this is poverty I embrace. I see my position as fortunate. I have a landlady—no, a friend really—she has for some time inhabited the tired structure I also call home, a building with failing plumbing and sometimes dubious electrics. Owned by her absent uncle, this is a building that might normally be condemned. Nonetheless it's a home, and one she is happy to share with me without a fee. Not that I want to take advantage, and I do what I can to pay in other ways, light maintenance and gardening and keeping an eye on the place generally. Celeste is

happy with the arrangement. She is often away and is glad for the place to have a regular occupant. As for my own living necessities, food and clothing, medicine when required, transport and so on, these I cover myself through the sale of my oil paintings. And although the income from the sale of my works is unpredictable and irregular, I am more than happy. My life is finally real. I have been able to remove myself, distance myself, from the material and financial world that serves to govern most everybody's every action, a world that had, over time, grown increasingly repugnant to me the longer I spent shackled to it.

As I have said, my life is real, and because it is real I finally feel alive. Never have I been less secure in the way most people consider security. I have no money to fall back on and if my paintings don't sell then I don't eat, and that's just the way I would have it. It's simply this raw connection with survival, this fine line between life and death that in the end makes me feel alive. I want nothing for the comforts and trappings that money can bring. I care only for my art and for the basic essentials needed to sustain my life and my art. I do admit however that I am fortunate to have Celeste as a friend. Without the roof she provides I am aware the life I choose might prove too difficult to realize. The sales of my paintings could certainly never pay for ongoing housing of my own. Still, as I have often thought, I would find a way regardless, because that's the life force. I'd simply have to find a way, find another arrangement, perhaps even take some menial part-time work that still allowed time for art. I would find some other way to get by. I would have to, or I suppose I would die.

And so, because I've abandoned the conventional trappings of modern life, chosen this wonderful, soul enriching bohemian lifestyle, a life without money or luxury, without social or economic commitments and competitiveness, I'm truly free, as free as I can be at least, and so I embrace this poverty, and all the wealth it has brought and continues to bring my heart and soul.

As the old clock in the hallway clicks the hour (it no longer gongs, just clicks) I retake my seat and start blocking in the darkened areas around the eyes. The portrait is already looking good and although in reality it is way too early to tell, sometimes an artist just knows. The feeling is right. The vision is there from the outset and the notion that anything might go wrong is vanquished amidst a peculiar surge of confidence that stems from who knows where? And this particular painting has fortunately placed me in one of those moments. There is a voice inside my head that tells me this one will work.

Yet as I stare I now find there also lurks within me a different emotion, one that is strangely darker and less defined. There is something building here, something very odd in the way this picture makes me feel as it begins to take shape. I understand the portrait will work for me, that it will be a piece to make me proud, yet it unnerves me somehow, and at such an early stage in the work. I sit back for a moment and gaze wholly upon the portrait, the rough lines, and at the dark patches that will form the shadows of the face. At the same time I hear the weather as it beats against the outside walls of the house and see in my peripheral vision the grey sky through the glass. The weather is bleak. The day is cold. I have not seen or spoken to another human being in nearly a week. It all serves to unsettle me but in a way that I find hard to reconcile or be convinced of. I am not certain at all that my uneasiness is the result of this combination of elements.

Instead, as I gaze upon my unfinished portrait, I feel more and more it is the painting itself.

The outer door swings suddenly in and an icy blast whips through the room. I have not heard Celeste arrive but there she stands in the doorway, her eyes staring at me from somewhere back in her brain, two cameras focused amidst the dark recesses that house them. She is rugged against the elements and wears the same quilted jacket she has owned for all the years that I've known her. The hood is bound tightly around her head. She closes the door behind her with some effort against the arctic wind, lowers her hood in the same movement. She then dumps her bag on the floor and stands by the fire, removes her jacket and tattered gloves, then stretches her fingers. I ask her how she has been.

She doesn't tell me. She just says that she's cold and disappears into the kitchen. Next I hear the kettle groaning. Then it starts to hiss on the gas burner. Celeste returns with coffee for us both. She smiles faintly and places the mug on the table next to my paints. She stands behind me holding her drink with one hand, the other finding its way onto my shoulder and then the back of my neck. She gently massages the muscles there, knowing how they tighten when I sit for long periods. She sips her coffee and looks at the portrait that is consuming my time.

She says nothing and I say nothing to her; I just enjoy her touch. My eyes close as she works slowly the neck muscles between her thumb and forefinger. Days without human companionship can leave me savoring moments like these, little spoken, just the presence of Celeste in the room and the touch of her hand on my skin. Her hand slows until she is barely squeezing me at all. She is motionless behind me and I know she is studying the portrait. Still she says nothing but then suddenly abandons me and moves away to the fireplace. I ask her what's wrong and she tells me it's nothing but across her face there comes a sudden grey curse as she glances her deep set eyes away from me and back to the artwork. After a short while she shifts from the mantle to one of two tired armchairs and sits, her eyes now fixed on me, and the painting not visible to her from her position near the window.

I feel the gaze of Celeste as I continue with my work. She tells me if the weather is fine tomorrow she'll help me at the market. She has an old car and it will carry a dozen pieces to the common outside of town where we'll set up our little stall. I smile at her with gratitude.

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The new day comes on quietly enough. The wild wind has stilled at last and I'm woken by the glint of a bright sun through a tear in the blind. I lie there for a time, sensing that it's still early and besides I can't hear Celeste anywhere in the house. She must still be in bed.

I feel grateful the weather has improved. It helps ensure the market will draw a crowd, gives me some small chance of selling some artworks. I have selected a dozen local landscapes, all done in the last few weeks, hopeful they will appeal to the sentimentality of the townsfolk. Next month I will present a series of portraits of famous people, local and otherwise. In the time I've been going to the market my

paintings have been well enough received and each time, except for one market cut short by rain, I have sold more than the time before.

The sun has now risen above the tear in the blind so I decide it's time to rise. I throw back the mismatch of bed coverings, old blankets and clothing and stand stretching on the uncovered floor. One of our friendly mice scoots out from under the bed and vanishes behind the cupboard. I reach for my best trousers, such as they are, and having first removed the ones I slept in, put them on. I do the same with my shirt. Then I pull on a warm jumper, though I see it's thinning badly in the elbows.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table with a coffee when Celeste appears. Her hair is disheveled and the black rings still loom around her sunken eyes. She doesn't acknowledge me, just yawns and pours herself a coffee. She sits at the far end of the table then asks me how long after she turned in did I stay up working on the portrait. I tell her an hour or so. She stands and heads to the front room where I do my work. I follow her. Her eyes fix on the painting. The eyes and mouth are now done and I have begun to add the other facial features. Uneasiness seems to fill her and it is some time before she looks back, her dark eyes landing wholly on mine, her voice low when she speaks.

"Who is this?"

I tell her it's Peter Kurten, the Monster of Dusseldorf, a German serial killer from between the wars.

Chapter 2

Celeste's ageing car bursts to life after a few slow groans that leave me doubting whether we'll make the market at all. She says the cold is killing her battery. We back around and head down the hundred or so metres to the main road, the wheels bumping up and down on the rutted track. My paintings are stacked in the back, along with a fold up chair, and a card table that will serve as a counter between customer and me. Most times Celeste will leave me and go off around the other market stalls, seeing what she can find. She likes to buy homemade jams and preserves when she has the money.

As we go along I ask her how her trip was and whether her sister is getting better. There is no immediate answer. Celeste just stares ahead through the screen as the countryside flicks past. I look at her and it's as though I haven't spoken at all so I turn to my side window and gaze out at a few cattle grazing lazily across the way. I then spy a tree with striking spotted bark and branches that twist and turn in every direction. At once I get the idea to paint a series of unique looking trees, wondering if these might sell. After a moment I hear a short choking sound alongside, and when I turn to Celeste she tells me that her sister is dead, that her condition worsened during the week, that she passed away two nights ago. She then tells me she has to return in two days for the burial.

A few minutes pass without word. We come over a rise in the road and the market looms on our left. Celeste slows when she sees the people and the tents.

She noses the car in through the gate and a puddle from yesterday's rain splashes over the windscreen and bonnet. She stops the car in a parking spot close to the edge of the stalls. I thank her and tell her I don't know what to say about her sister. She tells me there is nothing that can be said. Her sister is gone and can't be returned. Together we climb from the car and start unloading.

Barely do I have my landscapes displayed when an old man approaches and makes a purchase. I can't believe my good fortune. Sometimes an hour or more will pass before anyone gives my work a sideways glance. The man looks closely at the piece as he digs out his wallet. He tells me he knows the place I painted, knew it when he was a kid. He used to play in that muddy gully he tells me, pointing with his finger and looking back at me. I tell him it's 'Farmer's Gully,' an eroded tract of land just north of town. He nods his agreement and hands me two crisp twenties from his wallet. Celeste smiles, though almost imperceptibly, then heads off around the other stalls. Despite the soft, muddy ground there are many people already in attendance and the sun is shining strongly overhead.

When a second painting sells soon after the first, my spirits are buoyed. By the time Celeste returns with a small number of jars, I have sold my third. She sees my pleasure and I see her eyes move from me to the remaining artworks. She is counting. She looks back at me and I smile as warmly as I know how and hold up three fingers. Celeste smiles back, mostly with her eyes, then shows me what she has bought. She then places the jars on the card table and surprises me when she leans her head against my shoulder, rests her open hand on my back. She moves away after that and sits on the fold up chair, reads a book she has brought along. I feel warmed by her quiet show of affection.

The end of the day comes and I have sold two more paintings. Although on the last piece I am beaten well down on the price, my sales have been better than I'd hoped. Had yesterday's weather continued I would be facing a lean time ahead indeed. Celeste though, I know, would refuse to let me go hungry. Happily I pull the small wad of notes from my pocket and show my friend. Again she softly smiles then packs up her chair. We start loading things back into the car. Ten minutes later we are motoring our way back along the road in the direction of our humble abode. As we pass through the town Celeste stops for a little fuel and I proudly pay for it. She at first refuses my offer but I insist. She is always paying for these things but not today.

I look out the side window as we drive along. The sun is falling below the horizon and burns a dull winter glow. As the night quickly gathers there is only half-light when we pull up at the house. I feel a sharp bite in the air as we each climb from the car. Celeste heads indoors with the card table and chair while I gather the remaining seven paintings. I shut the boot of the car and make my way for the house. As I do I see the outline of Celeste through the doorway. She stands quite still just inside the front room and seems to be fixated on something. I watch her for a moment then climb the few steps to the front porch and step inside. By then she's gone. The front room as I enter is lit by just the one dangling, undecorated overhead bulb. My painting of Peter Kurten stands in the centre of the room and for a moment I am startled as his staring eyes seem to capture mine. Quickly I pass the painting by and find Celeste standing motionless in the kitchen.

There is something peculiar in her gaze, something perhaps akin to fear. I ask her what's wrong. Those dark, deep-set eyes swing quickly across to me.

"His eyes were closed."

I don't know what she means and so I ask.

"The portrait," she tells me.

I frown. "The portrait?"

"Yes," she says, and her face turns paler than normal. "His eyes flicked open when I came through the door."

I feel my brow furrow further as I stare at her. A tiny rodent scampers across the floor between us and we hardly notice. I ask Celeste to come with me and we both return to the front room. I lift the incomplete work from its easel and turn it so we both can see.

"It disturbs me," she utters, her voice uncharacteristically rapid and a few notes higher than normal.

I look from her back to my artwork and feel again the peculiar uneasiness that beset me before Celeste returned from her trip away. It's ridiculous, I tell myself; this is a boxed canvas with a few splashes of paint. And yet I cannot deny there is something in the way these shapes and dark marks come together, and something more than that in the frightening mix of life and death that seems to linger in the eyes I have created.

Celeste says it again. "His eyes flicked open when I came through the door."

Even though I feel disturbed myself by the image, I know that what Celeste says is impossible. I try to explain it away by pointing out to her that she's tired, the darker than normal rings around her eyes tell me as much, that she's in a fragile, sensitive state, stressed no doubt by the death of her sister.

"I know what I saw," she says, quite slowly and deliberately, her voice now deeper, her gaze fixed on Peter Kurten.

I ask her, did she see it directly, or did the movement catch her eye?

She admits it caught her eye. "I saw it from the corner of my eye. And when I looked he was staring."

Celeste is plainly frightened by what she thinks she saw and I place my arm around her to give her comfort. I know that what she saw was a trick of the light, or a trick of her mind, or both. I guide my friend away to the kitchen and we sit together at the old chrome legged table. She is still distracted so I divert the subject to that of today's successful market. I tell how I can now afford to fill the pantry for us both, buy rice and pasta and ingredients for soup and bread making. I have learned through necessity to make money go a long way as far as foodstuffs go, and how to put together meals that are wholesome and at the same time inexpensive. Rice and pasta have become staples. Later in the year when the weather is warm my vegetable garden will come into its own and it will provide cauliflower and beans, broccoli, tomatoes, pumpkin, zucchini and a multitude of other crops.

Celeste looks at me from across the table and her face is tired and drawn. The look she shows is one of sadness and I know the death of her sister is driving her thoughts. Once more I tell her how sorry I am. She reaches across the table and holds my hands. She then smiles and tells me how stupid she is. I ask her why.

"The painting," she says, in a self-mocking tone. "As if the eyes could move."

I smile back at her while she still holds my hands. The light is all but gone from the kitchen and the shadows forming across Celeste's features give her a slightly Gothic appearance, her darkened eyes vanishing like stones into two bottomless pits. I become aware of the dull glow that filters up the hall, the bulb in the front room being the only light turned on. For a moment I turn my face to the glow. I see that its brightness builds down the length of the hall and strangely I feel it chill me. I somehow sense a presence at its end. I sense Kurten in the front room.

I turn back to Celeste. She's still holding my hands and now I'm holding hers back. I'm looking at her darkened form and I know she's looking at me, though I can't see her eyes.

Her voice comes at me from across the table, "How long is it since you've had a woman?"

My grip tightens a little and I feel Celeste's hands go clammy and cold.

My throat contracts and I tell her seven years. I'm still gazing at her black, unmoving silhouette.

"Will you sleep with me tonight?"

I stare deeply into the silhouette as she tells me that she needs to be held.

Meekly, I answer, yes.

The evening is getting cold now, and as Celeste prepares a dinner for us both, I light the open fire in the front room. Kurten's eyes fix on me from the moment I enter. I tell myself how stupid this is yet I find it hard to look away. I light the fire and go.

Our meal consists of eggs on toast. There is not much else until we shop tomorrow. Celeste takes the plates to the sink and scrubs them clean under running water, then lays them to drain. I ask her would she like a coffee and she accepts. She has hers strong and black. I need a little milk to take the edge off mine. We retire to the front room and I notice Celeste positions herself away from the portrait of Peter Kurten, where she cannot look directly at the piece. She picks up an old book from our pile on the floor and begins to read. I ask her if she is feeling okay. She says that she is then puts the book in her lap and smiles from across the room.

"I'm just so tired," she says. "I'll be glad when the burial is over."

I nod my head without speaking, and as she involves herself once more in her book I turn my attention to the portrait of Peter Kurten. I seem to have no choice in the matter. His eyes have been watching me from the moment I took my seat. I stare at him now and he stares back at me. I remember Celeste's words, and as ridiculous as it is, I watch for him to blink. I stare and I stare but of course he doesn't blink. Yet his eyes do call me. They gaze deeply into mine and they demand me of my time. They demand that I complete the work that I have started, that I finish what I have begun, that I bring life to the lifeless canvas that stands before me.

Not tonight though. I feel ill at ease despite the successful day that was had. No, I will not work on Kurten tonight. If I do I will get involved and stay up for hours. Aside from that, Celeste is uncomfortable with the piece and I would prefer not to work on it when she is home. Besides that, she has said she needs me tonight. She needs to be held. I cross the room and take a book from the pile, a Jules Verne tale I had begun some weeks ago. My bookmark is still sticking out. I return

to my seat and try to pick it up where I left off. Celeste smiles very faintly and for a moment I feel her watching me. Then the sensation is gone, and as she turns back to her page the only eyes I now feel upon me are those of Peter Kurten.

Chapter 3

Morning comes vaguely through the old blanket that is the blind in Celeste's room. She doesn't wake but turns away regardless from the growing light. She is now facing me and her eyes are closed. I hold her close and in her slumber she returns the favour. The day is now here and Celeste is sleeping peacefully still, with me alongside. Only once in the night did she stir. It was just after four according to the ageing digital clock alongside the bed.

"What was that?" she had asked in the night, still half-asleep and rolling herself against me.

I had heard the sound too, but then I had been awake for hours, my eyes fixed on the gloom of the ceiling, if not on that then on the faint outline of the window, the vague shape of the door. In the night I tell Celeste it is nothing, just go back to sleep. A minute later her regular breathing tells me she has done just that.

The sound comes again, as it has, on and off, for most of the night.

Finally though it's morning and Celeste and I lie together in the warm comfort of each other's arms. The glow of day grows stronger and as it does I feel myself relaxing at last into sleep. Hours pass before I return, and when I open my eyes Celeste is still there alongside, awake and watching me.

"I need to go back today," she tells me after a minute, "for the burial."

I look at her expressionless face, at her cement eyes that gaze back from within their darkened pits.

"But you said in two days. That was yesterday."

She tells me that she's ill at heart and needs to go today, that she needs this all to be over. I tell her it will make no difference; they will bury her sister tomorrow anyway. Celeste rolls onto her back and stares at the cracked and mottled ceiling. A spider is active in its web at the base of the light. Celeste is watching it and then I see her frown. Her head rolls back towards me.

"What was that noise in the night?"

I tell her I don't know, but that I heard it too. I feel her eyes still on me as I take my turn to focus on the ceiling. She speaks again, then lifts herself onto one elbow.

"Something moved in the house."

I tell her we need to be rid of the mice, as much as I do feel for them, that they are eating the house. I have heard them in the walls. They've been into the cupboards and the bedding too. I tell her they will make us sick. Celeste remains propped on her elbow.

"It wasn't mice," she says.

I say nothing in reply but keep my eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"There was something moving around."

I feel Celeste still staring. She exhales at last and falls back on her back. She then rolls a joint and lights it. The sweet smell travels to my nose. She passes it to me and smiles.

“I like your vegie garden.”

I draw it into my lungs and feel calmed and relaxed almost immediately. I smile back at Celeste. Now we’re both smiling. I pass our little luxury back to her and then I speak.

“I don’t know what it was Celeste. It’s an old house. They make noises in the night.”

I know that I’m lying to my only friend, but not entirely. I can’t be perfectly sure what made those noises in the night, but I know it wasn’t the house, and I know it wasn’t vermin either. Like Celeste, I had heard movement. As well as that, I know it came from the front room. The first noise had woken me, and as it never came again while I lay there in wait, I dismissed it and went back to sleep. Then it woke me again and this time I heard shuffling too. I had lain awake from that point on, and as I lie here in bed now with my only friend alongside, I know I cannot destroy the portrait. I have a calling within me to finish what I have begun. From the outset I knew this was right. Finally for me, a masterpiece.

Soon I rise and move to the window, pull the blanket a little aside and stare at the day. Celeste lies in bed and watches me. She asks me how it is. I tell her overcast and grey, a little drizzly. A good day for travel, she says. The room is cold and I tell Celeste to stay in bed while I get the fire going. I move down the hall and into the front room and am drawn immediately to the portrait of Peter Kurten. He stares back at me through cold and contemptuous eyes.

“How did you sleep?” I feel inclined to ask, as I watch him.

Never before have I painted eyes such as these and I find it difficult to look away. But I do. I turn and stoke the fire and a faint orange glow shines through the coals. I place some small pieces of dry wood on top and soon they take. I then place a few larger pieces on the pile and watch for some minutes until the fire is again crackling.

Within minutes Celeste is in the room. She is yawning and her hair is disheveled. Although the fire is now putting out some warmth she pulls her robe tight. I see her eyes flick quickly to the portrait. She then looks at me and then away, looks around the room. I tell her everything is fine, and it is. I cannot see that anything is different to how it was last night. We both have a coffee by the fire and again I see that Celeste positions herself away from Kurten’s gaze.

“I’m going into town,” she says, “before I leave today. I’m going to get us some food.”

I reach into my pocket and hand her some money. She tells me no but I insist. I tell her I love my job and because I love my job I can also love my poverty. When I do have money I pay my way. She smiles and gently takes the cash.

“You have enough to pay for,” I say to her. “You have a car to run and you have to get to the burial and back again.”

She nods and her eyes look weary in their dark pits. She finishes her drink and rises to leave for the shops. As I hear her tired car drive away I feel keen to start again on my portrait. But no, I will wait till Celeste has left for the burial. She’ll be gone for a day or two and in that time I will have it done.

Before too long, maybe an hour, Celeste returns and I help her inside with the bags. Although the pantry is not filled, we at least have enough to get by. Immediately she says that she's going. She grabs a bag from her room and leaves. From the window I watch as her car disappears down the track. Suddenly I feel quite alone. Then I turn and see Kurten's eyes fix upon me.

Those deathly grey eyes watch me as I take my seat and reach for my brushes. It won't be long before I need to replace some of these, I think to myself. I have scissors on the table that were given me by my mother and I trim away a few stray hairs before I start. Methodically I mix my paints and spread dabs around the old china plate that serves as my palette, a variety of facial shades.

Over the next half hour Peter Kurten comes further to life, his face rising more from the canvas with each passing minute. I feel a shiver, not one of fear so much at the face that I'm creating, but one of exultation as I see the creation of the work for which I have so long waited. Soon I reach a point where I can go no further. Nothing compels me to push, to change anything about the face that stands on the easel before me. Most always I second guess my work, look at it so long that I see flaws and feel compelled to make changes. Sometimes the changes are for the better, as often as not, they are not. I stare into the face of Peter Kurten and know that I have it right. It is perfect and for the moment I cannot look away.

After a time I rise and head to the kitchen. I need coffee, and although the brand is cheap, this is one luxury I would not like to give up. The rush it will give will complement my feelings of euphoria. I take it back with me to the easel and retake my seat. I see Kurten staring at me, analysing me, assessing my weaknesses, my strengths, my vulnerabilities, my threat to him perhaps—through cold and insensitive shark-like eyes. I stare back for as long as I'm able but his will is stronger than mine and I look away. I take a mouthful of coffee and feel as the caffeine kicks my heart. Moments later I look back at the canvas but avoid as much as I can Kurten's eyes. There is still his hair that needs to be done but before that some more work on the background. I'm still full of inspiration and determination and for now it overrides the increasing uneasiness I feel building within me.

I work on the background, using a dabbing sponge technique I developed myself. It provides a mottled effect without brushstrokes. I have used it before and always find the results very good. Very soon the darkness builds in back of the picture, and behind where Kurten's hair will be. Methodically I work away and feel myself absorbed in the project yet again, still trying as best I can to avoid Kurten's eyes. I start now to dab in the basic hair colour and shape, then work on detail.

After a time I reach a point where I decide to let the portrait go until tomorrow. That will give the oil paint some time to at least partly dry. It will allow me some time too to step away and come back in the morning with fresh eyes and complete my work. I sit back in the chair and give the painting an overall viewing. My eyes move to every part of the work except Kurten's eyes - and yet I feel them on me, as I always do. Eventually I succumb and my stare meets his. I feel an urgent jolt in my heart in the instant our eyes meet, for I believe I see a momentary glint. A second later it's gone and I stare into the lifeless, death eyes of Peter Kurten. As I sit I see that glint over and over in my mind, a moment of mirth perhaps in a

killer's madness. The portrait is wondrous and although it now begins to disturb me deeply, I can't help but feel great satisfaction at the nearly completed piece.

I sit a little longer feeling more uncomfortable, finding that I'm now unable to look away from the eyes I have created. I hold them in place with mine, knowing they won't stray, not while I stare at them. I also figure that if I never look away I need never again fear the moment when our eyes first meet, for that is surely the worst.

This goes on for a minute or two until I think to myself how ridiculous this is, so now I do look away. But then I lift the easel and place it on the floor and face Kurten towards the front door. I won't be heading that way tonight so there is no chance of Kurten's gaze catching mine, no eyes on me too when I re-enter the room from the hallway. In the instant I turn his face away I feel a flooding sense of relief, freedom at last from his stare.

I now tidy my work area a little and notice for the first time today, a mouse. It emerges from a gap in the skirting board that abuts the front door jamb, shoots under my legs, across the room and into the hall. I quickly peek up the hall in time to see it vanish beneath the back door and be gone. From this point on, there are no more sounds in the walls, no more tiny feet scurrying across the floor. The mice are gone. My brow furrows as I gaze at the back door.

Chapter 4

The day wears on and I have not re-entered the front room where the portrait of Kurten sits. I now sit at the old kitchen table, playing patience with a deck of cards. The house is eerily silent with the mice gone; silent but not empty. I sit in the kitchen and Kurten sits on his easel, gazing his hollow, soulless eyes at the front door. I see him in my mind's eye; the image of him sitting alone has been the backdrop to my thoughts for hours. I lift my joint from its resting place and inhale a little more of the sweet, peace-giving nectar. I feel wonderful now, and my portrait is nearly done. Tomorrow will see it completed. I watch the smoke float away into the light overhead and I smile to myself, then laugh a little as I remember the uneasiness I had felt earlier, brought on by a painting I was creating myself. Such lonesome lunacy, I think to myself. And Celeste had felt that too. How crazy we must be. I laugh a little more.

As dusk bears down, the sunlight that has struggled all day through a dreary sky fades away and the house grows increasingly cold. I'm hungry now and start preparing some vegetables for a meal. There are potatoes in the cupboard. I peel some and set them boiling, some beans in another pot. I then head down the hall to stoke up the fire in the front room. I should not have left it for so long. As I get nearer there is no warmth coming up the hall. The fire could well be out. I enter the room and am struck by the chill therein. Yes, the fire has gone out; natural light has drained away almost completely and there are no coals glowing in the darkened recess. Night is coming down quickly now, and as the remaining light glows vaguely in the window I see the black outline of the scant furniture, of my

worktable in the centre of the room and the distinct shape of my canvas standing on its easel by the front door. I switch on the overhead light and am struck at once by the face of Peter Kurten, turned away from the door now and fixed upon me.

Again I see a glint in his eye, faint but there in the instant of recognition it would seem, then gone. He stares at me still and my heart thumps a little as I reach for a chair. My knees have gone slightly weak. I gaze back at Kurten, fixated, unable to look away. How can this be so, I ask myself? I begin to theorize, attempt to explain it away—I did not sleep well last night, I painted today, I'm weary, and perhaps I never faced the portrait to the door—just thought I did, and that's all. Yes, surely, that's it. My eyes are still on the face of Peter Kurten. There is now no glint in his eye, no recognition, no life. But is that the tiniest look of mirth I see, something restrained about the mouth? I did not paint that. I did not put humour in this evil face. I bury my own face in my hands and then look back. The humour is gone from his expression and I thank God—if there be such a thing.

I calm myself a little, attempt again to rationalize events. I think back to when Celeste had said Kurten's eyes had opened when she entered the room. As best I could I had dismissed that as a product of Celeste's own weariness and stress. Yet I cannot deny the uneasiness that has built within me as this painting has developed. I cannot deny the noises in the night, the noises we both heard, and now I try with all my might to remember which way I had faced that canvas when I left the room earlier today. I wrack my brain but the memory is not clear. I am still gazing at Kurten's face. It is dead now—motionless, emotionless, gazing back at me—nothing more than oil paint on canvas. I run my fingers through my hair and start to chuckle. Then I laugh aloud at this absurdity, that an oil painting could scare me. I sit back and gaze light-heartedly at the portrait I create, at the blank expression that stands before. And then I see it again, that momentary spark in his eyes, or do I? In the instant it arrives it is gone, and in that same instant I remember too that the mice have fled the house.

I keep my gaze on Kurten and still there is nothing there. There never was. This is absurd. The light, as it changes, moves across the painting and changes the way it looks. That is all. As I try to believe these things I rise and take my eyes away from the stony stare of Peter Kurten. I move to the fireplace and restock the pile. I then relight the fire and it takes quickly enough. The whole time I keep my eyes away from the portrait but keep the canvas in the corner of my eye. Once the fire is wholly alight I set my gaze again on Peter Kurten. But this time as I reach and turn his canvas to the door, as I take those godless eyes away, I make a mental note that I am doing this. I stand then and move away then look down at the easel and the back of the canvas. Yes, Kurten is facing the door. I turn and switch off the light. The flames lick high under the mantle and the firelight flickers throughout the room. I head back to the kitchen to tend my meal.

My pots are bubbling away on the stove. From the fridge I take two small slices of cold meat, leftover from a meal Celeste did not finish. These will go with my vegetables. I drain the potatoes and mash them with a fork, then scoop them onto a plate with the beans and the meat. The house is deathly silent as I sit and eat my meal.

I am almost finished when I hear it come, a small thump and a faint scraping sound from the front room. Putting down my knife and fork I slowly make my way

along the darkened passage, see the flickering flames on the wall as I enter the room, and see Peter Kurten turned once more and watching me through the half-light.

For more than a fleeting moment my heart stops in my chest and I reach quickly for the light. As it comes on I see again the mirth on Kurten's face. In my peripheral vision I see the fire as it glows beneath the mantle and for a split second I consider throwing the canvas onto the flames. But I can't. The art is too pure, the portrait too perfect. I cannot destroy my masterpiece, because tomorrow it will be finished and will be my crowning achievement. Yet, as I stare, I feel something well in my eyes, tears of frustration, tears perhaps of fear, I'm not sure. Certainly I am feeling scared. I do not understand this at all, for how can this be happening? And how will I sleep tonight?

In the corner of the room is an old wooden chest with a latch. I drag my eyes away from the portrait and fix them on the box. I then look back at the canvas. Yes, it will fit. I approach the painting and lift it from the easel, take it across the room and place it gently, face up, in the wooden box. I then close the lid and clip the latch into place. In the kitchen I find a padlock with a key and I lock the box shut for the night.

I return now to the kitchen. My body feels cold and clammy and with fidgeting fingers I roll another joint. The flame from the match quivers in the cold air before me. My mental savior then ignites with a crackle. I draw the smoke into my body and quickly feel its soothing effect. I so wish Celeste were here although I know these goings on would frighten her. But dammit, they're frightening me too and worse because I'm here alone. Again I consider burning the portrait but it will break my heart to do it. I sit still and draw quietly on the smoke. Already I'm feeling more at peace. I think of Kurten inside that dark box, just like the real Peter Kurten must surely be. In my mind's eye I see myself closing the lid, with the portrait inside, then snapping the latch and locking it tight. I see the key for the padlock on the table before me. Rest easy, I tell myself, Kurten is locked away for tonight.

I look at the kitchen window and can see nothing whatever through it. It is wholly dark outside now and all is so very quiet and still. All I see as I gaze at the window is my own reflection as I sit at the table, a coil of smoke periodically escaping my mouth and floating to the ceiling. The image captivates me and as I watch my face in the glass I wonder how I came to look this way, my face a portrait itself, a study in light and shade. Like Celeste's eyes, mine too are lost in darkened caverns, recessed far into the shadowy holes of my head. I smile and my smile looks strange and freaky so I keep doing it, keep watching, and soon I start to laugh a little. I don't know why I'm laughing. There is something in the way that I look. My nose is looking strange. My image is pulsing. It all goes on for a while then I take a final drag and hold it inside me for as long as I can, then slowly exhale.

The joint is now done and I put the remains in the ashtray on the table, sit back and enjoy the buzz and comfort of the hard kitchen chair. All is peaceful and the house is so quiet that it hums in my ears. I think again of Kurten, locked away in his box, angry and fuming perhaps, and I smile at my own diseased mind, for how can any of this be real?

Now I am feeling tired and decide to call it a night. The warmth from the fire in the front room has begun radiating along the hall and into the kitchen. I decide to put one more log on the pile and hopefully still have some embers by morning. I head down the hall, the dull glow from the fire still faintly lighting the doorway as I approach. I enter the room and turn on the light. My eyes go straight to the easel and thankfully it stands bare. I look now at the wooden chest, the padlock still in place, my wonderful burgeoning portrait locked safely within. I feel a sense of relief. Had Kurten been sitting on his easel, staring back at me, I might have run screaming into the night. I turn my attention to the fireplace. The fire has burned down a little and the coals glow beautiful and orange. I turn off the light and squat in front of the fire, watch as the coals radiate hypnotically before me.

I am staring, trancelike into the embers and time runs away from me. I have no idea how long I stare but at last I reach for a log and as I place it on the coals a thousand tiny sparks launch up from the fire bed and die out under the mantle. The bark on the log crackles as the fire takes and the log comes alight. I stand now as the darkened room flickers to its glow and cross the room to the box that holds the portrait of Peter Kurten. I bend down and touch the lid with the flat of my hand, bid my friend inside goodnight.

As I do I feel a sudden thump inside the box - then another. I jump back and lose my footing, fall to the floorboards and stare, bug-eyed at the box.

A full minute goes by, maybe two, and my eyes do not move from the box.

Slowly I get to my feet. It seems that all is calm again and so I edge my way to the door, still watching. There is nothing more; the box has not moved and there are no more sounds. My skin has again gone cold and clammy, and as my feelings of uneasiness return, I make my way to bed.

Chapter 5

For some hours I lie awake, watching the darkened ceiling above me, if not that then through the glass the vague hint of an outside world. The night is eerily calm, not a breath of wind outside, and I'm glad, for my ears are on high alert, listening for any sound unnatural, any noise out of the ordinary.

Hour follows hour and the only sound that sometimes breaks the silence is the fridge in the kitchen kicking in and out. Kurten is asleep in his box, or maybe dead from suffocation. My mind replays all the strange events that have happened as his portrait has inched towards completion. My skin crawls at the memory of seeing Kurten twice turned on the easel, watching me smugly as I re-enter the front room. I then feel a thump in my chest as I recall the sounds that came from within the wooden chest when I touched it with the flat of my hand and bade this new companion goodnight.

All of it madness, I spend too much time alone. None of this can be real. That I want to believe, and perhaps I could, if not for Celeste having also been privy to the goings on. I'll be glad when the dawn comes and I rise up and complete the portrait. Slowly now I drift to sleep.

Sometime later, morning does come and I'm woken by the grey light through the window in my room. Oddly enough, I have slept well for the last few hours. I lie for a time and listen. There are still no strange noises, just the sound from the fridge in the kitchen, and now the chirping of birds outside.

I climb from my bed and pull an old jumper over the clothes I have slept in. I head for the front room and feel relieved to see that all is as I left it, the easel bare of its portrait, the wooden chest containing it still padlocked and against the far wall. The fire lives on, I see, as I stir the ashes with a poker. There is the normal morning chill throughout the house and so I put some wood on the coals and head out to the kitchen for coffee.

I take the coffee back with me into the front room, set it on my table, then with the key to the padlock, open the box that holds my work. Nervously I swing the lid up and the face of Peter Kurten stares back at me. It appears void of expression, just stares lifelessly back. There is no glint in the eye, no hint of recognition, no smirk on the lips, no anger at being locked away either. I feel relieved. I lift him from his overnight tomb and position him carefully on the easel and back atop my work table. Staring into his face I take a slurp of my coffee. I study what needs to be done today to finish my finest work of art. It is only the hair, and only then some minor detail, no more than half an hour to completion. On my palette I mix the paints to the required shade and add some lighter and darker variations as well. The fire warms my back as I prepare for the final strokes.

I touch the canvas with the first brush stroke and immediately my attention switches from Kurten's hair back to his eyes. I freeze for a moment before him. I gaze intently into those cold, dark eyes. Something changed in the moment the brush touched the portrait. Kurten's eyes are suddenly alive again, full of recognition of me, watching me in return. And so once more I start feeling quite unnerved, but I won't be put off.

"Good morning," I say to him, in a low voice.

There is no answer of course, no change in that which stands before me, just that familiar sensation of another presence in the room, of my not being alone.

I continue on. Kurten doesn't seem to mind, and before very long I sit back and study minutely my finished masterpiece. I feel a rush as I realize its perfection, as I know in my heart there is nothing about this that I need to address, no second-guessing this piece. It's perfect.

I find it difficult to look away. The face of Peter Kurten is complete and stands on the easel before me. How incredible it looks, how real, how very lifelike. Yes, I think to myself, as my smile weakens a little and my gaze intensifies; how disturbingly lifelike this is. I lean into the face before me. I can see right into those eyes and they stare right back into mine, brashly and without care. I feel my stomach churn very slightly and I sit back. Then I stand, still watching Kurten's face but now feeling somewhat ill. I turn and move away to the door. At the doorway I turn and look at him again then quickly head to the kitchen, pull out a chair and sit, away from Kurten, away from those eyes. I start to perspire and my heart begins to pound. The absolute reality of that face, now it is complete, replays over and over in my mind. I gasp a little for air.

I reach for the makings and roll a little something to calm me down. As my fingers nervously work I ponder what to do with the painting I have just

completed. My art is what drives me but so does my need to eat. I painted Kurten to sell at the market, the first of a series of planned portraits. I inhale now and feel the soothing effect almost straight away. Slowly I let it out and watch as the cloud dissipates around me. The thing is, I don't think I can let the portrait of Kurten go. It is, as I sensed it would be, my greatest work. But too great I now fear, too great for me to release into an unknown world. Too frightening too to unleash on someone unsuspecting, for I know there is something not of this world in this painting. I cannot let this portrait go, yet what am I to do? I can't keep it here either. It's too unsettling to have near and Celeste, having also felt its ominous nature, would not allow it. But I cannot destroy the work; my portrait of Kurten is alive.

I sit and ponder the situation some more, the joint crackling gently each time I take a drag, my body now feeling light and easy. I remember the box, the wooden chest, Kurten's bed last night. That is the only place for him I decide. I cannot sell him. I cannot give him away. I cannot destroy him. All I can do is keep him locked away, take him out occasionally and ponder that incredible face, those frightening, deathly eyes. Yes, that's what I'll do.

Chapter 6

Dusk is closing in as I hear Celeste's car in the distance, growling through its leaky exhaust and bumping along the uneven track that leads to our door. I lift myself from the chair near the crackling fire, put down the novel I've continued reading throughout the afternoon and make my way to the window. Through the gathering gloom I see my friend emerge from her car, looking tired and worn, her face a mix of dark shades. She comes to the door and I open it. She looks at me without expression and pushes past and into the front room. A cold breeze follows her through the doorway, stopping just as suddenly as I swing the door against it. It's just as well I restocked the firewood this afternoon; the night will be cold. Celeste pushes her stringy hair away from her face and sets her darkened eyes upon me.

"It's over," she tells me. "She's underground now. In a wooden box."

How ironic, I think to myself, and my eyes catch sight of the wooden box where Kurten lies once more, asleep in his own dark world. Celeste sees me look at the box but makes no comment about it.

"Where's the stuff," she asks. "I need the stuff."

"The kitchen," I tell her, and she goes on through. I hear her dump her bag and by the time I join her at the kitchen table she already has the joint made and is lighting it. She exhales and gazes at the ceiling. I tell her I'm sorry for her sister being dead. She tells me it doesn't matter anymore. She then asks how my painting is going. I tell her it's done and locked away in the wooden chest. Her eyes fix on me, barely visible in their blackened recesses.

"Can I see it?"

I feel some slight panic. Celeste passes her joint to me and I take a draw, then hand it back.

“Come on,” I then say, and we both head for the front room and I turn on the overhead light.

I fumble in my pocket for the padlock key. Celeste looks curiously at the lock.

“You think someone will steal it?” she asks.

I don’t answer her. I just hoist up the lid, then gasp. Kurten’s eyes are closed but open as the lid lifts, then fix on me. Instant recognition, the glint I have come to know. Celeste has not seen it this time but now recoils as Kurten spots her and his gaze shifts. He fixates on my female friend and I am no longer in the room. Celeste groans her horror and I slam the lid shut. With shaking hands I relock the box. I feel the blood drain from me and turn to find Celeste collapsed on her behind on the floor, panicked.

“What in God’s name have you done?” she sputters.

I feel meek before her accusation. But really, what have I done? I have painted a portrait, nothing else.

“It’s not what I have done Celeste,” I answer. The air seems gone from my lungs as I add, gasping, “It is what I have *not* done. I have not destroyed this.”

At this there is a sudden hammering inside the box and we both jump back. It doesn’t subside until I add, “I can’t destroy this. This is my masterwork.”

Celeste shifts her eyes from the box to me then leaves the room. I follow her through to the kitchen.

“That thing is alive,” she spits, her fingers deep in her straggly, dank hair.

“Yes,” I answer her, the only answer I can give.

Her heart is hammering, I can tell, and as she steadies herself on the back of the chair her breathing is audible. I move around to offer support but she pulls away, leans back against the sink. When she speaks her dark eyes are down and her voice is husky and low.

“You can’t keep that thing here.”

I know she is right and I knew she would say this, but what can I do? I don’t understand this any more than she does and it scares me too, but I think that maybe this can be managed. I take a step towards her and she recoils again as though I am Frankenstein and that oil painting locked away in the wooden box is my monster. Perhaps in a way she’s right.

“Celeste,” I say to her, “I know you’re right. This has been freaking me out too. I can’t explain this at all, but I know I’ll never be able to create anything like this again. Listen to me Celeste; in this I have somehow found perfection.”

Celeste becomes frantic now, her fingers of both hands clutching at her dreadful hair. Her voice is raised to fever pitch.

“It looked at me,” she screams. “That goddam thing looked at me.”

We stare at each other, and for a minute or two we say nothing, the both of us just staring, lost I suppose in our own thoughts. Then we are seated at the table, opposite each other, the dusty, bare bulb glowing overhead. Kurten is silent in the front room. I look at Celeste. She seems to be calming now. She looks to be collecting herself a little. She grabs for the makings and rolls herself another joint. She then pushes them over to me.

“Make your own, I’m not sharing,” she says, and lights it.

I decide I do want one too and I grab for the stuff and start making my own. Celeste has taken a couple of pulls by the time mine is done. She leans back in the chair, watches the smoke rise into the light, then looks over and surprises me when she smiles.

“What?” I say back at her, forcing a smile of my own.

She looks at the ceiling again, the smile fading, then back at me.

“So what are you,” she asks, her voice still rather strained, “some kind of genius?”

I see then that she shudders as a chill passes through her, and she adds, “Because I’ve never seen anything like this in my life.”

I tell Celeste I’m no genius, that all I did was paint a portrait. She quietly draws in the smoke and I can see now that she’s more relaxed than she was. I’m starting to feel the same way. I tell her that I’m glad she’s back, that it’s been a strange couple of days. She looks back at me but still with a degree of uncertainty. We seem to be getting lost now in the smoky, wonderful haze of the room. As I look at Celeste her face is pulsing in and out, hurtling at me and falling back, hurtling at me and falling back. But through it all she doesn’t change. Her skin remains the pale, broken leather of an old car seat, her eyes stay sunk in their darkened wells, and her stringy, limp hair falls without design across her face.

“And so you keep him in the chest?” she suddenly asks.

I tell her, yes.

“And you keep it locked?”

Again I tell her yes, that he was locked in there last night.

Slowly Celeste nods. Then she shakes her head.

“No, this is all too weird,” she says, and I hear some panic rising again in her voice. “You gotta get rid of that thing. Burn it.”

I feel turmoil building within me. I cannot get rid of my masterpiece. If it goes then I must go too. But where would I go? I have a sudden vision of myself in a darkened laneway, in ragged clothes, warming my hands over a fire drum, sleeping behind an old dumpster, every day fighting away the drunks who would steal or destroy my paintings.

“Celeste, please.”

She rolls her eyes away, takes another draw and slowly exhales. Her face softens a little.

“Then you gotta promise that thing stays locked in the box,” she says firmly. She then dumps her remains in the ashtray. “But if it all starts getting too weird around here it’s just gotta go.”

I don’t answer but a feeling of relief goes through me and I smile at my friend. The whole room is pulsing around me now, not just Celeste. I inhale my last, trying to get all I can from what there is. I get to my feet and head for the front room to stoke up the fire. I hear Celeste’s chair grind across the floor and I feel her behind me as I make my way down the passage. The fire has burned down a bit, bright orange coals and a few low flames. The dark room dances rhythmically to its glow. Celeste flicks the switch as soon as she gets to the room and it fills with unnatural light. She steps ahead of me and fixes her eyes on the box but doesn’t approach it. I suppose she’s just seeing that the padlock is secure. She stays near the door a moment or two then heads back to the kitchen while I stock up the fire

with wood. As I stand to leave I too look at the box. It sits serenely and silently against the far wall. I return to the kitchen. Celeste is boiling some pasta. I lean in the door jamb and watch her. Nothing is pulsing now but I feel relaxed.

“Do you want some of this?” she asks coolly, without looking up.

“Yes, please,” I answer.

As she stirs she asks where the mice have gone and I tell her they left. For a moment she stops what she’s doing and her hand hovers above the pot. A few seconds later she starts stirring again.

“At least we don’t have to share our food,” I say.

Celeste makes no reaction, sees nothing humorous in that. She turns and pulls out a chair and sits again at the table, her fingers back in her hair as she stares at nothing. She then turns to me and speaks.

“So is that what you’re going to do then, keep it locked in the box?” There is still some panic in her voice but she’s trying to hide it.

Yes, what am I going to do with it, I wonder? I gaze back at her stricken face and know I have no answer to give. My stomach is churning. What in God’s name have I created here? The wind outside gets up suddenly and whips under the eaves, whistling ever so lightly.

“Well?”

I tell her I don’t know; that all I know is the portrait of Kurten lies locked in the wooden chest in the front room and while we leave it alone it’s as though it doesn’t exist. Celeste is unconvinced and shakes her head.

“I can’t go into that room,” she says softly.

I tell her everything will be okay, that she will get used to the portrait being in there. What harm can there be with it locked in the box?

I watch her and can see that she’s getting worked up again.

“Put it under the house then,” she says to me. “For God’s sake, this is my home.”

I look at Celeste’s poor, exhausted face. What a week she has had, first with the burial and now with this.

“Okay,” I say to her, “but can I do it tomorrow? It’s dark now.”

She nods but without any change of expression, then gets up once more and stirs the pasta.

Chapter 7

It’s three in the morning. I’m squinting at the clock on Celeste’s side of the bed. Again she has told me she needs company in the night. I know she’s unsettled by all that has gone on, by the death of her sister and the burial, but most of all I fear, by the portrait of Peter Kurten. She doesn’t want to be alone in her room and I really can’t blame her. I hear her sleeping alongside me now, her breathing regular, unlike the erratic gasping that followed her seeing the completed portrait as it lay in its box, looking back at her.

So what is it that has woken me? I'm really not sure but now I find that I'm quite awake. Either way I need to go to the toilet. I lay still, hoping the urge will pass. Of course it doesn't and the clock shows 3:17 when I finally give in and climb out into the darkness of the room. The room is very cold and I'm glad to be fully clothed, as I am every night this time of year. The wind is gusting outside, whipping under the eaves in a low and ghostly howl, and I hear the odd spatter of rain against the glass and on the corrugated tin roof. Quietly I pull back the bedroom door. It doesn't close anymore. The structure has shifted over the years and like so many of the doors in the house, wedging it in the jamb is the best we can do. It creaks as I pull it back and behind me I hear Celeste grumble and roll over. Rubbing my eyes I slowly make my way along, then relieve myself in the dark little room off the back porch.

As I come back in and start making my way back to bed I stop at the top of the hallway. The hall glows before me, flickering with light from the fire in the front room. I stare curiously for a time; the fire should have burned down by now, be just smoldering embers at best. I start making my way along and the warmth radiates out of the room. When I get to the doorway I see the whole room aglow, feel the warmth pouring out. I step into the room. The fireplace crackles and burns, the flames licking high under the mantle, the pile freshly restocked. I turn my attention to the wooden chest that holds the portrait. I see that it's still securely locked. I take a tentative step towards it and feel a great sense of unease as I do, but yes, the box is just as we left it. Confused, I look at the crackling fire once more then slowly turn to make my way out of the room. The wind outside is still gusting and the rain is beating lightly now on the front door. I am almost out of the room when in amongst all the sounds from the weather I hear a low voice. I feel chilled in the spine and stand rooted, listening for it to come again. Perhaps it was the wind under the eaves or whistling in the gutters.

But it comes again and this time there is no mistaking it, a human voice, and coming from behind me. I turn and face the box, take a step back towards it, then another, and soon I am crouched beside it.

In a whisper I say, "What?"

The voice comes again, words spoken lowly from within the wooden chest.

Bringe mich die frau.

I recoil from the box as Celeste had earlier. I groan involuntarily and move to the safety of the doorway. The flames continue to lick high under the mantle and dance light across the walls. Again my eyes fall on the padlock. It is fixed. There is nothing I can do right now and so I turn to leave. My body is cold with sweat. As I head back down the hallway the words come again, louder this time, more assertive:

Bringe mich die frau.

There is no more sleep for me tonight. I lie on my back, my eyes fixed on the ceiling as so often they have been of late. *My God, it spoke.* I cannot believe what is happening in this house. I am lying still, not hot, not cold, just strangely numb, in total disbelief at what has just happened. I think of the words that were spoken, *bringe mich die frau.* I have no idea what that means but am determined to remember the phrase, to find out the meaning tomorrow. Certainly it was German.

I have heard German words, German accents too. The accent was German. Now my body chills again, for Peter Kurten was German. In the dark of night my hands come to my face. My eyes are closed tight and my teeth are clenched. The wind whips wild slashes of rain against the house and my tears force their way out of shut eyes. I feel so nauseous that I might be sick. What in God's name have I created and where will this lead?

The wild weather keeps up for the rest of the night but as dawn brings light to Celeste's bedroom there comes some relief. The wind dies down as the light outside grows and by the time Celeste awakes it is calm. She looks at me briefly then closes her eyes again. I quietly pull myself out of bed. I need coffee and I need grass. I make my way to the kitchen and begin to organize both. While the kettle is heating I head back down the hall. The fire has died down, I can tell, there is no heat radiating from the room. Barely though do I get to the doorway when, from the wooden chest on the far side of the room, those words come at me again, *bringe mich die frau*.

"Shut up," I yell at the box, stopping dead in the doorway and grabbing at my hair with my hands.

It's then that I hear Celeste behind me and I gesture for her to stay in the hall. She does, but leans forward and whispers, "Why did you yell?"

At the sound of Celeste's voice the words come again, louder this time, more urgent. I hear Celeste groan as she jumps back.

Bringe mich die frau.

There comes a mad hammering from the box and the words are repeated once more, louder still, the voice inside now manic with rage. I lunge for the box and pick it up, make a rush for the front door. There are tears streaming down my face and the hammering and yelling from inside the box continues. I hear Celeste moaning and crying in the hall as I run down the steps and shove the box as far under the house as I can reach. I stumble backwards after that and struggle to find air for my lungs. Then I double over and throw up what little there is in my stomach.

On all my fours, the mud from overnight rain coating my hands and soaking into my clothes, I stare at the wooden box just ten feet away but now under the house. The yelling and thumping has stopped and the box lies peacefully at rest. I sit back and recover a little and as I do I see a concrete block in the grass. I lift it, scramble back under, and place it on the chest. I expect a reaction but there is none. I look at the padlock and see that it's still secure.

I back out then make my way up the steps and into the house to find Celeste curled into a ball and crying. She is shaking and tears are pouring from the dark pits of her eyes when she looks up at me.

"What does he want from me?" she pleads. Her voice is strained.

I fall back against the other wall and stare at her. I am stunned by everything.

She pushes her hair back, sniffs hard and wipes her eyes. "Bring me the woman," she then says.

I stare at her and she can see that I don't understand.

"That's what he was saying," she shrieks at me. "Bring me the woman. What does he want with me?"

Celeste knows German. I had forgotten that. I hear the words of Kurten again, rising out of the box. *Bringe mich die frau*. They replay over and over in my head. My head zones out. I hear that voice, those words in German again and again.

Celeste brings me back. She is screaming at me now, throwing things at me. "Get rid of it. Get rid of it." I grab her and take her in my arms and this time she doesn't pull away. Instead she just howls into my shoulder. Slowly she stops and pulls back. She heads for kitchen then pushes back past me with her keys in her hand. She is still sobbing as she stumbles down the steps. I watch from the window as she gets in her car and bumps down the track and away from me in a haze of blue smoke.

I head into the kitchen myself. I have no idea where Celeste is going. I suppose she just needs to be gone for a while. I sit at the table and gaze straight ahead, the failing cupboard doors, the chipped paint, the dried up plant on the window ledge. Celeste's home, such as it is, and I ruin it for her by painting a simple portrait of a long dead and evil man. I curse myself, but how was I to know this *thing* would come to life? How ridiculous that sounds as it goes through my head. Alive, how can that be? Can this really be alive or are we both just insane?

I drag the makings across the table and finish rolling the joint I started earlier. My hands are still shaking as I light it. I draw on it quickly. It feels good but I push my face into my hands and grimace, knowing I have to get rid of the portrait. It doesn't matter anymore that this is my masterpiece. What good is it? It can never be displayed or even taken out again from the wooden chest that holds it. I take another pull on the smoke and watch as the room fills as I breathe out. Okay, I think to myself, the painting goes. But I cannot destroy it. I will simply remove it from the house altogether. There is an old mineshaft across the way, a kilometre across the paddocks, not much more. I was told about it by an old man who lives down the road. Perhaps I can stash the painting there, find a ledge or a nook somewhere deep in the shaft, where nobody will find it. I can take it there in its box, keep it padlocked, shut it away from the world. Yes, I can do that. Then at least I will always know where it is.

Soon I am finished my joint and the room is humming around me. I forego my morning coffee and disappear out the back door instead. I look across the rolling paddocks, see the gentle foothills and the range of tall mountains beyond. It is in the foothills that I will find the mineshaft. I head there now but without the box. I need to find the shaft first then return and take the box and the portrait there. Hopefully I can do it all before Celeste comes back.

The paddock grass is wet and soaks into my pants and in through my holed shoes. The ground is soft and soggy underfoot from all the rain we've had. I tramp a few hundred metres before the cattle in the paddock notice my presence and start moving towards me. They stare at me blankly as I pass through and I stare back at them. They move towards me with gazes fixed and I pick up my pace. I hear them behind me as they pick up theirs. I start to run a little then stop and turn, stare them down. There are five or six of them now and more coming. The five or six stop as one and stare back. *Get away from me*, I say under my breath, and I mean it. I turn back, make it to the next fence and get through the wire before they can reach me. They keep staring at me like zombies, freaking me out, so I turn away and keep on for the foothills.

Before long I climb through the last barbed wire fence and find myself no longer in pastureland but in the bushland beyond. The foothills are bigger than they appear from the house and the scrub and trees grow thickly up the sides and as far as I can see. I push through the undergrowth until it suddenly clears and I'm on an old track, two wheel ruts and a raised grassy strip up the centre. I follow it along figuring it might lead to the mineshaft and sure enough it does. First there are piles of gravel to my left, overgrown with grass and stunted plants. It doesn't look like anyone has been here for a long time. I go on a little more and the track splits, one part continuing on ahead of me and the other veering left into an opening in the hillside. The opening is hard to see because everything has grown up in front of it. I push my way through until I can see into the shaft. There are broken pieces of ancient machinery, rusted and strewn around the opening, chunks of timber too, old and slimy, resembling railway sleepers. The ceiling is low and I have to duck as I enter. The light quickly disappears and I am encased in darkness after only a short distance. I'm wishing I had a torch. I think Celeste has one back at the house.

After another few metres of fumbling my way, slipping and tripping on the uneven floor of the shaft and bumping my forehead, I decide to head back out. I feel pleased though. I feel sure the mineshaft will be a good place to store the portrait of Peter Kurten. It doesn't seem like anybody ever comes here, judging by the run down, overgrown state of the place and the way the bush encroaches on the track outside. I will head back home now, find the torch, grab the wooden chest from under the house and return back here. Somewhere in this shaft I'll find a place secret enough and remote enough to hide my dreadful, haunted masterpiece. Somewhere safe where nobody can find it, but I will always know where it is, and Celeste can live peacefully again in her own home. I turn around and head for the rough circle of daylight at the end of the shaft.

Chapter 8

I make my way back along the narrow track then back through the bush and undergrowth until the paddocked farmland opens out before me. In the time I have been at the mineshaft the weather has closed in, the sky is grey again and the clouds are low overhead. The breeze that whips into my face from across the way is chilled but it's not just the cold I feel. The breeze brings with it the strangest sense of foreboding.

I cross the first paddock. The cattle, now a dozen or more in number, accumulate on the other side of the fence and resume their silent study of me. There is nothing I can do. I cannot get home without crossing the final paddock so carefully I make my way through the fence. I move along the fence line slowly with the idea of skirting around them but they plod after me and then surround me at a slight distance. I shout at them and make a quick gesture to frighten them away but they make no reaction. They appear determined to not let me pass. I realise

how stupid this situation is and I tell myself so but I feel anxious nonetheless. Cattle up close have always made me feel ill at ease.

I cannot be held prisoner by cattle so I steel my courage and walk as boldly as I can through the group. I feel the eyes of the cattle on every side of me and I realise suddenly a difference in their behavior, from the way these animals were when I crossed the paddock before. When I crossed before they followed along behind but this time they are circling me and keeping me within their group. Cautiously I push forward across the paddock and the group moves with me. The ones ahead of me are facing me and backing away as I draw near to them. It really does seem the cattle are trying to prevent me from crossing the paddock, to stop me from going home. As I draw nearer to home the first thing I see is the rusted tin roof as it emerges in the near distance. The cattle now all move ahead of me, every one of them, trying in some passive way to prevent me from going on. But I'm nearly there, a hundred or more metres only until the fence. The cattle are jittery, diving this way and that, agitated, beginning to low. Their behavior is strange but I find they no longer frighten me. There is however a fear growing within me, one that I can't fathom at all but I know it's not coming from the cattle. In fact I now feel an odd sense of kinship with these beasts. I sense that somehow they are trying to protect me. By the time I climb through the fence the group is frantic, lowing loudly, heads high, staring forward with a strange intelligence. As I turn from them and set my eyes on the house I feel something dark stir within me.

I head to the back door but stop short. Instead I skirt the house and see Celeste's car in its usual spot. Wherever she went she is back already. I feel the clouds overhead darken further, closing down on me as I make my way to the front of the house. There is no sound from within and for some reason I am loathe to enter the dwelling. I carefully approach the front steps and that's when I see it. My heart thumps in the instant I see the wooden chest that held Peter Kurten. It is burst open, still under the house but the wooden lid is splintered and broken like a bomb has gone off inside. I call to Celeste. There is no answer so I call again. There is nothing, just the cattle lowing still, from beyond the fence. Slowly I climb the steps and push the front door that is already ajar. It swings in and the bleakness of day throws patches of light and shade into the otherwise darkened front room. Everything is silent and everything is still, the scant furniture, the dangling bulb, the unadorned walls. But most still of all is the body of Celeste, lying half-naked in the dismal light, a bloodied knife glinting faintly beside her.

I collapse on the porch in the instant I see her, my heart already broken, my tears already flowing. I drag myself inside the house and fall again, this time beside her dead body. There is blood pooled beneath her and it splashes on my clothes. I stare down at Celeste through blurred eyes. My tears are falling into the gaping wounds in her naked chest and abdomen. I put a hand either side of her face then turn her sad, blackened eyes towards me. My head now falls to hers and I hug what remains of my only friend. I am howling into the stringy, disheveled hair that once framed that tragic face I had come to love. What is left of my heart implodes like a death star and my gut turns suddenly inside out. I pull up and scream at the world. I scream till my lungs would burst. Then I once more see the knife and I stop.

Gently I lay Celeste's precious head back on the floor. There is nothing I can do for her and my horror is being matched now with rage. I seize the bloodied knife and storm from room to room.

"Where are you, you bastard?" I scream. I scream it over and over as I search the house. I have no fear whatever of Peter Kurten. I have no fear of anything. Celeste is dead, strangled, stabbed and defiled on the floor in the front room. There is nothing that bastard can do to me now that he has not already done. I am already dead. In killing Celeste he has killed me too. Now I will kill him.

I search the house but he isn't there. My head is about to explode. My blood is pulsing through my veins so hard I can feel it. I come back now into the front room and again I have to face the sight of Celeste, dead on the floor. I collapse into one of the chairs and howl my heart out. Then I look at her again, the pathetic mess that remains, all that is left of someone who asked so little, and I realise now what I must already have known. Celeste is dead because of me. I did this to her by painting the portrait of Peter Kurten. This is all my fault. Everything shrinks within me at the terrible realization. I have killed Celeste by my own hand and now her killer is loose to do it again and again. In painting Kurten I have recreated a terrible killer, given rise again to the Monster of Dusseldorf.

So now I panic. I have to get help. I run down the rutted road, the bloodied knife held aloft in case I stumble across Kurten, run for the old man's house down the way. He has a telephone and can call for help. Tears pour down my face as I run. I sob and howl in the knowledge of what I have done, of what I have done to Celeste and what I have unleashed on the world. I reach the old man's house and fall up his steps, bash wildly on his front door. His wife opens the door and screams when she sees me. I beg her to let me in. I tell her I've done a terrible thing, that my friend Celeste is dead in a pool of blood. Can she please call the police? The old man appears behind her and holds the screen door closed. He sees the knife that I hold, the blood on my hands, the blood on my clothes too, tells his wife to call the police. Breathless and gasping I thank him and descend the steps from the porch. Now I have to go and search for Kurten. I have to kill what I have created before he kills again. I run from the house and head back the way I came.

By the time I get back to our house the clouds are so low they all but blot out the remains of the day. I circle the house in the half-light looking for Kurten, looking for anything, any sign of where he might have gone. I drag the remains of the wooden chest out from under the house and tear off what's left of the lid. The canvas on which Kurten was painted is still inside but the image of the man, the terrible face I created, is gone. I back away and for a time just stare at the box. Then I get to my feet and keep searching. Near the back of the house I see an old brick that's been dislodged from its place in the mud, and footprints too that lead off into the paddocks. I scale the fence and see a trail of flattened grass heading back towards the foothills but away from where I had crossed before. In the far distance, in the gathering gloom, I see the herd of cattle, heads down, eating, paying me no heed whatever now. I feel my sticky hand clench tighter around the knife and once more I make my way across the paddocks.

The flattened grass moves away in front and I follow it, knife at the ready. The sun is now low in the sky behind me and has poked out from behind the clouds. The rays light up the grass and seem to point the way. Kurten has taken a direct

route to the foothills. My rage builds to bursting point and pushes me on. I will find this creature and kill him or die myself trying. I am nearly across the paddocks when from behind me I hear the sirens. They wail in the distance. Now I'm through the final fence and pass from the pastureland into the scrub and trees. There is no longer any trail to follow. I cannot see where Kurten has gone and dusk is closing in quickly. I fumble through the bush and again come out on the narrow overgrown track that leads to the mineshaft. I cannot see any evidence that Kurten has passed through here. I scream his name into the gathering night. I scream it over and over but nothing comes back at me.

I move along the track, listening for any sound, watching for any clue. The distant sirens have stopped now. I reach the mineshaft and there is just enough light for me to see just one set of tracks in the muddy entrance. The tracks are my own from earlier. Kurten is not inside the shaft so I press further on. Very soon the trail peters out and I head up into the hills. Further and further I climb until night is fully down and with the clouds so low the world is now as black as the feelings within me. I stop and rest, my back against a tree. I'll search again at dawn. I know the night will be long and I will not sleep. I might even freeze to death.

The air is now very still. Whatever breezes there were earlier in the day are gone. It should be raining but it isn't. The night is coming in very cold already but I couldn't care. I just want to find Peter Kurten and drive the knife that I hold in my hand through his heart like he did to poor Celeste. The image of her dead on the floor haunts my mind. It will not leave me be and neither it should. She has lost her life because of me and I deserve to be haunted by that fact forever. I'm crying again now, crying in the dark, with my back up against a tree, a bloodied knife in my hand and my face tucked into my knees. My insides ache from a pain I will never be rid of. The night goes on, hour after lonely hour, and I hear no sound that is human.

When dawn comes I am as I have been for some time, on my side, rolled into a ball for warmth. Finally the day is here. I get to my feet and stretch myself. My fingers are still wrapped around the knife but I switch hands and stretch my fingers too. I have not slept at all. I cast my eyes around the bushland as the morning light gains strength. There is nothing but trees and bracken, bark and undergrowth. The clouds still hang but I don't think it will rain. I have no idea where to look for Peter Kurten but I know he is here somewhere. I feel it in my gut.

I move further up the hill, pulling my way up through the dense undergrowth, all the while watching and listening. The way is getting rocky and above me I see an outcrop of granite. It must be the top of this hill. I work my way towards it and pull myself up through a narrow cleft. The granite goes on and I grapple and climb my way up a natural stairway of stones. The sky opens out above me and I pull myself up and onto the top of the outcrop. Nothing but a few wiry weeds are growing here and as I stand and look around I have a view across a valley of bushland in one direction with a creek in the bottom and more hills beyond. Turning around I see out over the pastureland. I even see the roof of the house where Celeste and I had lived. Dotted across the picture I see the cattle that tried so hard to stop the horror that was to meet my eyes just a few hours ago. And now I see something else. A band of men coming across the paddocks, heading towards

these foothills. The police. I breathe a slight sigh. They must have waited till first light. They can help me find Kurten.

I watch the band of police as they make their way across the pastureland. The cattle are looking up now and moving towards them. Should I wait for the police here or should I go on? The trees soon block my view as the police draw nearer the bushland. I consider climbing back down to meet them along the mineshaft trail. But I hear something behind me and turn. I cast my eyes down into the valley and see movement amongst the trees. It's Kurten. I know him at once. I call out his name but he doesn't react. I feel the knife in my hand and chase down the hill as quickly as I can. As soon as I am off the rock I'm blind again amongst the trees. But I know what direction to head. In my mind I again see Celeste, dead and defiled on the floor, mutilated without a care. My rage peaks yet again and I scream like an animal at Kurten.

“Get back here you bastard. I’ll kill you.”

Five minutes have passed and I am now in the bottom of the valley, the small creek tinkling along beside me, tumbling and churning over rocks. I can't see Kurten. All I can see when I look around is trees and somewhere behind me I hear voices calling out. The police on the far side of the hill. The voices are distant but I hear them calling my name. I am about to call back when I spot Kurten again. He is moving amongst the trees on the far side of the creek, following it upstream.

“Stop you bastard,” I scream at him.

This time he turns and looks at me, those cold, dead eyes. He shouts something back in German then keeps heading away. I cross the stream, going from rock to rock. I'm now on the same side as Kurten and he is only thirty metres ahead of me. I keep screaming my rage at him, my eyes blurring over with tears as I hunt him down. Suddenly he slips near the edge of the creek and falls against some rocks. I hear the police behind me, on the far side of the creek, close now but I dare not steal a glance. I dare not take my eyes off Kurten.

Kurten is sprawled on a big, mossy rock, his face oddly passive but his eyes cold and dead as he sees me loom over him then pounce upon him like a cat. The police are calling out from the other side but I'm not making sense of their words. I raise the knife over my head. Kurten sees the police then leers up at me. Again I see the glint of humour in his eye.

“Auf wiedersehen mein freund,” he says, and one second later a bullet from a policeman's gun passes through my temple and I collapse on the rocks, the knife falling from my hand and into the creek.

Faintly I hear Kurten laugh and in the three minutes it takes for the police to cross the stream and reach my dead body, he is gone.
