

WITH CLOUDS AT OUR FEET

SIMON BROWN

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We have not seen the likes of this evocative and sensitive story about the private lives and relationships of the undead since Lucius Shepard's brilliant novel *The Golden*. Here is a glimpse into people who might be our neighbours ... and who must feed their urgent need.

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The sun was still a half hour from rising when Leon brought the cows in for their first milking. The beasts were shuffling, snuffling shapes against a paling sky, smelling of grass and damp soil. Leon came up behind them, stroking their flanks, shooing them softly.

As they ambled into the milking shed I led them one by one to the bail and locked them in, then waited for Leon to tell me to get on with it, as always. He paused at the gate and looked at the sky, turning pink now. He sniffed the air cautiously, like a nervous fox.

"There's a change, Andrew. Summer's come early."

"Summer always starts about now," I told him, smiling. "I've got a memory."

Leon glanced at me almost slyly. "I still smell a change." He nodded at the bucket and stool at my feet. "You waiting for a starting gun?"

I went to the first cow and tied back her milking leg. As I made myself comfortable on the stool I warmed my hands against my jeans. Leon sidled up to the cow and patted her nose. The cow licked his hand, tasting for salt.

"There you go, Nancy," he murmured. He had names for all the beasts, but I never bothered. I couldn't tell Nancy from Maria from Betty

from Jenny.

The milk came easy, warm and thick, frothing in the bucket. "Bet that's sweet," I said to Leon.

He stood by Nancy's flank, grinning lazily at me, and scratched a scab from a small patch of skin over the cow's spine. "Not as sweet as this," he said, and bent his head so he could lick at the seeping blood, shiny and almost orange under the shed's wan electric light.

Nancy didn't flinch. She was content to be milked, to have her head in the bail trough, to quench Leon's thirst.

I was patient, as the second brother, content like Nancy. When Leon was done we moved to the next beast and swapped places.

We took our time that morning, feeding casually, enjoying the routine more than usual. It made me wonder if perhaps Leon was right after all and a change was in the air, but less to do with the season than something closer to home, something as yet undefined. I felt a sense of anticipation, that something was on its way, but I did not dwell on it.

After the milking we followed the cows to the east paddock and stayed there as the sun rose, watching its light measure itself against gently rolling hills, picking out solitary snow gums and the startling yellow clumps of flowers hanging from green wattles. A mist drifted up from the earth and curled around our feet for a few minutes before being burned away by the sun.

Around us shimmered the purple rim of the world, our little valley surrounded by the low mountains of the Southern Highlands. Eucalyptus oil, suspended in the air after yesterday's heavy rain, made the morning smell clean and new.

"Warm day coming," Leon said.

"Whatever you say, Leon." That made him laugh.

* * * *

We knew we had a visitor before we reached the house. There was a Ford parked in the driveway, a new model, which neither of us recognised as belonging to anyone we knew. Then we saw a pair of expensive black shoes left outside the front door, and we had an inkling. He was waiting for

us in the kitchen, pouring water from a kettle into a teapot.

"Christ, you boys get up early," he said by way of greeting. He studied us both for a moment, then added: "You are both looking fine."

"Hello, Father," I said.

Leon said nothing, but Father pretended not to notice.

"I thought you might like some breakfast. I've put a few rashers of bacon under the grill."

"We've already fed," Leon told him.

"I'm still hungry," I said quickly, throwing a warning look at my brother. I did not want any unpleasantness.

"What you get from those cows of yours you can't call food," Father said authoritatively. I watched Leon bite his lip, and Father saw it too. "But, of course, you're only half-blood. You don't really understand the ... need. Perhaps cows fill you, after all."

He was trying to be conciliatory, for Leon's sake rather than mine; he and I had never been sour with each other. Somehow, though, his words sounded patronising and made Leon flush.

Father checked the bacon, turned the rashers over. I started making conversation, retrieving cups and saucers from the dish rack, but Leon refused to join in and I could tell Father was starting to wish he'd never left the city.

But I kept on, anyway, more to fill the silence than anything else, and gradually wore them both down. By the time the bacon had gone crispy and the rind crinkled black, all three of us were sharing small talk. Father had seen enough farming to ask us some sensible questions about the property, and we knew barely enough about his own life in the city to seem interested in return.

By the time we had eaten and drunk our fill, the sun had warmed up the kitchen and Father was beginning to sweat; he was so much a part of the city he hardly ever had proper white sunlight touching his skin. In a few minutes he would have to retreat to a darker room or start to pass out. A couple of times I opened my mouth to suggest we move into the lounge room, but Leon always got in first, asking Father about this or that. It

occurred to me after the fourth occasion that Leon was deliberately trying to keep Father in the kitchen, and by then it was getting too warm for us as well.

Father's face was starting to blotch, around the jaws first and then slowly up and around his cheeks and forehead. His pupils contracted to the smallest dark points. I could tell he was not far from fainting and I stood up to go to him. Sudden nausea almost made me double over. Father shook his head, trying to smile, and waved me away, but the action was so feeble it was almost comical.

I grabbed him by one arm and dragged him to his feet. When Leon saw I was determined, he came to my assistance, taking Father's other arm. Between us we managed to get him into the lounge room. As soon as we entered the cool and the dark our strength returned, though more slowly for Father. He and Leon regarded each other for a moment, the look passing between them a strange mixture of resentment and respect, which confused me a little.

Father and Leon sat in chairs while I took the lounge, stretching my feet over the edge. Conversation was scattered and stilted again, as though we were just starting out. Eventually, Father slapped his knees with his palms, which was usually his first preparation for standing up before leaving, a kind of visual sigh. This time, though, he stayed seated and leaned forward, his elbows sticking out at angles so his arms looked like a dog's hind legs.

"I want you both to come back with me to the city," he said, forcing the words into a rush. Then, more slowly: "Just for a visit; I know you don't want to leave your farm, but I want you to see for yourselves how I live."

"Mother told us how you lived," Leon said coldly. "And I remember some."

Father shook his head, his expression genuinely sad. "Your mother wasn't one of us, Leon. She didn't understand. You and Andrew might. I want you to see my home."

* * * *

Father left us late in the afternoon, and without an answer. I was willing to take him up on his offer, partly out of curiosity and partly out of a sense of family duty, but Leon was not at all interested in the idea. I saw Father out to his car and told him I'd work on Leon, and he smiled resignedly, not really

believing Leon could be swayed.

“He was old enough to know both his mother and me,” he said, “and so had to make a choice between us. When you’re a child, you can’t believe both sides of a story.”

But I kept my word, and over the next few days raised the subject every now and then, and gradually Leon came around. I think he knew as well as I that it was only through our father that we would learn about the need that filled us as much as it filled him, even if in a diluted form. Leon and I pretended it was not the single most important thing in our lives; we tried to hide it under the layer of routine necessary in running even a small property like our own, but we both understood our lives revolved around our need for blood to survive — warm blood, the blood of mammals.

On Thursday we went into Warramanga to do the banking and to talk with Jo Liddel, who looked after the local dairy cooperative; then, during the hottest part of the day, we spent a couple of hours in the pub drinking beer and catching up with all the latest town gossip. As we were leaving, Leon said I should phone Father and let him know we were coming.

“When?” I asked, acting surprised.

“Well, this weekend, I guess. Get it over and done with. We can go back to see Jo and ask her to send someone out to milk the ladies. But only for a couple of days, Andrew. We don’t owe him anything.”

So he went to ask Jo for the favour, and I went to the post office to phone Father. He wasn’t home, but I left a message on his answering machine and told him we’d be up tomorrow night, on the Friday.

* * * *

The next morning, later than usual, we brought the cows in together. It was a cool start; not cool enough for a frost, but a mist dressed the hills and higher paddocks, swirling as we walked through it. We found the cows on top of White Ridge, where an old wire fence stopped them from falling into the Murrumbidgee River. We stood there for a while, watching the brown water idly wearing away the limestone walls of the shallow valley, watching as the sun slowly took over the sky, feeling time pass by as though we were outside of it.

The cows started lowing. We walked them back to the shed, relieved them of their milk as we relieved ourselves of our nagging hunger. We let

them loose nearby so we could gather them quickly in the afternoon for the next milking, then went inside to wait out the day so we could conserve our strength for the drive that night to Sydney.

Leon wrote out instructions for whoever Jo sent to cover us for the weekend, spending some effort over it because he didn't want anything to go wrong with his beloved beasts. I packed our bags, then pored over an old Sydney street directory so I could navigate us to Father's place once we hit the city. Leon said Sydney was the hardest city in the world to drive around, and I believed him. I told him we could drive to Goulburn then catch a train into Sydney, but he shook his head and said we needed the car because it gave us independence. I guess he meant independence from Father, but Leon didn't elaborate.

We did the second milking around 4.00 in the afternoon, then penned up the cows and stuck Leon's instructions to the front door.

"I hope whoever Jo sends can read your writing," I joked, but he just looked sour at me and I felt stupid for trying to make light of it.

As we left the farm and got onto the dirt road, Leon driving, we looked back for a moment, already homesick. Then Leon gunned it and we sped off too quickly for my liking, leaving behind a great cloud of dust that hid the farm behind us.

* * * *

It should have been a six hour trip, but we did it in seven, not including stopovers at Goulburn and Mittagong so Leon could relieve his bladder, which I told him must have been smaller than a twenty-cent piece. The problems started once we hit Sydney — the street directory I was using was about ten years out of date. Some streets had become one-way, others had disappeared entirely. Once we ended up on a highway that ended up taking us back out of the city.

Eventually, we found the right street, which turned out to be no wider than a country lane with cars parked up on the curb between stunted plane trees. The street was lined with terrace houses, originally made for stevedores and other dock labourers, but now fashionable and expensive, painted in pastels and decorated with iron lace and lead-glass windows. Father's place was bigger than most, comprising two semi-detached joined together, and done up as well as any other on the street. Before we had gotten out of the car the front door opened and he was there, backlit by a hall light, balancing on one foot and then the other as he slipped on his

loafers.

Leon pretended to be busy with our bags when Father came down to greet us, but I shook his hand, something we never did on his visits to the farm. I could tell he was happy to see us.

"I got your message this morning," he said, grinning. "Your room is ready, and I've got some dinner cooking." He took the bags from Leon and led us into the house. "I told all my friends you were coming," he added excitedly. I was embarrassed by his eagerness, and Leon seemed surprised.

The entrance hall was Victorian, forest-green wallpaper with a gold design, oak side table and hatstand, an ancient elephant's foot umbrella stand so old it did not look out of place, a staircase at the back with a polished mahogany balustrade, and Father, of course. He was dressed in dark pants, a white shirt under a smoking jacket the same colour as the wallpaper, leather loafers. His face narrow, pinched, looking calm and speculative at the same time.

"Your room is upstairs," he said. "We'll drop your bags off and then get something to eat."

Our room was, thankfully, plain, with two single beds separated by a table with a lamp on it. A small window looked out over a succession of peaked tin roofs, shining like frozen waves in the bright moonlight.

Father showed us his room, and my first impression was that it looked like the hallway writ large. He looked apologetically at us. "My time, you see," he said softly, and ushered us downstairs into the kitchen.

We sat around an old wooden table scarred like the skin of a whale, and ate a lamb stew with thick gravy we sopped up with fresh white bread. Leon and I wolfed down the food, we were hungrier than we knew, but Father barely touched his meal. He seemed on edge, and the conversation we shared was perfunctory.

At the end of the meal Father said: "I expect you'll want to see something of the city tomorrow; do some shopping, maybe."

"We lived here, once," Leon said shortly.

"It's only that I tend to hide away during the day, so I'll leave you to yourselves. But tomorrow night, I promise you a good time. I want you to

meet some people ...”

His voice faded when he saw Leon’s expression.

“In fact, I have to go out now,” he continued. “I wanted to wait until you arrived, but I can’t...”

Again, he seemed lost for words, and Leon and I both understood then he was edgy because he needed to feed properly.

“We’ll be all right,” I said quickly, and he nodded his thanks.

* * * *

After the meal, Leon and I went to our room. Leon was very tired after all the driving, and he fell asleep almost the moment he lay down. I took off my shoes and socks and waited on the edge of my bed until I heard Father leave the house by the front door. I was surprised, somehow expecting him to disappear across the roof tops instead of going on to the street like a normal human being.

I left the room to explore the house properly; driven by curiosity and a kind of nervous anxiety I knew would not let me sleep. My night vision is excellent, and I did not need to turn on any lights. Colours were subdued, but details sharp.

I first went to my father’s bedroom, and found on his dresser photographs of Leon and me as children, and a photograph of our mother. Father had never spoken much about her to us. The photograph suggested feelings I’d never suspected in him. She was very young in the picture, no older than 20 or so, and it crossed my mind that Father may have thought of her as two women, the one in the photograph whom he had loved and with whom he had shared his life for so many years; and the other whom had taken his children away from him, the human who had betrayed his trust. It seemed to me ironic that it was the second woman I knew and loved as my mother, and it made me wonder if perhaps that was the basis of the gulf that existed between him and his children, rather than the fact that we were half-bloods: not entirely human, neither predator nor prey.

The next room I visited was the study. A roll-top desk took up one corner, its cover half-open. I slid it all the way back, found a stack of bills in a letter holder, an old fashioned fountain pen, a bottle of blue ink, and blotting pad. Sitting on a second desk, beneath the room’s only window, was a small computer, with a writing pad and scribbled sums beside it.

There was a painting on the wall,, a bush scene in the Heidelberg style, and on closer inspection I discovered it was an original Streeton.

There was little of interest in any of the other upstairs rooms, all bedrooms, nor in most of those on the ground floor until I reached the living room, occupying the whole length of one side of the house.

A shallow bay window gave a view of the lane out front, and on the opposite wall large French windows looked out over the back garden. A leather lounge and two plush seats occupied the centre of the room, facing an open fireplace that appeared as though it hadn't been used in years. The walls were lined floor-to-ceiling with bookcases made from oak and glass fronted. Most of the books were old, covering a range of subjects as diverse as English history and biography, science and, it seemed strange to me, theology. There was a large section devoted to medicine and anatomy. The bookcase nearest the entrance was filled mostly with more recent editions, even a few paperbacks with the spines so cracked it wasn't possible to read the titles. The top shelf was reserved for a group of photographs. My father appeared in each one, always accompanied by a woman. The photographs spanned decades, the oldest looking, judging from the clothing, probably taken in the 1880s; Father looked younger there, but not by much. The most recent photograph showed him with a small woman with a beautiful face and dark hair falling in rings down to her shoulders.

I don't know how long I spent in that room, but I eventually started feeling tired enough to sleep. Before returning upstairs, though, I wanted to see the garden. I left the house through the French windows, leaving them open behind me. The back of the house was bordered by paving and a dry stone wall that supported terraces. The garden was filled with ferns and palms, a cycad or two. It contained no flowering plants that I could see. The lush, semi-tropical vegetation, so different from that on the farm, drew me in, its appearance and smell as strange to me as the city itself. As I followed a series of slate steps to the top tier, cool, wet leaves slapped against my skin. At the end of the steps I walked along the length of the tier, rich humus feeling like a moist carpet beneath my feet. A drip line wound between the plants, and the air was humid, heavy.

I looked up into the sky, found Orion just above the horizon, but the city's lights were so strong that I could only barely make out his form. I took a step sideways, and felt the ground start to give way beneath my feet. I scrabbled for purchase, but it was too late, and I slid downslope for nearly two metres before catching a broad cycad leaf with one hand and steadying myself. Several metres of topsoil cascaded over my legs and feet, flooded

like a dark stream down the whole width of the terrace.

Something hard and unyielding scratched between my toes. I knelt down to see if I had unlinked a section of the drip line. The tip of a finger bone was sticking up out of the partly collapsed tier, pointing at me accusingly. Without thinking, I pulled it out. I held three joints, still connected by tegument, creamy white where the soil had dropped off.

Feeling numb, I stood up. Still holding the remains, I started moving back to the house. I took two steps before a terrible curiosity overtook me. Kneeling down again, I scrabbled away at the dirt. I found more bones, most loose, and all belonging to what had once been a human hand, and quite a big one judging by the size of the pieces I had uncovered.

My own hands were shaking now; I balled them into fists. I didn't have the courage to continue digging. I looked back at the house, seeing it differently now, wondering again about the women in the photographs.

But no, I told myself, the hand had been unusually large, and its owner had died not so long ago.

Father had always told us, had even convinced our mother, that he had never killed anyone while feeding. Yet no-one else would have buried the remains in his garden.

I heard someone enter the kitchen, then saw my father illuminated by the fridge light. He brought out a bottle of mineral water, closed the fridge and shut himself in darkness again. I froze, not knowing what to do next. The problem was solved for me when Father opened the kitchen window and called out to me. I had forgotten how good was his night vision; vastly superior to my own.

"I thought you were in bed. Didn't know you were a stargazer."

"You get used to it in the country," I replied, trying to keep my voice casual. "The city makes the sky too light."

"Then come inside and have a beer."

I nodded, attempted a smile. My heart was racing, and I absently wondered if his hearing was as good as his eyesight. When I got to the kitchen he had already poured two glasses of stout. He handed me one of the glasses and raised the other to his own lips, hesitated when he saw me staring at him.

“What is it, Andrew?”

“There’s some blood around your mouth,” I told him, motioning around my own mouth to show him where.

“I should have cleaned that up,” he said levelly. He went to the kitchen sink and slapped water over his face. It ran down his hands, rust coloured.

“Whose was it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know his name. To be safe, I never feed off the same person twice. That’s why it’s important full-bloods like myself live in large cities.”

“Like you? How many are there like you in Sydney?”

“A dozen or so. Quite a large colony, actually. Melbourne would have a similar number. There are smaller colonies in the other capital cities.”

“How many like me?”

“I don’t know, Andrew. I’d heard stories of half-bloods, but until Leon was born never knew any. As far as I know, you and your brother are the only ones of your kind in Australia. Nearly all die in childbirth.” He looked away from me then. “Or are aborted.”

Quickly then, he drank his beer as if it was no thicker than water.

I showed him the finger bones still in my hand.

“I thought I’d been more careful than that,” he said.

“You told me you never killed.”

He looked surprised. “I have *never* killed to satisfy my need.” He pointed to the bones, said more quietly: “This is something else, entirely.”

“Something else?” I closed my fist around the bones, hiding them from him. I felt completely hollow inside, as if all emotion had been drained from me.

“Andrew, in my long life I have killed four men. The one planted in the back garden was the first in nearly eighty years. When I was ... younger ...

my temper was considerably shorter. I was less forgiving of personal slight or physical threat.”

“Why?”

“I returned one night and surprised him. He attacked me with a jemmy.”

“Did you drink his blood?”

“Of course. I wasn’t going to let it go to waste. Then I cut him up into manageable pieces and buried him in the garden.”

I handed him the remains. “You should have buried him deeper.”

He nodded. “Will you tell Leon? I don’t think he’d understand.”

“What makes you think I do?”

* * * *

The next morning Leon and I woke early and made ourselves a simple breakfast. I talked little while we ate, but Leon didn’t probe. I had decided to tell Leon about last night; I didn’t like keeping secrets from him. But in the clean light of a new day, it somehow seemed not so important. It wasn’t a secret, I tried to convince myself, it was a confidence. I decided not to tell Leon, but didn’t like myself much because of it.

Leon suggested we catch a train into the city centre and spend the day there. I could see he didn’t want to stay in the house. I agreed, wrote a note for Father telling him where we were going, and then we walked to the local station. The ride to the city took us twenty minutes; it was strangely uncomfortable travelling in such close proximity with so many people. I hadn’t expected it, and couldn’t quite put my finger on what made me uneasy. The feeling grew when we left the subway and were swept up by the human tide rushing along George Street.

Perhaps it was just that it had been a long time since I had been in the midst of so many people, since I was an infant, and it was a shock to my system. I could see that Leon was feeling the same way, so we took refuge in a coffee shop and, in something of a daze, watched the crowds as we sipped on cappuccinos.

“I find it hard to believe they all have a destination,” Leon said after a

while.

"Maybe it was a mistake coming in today," I mumbled.

"We're too used to the slow and quiet country life." His expression changed. "No. It's something else, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's all the warm bodies. So many of them. So much..." He swallowed the next word, then coughed it out like a curse. "So much ... blood."

I knew immediately that he was right. It felt as if we were in a city of animals, a city of cattle, and the realisation made me suddenly nauseous. I hastily drank some cappuccino, but the milky taste made the nausea worse. The nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach reminded me that we hadn't tasted blood since the previous afternoon. It was possible for us to forgo blood for several days, but here and now, surrounded by so many people, the nagging was quickly becoming an urgent need. "Let's go back to Father's," I said.

Leon shook his head. "No, not yet. We can stick it out a while longer. We're not like him."

I was in no state to argue, and weakly followed him as he left the coffee shop. We stumbled across an arcade, old and neglected, with only a few disinterested shoppers milling around under its shabby skylights. We found a second-hand book and music store, and recovered our equilibrium while pretending to sort through the bins of old paperbacks and racks of ancient CDs. We were there for nearly half an hour, and in the end bought a handful of books we didn't really want but felt compelled to buy to give ourselves some excuse for lingering so long, for not facing what had confronted us so unexpectedly. *Our own heritage*, I told myself, *and it makes us feel unclean*.

Outside, we found that the day had warmed up considerably, and the sun's glare bouncing off building and pavement would soon be intolerable. We retreated to a large cinema complex and watched two films in a row. When we reappeared on the street hours later it was not much cooler, but the light had dimmed. The crowds had diminished, too, and we decided to leave before we were caught in the five o'clock rush of homeward bound commuters. At that moment, I think even Leon looked forward to returning to Father's place.

I avoided looking at my fellow passengers, and instead gazed intently out the carriage window. The landscape was cluttered with overhead power lines, rail cuttings and warehouses. It was a drab and dispiriting journey, made worse by the effects of the day. I could sense Leon's own tenseness; we seemed to be feeding each other's anxiety.

I tried to push it to the back of my mind, and found myself remembering our mother. From birth, both Leon and I had needed blood; when we were still with Father, he had satisfied that need, taking it from his own veins. Mother could cope with that; she gave us milk, and he gave us blood, there was a symmetry about it that seemed both ironic and necessary to her.

As we got older, however, our need for blood increased beyond what our father could provide himself. I was too young to remember, but Leon told me Father's solution had included overfeeding himself and then regurgitating the excess. I could only begin to imagine what effect this had on mother, but in the end what drove her to leave Father was the source of the extra blood. It had been possible for her to ignore his needs when it had been closed away from her, a part of his life but not of theirs; that changed when her children became a part of it, and she could no longer consciously ignore that normal humans were being used as prey to keep Leon and me alive.

She fled, away from the city and the darkness, to the small farm left her by her parents. She bought a few head of cattle to supply us with the blood we needed, and tried to live as normal a life as possible, raising us to think and behave like her own people; taking blood from the cattle had been no more cruel, no more inhuman, than taking their milk.

And now I was aware, as I had never been before, of the difference between my nature and my nurturing. I was both human and vampire, and on that train could find no way to reconcile the two sides.

* * * *

And then, shortly after, a second journey.

Father was waiting for us when we returned home, impatient. He waited while Leon and I changed clothes, freshened up, then bundled us into his car.

Leon asked him where we were going.

"To see some friends of mine," Father answered, but didn't elaborate.

We drove out of the city, towards Parramatta. Sydney slid by us, the night revealing a place of neon signs and street lights; the sky drizzled for us, making everything appear brighter, somehow, and less real.

Father didn't talk. Leon and I were tired from the day's events, each of us wishing we were back home on our farm.

Sydney made me feel like an orphan.

* * * *

We parked behind a hotel, and father led us into one of its bars. It was a crowded, smoky place, dimly lit; comfortable lounges and chairs divided the space, and a dozen conversations drifted in the background. Father headed for a lounge surrounding a low table at the back of the bar, already occupied by two women and a man. They looked up as we approached, smiled a welcome.

"These are my sons," Father said to his friends, and I heard the pride in his voice. I latched on to that, felt less adrift.

"Leon, Andrew, I would like you to meet Kathryn Goodall, Rosmarie Eckert and Gustave Cosserat."

Each of the three nodded in turn, still smiling, then moved closer together to make room for us. Father and the two women exchanged kisses. For an awkward moment, no-one said anything, then Cosserat nodded to a half-empty whisky glass on the table in front of him.

"I will get some drinks. Cognac, of course, for Edward. And Leon and Andrew?"

Edward? My father's name, I remembered, surprised. I had never before heard anyone call him by his first name.

Leon and I asked for beers, and Cosserat left. I watched him move away, and recognised the kind of effortless grace my father possessed. When I looked back, I saw the two women staring at me. Again, something in the way I was being studied reminded me of my father.

Predators, I thought, and almost immediately realised I was wrong. It

was an intense curiosity I felt from them, not hunger.

"I can see you in both of them," the one called Eckert said to my father. Leon tensed. Eckert laughed, the sound like music. "I can see something of all of us in both of them."

Goodall laughed then, too; in relief, I thought.

"We are not like you," Leon said levelly.

Eckert surprised him by nodding. "You are right, of course, you are not like us, not exactly."

"Not exactly," echoed Goodall, smiling to herself.

Cosserat returned, carrying a tray loaded with drinks. He handed father two glasses of cognac. Father threw one down, sighed in relief, then started more slowly on the second.

"Not quite a substitute," Cosserat said to Leon and me in a confiding tone. "But the drink has the ability to take your breath away, to slow you down a little. And it is as smooth as skin on the palate."

Leon and I must have blanched at his words; Goodall and Eckert laughed again, and I could not help blushing. I felt like a virgin at an orgy, both offended and left out.

"But you don't all drink cognac," I said.

"Oh, no," Cosserat answered. "None of us is as old as your father. He is steeped in his hunger; we are, in comparison, novices."

"What is old, exactly?" Leon asked.

Cosserat shrugged. "I doubt your father could even answer that question. Who can remember before photographs? I have known so many times, so many countries, so many friends, that much of it is a blur for me now. It must be far worse for Edward. I know that when I was young, which is many centuries ago, your father looked then pretty much as he looks now."

"But sometimes our first memories are among the most resilient," Eckert said. "I clearly remember my childhood in Prague. I remember smoke in the winter sky from all the fires, the sun hanging red over the city

at dusk. I remember the smell of horse-shit in all the streets, stronger than any other smell. I remember the sound of bells from sleighs on the frozen river."

Goodall glanced enviously at Eckert. "My time is this century," she told us. "My childhood was spent in India, just before it won its independence."

"So you are at least fifty," Leon said ungraciously, but Goodall didn't seem offended.

"Unless there was a previous life," she said simply. "Maybe we are never born. Maybe we simply fill up with life, then burst into flame and are reborn, childlike and empty. Each of us is a phoenix."

"I was born," Leon said then.

Cosserat looked at us sadly. "Yes, we know. Your kind is very rare among us."

"Father told me most of us are stillborn," I said. *Or aborted.*

"We all share a curiosity about our origins," Father said then.

"We are all human, to one degree or another," Cosserat added.

"Do half-bloods die?" Leon asked.

"I don't know," Father said.

"You two are the first half-bloods in your father's experience," Eckert said. "I have known only one, a man. I last saw him over a century ago, when he was already one or two hundred years old. He may be dead now ... or not."

"My sons and I have not discussed such matters in any detail," Father said, apologetically, to his friends. "There are things which all three of us have left unmentioned. I thought it time to correct some of that."

Leon blinked, but said nothing. Like me, I sensed his growing curiosity. I wondered if it would've been the same if we had not visited the city that day and felt overwhelmed by our own natures.

Eckert nodded. "Do you deny your heritage?" she asked Leon and

me.

“Not deny, exactly,” I said. “We have found another way.”

“They feed off cattle,” Father said.

His three friends looked aghast.

“They satisfy us,” Leon said quickly.

“I’m sure,” Cosserat said placatingly. “Have you ever tasted human blood?”

“Not since we were children.”

Again, there was a pause in the conversation. It occurred to me then that the whole evening had been leading to this point, and I suddenly felt a terrible anger towards my father. He had set it up so that this very topic *would* arise. I looked at him, and for the first time saw how nervous he was. He met my glance for the briefest of moments, then turned away. *He wants us to submit. He wants us to join him and his friends tonight. He wants us to feed off a human ...*

I saw Leon open his mouth to say something, and I knew instinctively it would be the wrong thing; Leon had not yet realised where the conversation was leading us. It was a confrontation — a choice — I wanted to avoid.

“And what do you all do in this city?” I asked clumsily. Leon shut his mouth, looked at me, frowning.

The others all appeared vaguely disappointed.

Cosserat seemed befuddled for an instant. “Umm, the same as your father,” he said eventually. “We have all lived long enough to make sizeable fortunes. We tend to rest during the day, going out only when necessary to advance our business interests. The advent of the computer and advanced telecommunications has made that task much easier.”

“You must all have had a trade once upon a time,” I persisted.

“Not Rosmarie or me,” Goodall said, slightly bemused. “In our day, women were kept.”

I looked at Cosserat, who seemed embarrassed. "I was a priest."

"A priest!" Leon spurted.

"A Catholic priest. I have always been drawn to the spiritual life."

"As are all our kind," Father said quietly.

"In my case the pull was a little stronger. I thought the hunger in me was nothing more than the manifestation of my devotion to God."

"You believe in God?" I asked, surprised.

"How else do you explain our existence?" Cosserat asked, genuinely mystified by my question. "How else can we put in perspective the desire that drives us to become predators amongst what once must have been our own kind?"

"I was a good priest. I looked after my flock with great love and attention. But the Church could not long keep a blind eye to my agelessness. I had to leave its service; I arranged for an accident. The Church believed I had died at last, and I was free." His expression became sad. "Well, free to wander, to leave behind my home, my friends."

"Then officially you are still a priest?"

Cosserat nodded. "Yes. I still have all the authority vested in me by the Church, but I no longer practice, of course. It wouldn't be ... right."

* * * *

There was another round of drinks, this one bought by father, and the conversation drifted a little before Goodall suggested it was time to move on. Leon and I were instantly alert.

"Maybe Leon and I should leave you to it," I said.

"We've had a very long day," Leon said in support.

"Good heavens," Eckert said primly. "By the tone in your voices you'd think we were going out to rob a bank."

"Not exactly..."

“Or to *dinner*,” she added quickly, a smile playing at the corner of her lips.

“I feel like Italian,” Cosserat said playfully. “Or maybe Thai.”

“Enough,” Father said quietly. He turned to Leon and me. “Dinner as in a restaurant, you two. I’m sure you’re as hungry as we are. Why don’t you join us? If you want to go home after that, I’ll drive you back and meet up with my friends later.”

Leon and I glanced at one another, and both of us nodded.

“We are hungry,” Leon admitted. “We didn’t eat much today.”

“Missing your cows?” Eckert asked, her smile still teasing.

* * * *

Neither Italian nor Thai, but a steak house. I was embarrassed to see that only Leon and I ordered our steaks rare. The watery blood leaking from the edge of our meals actually made the others slightly nauseous.

“Not real blood at all, you see,” Cosserat explained. “It reminds me of artificial cream.”

“Or soy milk,” Goodall added, her face wrinkling.

We ate our meals slowly, talking about books we’d read, films we’d seen; Father’s friends even spent some time asking us questions about our farm, about what crops we’d planted, how we made a living, about the recent drought and the even more recent floods. Despite our earlier misgivings, Leon and I started to relax, to enjoy the company we were keeping.

As the night wore on the place became busier and busier; when someone put some coins in a jukebox, we had to raise our voices to be heard by each other.

Eckert complained about the selection of music, mostly country and western, but both Goodall and Cosserat announced they preferred it to rock or pop.

There followed an argument about music, Leon and I contributing as

much as the others.

When the meal finished, no-one felt like leaving the table. Several rounds of drinks were bought, but only Leon and I seemed to be affected by the alcohol, our speech slowing and our thoughts becoming increasingly confused. At one point, Leon even got up to dance with Goodall, his usual timidity worn away by then.

Soon after I found myself talking with Eckert and Leon about our father. She had known him almost as long as Cosserat. I got the impression she was being guarded in her replies, but it was obvious she respected and liked him a great deal. Leon, hesitantly, asked her if she and Father had ever had an affair. Eckert smiled sadly, and did not reply at first. Leon mumbled an apology about being too familiar, but she waved it aside.

“Your father and I did have an affair; but it was so long ago that I cannot remember as much about it as I would like. You have to understand, our capacity to recall emotions is as subject to selective memory as normal humans. We remember the good times and the bad times, but not always the events, the causes, behind these emotions.”

Leon asked more questions, then, but I found myself wondering about my father’s relationship with my mother. How much of their affair did he remember? It hurt to think that, however clear the memories he had of her may be now, in time he would forget most of it. The realisation saddened me, and made me also wonder if a time would come when he would forget about Leon and me.

I excused myself from the table and made my way to the toilets, a sign above a narrow doorway indicating the way. Behind the door was a whitewashed corridor with the men’s and women’s toilets on either side; at the end of the corridor was an exit. Somebody was standing in the exit, their back to me. I heard a commotion on the other side, then a faint moan that sounded like someone in pain. Without thinking I went to the exit. The person there turned around, and I recognised Cosserat. He looked at me blankly for a moment, then smiled and frowned at the same time.

“Is someone hurt?” I asked, about to edge past him.

“No-one is hurt...” he began, and moved to block my way.

What made me push past him, I’ll never know. It wasn’t a conscious decision, my brain was too befuddled with drink by then to think so clearly. I think now that it was inevitable, as if the events of the last few days since

Father's visit to the farm had all the time been leading to this moment.

The shock of cold rain splashing onto my face startled me. I stood in an alley, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. Then I heard the moaning again. I looked around, saw two bodies against one of the alley walls. I blinked, brushed water from my eyes, and recognised my father. With one hand he was holding a man I had not seen before against the wall; the man was barely conscious, his eyes rolled back in their sockets showing only the whites. My father's mouth was on his neck, sucking furiously. There was no blood, only the sound of air and liquid.

I don't know how long it went on for. I was aware of Cosserat moving behind me, of his own hands gently falling on my shoulders. When my father had finished feeding, he gently let the stranger slump to the ground, then turned around and saw me there for the first time.

Blood smeared his lips, whirled on his chin. The rain quickly drained the blood away.

"This is what it is like for us," he said eventually. "We are parasites, not predators, you see, and must take what we can, where we can, from whom we can."

"What... what will happen to him?"

"He will wake a few hours from now with a headache. He will be light-headed for a few days. He will remember nothing of tonight, nothing of me."

Father looked up into the sky, let the rain fall into his open mouth. He swallowed the water in great gulps, washing away the taste of blood. When he looked at me again I could see infinite sorrow in his eyes.

"Your mother was right, you know, to take you and your brother away from me. The life I lead is filled with the blood of other people, and my past is nothing more than the story of my hunger. I would not wish it upon you."

"That hasn't always been the way," I said.

"True. I thought it would be fine to share my life with my two sons. But you are not like us; I hoped you might be, for selfish reasons."

I turned on my heel, went back inside. I didn't want to be near my father. At that moment, he repulsed me, made me feel sick to my stomach.

When I got back to the table Leon was gone. Goodall was there, and told me that he and Eckert had gone for a walk.

“A walk?”

Goodall frowned, as if she realised she may already have said too much. I ran out of the steakhouse before she could say anything more. I scanned the street for a glimpse of Leon, but didn't see him. I was starting to panic, and didn't know which way to go. I forced myself to calm down, and headed north. I checked at every alley or side street, but still saw no sign of the pair. After a few minutes I crossed the road, made my way south, past the steak house. Eventually I came to a side street that was darker than any of the others, many of the overhead lights having been broken. I ran down, went past an alleyway before I realised it was there. I went back, peered in, but it was so dark I could see nothing.

And then that sound again, the helpless moaning.

“Leon?” My voice was small, barely above a whisper.

No reply. I entered the alley, took a few steps forward. Now I could make out shapes not more than ten metres from me. I forced myself to walk towards them. I recognised Eckert, standing side on to me. She was pinning a woman against the alley wall. Leon's mouth was attached to the crook of one of the victim's arms. Eckert's face was raptured, her eyes staring at the blood that pooled around Leon's mouth, dribbled to the ground.

“No!” I screamed, and rushed forward. I knocked Eckert aside, and as the victim collapsed I spun Leon around to face me. His face twisted in sudden rage, and he lashed out at me, his hand slamming into the side of my head. I fell back, lost my balance, and Leon was on top of me, beating at my face with his fists.

I heard Eckert scream, then saw her pull Leon off me and force him against the wall. She was tremendously strong.

“*Stop it!*” she cried. “Leon, stop it, *now!*” He stopped struggling, seemed to fall in on himself.

I picked myself up, stood there in a daze. My head felt as if it was ready to fall off my shoulders. There were running footsteps behind me. Father and Cosserat. Cosserat took one look at the scene, nodded as if agreeing with some thought he'd just had, and picked up the victim, carrying

her further into the alley. He laid her down carefully, placing her arms across her body, straightening her legs.

Eckert looked at me, then at my father. "It's all right, Kathryn," he said, and she let Leon go. My brother was breathing in ragged gasps; even in the poor light I could see how white his face had become, and how bloody his teeth. Father went to him, put his hands around Leon's face and gently kissed him on the forehead.

"I'm sorry. I should never have brought you here." He looked at me, then. "I should never have brought either of you here."

* * * *

Leon and I stood atop White Ridge, looking across at the curving, blue line of the Southern Highlands. The hills folded in on themselves, shadow and light making them soft as skin. It was morning, near the end of summer. Last night's rain had passed slowly over the land, leaving the grass and rocks glistening.

Our small herd of cows were milling around us, beginning to nudge at our palms. They needed milking, and soon we would need feeding. Leon and I said nothing to each other, for the moment content to be in each other's company, searching in the landscape to find something we had lost, knowing even as we did so that we would never find it.

Below us, in the steep valley of the Murrumbidgee, a mist was starting to rise. We stood there with clouds at our feet, afraid of our past, and even more afraid of our future.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

"With Clouds at our Feet" is a story about pity, possibly the most destructive of emotions. It is also about fathers and sons, and how the love between them can, with distance and time, express itself as a kind of pity.

The story did not start out that way. Originally, I had intended it to be more straightforward, and quite explicitly horrific and graphically violent, but as is so often the case, the story's characters refused to follow the path I had planned for them. And they were right.

— *Simon Brown*