

By the Tracks We  
Leave

David Briggs



Copyright © 2017 David Briggs

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 10:1508669716  
ISBN-13:9781508669715

To Matt

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank all my friends and allies – both human and canine – who have helped me in the long and often haphazard process of writing this book. Amongst these, my greatest debt as always is to my wife Ann, who has sustained me throughout with her love and belief and generous yet honest criticism of everything I write. I owe a debt, too, to our dogs, who have often dragged me through the blockages of an empty page or a stalled idea by the simple device of demanding a walk; somehow, on those walks, inspiration comes. I thank, also, Geoff Walker for his helpful critique of an early draft of the book, and Richard Cullingworth, Monika Kron, and Elaine Singleton who have offered invaluable comment and advice on later versions. There are others, too, who have contributed in small but significant ways, simply by their passing presence in my life – for every story is derivative to some degree and draws obliquely on personal experience and on the people involved. None would recognise themselves here, I am sure, but I thank you all the same, both for passing by when you did, and for reappearing in my thoughts as I wrote this story.

We will be known forever by the tracks we leave

*American Indian Proverb*

## NOTE TO READERS

Stories, I would contest, are like birds: made to fly and to sing. Yet most books seem to spend the majority of their lives silently caged – on a bookshelf somewhere; in a library storeroom; or in the box of discards waiting to go to the Op-shop or tip.

I would love this book to travel. I have therefore placed free copies at various locations around the world (most in New Zealand, a few elsewhere) in the hope that they will be picked up, read, and passed on. If you have discovered one of these, therefore, please feel free to take the book. And however you have come by this copy, when you have finished with it do not hoard it or carelessly discard it; instead, find somewhere to leave it, from where it can continue its travels.

I would, of course, love to know where it goes. And equally, if you have comments to make about the story, I'd be delighted to know. So if you have time, please contact me and let me know where you found the book, what you thought of it, and where it went next.

You can contact me by any of the means below:

Email: [dave@briggsnz.net](mailto:dave@briggsnz.net)

Website: [davidbriggs.co.nz](http://davidbriggs.co.nz)

David Briggs, on Facebook

You can buy further copies from Amazon or via the links above.





# 1. ROGAN

Rogan Fielding paused for a few moments, panting, braced against the slope. He looked up. The track was indistinct here, little more than a faint scratch across the land, but he could see the rough line of rocks that marked the divide. After that, the route would be easier: a longer, gentler descent into the next valley and the first hut, his home for the night.

He would sleep well. Only half a day out, and his legs were aching. But it was doing him good, body and mind.

He hitched his rucksack onto his shoulders, and restarted his climb. He kept his eyes on the horizon, on a stunted tree that he had already marked as his next point of rest, willing it closer, watching its slow rise with each hauled step.

Then the tree changed shape, became the figure of a man. It moved right to left along the ridgeline, back hunched against the wind.

He measured their progress, trying to calculate whether they would meet - hoping they would do so, for the sight of someone else made the hills suddenly seem vast and his own existence small. Yet in another dozen steps it was obvious that they would not. The man was striding out, seeming to eat up the path; they would miss each other by a hundred metres or more. He thought of calling; wondered if the other walker would look down, see him and pause. But the man strode on.

A few minutes later, Rogan crested the slope himself. The force of the wind brought tears to his eyes, and he turned away. Further along the ridge, the man was still walking fast. As Rogan watched, the figure dissolved to a black shape again, dwindled,

was itself eaten up by the land.

He turned around, facing the wind once more. With gritted teeth he strode into it, head down. Another five minutes and he reached a low cluster of rocks where the track split. He ducked between them into a narrow cleft, threw himself down and lay back. Above him, the wind whistled and howled.

Walking had been Kate's idea. She had suggested it for his sake - yet perhaps for hers as well. He went to flab too easily, she said - and she didn't like fat men. It would help to keep him in trim; it was that or join her in the gym. To his surprise he had liked it, and they had walked often. After she left, though, he had failed to keep it up; had slipped back into a more sluggish life. He'd put the kilos back on and hadn't fretted over it, for there was no-one who might care. And as he buried himself deeper in his work, there hadn't been the time. So the sudden decision to go tramping again, not just a stroll but a three-day hike, had been something of a surprise even to him. He'd questioned his motives as he searched the house for missing gear, tried to brush the mud off his walking boots, wipe the mildew from his waterproofs, did so again soon after he'd set out, when he encountered his first real climb.

Yet lying there now, he knew that he was enjoying it and could see its sense. Another tentative step on the journey back. For in the last few months, something had stirred. At first just the sharp recognition of loneliness. Then the gradual - sometimes clumsy - attempt to do something about it. An evening with Mac and the others in the bar. Driving to Christchurch to spend a night with old university friends, reliving memories, before parting in embarrassed hugs and promises. With an oblique look, browsing the on-line dating websites, before hurrying onto some other page in the endeavour to make it feel like an accident. Once, when he could not settle, couldn't face the night alone, cruising the Dunedin streets, assessing every woman he passed, finding

himself lured and repulsed in equal measure; until he realised that he was looking at girls of fifteen, women of fifty, and could hardly tell them apart, and swerved away, down a side-road, made his way home.

He checked his watch. Nearly two o'clock now. Time to move on. He picked up his rucksack. Feeling refreshed, buoyant, he set off, through the tussock grass, down to the stream, followed it more slowly, stretching the day out and reached the hut just as the sun slipped beyond the western ranges, turning the sky to blood.

As he'd promised himself, he slept well that night, and woke late. The new day seemed to welcome him, as if impatient for his return. Bright sun, a pale sky swept clean, a restless breeze teasing at his face. As he strode up the hillside towards the next ridge, he saw himself as a tiny point on an empty landscape, making microbial progress across world. By lunchtime, however, it had all changed. The sky had become faceless and opaque. Clouds piled against the peaks, the horizon shrank. The air started to bite. Just below the ridge he stopped and ate a hurried meal, crouching in a hollow.

As he stepped onto the crest, the rain came.

It swept towards him, swallowing up the land. It spread its gauze of grey around him, and pulled him into itself. It seemed to focus all its energy upon him, the only living thing in its way - battering at his anorak, lashing at his cheeks, filling his eyes. It hung in large droplets from his nose. His boots squelched and slipped in the mud. His exposed hands were stiff and numb.

He zipped his anorak to the chin, pulled the hood tight. With lengthened stride he drove forward. How far to the hut? Five kilometres? He counted his steps, subtracting them from the distance he still had to go. Fixing his mind on his destination. Imagining its eager embrace.

The thought brought a small, new seed of hope. In these

conditions, he might not be the only refugee from the hills. Other people might already be there; maybe even the man he had seen the previous day. He conjured up the scene in the hut. A fire. Smoke hanging beneath the roof. Bodies huddled close, welcoming him amongst them. A hot stew on the stove, enough for him to be given a share. Maybe a beer or two, or a warming whisky. Laughter at their mutual misfortune.

He strode, slipped, stumbled on. Cursed aloud, his voice fleeing to nothing in the clamour of the wind and rain. He thought again of the hut, of the people waiting; the promise of warmth and company.

\*

The door was unyielding. He pushed again, but it would not budge.

It had taken him another two hours to get here. The daylight had almost gone. He was tired, miserable with the cold.

For a third time he pushed. The obstruction, whatever it might be, seemed to be low down, half a metre or so above the ground, almost as if someone on the other side had their knee against the door.

He hammered on the wood, shouted: "What the hell's going on?" He listened, half expecting laughter in return, but there was no answer. He knelt and slid his hand around the edge of the door. He touched something soft: fabric or perhaps the fur of an animal. Instinctively, he withdrew his hand.

He reached out again. A sack, full and heavy, wedged against the door. He tugged at it, but it would not move.

Crouched, he put his shoulder against the wood, heaved with sudden desperation. It slid slowly open. He stumbled inside.

The room was dark. His outstretched hand jarred against a wooden post. But the sudden dryness of the air felt good and

warm on his face. He steadied himself, while his mind and eyes cleared, then turned to look back at the door. He felt his breath catch. The thing that lay there was no longer a sack, but a human figure. A man, slumped forward, head loose.

“Are you alright?”

He stepped forward, knelt down beside the figure; reached a hand out to the face.

The wind yanked at the door, making it bang against his leg, scattering rain and grit across the room.

Even to his fingers, the touch of the skin was cold. It was a strange, dull coldness. The product not of the weather but something more visceral, more consuming, draining the last warmth from his hand.

Dead?

His sluggish mind resisted the notion. It didn't seem possible. Death wasn't something he knew or expected first-hand. Not in this way, not so incidentally. If it were to approach him, surely it would be with a fanfare or warning. So he remained kneeling, waiting for the man to move or respond in some way, curious rather than alarmed.

Then, tentatively, he reached out and touched him again. Still cold. Water dripped from his sleeve onto the man's shoulder, and he went to wipe it away; stopped, took the man's wrist instead, felt for a pulse. There was nothing. He put his ear to the man's mouth, trying to catch some small sound or brush of breath. Again, nothing. He pushed the man's collar down and touched the neck. It felt doughy and inert.

As the truth at last broke, questions spilled into his mind. Was this the man he had seen only yesterday? How had he died? Was there still any chance of reviving him? What should he do? Should he try and get help?

In what seemed like his first act of rationality, he fumbled for his mobile phone, yet knew as he did so that there would be no

signal. He looked around, hoping for some form of illumination – a candle, a lamp – but in the gathering gloom could see nothing. He shivered, as much perhaps from the shock of his discovery as his physical state.

Then his thoughts steadied. He had a torch. And it was just another backpackers' hut like all the others. He knew its layout, what it had to offer. Bunk beds on either side. A wood stove on the further wall, a small table, three or four wooden chairs. A single window and a sink behind him, just inside the door, fed from the rainwater tank outside. There would be matches, perhaps candles, by the stove; if he were lucky some paper, dry wood.

He found the torch and played it around the room, careful to avoid the man. Within minutes, he had two candles guttering on the windowsill, the makings of a fire in the stove, a battered billy full of water waiting for the heat to take hold. Only then did he step past the body and push the door shut.

One of the chairs was lying askew in the middle of the room. He righted it and sat by the stove. Huddling close for every grain of warmth, he looked across at the man. Not directly at first, he was not ready for that, but with a quick, sidelong glance.

The man was dressed normally enough. An old Barbour jacket, its fabric scuffed and cracked, dark green trousers, muddied walking boots. Despite the misshapen sprawl of the body, he was obviously tall, rather angular, a man who had carried little waste. He might have been in his seventies or early eighties. White hair, untrimmed, hung in loose strands across his scalp. Long fingers splayed from bony hands.

Was it the man he had seen the previous day? He could not tell.

Slowly, fighting his emotions, he looked back at the face, studied it, seeking clues. It was thin-featured, the hollow of the cheeks emphasised by the dancing light. There was a rough

stubble on his chin. The mouth hung slightly open. The eyes were vacant, expressionless, yielding no hint of knowledge or a past.

Just a body, a corpse, that existed only as it was now, slumped by the door. Fancifully, he imagined that it might have been there for years; might stay there for years more, anonymous, hardly noticed, save when someone tripped against a stray foot, or needed somewhere to drape a wet pair of jeans.

With an effort he pulled his wandering mind back, stood up, said aloud: "Christ, I'm tired."

He needed to focus on practicalities. To get changed, dry out his clothes, eat, sleep. Yet when he opened his rucksack, the inadequacies of his preparations for the trip became starkly evident. His rucksack was old, the seams had leaked; he'd not packed anything in polythene bags. His sleeping bag and mat, spare clothes were all wet. He stripped off, chose the driest alternatives he could find, and put them on; arranged all his wet things around the stove.

The knowledge of the body, there by the door, dragged at his attention, as if he were being watched. He glanced towards it.

Who was he?

Suddenly curious, he went across to the man, seeking some means of identification - a wallet, a diary, any piece of hard fact. As he did so, a new thought occurred. He gave the arm of the jacket an experimental tug. It resisted. He heaved the body into a sitting position, its back to his legs, and pulled again. The jacket slid off. With an effort, he hauled the body around, propped it against the wall. It sat there, looking drunken, defeated, disarranged.

The light from the candles played across the face, carving shadows in the skin. It etched out a coarse scar that ran across his forehead, diagonally from his left eye. Rogan reached out and touched it. The blood was dry, congealed.

Had he fallen, been attacked?

He fetched a candle and searched for marks on the floor, where the man's head would have lain. Amid the other stains on the wood it was hard to tell, but there seemed to be a small dark area, the size of a dinner plate. It was smooth, yet faintly tacky to the touch.

Then another question: where was the man's pack? Surely, there had to be one. He looked around. There was none in sight. Lost before he arrived? Abandoned?

But as he stood up, something else caught his eye. A crumpled piece of paper in the space where the body had lain. A photograph. He placed it on the table, then retrieved the man's jacket, put it on. The lining was cold against his skin. It seemed unwilling to warm him. He felt in the pockets, found them empty.

He picked up the photograph. The paper was soft, creased. Had the man been holding it? Had it simply been loose on the floor? He peered at it. A woman. In the dim light it was difficult to make out any details, and the colours had faded – but in her forties, perhaps. Slim, dark-haired. Laughing. She stood, holding a bicycle, in front of what looked like a shop doorway. On the wall above her, in large letters, was a word: ANGER.

He turned it over. There was nothing on the reverse. He placed it back on the table, stood looking down at it. Had it been the man's?

Would she be waiting?

Across the room, the body faced him, its thoughts a secret. It seemed twisted, molested and he went over to it and righted it as best he could. The sense of pillage remained.

He turned his mind to his own comfort again and scouted around the hut, searching for anything else he might wear or use as bedding until his own sleeping bag dried. There were no mattresses, but on one of the bunks he found a thin blanket, and in a corner was a small pile of odd and holey socks. He pulled two onto each foot, used two others for his hands.



The heat from the stove was already waning, and he threw the remainder of the logs into the fire, knowing that he'd regret it later in the night when the fire died.

The action made him realise that if he were to have hot food, he needed to cook it soon. He went to his rucksack, took out the remainder of his rice, a bag of sauce. Clumsy in his mittened hands, he cooked them together on the stove; ate straight from the pan.

Finally, dog-tired, he poked at the fire, pulled the two chairs together in front of it, huddled into the blanket and tried to sleep. Failed. Found himself instead fixed by the shape of the body across the room. A formless shadow against the wall, made real only by his memory of the cold skin, the empty look of the eyes. And by the sudden darting light from the stove that every now and then would make quick sketches of his features, bringing them alive.

He found himself, also, prey to his circling thoughts. Reliving the events of the day. Trying to make sense of the scene he had stumbled into. Exploring different explanations, imagining different scenes, each of which dissolved into fantasy. He pushed them away.

New thoughts queued up in their place. About the woman who might be waiting. About the man's life.

Muddled thoughts about his own.

Kate. Life with her, and without. Meeting and parting.

Familiar thoughts, like old yet unwanted friends. There'd be no sleep now, for a while. He let them in.

It had been her suggestion to leave Christchurch, to come here.

She'd told him one evening, as she sat at his feet by the fire, in their small town flat. There was a vacancy in the Queenstown office of the real estate company she worked for, with responsibilities for farm and lifestyle properties. She'd almost been promised the job if she applied. Would he let her?

It offered not only promotion, she said, but more money, a new life away from the city. They'd be able to get a bigger place, maybe even a house. Out in the country or in a village somewhere. They'd be able to have pets.

And it would be good for him, she argued. An opportunity to do what he wanted, to go independent, to be his own boss. The chance to show people what he could do.

He could hear her hope, feel her eagerness, see her excitement in her eyes. He could not say no. So he'd leaned forward and kissed her, in the pale centre of her head where the hair parted; gently, slipped his arms down her side. Whispered his love to her, telling her that he'd happily go anywhere with her - even Otago. Making a joke of it, making her laugh, so that the import of it all would not show.

Two weeks later, he had submitted his resignation to the TV production company he was working for. They reacted swiftly and with what seemed like real concern, asking him to think again, hinting at inducements to stay, sketching out the career he was abandoning. As calmly as he could, he batted it all away, wrapping his decision up in the ambition Kate had painted for him, in the yearning for independence. They hadn't heard the last of him, he assured them; he'd be back, and charging a lot more for the fruits of his labour. They wished him luck.

The reality was no easier than he, or they, had expected. Not just his work, struggling to get established, but Kate equally. Trying to match her emotions, chasing the all too familiar switchback of her moods. Huge joy and hope at first, driving her to excess - at work, with friends, in their private play together. Then slowly, inevitably, its antithesis creeping in. Doubt and despair.

He watched, feeling helpless, as her world unravelled again. As she retreated back into herself, feeding off her failure and sense of blame. Hungry all the time for more. So that when she

guessed that his own endeavours were failing, as she easily did – for in her eyes everything around her was fraying and at risk – she absorbed the blame for that as well.

He fought against it, as best he knew how, with false cheerfulness, manufactured hope, genuine love and sympathy. But it did no good. Like twigs in an eddy, they circled around each other, neither able to reach the other. Neither of them wanting to recognise their plight, pretending.

Until, after a year, she left.

Since then?

Doubts of his own. And guilt. And confusion.

For he had thought that they could be happy, and that he gave her as much as any man could. Not just love, but understanding, support. Was that true?

And if not, where exactly had he failed?

He still did not know.

But it had left him drained. Bereft, betrayed. Not by her – he could say that honestly. Rather, by himself, by his own limits and lack of strength, his own judgement of himself, of her. So that he no longer trusted his emotions, or other women he might meet.

In response, he did what he later supposed every man did: threw himself into his work. It had its compensations. He found himself thinking, writing with a new edge – the sharpness of solitude, of anger. It brought achievement of a sort. A monthly programme for Radio Otago. A documentary for a TV franchise. Articles for newspapers and magazines. Enough to live off. A rough trajectory beginning to form.

Though no replacement for Kate, nor any real attempt to find one. The nut of distrust that had grown within him seemed to harden rather than dissolve. It guarded his independence; probably cast a shadow of surliness around him, like a warning to others. If so it had worked, for he was still alone.

He went over to the stove, felt at his sleeping bag and mat.

They were almost dry now, enough at least to use. He made up a bed on one of the bunks, crawled into the bag. Lay there, gazing at the ceiling.

The fire in the stove flared again briefly, and he instinctively glanced across the room. The man's eyes glinted back, his mouth shaping silent words. Like a dying man, trying to reveal his secret, voice his last wish.

Then darkness once more.

He turned over, towards the wall, slept.

\*

The dawn brought confusion. He woke with sleep still cluttering his mind. The silence, the smell of wood smoke, the shape of the bunk above him, the wall at his side, were all strange. The body by the door, waiting for him when he turned, unfathomable, like the remnant of a dream made real.

After a quick breakfast, he packed hurriedly. Then he stood, looking around. It seemed inappropriate simply to leave like this, but there was nothing he could think of to do.

He saw the jacket he'd worn during the night, took it across to the body, hung it around the shoulders.

Then another thought. The photograph. He went back to the table, picked it up, looked at it again. The paradox of the laughter on the woman's face, the word behind her - anger - intrigued him and seemed to beg attention. He slipped it into his pocket, and with one last glance at the man, stepped outside.

After the excesses of the previous day, the weather now was apologetic. The wind scuffed its feet in the grass; tag-ends of clouds scuttled away towards the mountains like late night revellers caught out in the dawn. The air tasted of a fresh start.

He closed the door, then noticed a pack at the corner of the building, propped against the wall. It was old-style, metal-

framed, well-worn. In the space beneath the main compartment was a small, lightweight tent. He unzipped the pack, looked inside. It smelt fungal and damp. Beneath a rolled-up sleeping bag, he found a polythene bag containing a few items of food, another of used clothes; kerosene stove, matches. In the outer pockets a water bottle and topographic maps, a compass. The usual paraphernalia of a well-prepared walker out on the hills. The only item of any exception was a notebook, bound in a plastic wrap. He flipped it open, browsed through the pages. It seemed to be a diary of sorts, for there were dates with short passages beneath. Not records of anything specific, but seemingly random thoughts, written in a personal language of abbreviations and half-words, and in a scrawling hand. Nothing to identify him.

He repacked the bag, put it inside the hut, set off back to his car.

It was late morning by the time he arrived. As soon as he did so, he rang for the police, was passed onto the Queenstown station, and told his story. An hour later two police cars arrived. While a pair of officers headed up to the hut, he gave a statement, sitting in one of the cars. He felt suddenly weary, weak, and the policewoman taking the statement offered him coffee. He drank it gratefully. Even so his account seemed stumbling and confused, and as he added his signature he noticed his hand tremble with fatigue.

When he had finished, he drove slowly back to town, seeing the world slip past him in a daze. At home, he fed the cat, bathed, ate. Then the urgent need to tell someone about it all engulfed him. He rang his sister, Trish, in Auckland. She listened sympathetically, as she always did, while he recounted the story in a jumbled way. She told him to get some sleep and call again when he was rested. He went to bed.

He was still asleep at nine the following morning when the phone rang. It was the police, thanking him for what he'd done,

telling him that they had recovered the body though not yet identified the man. Nor could they yet confirm the cause of death; there would be a post-mortem, as there usually was in circumstances like this. Then the coroner might order an inquest. If so, it was possible that he would be called as a witness. They would keep him informed.

He replaced the phone, relieved. He'd feared that he'd find himself tied up in bureaucracy for days. He had other things to get on with: his weekly contribution to the Queenstown Gazette; an article for the Air New Zealand magazine; his next programme for Radio Otago. Though at that moment, he told himself, they could all wait another hour or so. He lay down again, closed his eyes.

Then he remembered the picture.

He went to the bathroom, where he'd hung his anorak to dry. He felt in the pockets, pulled out the still-damp photograph; took it back to the bedroom, stood studying it.

Was it important? Ought he to tell the police?

He reached for the phone. As he did so, it rang.

"Mr Fielding?"

Warily, wondering if it was the police, he answered: "Yes?"

"ODT here - Otago Daily Times. My name's Lester Lovell. I work on the news desk. I understand you found a body of a man on the hills yesterday. I wondered if you could tell me a little about it: how you found him, what state it was in."

He felt a wave of fatigue, and had to push down an instinct to refuse. As a journalist himself, he was used to that - being denied an interview - and it always irritated him; he, at least, should play the game. Nevertheless, he found it difficult to be forthcoming. Standing there, trying to piece the story together again, make it sound linear and rational, he realised how recent it still was, how unformed his memory of the episode. How, even as he recounted them, the events reshaped and reordered themselves in his mind

and became something new.

By the end of the morning, however, he had had considerably more practice in the telling. For in close succession, he had three more calls: from a local paper, from a news agency, from Radio National. Later – and belatedly he acknowledged – he rang Radio Otago to give them the story. Each time, the questions were much the same. What had happened? How did he feel at the time? How did he think the man had died? Did he know who he was? Could he give a little information about himself?

It was the same in the afternoon, when he went into town. News of the event had clearly already been aired on the radio or TV. And once released, information travelled fast in a small community like this, though mutating as it ran. When he called on his neighbour, to thank her for looking after Darwin while he'd been away, she showered him with concern. It must have been a shock, a horrible ordeal. Was he alright? Did he need to talk about it at all? At the store, Pru asked: "What's this about a body?" Outside, Greg, one of the crowd he knew from the bar, crossed the street to him, calling out: "Hey Rogan – someone said you'd found an injured climber." By the next day, in the bar, the body had become a murdered man. Each time, he felt the story drift a little further away from him, from his own experience. It was no longer his, but a tale that anyone could tell, with a momentum of its own.

What he was left with, as he sat at his desk trying to work, or lay in bed searching for sleep, was something different. Not a story, but the bones of one. Broken fragments, images that came back to him, uninvited. A dark shape slumped against the wall. A mouth, hung slightly open, showing crooked teeth. The coldness of a jacket on his own skin. A crumpled photograph. And questions – not about his discovery of the body, but a time before. A gap that he could not fill, a place that he had not been. The man himself. Who he was. How he had died. Why – and why there,

then? His life.

Another story, suddenly cut short, untold.

He rang Trish once more.

Of the three siblings, it had always been he, the eldest, and she the youngest, who had been closest. They shared much in both personality and tastes, and in the as yet unresolved pattern of their lives. Only the middle one, Beth, had followed the path that their parents had expected and wished for them all. Getting married, settling down – though to their disappointment, not nearby – having children; wholly fulfilled. Like him, Trish was still searching. The difference between them, he felt, was that she enjoyed the hunt, and did not show the scars, whereas for him the scars seemed to be all. He envied her for that, wondered how she achieved it. Claimed to himself that it owed something to his own brotherly protection, his concern, his advice. In return, she gave him what he needed: understanding, gentle adoration, teasing inquisitiveness.

He got that now. She listened again as he told her how his discovery had turned already into something of a local legend, with him as the hero. “So you should be,” she said. She commiserated as he grumbled that it was all getting too much for him, distracting him from his work. “You poor thing.” Then she quizzed him about the man. Had he learned anything about him? Where did he think he was from? Was he a local?

Surely someone knew him, was missing him. “That would be so sad,” she said. “Not to know. Not even to have felt some twinge of anxiety, some sort of telepathy.” She didn’t believe in such things, he knew. Like him, she was a rationalist, scornful of anything that even smelled of mysticism. But she believed in the force of love. “To have lived those days as a lie.”

He thought once more about the photograph.

It was the one element of the story he hadn’t told her about, though why he was not sure. Mild embarrassment, perhaps, at



the fact of his taking it; the further embarrassment of having to excuse his action to the police, if she told him he ought to hand it over. He shied away from telling her now, but could not suppress the question: who might it be; might she be waiting?

After he had put the phone down, he retrieved the picture, looked at it once more. Something about it told him that it was not recent. The feel of the paper, heavier, softer than modern materials. The colours – russet mid-tones, like pre-digital photos, taken on film. The shop window, the bike, not like anything found on the street today. So a picture from his past? Some family memento? A wife, a lover?

And the word above her head. Anger. Unintended? Or a deliberate piece of code between the two of them – photographer and photographed – saying something about that day? Or a message just to him, from her? I'm angry. I reject your anger.

Another conundrum.

The next day, however, one question at least was resolved. In mid-afternoon the officer who had interviewed him in the car rang. A courtesy call she said, just to update him on developments. "We have a name for him, now. Nielsen. John Trelawney Nielsen to be precise. It's a bit of a surprise you didn't know him: he's a local – well, of sorts. He lived out at the end of the Parehike Valley. Kevin, your bobby, recognised him when we circulated the photograph. He checked with Nielsen's neighbours; one of them, a Mrs Guthrie, gave us a formal identification."

Rogan thanked her. "Do you have any idea yet about how he died?"

"Not yet. The post mortem will take a few days, and then the coroner will have to prepare a report. It should be here next week. We'll know then whether there'll need to be an inquest: you'll probably be contacted if so."

"What about family, relatives?"

“None that we know of; he lived alone. Though there’s possibly someone back in England: it seems he lived there for a while, years ago. We’re making enquiries.” But often, she continued, things became clearer once the funeral was arranged. Kevin would be asking around, to see who might take that task on. Locals often remembered then, or the announcement brought people forward. Then she added: “Though it looks to me as if he was just an old man, seeing out his time. There are a lot of them like that in these remote places. They hide out there, the last of their line, living on their memories.”

\*

Mac was sitting at his usual table, alone. One leg stretched out, easing the pain in his knee. An injury from his days at the sawmill, he’d said, and not the only one: a finger on his left hand was reduced to a knuckle-stub, a thumb twisted. Rogan went across to him, clutching a beer, pulled out a chair.

“Others not here yet?” Usually there was a crowd of them, six or seven at least. A mixed bunch. Maddy, Mac’s daughter-in-law; Rob who ran a landscaping business, Vince one of his workers; Aiden; the brothers Greg and Brad.

Mac sipped at his glass. A tonic water; he reserved beer-drinking for when he had company. “Something on at the school,” he said. “So Maddy won’t be here until later. Don’t know about the others: broke, I expect; they often are. Or just sitting in front of their telly.”

It was true. Rogan was only an occasional member of their group – welcomed on a form of guest status, which as Mac had once told him meant that it was his duty to buy the beer. He did so willingly enough, for it was good to have their company when he needed it: nights when he tired of his bachelor existence, the silent room, or as now when he needed to talk. But he had

become aware over recent months how their presence had thinned.

“What brings you out? Nothing better to do?”

“Just the opposite really. Far too much. So I’m playing truant.”

They were silent for a while, then Mac said: “So it was JT you found.”

It took a moment for the meaning to crystallise. “Nielsen? Yes. Did you know him?”

“A little. Not close. I don’t think any of us did. He kept himself to himself, though he can’t be blamed for that.” Mac rubbed at his knee, grumbled that it was troubling him tonight, blaming the weather. “Lived out in the Parehike somewhere, at the end of the road, so we didn’t see him often. But he used to come in for supplies, spend a bit of time with Bill.” He finished his tonic and put it down on the table. “You staying long enough for another?”

Rogan nodded, quickly downing the rest of his own beer. “Here, I’ll get them.” Mac resisted briefly, then yielded to the offer with a nod and rueful smile.

“You know his story, do you?” he asked, when Rogan came back.

“No.”

“Quite something. Before he came here of course. Years back. Captured by some rebel group in South America somewhere. Guatemala, I think. Held him for a few years before he got away. Probably made him what he was. Independent. Bit of a loner.”

Rogan thought of the body, tried to fit the events to the man he had seen.

With a little prompting, Mac went on. Nielsen, it seemed, had been captured along with some other tourists – back-packers – by an armed group. He was held in the jungle, eventually escaped when the chance arose, made his way back to civilisation. Later, he’d led the army back to the camp. Too late: the other hostages had been killed.

"Maddy will know more," Mac said. "I can't remember it all now. She learned about it at school, or maybe that boy of hers did. You should ask her."

Later, Rogan did so. She arrived just after Rob; while he got the drinks, she leaned over and kissed Mac on the cheek, asked him how his knee was this evening, brushed his cheek with a hand when he admitted that it wasn't good; greeted Rogan with a warm smile.

"Our friend here wants to know about JT. I said you'd oblige."

She told him the story again. "He gave a talk on it once, at school. Ben came home full of it. So what I know I got from him." Perhaps for that reason some of the details differed from Mac's account. How long he'd been held for, how he had escaped. And it was in Nicaragua, she said, not Guatemala. Mac was never any good at geography.

"Or history. Or English and maths," he muttered.

"So when was this?" Rogan asked.

"Nineteen-sixties. About 1968, I think."

"So then what?"

"Afterwards? I don't really know." She looked at Mac, eyebrows raised in enquiry.

"No. He never said much about any of it. Not unless you really pushed him. Like I say, kept himself to himself. He was British, I think, originally; came here first as a child. Then worked overseas. Africa was it? Came back fifteen years ago, when he retired, and has been here ever since."

"There were reports about it at the time, in the local papers," Maddy added. "When he came back, I mean. They treated him as a bit of a local hero, and interviewed him. I looked them up, after Ben told me all about him. They're in the library."

They talked on, adding in a few more memories about Nielsen, things he'd told them, things they'd heard; opinions about his character. Not much of a legacy from a life, Rogan mused.

As they talked, Vince joined them. He was an edgy, brittle young man, with the ragged hair, fleshy lips, careless clothes of a seventies rock-star. Of them all, Rogan knew him and warmed to him the least. He seemed moody and self-absorbed. He could swing from bright bonhomie to dark despair in the space of an evening. He seemed to be in the latter shade tonight, for he sat slightly apart, staring into his glass, saying little.

For a while, they speculated about how Nielsen had died, circulating through the possibilities. Coming back over and again to the wound on his head. Favouring, as a result, an attack of some sort.

"Nowhere's safe, these days," Mac said. "It'll have been some druggie after a few dollars. It always is."

"I'm not sure you get many druggies out there on the hills, dad."

"It just takes one."

Rogan put down his glass, rose, ready to leave, then stood there looking around. "What about family, a wife? Did he have anyone do you know?"

"None that I heard of," said Mac. "But you ought to talk to Bill in the store. He knew him as well as anyone. Used to spend a bit of time together."

There were nods, a raised hand, as he turned towards the door. Except from Vince, who got to his feet, followed him. "I need a fag," he said. Outside, he stopped, took a cigarette from his packet, offered the pack to Rogan, who shook his head. "You seem very interested in our friend Nielsen." Vince cradled the cigarette to light it.

"Not especially."

Vince drew on his cigarette. "People have two opinions of him around here. They either like him or loathe him."

"Why's that?"

Vince shrugged. "Some folk didn't know him well, I guess."

“Did you?”

“Well enough. As much as I wanted to.” The tone of his voice was clear, but he added: “Me, I couldn’t stand the guy. Wouldn’t trust him an inch.” He flicked a tag of ash from his cigarette, and watched it fall.

\*

The funeral was clearly going to be a low-key affair. There were barely twenty people there. Rogan knew some of them: mainly men from town or the outlying farms; a few he could recognise but not name. Two rows in front of him, three strangers sat together, forming a phalanx of erect backs.

He’d taken a seat near the door, feeling a need to be there, to close his belated involvement in Nielsen’s life, yet an intruder nonetheless.

While the congregation assembled, music played softly. Not the usual church music or plangent tunes, but African songs - a male choir, backed by gentle drums. From a CD that Nielsen had lent him, Bill explained as he stood up and faced them, introduced himself: the sort of music JT liked. Then, with a cough, he welcomed everyone, apologised that he was no public speaker, outlined the style and order of the service. Nothing religious, he said - JT had no truck with that, and they wouldn’t want him walking out on them. There was subdued laughter. They’d start with a minute of silence, for reflection, then he would read a brief eulogy; after that, others would be invited to stand up and say their piece.

As he spoke, Rogan felt something brush against his neck. There was a whispered apology. He glanced around. A woman was leading her child along the back aisle, her hand on his shoulder. She took the seats at the far end of the row, ushering the child in first. He sat down hurriedly, then hunched forward,

rocking back and forth with a strange, nervous intent. The woman restrained him with a hand.

Bill was true to his word. The eulogy was brief, and he was no orator. He spoke head down, reading from his notes. His voice was small in the cavernous room. From where he sat, Rogan could hear only fragments of it, most of them words and phrases he was already primed to listen for and recognise. Kidnapped by the Sandinistas. Held hostage. Escape. Came to Otago. Parehike. Walking in the hills. A bit of fishing.

A whole life, he reflected, shrunk to its minimum.

Then a few more phrases – said with more emphasis, more personal. “A good friend, when you made the effort to know him. We spent quite a bit of time together, playing chess. He was good at it. Better than me. And he never gave any quarter. So most of the time I lost. But he’d be even happier than I was if I managed to win. As though it really pleased him.”

Afterwards, as Bill had promised, a few of the others there stood and said a few words. Pru, Bill’s wife. Mac. Rob, talking fluently, and in a generous encompassing way, as if for the town as a whole. Mick Stead, who ran the large farm that surrounded Nielsen’s property, so was a neighbour of sorts. Bunny Crockett, who seemed to know everyone; turned up at every funeral, it was said, as she did every christening, the self-appointed censor who counted you in and counted you out.

Simple words for the most part. Things that might have been said about anyone, hardly singled Nielsen out. But a mark of respect, of recognition, from those around him; confirming that his presence in the community had been noted, and his departure mourned.

At the end, Bill asked if anyone else had anything to say. After a brief silence, a shuffling of feet, one of the three strangers sitting a few rows in front of Rogan stood up.

“If I may.” He cleared his voice, a coarse ‘hrrumph’ that

carried to the back of the room. "Just a few words. From myself and my friends here." He stood facing forward, so Rogan could only see his back. But his voice was strong and firm and carried around the room, though his sentences were short and he wheezed as he took breath between them. He told how Nielsen had been a tramper, used to walk with them in the hills. How he loved the hills. Knew them intimately. Often walked there alone. Loved not just the landscape but the rocks from which they were made. "Fitting, therefore, that his life should end there," he said, then sat down.

Bill thanked him, asked again for any further contributions, then said simply: "That was JT."

Another African song, filling the air as they walked one by one up to the coffin, paused, touched it, perhaps said a prayer, went out again into the crisp sunlight of the afternoon.



## 2. MEL

They stand on the ridge, panting, but satisfied.

The long haul up the slope had been hard going. Long stretches of rough tussock grass, rocky outcrops, patches of scree. Wind, cold from the south. They rested frequently as they climbed; spoke little, save for the occasional grunt of effort, word of warning, or small curse at a missed step. They are still not ready for words.

Blanco, especially, looks exhausted. Almost eighty now, his stocky body relaxing to fat, this is at the limits of his capability. He knew it when they first talked about the trip, as they drove back together after the funeral – but he had refused to be left out. He owed it to JT, wanted to be there. Now, his face is red; he is hunched forward. He draws deep breaths, wheezing noisily with each one. Mel hopes he will be alright. They are a long way from any help.

He glances at Piri. He, alone, has recovered quickly from the climb. You would never expect it to look at him, or if you watched him at home. He's only in his early sixties, but he's large and heavily built; he eats poorly, drinks too much, smokes to excess – already, he has a cigarette in his mouth and is turned against the wind, trying to light it. He looks and sounds like someone who might rarely leave his sofa or his seat in the bar. But all that belies the real man. Only if you see his hands can you tell. He lives outside, earns his living in the bush: hunting pig or possum, weed-bashing, tree-felling, fencing – anything he can find. He's effortlessly strong. And he's an obsessive walker. Whenever he can, he gets away into the high country, often alone.

If you are to get into trouble in the mountains, he's the man you need at your side. Though at night, in the huts, you might wish for someone else, because he snores like a train and farts like a boar.

He looks up now, through a cloud of cigarette smoke, and grins. "That's better," he says. "I can breathe now."

Mel opens up his rucksack and takes out a flask. "Coffee?" He holds it up and they each nod. He unscrews the lid and pours a cupful, hands it across to Blanco, who swirls it beneath his nose, drawing in the vapour. But before he drinks he raises the cup, looking east, back down the valley, in a silent toast.

When the others have their turn to drink, they do the same.

Mel is the last. While he waits for the cup to be returned, he looks around. The ridgeline where they are standing is narrow. To the south it falls steadily to a wide shoulder of land; northwards there is a shallow col, then a long rise to the rocky peaks beyond, high enough for snow to have caught and been preserved from the first falls a few weeks ago. Westward, the way they were walking, the land drops into the next valley, dense with pines. Eastward, back the way they have come, a receding mosaic of pale greys and greens and browns, smudging in the middle distance to the haze of the lowland, the thread of the Parehike silver in the sun. Beyond even that, the shapeless lowlands.

The sky seems drawn tight, pale and clear. To the south, though, he can see clouds building. How long will the weather last?

Piri has perhaps had the same thought. "Time for action, my friends," he says. "We don't have all day." He pinches out his cigarette and returns the stub to his breast pocket. "Where shall we put him?"

It's Blanco who decides, as it should be. Of them all, he knew JT best. He has walked with him most often, worked with him, shared experiences with him; though perhaps talked the least, for

he is no conversationalist, so his offer to talk at the funeral had been a surprise. He nods across to the cluster of rocks, forty or fifty metres away. "That'll do. Sheltered there with him once. Waiting for the snow to ease. Found a couple of sheep doing the same once we could see anything. Don't know who was most shocked."

They walk up to the outcrop and inspect it. The rocks rise just over a man's height, making a sharp and ragged face on the southern side, but sloping and rounded to the north. They are split by a narrow cleft. It's a good place to rest. A fitting spot.

They start to collect stones and pile them up on the flat surface above the cleft. Piri and Mel do most of the carrying; Blanco arranges them. He does so with a professional exactness. This will be no rough and ready cairn, but a work of engineering. Every now and then he stops and stands back, inspects it, gives a small 'hrrumph' of either satisfaction or despair. Several times, he demands better materials that will nest more tightly together. "Built to last," he says.

After an hour or so, they pause for lunch. Each has brought his own fare. Thick slabs of bread and cheese for Mel; hangi wrapped in silver foil for Piri, and still warm and odorous; neatly made sandwiches of cured ham and salad for Blanco. But they share the rest of Mel's coffee, and afterwards Piri hands around a hipflask from which they take a draught of Canadian Club.

Then they continue their work. It is surprisingly slow, and becomes more so as they have to search more widely for suitable stones, and as they gradually tire. Several times, Mel glances nervously at the gathering clouds. So far, they appear not to be advancing. But the wispy white heads seem to stretch further outwards, a portent of snow to come. He wants to be home before the weather breaks, or at least back in the shelter of the Parehike.

Gradually the cairn grows. Blanco is building it in the shape of a hive, round in plan, its sides steep at the base, then curving to a

dome. But he has left a hollow in the centre.

Its shadow lengthens as the afternoon slips away.

Mel looks at his watch. Twenty to three. Another half hour and he knows they must leave. The walk back is easier, and once they are off the ridge the track is good, but they need to allow at least two hours for the return trip.

The wind seems sharper, more personal.

Above them, a harrier throws its wings outward, and lets the air sweep it away, down into the valley.

They still say little. Each, perhaps, is lost in his own thoughts, his own memories. Mel is trying in his mind to create some sort of synthesis, an image of the man that might sum him up. Something he can preserve in the years ahead, and associate with the day. It is difficult. Compared to the others he has known JT only briefly: a chance meeting in an outdoor equipment store in Dunedin, four or five years previously, the discovery that they were heading for the same area, the invitation to join the group. And the age difference between them has meant that he never had quite the same instincts, never observed things through the same eyes. But what make it harder are the dissonances he always sensed in his character. The clashes of light and dark, acceptance and anger. Because of these, in those early months, he had not been sure if he liked him very much. He seemed too temperamental, too indrawn, always guarding a part of him from view.

Only later, when he learned something about JT's past, did some of it seem to make sense. And only when he was with him alone - sharing a hut, staying occasionally at his house in the valley before or after a trip, eating together in a pub - did he get glimpses into the man. The sharp intolerance, focused on people he regarded as fools or hinderers, people who refused to help. The affection, bordering it seemed on love, for people he saw as struggling against adversity, people without a voice. The deep

introspection underlying it all. The flashes of humour, when the thoughts broke out, often laced with bitter irony.

None of it, however, is concrete; it is all circumstantial and contrived. He knows that what he's searching for is false. And in the end he settles on a moment that he suspects never really happened – but nevertheless seems clear and firm in his mind. It is of JT, walking ahead of him through driving rain, head bent, wind clawing at the hood of his anorak, legs smeared by mud, puddles splashing beneath his boots; the dog at his heels shrunk to a small, wet and miserable whelp. Taking each measured stride, and enjoying every moment, not despite but, it almost seemed, because of the battle, because of the discomfort. As though that made it all more worthwhile.

Blanco stands up. "That's it," he says. "Time to do the honours."

He walks across to his pack and extracts a small wooden box, like those that are used to hold chessmen. It contains ashes. "Anyone want to say anything? You know it's not my strong suit."

Piri nods. "I will talk to the tūpāpaku." He gives a quick, wry smile. "It will hear me, even though JT would deny it." He takes the box and holds it out, facing the valley to the east, to Parehike. For a few moments he stands there, saying nothing, perhaps just remembering, or choosing his words. Then he speaks in Maori: a long, flat intonation that the others cannot comprehend, though they stand, heads bowed, in reverence.

He stops, hands the box back.

Blanco places it in the depression at the centre of the cairn.

"I told him that he is a good man," Piri says. "I told him that he will travel with us always, and we will travel with him." Then he takes a sprig of leaves from a pocket and drops it on the box.

"He was one of the best," Blanco says. "An awkward, bolshie bugger. But the best friend a man could have."

Mel nods in agreement, though wondering still what sort of man he was.

Blanco starts to pile the remaining rocks on top of the cairn, closing it.

The wind gusts in fitful bursts.

### 3. ROGAN

“An obituary?”

Amy had called him the previous afternoon. Phil wanted a meeting, she had said. “He’s keen to talk to you.”

As he always was, Rogan mused. Not just about his plans for his monthly programme, but about life in general, the state of the economy, of Radio Otago. It had been the same today. After a brief but warm greeting, Phil unburdened his latest concerns. Advertising revenue was down; they were all under pressure to cut costs, to find something new that would help to revive their fortunes.

It had been ten minutes or so before he’d asked Rogan about his own life. He had clearly not heard the news Rogan had passed to the station. While he recounted once more the story of his walk, of finding Nielsen, of what he’d later learned about him, Phil had stood by the window, his gaze on the distant lake, as if lost in thought. But his hand was in his pocket, scratching at his genitals – a signal, Rogan knew, of rapt interest. As was the thickening of his Glasgow accent when he spoke.

“So that’s what you’ve been doing with yesel’, laddie, is it? Finding dead bodies all around the place. You’re not pulling my leg?” He gave himself another fierce scratch as if to give emphasis to his words.

Rogan stifled a smile, said: “No. It’s true.”

“It’s quite a story.”

“I suppose it doesn’t happen often. It certainly made me a bit of a local hero for a few days, in town”

Phil had nodded. “Local hero, I like that.” Then: “So is that

what you're going to give us this month?"

"What?"

"An obituary."

Rogan had echoed the word.

Now Phil asked: "Why not? It's different. And it's got a real personal touch."

"I don't know." Was there really a story there? Why did he feel so doubtful?

"You've even got a title ready for it: A local hero. Not everyone gets held hostage by the Sandinistas." Then he added as an afterthought: "And survives."

"It was a long time ago, don't you think? Will anyone be interested so long after the event?"

Phil came across to him, put a hand on his shoulder. "Demographics, laddie," he said. "Do you know our demographics? The average age of your audience?"

He shook his head.

"It's not typical for the station, I have to admit. But about forty per cent of them will probably remember the event. That ignores the twenty per cent or so who are so old they've forgotten." He gave a short chuckle. "You see, you reach the parts other programmes can't reach." Then he chuckled again. "It's alright. We like it. That's why we keep you on."

"You think it will work?"

"I know it will, laddie. And you should know by now to trust my judgement."

Still he was not convinced.

"Do you have any other ideas?"

"I thought of doing something on the cycle trails. We talked about it six months ago. I've been holding it back."

Phil looked at him beneath bushy eyebrows. "You think that cycling will go down well with the over sixties?" Then, seeing his twinge of hurt: "OK laddie, just joking. But wrong time of year,



and nowhere near as interesting. So take my advice, run with this. It's a god-send."

He resisted again, knowing that he was losing, relented at last. It would, at least, have been Phil's idea if it went wrong.

Phil nodded in confirmation. "Anyway laddie, we've already spent more time nattering than I can afford." He put his hand on Rogan's shoulder again, steered him towards the door. "But I've something to show you: have you seen my new assistant?"

"Not another one. What happened to Bernice?"

Phil made the shape of a half sphere in front of his already ample tummy. "Come and meet her. You'll like her. If you're good I'll let her play with you on this. Her name's Geraldine."

\*

Straight blonde hair, cut in a fringe across her forehead; big and baleful eyes. Generous lips. A naive intensity. He had liked her immediately, noticed himself watching her as they spoke, laughed inwardly at his own reactions; found his thoughts returning to her as he drove home. She had shaken his hand firmly, said how she had often listened to his programmes, liked them a lot; had sought out recordings when she got her job here, and listened to those as well. She'd shown obvious delight at being asked to work with him. Cocked her head to one side, spaniel-like, as she sat beside him in the meeting room while he outlined his idea for the programme, the material he would like her to find. Once or twice, glanced across at Phil, as if for confirmation, then suggested ideas of her own.

She'd shaken his hand again as he left, holding it just that second or two longer than she needed to, so that it felt like a personal message.

As Phil walked him to the door, Rogan had said: "She's nice. You've done well there."

Phil had nodded, given a fleeting smile. "I thought you'd like her." He opened the door, paused before standing aside. "Though still a novice, even if she doesn't think so. She's a tendency to try to run before she can walk." Then, enigmatically: "I know you'll keep an eye on her."

He'd been given worse tasks, he thought, though said nothing.

At home, he switched on the computer, waited for it to boot up. He might as well start on the programme straight away, and the best place to do so was usually the internet. He typed the name into the search engine: 'John Trelawney Nielsen'. There were no hits.

He tried variations on the name. 'J T Nielsen': 10,000 matches; 'John T Nielsen' over 37,000. The simple name 'John Nielsen' almost a million.

He included the word 'Nicaragua', and the list was reduced to 85,000. He added 'hostage' and it declined to a thousand or so.

He browsed idly through the hits: staff profiles for the California Department of Conservation; a computer program to model the climate with the acronym HOSTAGE; links to secondary search engines variously finding the words he wanted; books and newspapers which somewhere contained them; dead pages that would not open. 'The Citizen's News Daily is currently undergoing major changes. Please try back in 28 days, 21 hours, and 53 minutes.'

He looked for images, was offered 44,000. Men of all shapes, sizes, ages and demeanours. Most smiling, some gesturing, several hugging children or women; dressed variously in casual clothes, suits, uniforms – two in Santa Claus outfits. One sat in an aeroplane, a dozen or so were playing guitar, a surprising number were driving racing cars of one sort or another.

Were any of these the man he was looking for, he wondered? How could he tell? What combination of them might reconstruct a life?

He felt his doubts return. He went to his filing cabinet and looked inside, just to confirm that his notes on the cycle-ways were there. Always good to have a plan B.

From his computer came the ping of an incoming message.

It was from Geraldine. 'FYI - G' it read, cryptically. There was an attachment. It was an audio file of an interview with Nielsen from a rival local radio station, made at the time Nielsen had come to Otago. He listened to it, suddenly fascinated as he heard the voice. A South Island accent, softened by years in foreign lands, some of its nasality gone. Slightly hesitant, diffident: not just a modest man, but shy. The interviewer, he noticed, did much of the talking, rarely asking questions directly; instead, feeding him lines, telling him his own story. "And after more than two weeks you were found by a hunting party from a small village ... For years afterwards you worked as a geologist - mainly on water development projects ... After all that, it's clear that Otago was still your real home - where you wanted to go when your work was done." Nielsen responding to them with a down-turned word or phrase. "Something like that ... Amongst other things, yes ... Otago's a lovely place."

And the next morning another email arrived: 'More on Mr N' Press cuttings from local papers - the ones, no doubt, that Maddy had remembered. They sketched in again, the story of Nielsen's misadventure in Nicaragua, added a few homely yet predictable details about his reason for choosing to come and live in Parehike: for the peace and quiet, the mountains, the fishing. One mentioned his boyhood in Dunedin, and that he'd attended university there; in a single sentence listing his past jobs, another referred to him as a geologist and water engineer.

Rogan read them carefully, jotting down notes as he did so. It was beginning to take shape, he thought: his picture of the man, and the story he could tell. He emailed Geraldine, thanking her for the information, asking her to try to seek out more.

Meanwhile, he made a list of the personal contacts he could follow up. Bill, who had clearly known him better than anyone in town; Mick Stead, his neighbour out in Parehike, who had spoken at the funeral. The three unknown men who had sat together at the funeral: could he find them?

He started with Bill, was invited down to the store to talk to him. When he arrived, Pru greeted him with a smile, showed him into a back room. "He's with one of our suppliers at the moment," she explained. "But he won't be long. Wait here." Then she paused, looked down. "I'm glad you want to talk to him. Between you and me, it'll do him good. He needs to talk, I think."

Alone, Rogan looked around the room. It was large, cluttered. The heavy desk was piled high with cartons; more stock, empty cardboard boxes, stacks of files and papers spilled over the floor. On the wall opposite were pinned dozens of invoices, lists, letters. In the centre of the room, however, was a cleared space. Within it stood a small round table; on it, a chess set. A wooden, inlaid board; jade pieces, finely carved in dark olive and pale sage green, ranked ready for a game. He was standing beside it, handling one of the pieces, running his hand over the smooth stone when Bill returned.

"It's JT's," Bill said. "The board's teak, inlaid with rosewood and walnut. He got it from Africa, I think, I'm not sure where. A gift if I remember right - made by the locals. The chess set's hand-made, the same: by a Maori guy on the west coast, Hokitika way. JT put it here so that we could play together." He gave a quick grin. "I'd have been happy with my old boxwood set with the knights with the busted ears, but he reckoned this would make me play better. I can't say it worked; like I said at the funeral, he still beat me most times." Then he indicated the piece in Rogan's hand. "That was his side. He always played black. I assumed it was because of the time he'd spent in Africa and the like, you know, wanting to fight for the natives. But maybe he just liked the

colour.”

“You played often?”

“Most weeks, whenever JT came into town.”

“You knew him well then?”

“As well as anyone, I guess. I don’t think he had many close friends, not in town anyway. But I still don’t know how well I knew him. He wasn’t the sort to tell you much about himself – not directly. And I didn’t ask. Most of what I know just came out by accident – you know, when we were discussing something else.”

The limits of his knowledge became clearer as they talked. Bill and Nielsen had been happy, it seemed, simply playing chess. And they had played seriously so chatter did not really figure. If they had discussed anything of substance, it was mainly items of recent news. “He was always better informed than me,” Bill said. “You’d expect, living out there, he’d be rather cut off. But it was just the opposite. I think he made an effort to keep in touch with what was going on. Not here, not local stuff, but world events. Climate change, the Middle East, Ebola, AIDs – that sort of thing. It seemed to matter to him. I learned not to argue with him too much, just listen.”

“So was he active at all, politically?”

“I don’t know. Earlier in his life perhaps. He was a bit of a leftie, that’s for sure. I wondered if he’d been a commie when he was younger.”

For a while Rogan pursued this: was there any link, did Bill think, with what had happened in Nicaragua? Is that why he went there in the first place? Might his time there have influenced his politics? But Bill just shrugged. JT was just like that, he said: it seemed to be in his blood.

It was the same with the question of where he’d worked, what he had done afterwards – in the years between leaving Nicaragua and coming to Otago. Bill knew little more than Rogan had

already gleaned. That he was a geologist – he'd trained as that, still had an interest in it. "Showed me some of the fossils he'd found while out walking once," he said. "Not that they meant much to me, but he seemed proud of them." And he'd worked on some sort of civil engineering projects – yes, it could have been water. Something like that. In Africa, at least for a while. But perhaps other places too. Then he added: "I don't know why, but I always assumed that he'd been doing development work, that type of thing. For one of these charities: you know, for Oxfam or something like that. It seemed to fit the sort of guy he was, what he believed in."

As for family, wife, girlfriends, again Bill didn't know, though he'd speculated at times. "Seems to me he'd have been a difficult man to live with," he said. "Even worse than me!" But there must have been women, he thought. Nielsen was too physical, too charged, to have been ascetic, or to have been ignored by the opposite sex. "I reckon he might have been quite a ladies' man in his time."

"But no-one special, no-one he mentioned."

Bill shook his head. "Not that I remember."

"No one at all?"

"No. Sorry."

At the end, Rogan thanked him, indicated the notes he'd been quietly taking as they talked, asked if he could use any of the material in the programme.

Bill shrugged. "Whatever you like. I'm just sorry, I can't tell you more. You don't dig into people's lives when you get the chance, do you? It doesn't seem relevant or good manners then. It's only afterwards that it seems important." But then he said: "It was the same at the end. I didn't notice until after – after he died. And maybe even then it wasn't real, just me imagining. But in the last week or so, he seemed – I don't know – morose, heavy. As though something was on his mind." He shrugged again. "I

should have asked, shouldn't I? That's what a friend should do."

\*

'I met him in the back room of a London pub,' Rogan read. 'It was cold outside, and he said that he had not yet reacclimatised, and appreciated the security of solid walls around him. While we talked, he sipped at a beer, or carefully peeled layers off a beer-mat. He seemed nervy, yet at the same time filled with relief at being free - as well as evident sadness about the death of his fellow hostages. The previous day he had completed a debriefing with the New Zealand consulate; now he was trying to decide what to do next: whether to go back to New Zealand, or try to find work in England.'

It had not been easy. Typically, three or four days of intense research were all Rogan allowed himself in preparing a programme; then a day for writing, one more for recording. His fee did not merit more. But JT Nielsen seemed a harder nut to crack than his usual topics. There had been blind alleys, leads that petered out, false trails - Rogan had tired of the clichés he had found himself using to describe his frustration over the preceding days.

After several unanswered calls, he had managed to talk to Mick Stead, Nielsen's neighbour, on the telephone. Mick apologised for being elusive: there was bad weather on the way, he said, and he had been out every day, from dawn till dusk, getting the flock down.

Whether it had been worth the perseverance to contact him, Rogan was not sure, for Mick added little to what he already knew. Nielsen was affable, but quiet, independent, did not mix much. "I tried to get him involved in the field-days once," he went on. "You know, just to draw him into the town a bit. I thought he might judge the dog-show for us. He had a dog of his own, a retriever, and he clearly liked dogs. But no joy. He said he

didn't like standing up in public. I tried to persuade him that he'd be good at it - what with that background of his. That he'd have interesting stories to tell. But he wouldn't have it. There wasn't anything to tell, he said."

"Nothing else about him?" Rogan asked. "Friends, relations? Anyone you think I should contact?"

"Just Jenny Guthrie. She knew him much better than me." He read out her number. "I'll let her know you want to talk to her, if I see her. Though if you do, you might want to leave it a day or two. She's missing him, I know. She liked him a lot."

Rogan had taken his advice, written down the number in his notebook, returned to his computer. Back to the beginning, he told himself. To where it all started, in Nicaragua.

He'd expected it to be easy, that there would be press reports, news articles in abundance of his kidnapping and escape. But in Britain in the nineteen-sixties, it seemed, the significance of events in Nicaragua had not yet been appreciated, and the incident had merited no more than a few words in *The Times* and *Telegraph*. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua the press had been fragmented and struggling to find a voice. And in the years since, people had not wanted to remember everything from those times. Stories like Nielsen's had somehow got lost in the interlude.

What Rogan found was therefore piecemeal, incomplete. A brief report in *La Prensa* mentioning Nielsen's discovery by the army. Another in a history of the revolution, written long afterwards: half a dozen sentences describing the kidnapping and Nielsen's escape as part of a more general summary of early events in the war. An unattributed article in a magazine, speculating on what had happened to the other hostages - how and why they were killed. Beyond that, nothing.

He called Geraldine to ask whether she was having more success. She apologised. She'd been busy with other things for Phil, she explained: he seemed to have adopted her as his



personal assistant. It was said with a note of satisfaction, pride. Rogan could not resist a twinge of jealousy. Given with one hand, taken away with the other. It was often Phil's way.

He went back to his computer, feeling hard done by, cheated.

But serendipity, it seemed, had taken pity on him as it sometimes did, and flown to his aid. Following internet links from one page to another - not because he thought that they might lead anywhere, but just because he had nothing else to do, was still waiting for Geraldine to emerge again from Phil's grasp - Rogan stumbled on a reference to an article in a quarterly magazine on adventure tourism. According to the brief archive entry, it mentioned a man called Nielsen, and Nicaragua and the dangers of travelling there. The date was 1971.

He had searched for the original, failed to find it - the magazine, it seemed, long defunct. He was about to give up, when one of the lower results from the web search caught his eye. A collection of travel magazines on sale on Ebay. He checked the dates and issue numbers. The one he sought seemed to be amongst them. But while the 'buy now' price might have been considered a snip for any collector, it was far beyond what he wanted to pay: three hundred and fifty dollars for a dozen magazines. There was no way Phil would reimburse him for that. Yet he found the seller's details, and at the cost of a midnight phone-call to Britain, rang him.

It took some negotiation. The seller would not let the collection be split, and was not inclined to search through the magazines to check that the article on Nielsen was there. Rogan tried to persuade him, and as part of his reasoning happened to mention where he was calling from - Otago - mentioned the name of the town. Suddenly the man became more accommodating, began to reminisce.

"I was there, years back," he said. "December ninety-nine. I saw in the millennium at the pub. Well, when I say I saw it in, I

was present, but I didn't see too much." He reeled off names of people he'd met there, a woman - married from what Rogan could gather - who had shared the first few nights of the new century with him, tried to persuade him to stay. They were people Rogan did not know, and for that he was grateful. In a small town it was easy to know too much.

At last, he asked the man again: could he find the article, scan it; email him a copy?

"I guess so. Why not?" The following day it had arrived.

Now, reading it, Rogan felt vindicated for the trouble he had both taken and caused. It recorded an interview with Nielsen, only days after he had returned to England from Nicaragua, a week or so after the bodies of the other hostages had been found.

Nielsen had talked about the way the kidnapping had occurred, about how he felt at the time, whether it would put him off travel. Then about his time in captivity, the other hostages.

'He explained ruefully, sadly,' the reporter had written, 'that the three of them had only met when they got on the bus together to León, and they had little in common. They were three different people, thrown together against their will. Jacob, the Israeli, was the youngest of them - still a student; quiet, rather timid, very religious. He spent a long time praying, or reading the bible that he'd been allowed to keep. Saku - which is what they all called the Japanese man, because his full name was too difficult to pronounce - was older, probably in his forties, and rather excitable, but spoke almost no English. So though they were usually allowed to be together, they had not bonded to any extent, each dealing with the situation in their own way and alone.'

Fortunately, Nielsen had said, the guards weren't too bad. After the first few days - when no-one had seemed to know what to do, when the group were shifting from camp to camp and everyone was nervous and tense - they had treated them all

civilly. There were no beatings, only rare threats. Nielsen had got to know two of them as time went on - one called César, especially, with whom he developed a mutual trust. "I used to play chess a lot, just with myself because the others couldn't play," he had told the reporter, "but two pieces had got lost in the first few days after we were captured. He lent me a knife so that I could carve some replacements. I've still got the chess set ..."

That image seemed potent. When he had finished, Rogan sat back, gave a sigh of satisfaction. As he'd talked to Bill, he had felt the power of that small scene, the focus of the room - the chessboard and set, laid out ready for a game that would never be played. He'd wanted to use it. Now, he had another connection, there at the centre of events in Nicaragua. It felt like a gift.

He had the first shapings, too, of the story, and something that felt like a moral: nothing in life might really be planned or predestined, and yet each thing we do is in some way dependent on what has gone before.

He sat for a while, scribbling his ideas down. Threads and questions to follow up. England - how long? Family connections there? Who? Could he trace them? Chess - link to life in New Zealand, to Bill. Who was César? The other hostages.

Then he paged back through his notebook, looking for other ideas that he had jotted down. Fishing. Tramping. Dogs. Friends. More ideas to pursue.

He remembered the three men at the funeral - the one who had spoken so self-consciously, yet firmly, at the end. Could he track them down in some way? Who might know who they were?

Then the woman that Mick Stead had mentioned. What was her name? Jenny Godfrey, or was it Geoffrey?

He found the page, the note he had hurriedly written in the corner: 'Guthries - neighbours - identified body'. The telephone number, too.

'Upset?' it said, emphasised with an enclosing circle. He'd

have to play things carefully.

He composed his mind into one not so much of urgent enquiry as gentle sympathy, then picked up the phone, dialled the number, waited.

As he did so, another thought formed. He should go out and look at Nielsen's house, get a feel for the place. Look, perhaps, for clues to his life there, for remnants from his previous life. Might he even find the chess set?

The phone burred steadily. Darwin watched him from the sofa, then slid to the floor, came across and fawned against his legs, purring contrapuntally.

Outside, a fantail fluttered to the window, hovered there as it completed its mooning dance, then exited stage left.

Still no answer. He was about to hang up. Then the ringing stopped and the line was silent.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello." A strange voice. Hesitant, yet almost musical. Maybe a child too young to understand, at that age when they pick up new phrases as they hear them; or an elderly woman, confused by the telephone.

"Is that the Guthries?"

"Guthries."

"Are you Mrs Guthrie?"

"Mrs Guthrie."

"Yes. Can I speak to her? Would that be alright?"

"Alright."

He waited, thinking that he'd at last made progress. That whoever it was at the other end of the phone - male or female, adult or child - had gone to fetch Mrs Guthrie. But the phone stayed silent.

"Hello," he said again. "Is there anyone there?"

"Where?"

"Is there anyone else I can speak to?"

“Speak to.”

“Then can you give them a message?”

“What’s your name?”

“Rogan. Rogan Fielding. Can you give Mrs Guthrie a message?”

“Message,” the voice said again.

“Can you tell her I’d like to come and speak to her, tomorrow morning. Do you understand? Saturday morning.”

“Saturday morning.”

“That’s right. Thank you”

“Thank you”

He put the phone down, feeling puzzled, irritated. Had he achieved anything? Would his message be passed on?

But his doubts had forced him to a decision. He would drive out there anyway. If Mrs Guthrie or her husband were around, he would speak to them. If not, he would at least get an impression of the place, see something of Nielsen’s world.

For the moment though, he needed to work with what he’d got. And the start of it all, at least, was clear. The hostage taking, Nielsen’s escape. A story, sadly, that he’d never know in detail, would only be able to sketch out. But the heart of the story nonetheless. And an experience that must have had a huge influence on Nielsen, perhaps shaped his later life.

He sat at his computer, typed in a heading: Part 1 - Nicaragua. Then tried to imagine it. The innocent traveller, suddenly finding himself caught up in events, a world away from his own home. Not just the fear, the confusion about what must be happening, the incessant question - ‘why me?’ - but that secondary layer of incomprehension. What will it achieve? What good will it do anyone? What’s the point?

Even by the twisted calculus of his captors, might all this - might his life - be for nothing?