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Grey North looked down to the lights of the city's winter exhibition. Mechanical rides flung children and lovers across the dark, and their delighted squeals could be heard even from the hospital. A pair of nurses crossed the corridor between rooms. One whispered 'poor boy' and vanished. Grey's newborn sister took her troubled sleep in a room at the end of the hall. His sister was always to be called Pia, but now would be called Irene after her mother.

A rocket was launched at the exhibition grounds. The rocket slithered high into the sky and burst in a brilliant gold spider's web. Grey followed the falling embers to where a procession of cars' red tail-lights meant the end of the night.

His father came into the corridor and smoothed his thinning hair with his hand.

'Come see your sister, boy.'

But Grey did not shift from the window.

'It wasn't because of her. Your mother wouldn't stop bleeding.'

She had been only twenty-six years old. He had come home from school and she lay bleeding on the floorboards.

'Her heart gave out, boy. It was just— terrible luck.'

Grey was ten years old and did not believe his mother's heart would give out on its own. Something could have saved her.

'William North,' a nurse called down the corridor. The man acknowledged her with a nod and the nurse took his arm and led him to a room where he would speak with the doctor.

Grey watched the last of the fireworks bloom in the window pane.

The infant Irene was kept overnight for observation and Grey and his father stayed at one of a row of northern suburbs airport motels. It was a franchise motel with clean standardised rooms for people who had been somewhere and would soon be going somewhere else. A place between the places life was. At the motel you could be exempt from life. It was impersonal and soporific. They spent two nights at the motel and Grey did not cry. Without the motel room's one window were waterlogged flats, the flare of a distant oil refinery, a long and lighted bridge proceeding into the dark.

The nurses at the hospital tried to impress upon Bill North some rudiments of infant care. They suggested a home-calling nursing organisation and a paediatrician whose names he would not remember. They gave him pamphlets and wrote names and telephone numbers in his notebook.

Grey and his father spent another night at the motel where Grey did not cry.

With half the money he had in the world Bill North arranged for his wife's body to be returned to their home.

On the evening of the drive home Grey did not speak. The infant Irene sat between her brother and father in a bassinette in their truck.

Grey watched the brilliant city dissolve into the industrial western outskirts. Neglected parks. Commuter tract wastelands. Concrete brothels bearing names of flowers in neon – Tiger Lily, Lotus, Sakura. Colossal empty shopping centres whose monotonous geometry invited vandalism. Wisps of juvenile gangs at the edges of shadows and inside dim culverts. A degraded passage through which Grey admitted the consoling dream of the world broken.

After the outskirts, Highway 54 ran through rolling country, ever emptier, until the dark was broken only by spare dots of light adrift on the horizon. Then came the family's home in the Brisbane Valley. Mary Smokes was a town surrounded by blowing fields. In the west was a broad corridor of flatland before the Great Dividing Range before immense inland plains. North and east were lakes and a filigree of rivers and the D'Aguilar Range.

This was wide and empty country in which the world was uninterested.

Bill North turned his truck north off Highway 54 and drove across a rail line onto the Brisbane Valley Highway. A half-dozen men were loading horses in a yard close to the road. Grey's father stared out his open window but did not slow the truck. The truck's headlights brushed the man Grey had heard his father call Tanner. Grey looked back at the

obscure shapes of men working in only the deck-light of a bodytruck. He wondered if the horses were stolen.

Further north along that road, a mile south of town proper, was their house, a weatherboard cottage beached by an ocean of plain. Grey got out of the car into the cold and looked up at the stars. Silence and darkness made the stars fierce. A sleepless horse walked the fenceline, rattling the wire as it brushed and leant across it to the green pick in the Eccleston houseyard next door.

Bill North lit a wind-guttered candle on the kitchen windowsill. Without its orb of light, without the window, were the hills that channelled wind like water and the emptier plain and the silence that the wind tore into, and there all human attempts to reassure the eye and know the dark were swallowed. He lit the potbelly stove with rolls of newspaper and mixed powdered milk in a saucepan on the stovetop. He took a block of boxwood from the pile beside the stove and pushed the block into the coals.

There were three people beneath the roof before and three people now, but the house seemed utterly empty to Grey. One wall was darkened by the smoke of a lamp that the first Irene North burned beneath a print of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. Grey saw the stained wall and he burst into tears.

His father filled a glass baby's bottle from the stove, but Irene did not suckle as the milk was too warm.

Grey went to sleep in his room lit blue by the moonlight

that flowed through the window beside his bed. Before he lay down he looked out the window at the boys both he and his mother called the wild boys. They were walking across the haying grass to Mary Smokes Creek from Eccleston's. When the wild boys disappeared he slept. But late in the night he woke with terrible dreams and realised that his mother was dead, and he went to his father's room.

Bill North was exhausted and did not wake when Grey climbed in and lay down beside his sister. He put his finger in her tiny hand that gripped it. For the first time in his life his hand seemed large, someway closer to the hand of a man. He whispered in her ear that he hated her. Then he cried. Then he kissed her cheek. He fell asleep with her hand in his, tears running down his face onto the pillow.