Word from Stan

A shot cracks his house. It's the metal roof, expanding in day heat. He should be used to it by now. But he's dropped his cup of tea. Finding a cloth to mop up the spill Albie gathers shards of bone china, Geraldine's last uncracked one. He doesn't have the strength to swear. Instead he strolls out to stand by his gate. Men from the Shire have planted new trees in mounds along the footpath. Sun is cooking his scalp. He retreats to veranda shade where he sits and fidgets, rubbing the remaining thatch on his head. In a cane chair so parched that it peels he is tapping toes.

' Morning, Albie,' calls a young woman wheeling her pram past.

He forgets her name, watching legs and an infant in blue wrap, whose name is... can't remember. His recall of older events is in fine shape. The further back he goes, the clearer it becomes. There is a stamp of feet, with scraping voices and a sergeant's face. Albie studies skin-leather contours like a map while standing on parade. Though sun presses his head into shoulders he can still do a roll call of nicknames for each enlisted man in his company, including the non-coms. He counts as they march up a gangway, to ship out for the Middle East.

Albie is lying in a field hospital. Shrapnel throbs in his thigh, a wound infected during his escape. He blinks away sand stinging as the desert wind rears up. Simoom, they call this one. Such odd names they have for things like wind and rain. He runs. Shellfire. Mortars. In a village he shoots a soldier. But it's an old man, last line of resistance, pouring petrol into a well. With a final choke the old man curses. Albie hears sobbing, then finds the girl. She's been left behind, forgotten, not

grieving for the dead old man, and maybe even grateful. There are marks on her legs and shoulders. She's fifteen years old, perhaps sixteen. They are mere miles from the fighting. There is no food or water. He tastes her love in mended sheets. Her skin is without blemish, aromatic as spice. He knows that rescue is no longer possible. German tanks close in, ripping the sands, a steel simoom. But he wakes in another bed. His limbs have been bathed and bandaged. A nurse swabs him. Faint details print the retina, from a rout, his salvation. Then papers intrude. Already he's being demobbed with other diggers, stretchered home entire, without even a smoker's cough, while mates remain under Egypt sand. He wonders what happened to that girl.

Seas churn his stomach. Parched, despite gallons of drinking water, Albie is twisting in his bunk. The ocean pitches nightmares of mustard gas and trench mud: his father's war. Albie has been fighting Rommel in terrain stripped of leafy cover and civilians – like a crusader of old – with a little help from Kiwis and Poms. He returns home without injury, to spend weeks with family. Then the army sends him to New Guinea.

On a veranda his tongue clicks the soft palate. The pram lass is chatting to some neighbour. A passing car drowns her words. She's not much older than that Arab girl who may have carried his child. Warm work this – sitting and waiting. Albie's mouth rasps. A killing sun. And such dust...

No volume of beer or ice water slakes the Cairo thirst. Their sepia faces are shaded by slouch hats. Once home they separate into civilian lines. Albie remains under hat shade, unwilling to come out, to admit to Geraldine how things really are. He keeps back the buggery and blood, and a danger-relish of love. Too much remorse. He never describes the game of football they make with a German helmet,

its German head still inside. Nor does he relate the sport of tormenting prisoners, other men's sons. He's supposed to swear faith – for monarch and country – each year as Remembrance Day comes around. Albie knows the drill, shutting down his feelings. He does the soldier squint, speaking verse. Those that are left grow old. But he cannot forget. Acids of anger scratch his insides.

The pram girl departs. He catches a glimpse of her legs, with a gurgle or two from the child, some little boy with grandparents and a home.

Staring at foothills so far off they seem indigo, Albie photographs Geraldine in her white-banded hat, honeymooning in the Blue Mountains. Not a great beauty, she has that smile, and infinite tolerance. Never a cross word between them can he recall, other than a spat about naming their baby. Albie prefers Peter, his father's name, but Geraldine gets her way. The child is christened Stanley, after her brother killed in Singapore. At the Baptism her Dad recites a poem, composed by the hero – namesake and eternal youth. The sight of baby Stanley moves old Jack to tears. His soldier son is said to have written poetry but the verses never reach paper. All Stanley's words might die but for a pair of surviving POWs who rescue one poem, memorising it before Stanley's execution. A grand fellow, they tell old Jack. A top bloke, our Stanley. Geraldine learns the poem by heart.

On his veranda Albie curses, unable to recall more than one phrase.

In a compass of our mind, the sum we leave behind...

Words forgotten cut him adrift. He notices the girl with the pram but loses his labels, detached from people: from Geraldine, from Stan.

Gold-curled, the baby is – some say – the image of that late uncle. Geraldine's old Dad reckons Heaven has sent them an angel, for the one God has taken home. Stanley. Little Stan the man.

Albie shivers, despite morning heat, as if vandals are digging up his grave. He can feel fire again, sniff its smoke. Stanley is waking them, running down the corridor screaming.

' Everyone get out…'

Albie and Geraldine scramble outside in pyjamas. In moments the flames are licking their house. Little Stanley becomes a hero, courtesy of the local paper. School and Shire officials make such fuss. Albie tells everyone the fire is an accident. Seven years old, cherub-eyed, Stanley is a photogenic boy whose parents have lost heirlooms and photos and medals. The congregation takes up a collection.

Albie pats his pockets, searching for... he can't recall. The TV remote perhaps. Or he may have forgotten to turn off the gas. He's given up wearing a watch. Often he forgets about meals. Not only does he struggle to fix names to townsfolk he can't think what to call those flowers around the war memorial, or that pipe tune at the dawn service. He does know the names of dead cricketers and discontinued brands of cigarette. His face darkens, as though biting on rage.

' Bloody thing… '

He can't retrieve lines from a simple little poem.

Craning towards his street, Albie continues to watch for the postman. Tom is due to cycle past any time now, hat angled to the sun... Or is it Tim...? Heat presses on the veranda shade, trickling sweat from scalp to singlet. Thirsty work, this waiting. A few years ago Albie would be down at the Lord Liverpool by this hour. But a

Vietnamese doctor has warned him off booze. And smokes. No Geraldine any more, no fags and no beer. There's not much for a bloke to look forward to each morning, unless the postie stops for a chat.

‘ Mate, people don't write letters any more, except for banks... ‘

Albie writes to Geraldine at the base hospital during her training. He reads her replies during lunch behind the shop: a busy boy, leaving school to help his father run the grocery, though he lacks a future there, intending to quit town and try his luck in the big smoke. Instead he takes a shine to Geraldine, younger sister of a classmate. The brother surprises everyone by signing up. Stanley fibs his age and off he goes, later becoming an officer with the 2/11 field regiment. He writes to tell his sister how exciting it is, what a privilege to serve. Stanley's whereabouts remain secret, sections of the page blacked out. He knows it will happen, yet still he writes.

Albie volunteers too, against Geraldine's wishes. He says he'll be all right. His parents are so proud and so worried. All the young men go. Four summers later Albie returns, though another son and many school-friends do not. His eldest brother comes back from Kokoda in a wheelchair. The Japanese kill Stanley, decapitating him with a sword. The whole town assembles for a memorial service. Geraldine shows Albie one last letter from her brother, which talks of new manoeuvres, without poetry.

An old man shakes, angry enough to rip newspaper. He often does that, getting it delivered then shredding the pages with his hands. He can no longer read close print.

‘ Damn bloody thing… ‘

He obtains a position with the Shire pay office, a quiet desk job. The Middle East has been bad but the New Guinea jungle is worse. Leaf and branch drip with waiting death. Once home he loses the wish to run off and seek glory. He asks Geraldine to marry him, takes up accounts work, becoming the Shire paymaster. Upon retirement Albie has made it to town clerk, a post of respect. But by then he's lost Geraldine and his son.

Returning from an errand the pram girl passes by, sturdy looking, with tanned arms and legs. She waves. Despite straining he can't find her name. He does remember her grandfather, a sapper who lost an eye in North Africa. In the heat shimmer Albie spies a trellis where tomatoes peep from a neighbour's fence. His own crops fail. Crows get in first. He has read a few novels but his eyesight begins to fail. He adopts a cat that sleeps on his bed, a patch of warmth at night. He holds conversations with Puss about the desert, describing its barrenness and forbidden fruit. The animal is wretched, almost deaf. One night she gets skittled by a touring coach.

On his veranda Albie likes to sit until dusk, drifting inside to warm up soup, maybe thumb TV channels and stare at blurred homemaker shows. He refuses to watch hospital drama, having seen too many surgical wards during Geraldine's radiation treatment. Hiding under a scarf she loses hair and strength, disintegrating piece by piece. He accompanies her to a big city hospital, reading doctors' pamphlets in language he can't follow. Whenever she's feeling well enough Geraldine insists on attending Mass, to sing hymns, to take Holy Communion. Albie can remember his mother in a black mantilla, with the words in Latin as scrubbed altar boys bear the Blessed Sacrament, eyes down, innocent as little Stanley.

In New Guinea a young man finds the Devil at work. What Albie and other diggers must do is not recorded on the newsreels. They blow up bodies. They sever torsos. He finds prayer increasingly difficult. Arriving home, draped in hero colours, he becomes a married man, with a child. His boy grows up and moves away. Then his wife gets sick, fighting a war. Cancer eats her. As clear as last week Albie can remember sudden emptiness, a moment when he finally gave up on God, witnessing Geraldine die by inches and then yards. She lingers in remission before the seams split open. Life ebbs without dignity. Albie cannot continue to believe in mercy.

She has been buried some years when Stan finally writes. Only just heard about his mother. So very sorry. A letter from Thailand, where he is detained on a minor possession charge. Can his Dad send money for a lawyer? Stan promises to write again, maybe phone. Months pass. At last Albie does get a long-distance call, from some stranger, accent-thick, saying that Stan wants his old man to know before it appears in the papers.

Albie insists on going. He writes to ambassadors, aid agencies, even the RSL. Words are air. People warn that he'll get no special treatment. He staggers from one interview to the next. Memory flickers like a TV remote: rooms of light dazzling and smudged faces. He bumps into reporters, a footsore digger walking Asian streets and wishing for an ounce of Geraldine's strength. Men in suits fob him off with documents, preventing him from seeing his boy, allowing him to read only the one letter, thanks to a sympathetic prison officer, though he's not allowed keep it and cannot lay eyes on the author.

Friends have all dried up, writes Stan. *There's only my old Dad left...*

The jungle veteran sees himself on video replay, a white-haired fool tripping on camera cable, microphones in his face, embarrassing officials and countrymen.

Stan writes.

On my way home, Dad...

His boy is joining him on their old veranda. Down the main street Stan swaggers, hair swishing in a breeze, cricket bat under his arm. He breaks town girls' hearts all over again. He and Albie are sitting side by side; talking about this or that scrape the lad has been in, sharing a cold beer and laughing fit to burst.

Whack…!

The roof again. Albie's street is empty: no pretty girl or pram or postmen. He listens for one human voice, even a motor. Perhaps his hearing too is finally packing up. Then he catches the school bell and has no need to see children swarming their playground. He listens to a vehicle passing and can imagine the nod from a young constable at its wheel. Not Albie's first experience with the law.

Seventeen years old, Stan is stealing from Geraldine's handbag when his father catches him. Albie stares into eyes no longer angelic but rimmed red. The boy's skin is chalky, chest and cheeks hollow. His parents have been praying it will stop. But enough is enough. Albie throws the boy out. He can get himself a job, ungrateful wretch. Geraldine is angry, yet wanting to forgive. She prays for Stan. At twenty-one he returns, on parole. Valuables soon start to go missing. Albie has given their son every chance. No more. He kicks Stan out, for good this time. Geraldine writes to every last known address, for years. Not a word.

Snap…!

Like a firing squad, that one. Albie can almost feel the metal breaking: a gun salute of his roof. After all these years he should be used to it. But today feels strange. Odours taste fresh: each sound, each memory. He hasn't thought about that Arab girl in years, wondering whether he has sired a half-and-half child in a foreign land. He sniffs ripe tomatoes from vines next door. He can feel every creak and rustle, as if brand new. Windows on the house opposite blink behind great glasses. A pink door speaks. Weatherboards stretch arms.

Piece by piece Albie is re-assembling that first home: a bungalow with shutters, a lemon tree, a terrier, Geraldine – and the beautiful baby. A doctor is explaining that Stanley can have no brothers or sisters – some problem of blood grouping. Albie cherishes that boy as if his own life does not matter.

Squeaking of wheels. Finally. Leaning forward he feels confident this must be the postman coming into view, stop-start cruising from house to house. A man calls across the bitumen, no doubt sweating under a hat.

‘ How are we today, Albie? Another warm one... ‘

With a push of legs the postman cycles on, armpits probably wet, not needing to cross the street today.

Albie rises, with a back and neck stiff. He shuffles down the path then strains his gaze beyond the fence: no sign of legs or postie or schoolchildren. Empty as a ghost town. He trundles inside to put on the kettle.

At a table sits a man with no envelope in his hands, fingering grain in the timber. He turns pages in his mind, tracing for the thousandth time a letter from a Bangkok cell. A thin figure pores over paper, writing appeal letters that authorities will not forward. He rests his head on a table, smelling wood.