

Of Small Creatures

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Many years ago, I worked in the north of Tasmania, in the region where the wide coastal plain sweeps back to the foothills of the Western Tiers. The fertile plain is a rural palimpsest of crops, pastures, and grazing stock, with numerous farms and settlements strung along the lattice of sealed highways. In contrast, the looming foothills with their blue haze are more brooding and rugged, the partly cleared valleys cut by twisting metalled roads winding to the farmlets hidden among their flanks. Hot dry summers and frosty winters mark the passing of the seasons in the North, but the foothills also have morning fogs, more rain in the equinoxes, and an untimely loss of sunlight from the valleys in winter. The early settlers of these hills experienced isolation and hardship not felt on the gentler plain. Even now, to the outsider, their remoteness and closed aspect lays siege to the mind and imagination. Raised as I was in a beach-decked and populous isthmus in New Zealand, I never did feel entirely at ease within the shadows of these narrow valleys, with their rank grasses, sombre eucalypts, and damp, rambling undergrowth.

However, it was to such a valley I came one bitter winter, during an unseasonal search for work. The two previous years had been occupied with overland travel; rural solitude with outdoor work would provide a settling contrast to the travelling life. Two friends of mine had sought, amid the storms and silences of these hills, the Utopia that often beckons those who are young, itinerant and in search of themselves. In this valley they had at least Arcadia for a peppercorn, and generously they offered to share with me whilst I continued my own quest for hearth and haven.

Their own retreat was an old cottage like so many dwellings in the area, appearing round a last sudden bend, below the brow of a bush-covered ridge at the end of a dirt road, with cleared land dropping steeply away from where the sagging brow of a low verandah faced down the valley. Small and austere, it had a rusty iron roof capped by two crumbling chimneys, with a solitary water tank, also rusty, looming at the rear. The shabby, cream painted exterior walls were of pit-sawn timber, the warping fascias unembellished, windowless to the sides. The weather-beaten verandahs, both front and rear, were crowded by unkempt and ill-grown trees. Amid the gloom, beneath the beetling eaves of these sagging porches, low set sash windows hung blankly on either side of dark, timeworn doors. Like the sightless orbits of some wooden-headed Janus, they surveyed before and beyond the limits of the neglected, winter-stunted garden, which sprawled among the trees and bulged through the rotten paling fence that bounded its untidy reaches. Across the sour green of the weedy home paddock, black half-wild cattle lurked at the edge of the bush, and a derelict, unpainted barn mouldered near the sagging gate at the end of the road.

Within the dim cottage, a central hallway separated kitchen and parlour to the front, and two bedrooms at the rear. The drab interior walls were clad with a flimsy panelling on the lower part, with dingy wallpaper-on-scrim above. Each poorly-furnished room had a low overhung hearth, which in the cheerless kitchen enclosed a cracked and blackened coal range. The floors throughout were scarred and echoing, and the painted boards of the low, bulging ceilings were stained by leaks from the failing roof. A lean-to bathroom at the back, beside the tank-stand, housed a crumbling copper, a zinc bath and a similar large tub with a hand-crank agitator mounted on it for washing. Through all its days, this dwelling would not have been much of a home; more a place to eat, sleep, shelter, and grow old in, during the unremitting toil exacted by the thin soils of that narrow valley. At this late stage, no electricity, a water supply alive with the larvae, and an outhouse at a curious angle glimpsed through the overgrown fruit trees, completed amenities novel for sometime urbanites, unheeding and unknowing of a hard life outside their own experience.

My friends had been living there for a month, but had made no impression on the solitary squalor. Like most modern putative Utopians, they had few possessions, living happily in the present. Rucksacks, cardboard boxes, sleeping bags and other gear were out of place and time among the decrepitude, as was the battered ex-Post Office van which sat within the gaping timbers of the barn. They slept in the parlour, where meals were also eaten by candlelight beside the smouldering fire in the chilly evenings. From the beginning I experienced a sense of gloom within the old cottage, but shrugged my shoulders and was grateful for a place to stay. I made myself comfortable in one of the musty bedrooms with its water stains, cobwebs and peeling wallpaper. The door had slumped with age and use, closing hard against the jamb. The well-worn window with its rattling sashes framed the eerie green leaves of an old fig encroaching upon the verandah; the fitful wind would cause these leaves to screech slightly against the mottled panes.

The farmer from the next valley, who now owned the property, knew a little of the history which he had since recounted to my friends. Two spinster sisters had lived here in recent years, one a cripple. They were the last of the pioneer family that had settled the valley, loosing members one by one over the years to accident, illness, age, and foreign wars. The cripple eventually died after a fall, and her sister soon after, claimed by old age and another cold winter two years before the New Arcadians had come. It was the farmer himself who had found the solitary sister, cold and alone in her patch of garden, among the bare fruit-trees. She was buried with her crippled sibling and other members of the family, among the small collection of forlorn and weedy head-stones, beyond the curve of the gravel road.

Within the house were the still-unplundered vestiges of this past: old furniture, dusty ornaments, lanterns, sepia photos in cracked frames, and an old treadle sewing machine, worn but still serviceable. The barn contained items such as cracked and mouldy harnesses, a broken wooden butter churn, and unknown pieces of rusty machinery beneath rubbish strewn benches. A small, old-fashioned leg brace, with cracked leather and tarnished metal, presumably once belonging to the cripple, hung forlornly from a nail behind the door. No vestiges of youth or childhood remained; the well worn relics were those of toil, the patina of use now dulled by dust and neglect. Travail and decay were ingrained in those old buildings, and we, the newcomers, the transients, seemed of little consequence. The bush on the ridge above seemed poised to descend and claim the land once more, renewing its ancient cycle of organic occupation.

After my stay began, I was away each day in my old car for the first week or so, exploring the hinterland for work and a place of my own, returning in the evenings to eat and talk with my companions. They worked casually in the district, as need or opportunity dictated, otherwise spending much time in the hills walking, or back at the old house, painting and weaving. We would share the events of the day over our meal, and play cards together before the slow burning fire in the evenings, our voices loud in the candle-lit rooms, our shadows moving on the shabby walls and ceilings, the silence of the valley heavy in the winter night.

One night, I was alone in the house, the others having clattered away in their van for an overnight stay in Launceston. I went early to bed, curled in my sleeping bag beside the small green glow of my ticking alarm clock, the house silent around me. I was aware,

as never before, of the stillness of the valley and the creaking of the old house as frost settled upon it. The outline of the tree at the window was motionless against the starlight; the moon had not yet risen above the ridge. As I lay there I pondered on the passing of the years within this sombre dwelling. I remembered the song about time in a bottle, but here the bottle was a solitary settler's cottage, the memories ungentle and unmellowed in the immutable passing of that time.

It was then, as I began to doze, that a cold, purple glow appeared near the door and moved toward me as I lay on the cold narrow bed. In the sudden deafening roar of silence I cringed, fright raising waves of gooseflesh. A sudden paralysis seized my limbs as of an enormous weight lain upon me, oppressive and inescapable, stifling my breathing. How long this persisted I have no estimation or clear recollection, but when I feared I would never draw breath again, the glow suddenly vanished, and the weight lifted, leaving me shocked, shaking and covered in perspiration, fumbling for candle and matches. Eventually I regained my calm, thinking all had been a nightmare, and in time dozed fitfully as the candle spluttered and dwindled beside me.

The next day, the shock of the incident had faded, I left the cottage early, and in the evening when I returned, my friends were again home. I thought nothing of the previous night until I excused myself after dinner, took my candle and went to my room. It occurred to me then that I could not remember whether I closed the door the previous night, although it had been open in the morning when I arose. However, that particular night there was no further disturbance of my slumber, nor that of my friends as far as I knew; this calm also seemed to subsist over succeeding nights. During this time, I had eventually found a full-time job with a local carrier about twenty miles away, down on the plain. This meant early rising, and returning home tired after long hours behind the wheel. I was grateful for the meals that awaited me each evening, some company, and some conversation before setting off to bed. The memory of that incident began to fade as my life became busier.

Eventually, another trip to Launceston carried my friends away for the night. A cold supper with a note of their intentions awaited me when I arrived back from work that particular evening. I ate and went to bed, too tired to bother lighting the fire in the parlour, wearily shoving the sagging bedroom door closed hard against the jamb before I slid fully-clothed and shivering into my cold sleeping bag. That night, the glow came again, stealing into the cold, starlit room, settling around me as before, clamping my limbs in that awful embrace. This time I did find the door open as I went to make some tea on the spirit stove, after my thundering heart had slowed. Somehow that stiff and heavy door had been opened soundlessly and that, more than the glow, chilled my mind. The whole experience again left me shaken and enervated. I moved to the parlour to spend the remainder of the night on the floor amidst my friends' clutter, hoping that whatever manifested itself in that dingy bedroom would not follow. Extra candles sizzled in a pale glow to mark the passing of the remaining night. I decided to tell the others the following evening what had happened, hoping their sense of hospitality would not be offended by my seeming ingratitude.

The following evening I told of my experiences, albeit with some relish after I saw their initial reaction, and the detail of the door being open startled them as it had me. We decided that, for some reason, I alone was affected by whatever troubled the cottage, but I would move to the remaining bedroom and we would see what ensued. We were, after all, young and educated twentieth century skeptics, and confident in our rationality that we would come to no harm. That night, however, more candles than usual burned as we dined beside the smoking fire.

I moved to the other bedroom, and again, some time, and nights, passed without incident. Then once more, curious things began to occur, although less malign and terrifying than before, and not always when I was alone in the house. For instance, I had strange dreams or sleep-walking experiences, I knew not which, waking to find myself standing or crouching beside the bed. Sometimes, in these visions I would rise to beat upon the walls with blood-stained hands, panic and terror taking hold of my mind. Or, I would walk through the cottage as it was on evenings past, cleaner, neater, furniture in place, with lamps burning, and I would be seeking someone or something as I roamed from room to room.

Sometimes, sitting with a book, I would feel a compulsion to read out loud, as if someone stood listening at my side. I would be rewarded with a warm glow suffusing my whole body. At times, in the company of my friends, I would feel compelled to talk about the house, even to offer advice or criticism regarding present occupancy. Again, the warm glow would follow my compliance. Once I heard the whistling of a tune I myself was whistling, yet there was no-one else there. I began to develop irrational fears of some parts of the garden, and of that first bedroom I slept in; my legs would become cramped and heavy if I approached these places, and my heart would pound with dread.

For some reason I was singled out by a presence in that sombre old house, but could offer no answer or relief for whatever sadness and discontent subsisted from the past. Perhaps there was more than one such presence. The melancholy end to such a humble ambition as the settling of the valley confronted my restless mind, adding to my disquiet. Was there some resentment of our late witness to the slow and inexorable concluding of that small pioneering saga, enacted in the solitary valley? My friends, too, began to be affected by the atmosphere and my discomfort as if my experiences had begun an ever-widening growth of disquietude. The old house and the valley now had a new and more sinister aspect, sapping vitality rather than providing rest and solitude; a certain brittleness now pervaded our lives, contributing to lassitude, irritability, and uncharacteristic quarrels.

A final experience before I left the house was particularly eerie and unpleasant. This happened when I was once more alone for the night. In a dream I again rose and walked through those rooms, lit as before with lanterns. As I searched, I encountered a dark-haired girl who rebuffed me silently as I spoke to her. I walked out onto the front verandah where suddenly it was late afternoon, the sun gone from the valley. I looked through the window of the room where I had been sleeping, and saw a body upon the bed, draped with a sheet. Two mourners were standing by, bowed and silent, dressed in sombre clothes of decades past. I stood like a ghost myself, at the window, looking at this deathbed scene from some other time. One mourner leaned over to pull back the shroud, and as I awoke shaking and cold on that winter's night, I could not remember if the face I saw was mine.

I moved at last to live near my place of work, down on the patchwork plain. My friends left the valley soon after for a crowded back street in Hobart, a verandah view of the Derwent, and a noisier and more prosaic lifestyle. My new refuge was a high-gabled homestead at the end of a long tree-lined drive. Home and hearth to successive large families, it was warm, dry and welcoming. No trees shaded the walls, no graveyard lay beyond the avenue. There was plumbing and electricity, and I slept in the enclosed

and sunny verandah. I cleared the garden, with the help of a borrowed goat, in preparation for the imminent spring. Cows grazed in the home paddock, and my friendly farmer landlord left milk at the kitchen door. Birds roosted in the eaves of the old home, and woke me early with their rustling and chirping. Mice hid in my bed and raided my larder. But I did not mind. I remembered the silent settler's cottage in that shadowed valley. In its strangeness and decay, it was mostly shunned by these small creatures.