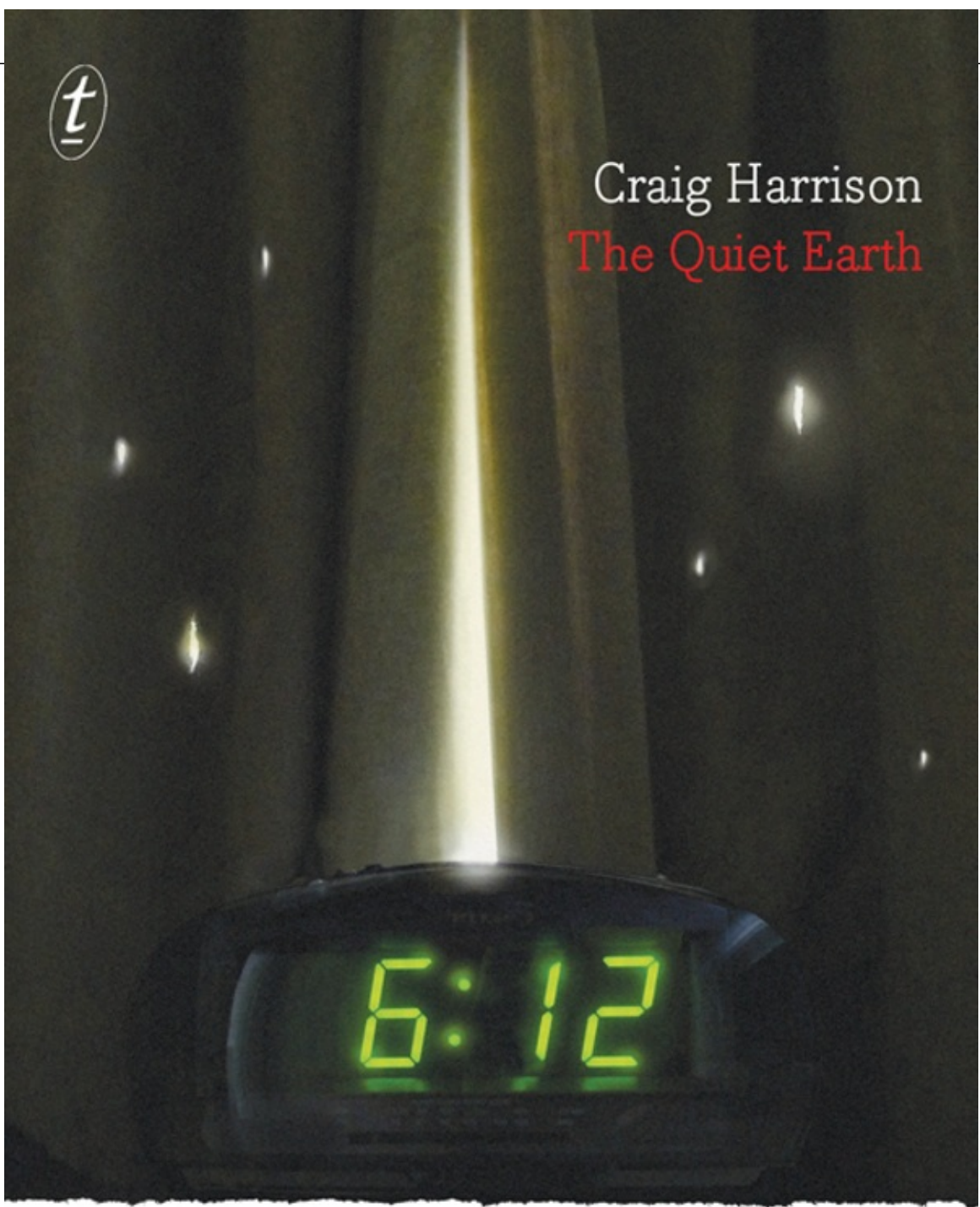


Craig Harrison
The Quiet Earth



INTRODUCED BY BERNARD BECKETT

Text Classics

CRAIG HARRISON was born in Leeds in 1942 and educated at Prince Henry's Grammar School, Otley. His rocket experiments in 1958 drew press and police attention, and an invitation to address the British Interplanetary Society.

Harrison attended Leeds University, where he received a BA and an MA. He organised the Liberal Party campaign in Ripon Division, Yorkshire, for the 1964 general election.

He arrived in New Zealand in 1966 after being appointed a lecturer in the English Department at Massey University. There he devised a course in art history, which he taught from 1968 until his retirement in 2000.

His award-winning satirical play *Tomorrow Will Be a Lovely Day* (1974) was performed for a quarter of a century, including in the Soviet Union. The novel that was its genesis, *Broken October*, was published in 1976. He is the author of five other plays, including the prize-winning *Ground Level* (1974), which led to a comic novel of the same name (1981) and a television series, *Joe & Koro*.

The Quiet Earth, a speculative novel, appeared in 1981 and in 1985 was adapted by Geoff Murphy into an acclaimed feature film starring Bruno Lawrence, Pete Smith and Alison Routledge.

Craig Harrison's most recent book, the young adult science-fiction comedy *The Dumpster Saga*, was a finalist in the 2008 New Zealand Post Book Awards. He lives in Palmerston North.

BERNARD BECKETT is a high school teacher in Wellington. He has published ten works of fiction, including the metaphysical novels *Genesis* and *August*.

ALSO BY CRAIG HARRISON

Fiction

Broken October: New Zealand, 1985

Ground Level

Days of Starlight

Grievous Bodily

The Dumpster Saga

Non-fiction

How to Be a Pom

The Quiet Earth

Craig Harrison



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INTRODUCTION

No Ex

by Bernard Becker

The Quiet Ear

A CHILD cries out in the night for its parent. The parent responds. Perhaps it is thirsty, or had a nightmare, or is tangled in its bedclothes? No, it just needs a reassuring cuddle. It needs to know it isn't alone.

In Craig Harrison's *The Quiet Earth*—first published in 1981 and loosely adapted into a cult sci-fi film four years later—it is not a child who awakens, but an adult, our narrator. John Hobson is not alone in the dark, but rather comes to with a flash of light at 6.12 a.m. in a motel room in Thames, on New Zealand's North Island. And when he calls out into the world, nobody answers. Every home, every car, every shop and street is deserted. The concept cuts so cleanly to the heart of our most basic fears that the most surprising thing, as you enter this novel, is the realisation that you haven't read the story before.

Perhaps the reason it is not a narrative staple is that the challenges inherent in telling it are so daunting. At some stage, in a novel like this, the reader must be offered an explanation. Yes, it would be a terrifying, searching experience to wake up as the last person left on Earth, but under what fictional circumstances can that scenario be made credible? In narrative terms, Harrison's opening gambit is like a crime writer opening with an exotic set of clues to a hideous case. It is a wager: stay with my story and I will bring this home. The reader, by picking up such a tale, enters into a contract—one that creates a special tension. We are at once fascinated and wary, hoping the author can pull it off.

The other challenge is the extremely limited palette the writer gives himself. With nobody for the protagonist to talk to, nobody to generate external conflict, the novel must develop through a single character and his response to the nightmare scenario. A short story has permission to observe, to linger inside impressions and fears, but a novel of this type avoids storytelling at its peril. Harrison, who acknowledges his echoing of a 'childhood favourite', *Robinson Crusoe*, instead embraces it.

The artfulness with which both these challenges are met sets this book apart. It is a high-concept novel, and within the New Zealand literary tradition that already places it comfortably in the minority. The greater appeal, though, is not the freshness of the concept but its execution.

Initially, the story moves through the actions and emotions we might expect of the protagonist. Hobson does as we would do: he searches, pieces together tantalising clues (all the clocks have stopped at 6.12, yet surely some should have been running fast or slow), listens in to the radio static, and battles his rising sense of terror. Fear not just that he is alone, but that he is not psychologically equipped to be alone. That he will disappear within the existential chasm.

What's happened? Any, any explanation would dam the panic...I struggled to be objective... An enormous isolation and loneliness, a sensation not of being observed but of being ignored, totally abandoned, was all I could separate from the confusion and fear. And this seemed all the more

insidious because even now it was recognisable, I could feel my mind shoving blindly against its shape, a distended growth out of feelings I'd always had.

This everyman quality, the camaraderie of the extreme, allows the first of the narrative tricks to be pulled. It is so easy to feel for Hobson's plight that we like him without this likeability having to be established through act or word. And that leaves it open for the author to establish a conflict between our instinctive loyalty toward the sufferer and the kind of man Hobson may actually be. With a certain stealth, the driving question moves from 'What would I do?' to 'What might Hobson do—and have done in the past?' It's a dark and disorienting twist. As the character moves through his broken world we come to realise that he might be implicated in the breaking of it.

The more Hobson's failure and fragility is revealed, the more we come to doubt his reliability. In clumsy hands, the unreliable narrator is a cheap trick, designed more to frustrate than to manipulate. Here, it is carefully employed. The genetics laboratory in which Hobson worked, the body in the chair, the vision on a dark road, the memories of an autistic son, Hobson's tentative attempts to piece together an explanation: none of this is incidental.

Just as we are beginning to come to terms with the frame of reference allowed us, everything is switched again—and this requires my making one last plot revelation. Hobson is not alone. Another man has survived: Apirana Maketu, or The Maori, as our narrator uncomfortably insists upon calling him (but then, so many things about this narrator are uncomfortable). Here we are, a touch under halfway through the novel, and finally the potential for external conflict presents itself. Harrison gives it free rein. Two men, a Maori and a Pakeha, a soldier and a scientist, each with no one else in the world to turn to. But that doesn't mean they have to get along.

There is more than a little Sartre in this scenario. The worst thing we could ever imagine is being alone, until we imagine being with somebody else. No exit, indeed. And now the range of possible explanations for what Hobson calls The Effect is compressed. Whatever the reason one man was spared must now extend to two, and yet at first glance they have nothing in common. This is a fairly archetypal working of intrigue: beginning with open possibilities, challenging the reader to design their own structure into which these clues can be fitted, and then hitting them with an impossibility. Not progress, but a promise of progress, the reminder that the writer has not forgotten his contract with you.

The second character brings not just conflict, but an alternative viewpoint. Although there is a natural tendency for us to identify most strongly with the first character we meet in a novel, it is not inevitable. The flaws we have already seen in Hobson magnify under his response to Maketu. And therein lies perhaps the most unsettling of all the novel's clues. For not only does the narrator's treatment of his sole companion speak poorly of him, but the way Hobson tells it The Maori's descriptions of himself contain the same offensive reductions and simplifications. Again we are confronted with the possibility—the only palatable possibility—of the narrator's unreliability.

The tension mounts. Tension between Hobson and Maketu, between fact and fiction, between cause and Effect. It is the nature of *The Quiet Earth* that you cannot adequately discuss the ending without saying too much. By the time the inevitable revelation arrives, we understand this story is as much an examination of John Hobson as it is an examination of the circumstances that brought his world to a standstill at 6.12 one sunny morning. We no longer like the man—we now know him to be self-obsessed, paranoid and dangerously violent—yet the intrigue remains. The story, compelling enough as a series of episodes, has one last surprise in store for us. What is it, exactly, that the reader has been

witness to?

While some people have claimed there is a deliberate ambiguity to the ending, to my mind this undervalues the author's craft. Craig Harrison, who has been a successful playwright and published five other novels in different genres over the past forty-odd years, knows exactly what he is doing. That there is only one chilling possibility left ensures this book can be rightfully considered a classic

CHAPTER ONE

The pull of the earth took hold of my spine, my limbs spread over space. There was the breath-beat of falling, spiralling, the air pushing hard for a moment and then letting go. The light split open my eyelids. It was brilliant, drained of colours, painful. An immense silence rushed around me. My throat was trying to make a noise, to beat it back. The light pulsed redness. Then the silence expanded.

I was sitting bolt upright in bed breathing fast and staring at the wall. The daylight was streaming into the motel room through the slats of the blinds. I seemed to have been awake, and asleep, for ages. I lay back and remembered where I was. The silence persisted. My watch at the bedside had stopped 6.12. Reaching out, I shook it and the second hand began flicking round again. How long had it been stopped? I got up and went to the window which looked out onto the main road; my arm moved up towards the cord of the blind.

What?

I paused. What was happening? The casual movement, everyday, ordinary, towards opening the blind, had been interrupted by something, by an impulse to stop, which had no sensible origin at all. I was so curious and *extraordinary* that I was pausing not because of the impulse itself but in a conscious effort to find a reason for it. But I had forgotten. My mind seemed to resist. The silence pressed in thickly. It was exactly like forgetting the name of a place you've visited dozens of times; it's just on the tip of your mind but you can't find it. You stop and think, and when there's no answer you go on. Perhaps, later, you will know.

Then I reached up and opened the blind to the enormous light.

CHAPTER TWO

It was still early; possibly, to judge by the sun, about 8.30 am. I looked out at the grass and the road beyond. The air was clear and bright with the promise of another fine summer day. All was quiet. The scene was cut into strips by the slats of the venetian blinds, and I pulled the cord to alter the angle of the slats, looking up, ahead, and down. Perhaps it really was only 6.15; nobody had woken up yet. Saturday morning in a small town like Thames was obviously not hectic. Good. That was why I had come to Coromandel, after all; for peace and quiet.

I showered and dressed. The water pressure seemed weak. Only when I tried to use my electric razor did I realise that the power was off. I tried the lights, the radio, the electric hotplates on the cooker. All dead. Probably a fuse. I went out of the door at the back of the motel unit and looked around from the balcony. There was nobody below in the car park, and no sign of activity. Descending to the office I wandered around pressing buzzers, knocking on doors, shouting hello, but the whole place appeared to be deserted. Curtains and blinds were still drawn and the car park was full.

Curiouser and curiouser: I realised that in all the time since I had been awake, not a single vehicle had gone along the road, nor had there been any kind of noise. Even a sudden breeze rustling the leaves of a tree in the garden of one of the houses behind the car park startled me, and I went and looked over into the garden. Nobody was there. There's a clock in my car, I thought, I'll check the time.

I unlocked the car door. The hands of the dashboard clock stood fixed at 6.12. For a moment the breath went dry in my lungs. I slid into the car, slammed the door shut defensively, put the key in the ignition, drew out the choke, turned the key, revved the engine, reversed, then into first, accelerator down. The Marina skidded on loose stones and swept along the drive away from the motel. The clock had started again. I slowed at the end of the drive but there was no traffic and in a few seconds I was on the main road towards the centre of town.

All this happened very quickly. Because of the sight of the clock. It was impossible. What am I doing? Why am I driving into Thames at about 6.30 am, or whenever, because of a clock? And a power cut?

The first wave of panic subsided, then thickened hard as the total emptiness of the town slid past, stared back, blank. In the middle of the main street there was a car stalled at an intersection. I slowed down, drew over to the kerb and stopped fifty metres away. When I cut the engine off, the silence fell around the car like a solid thing, shutting against me. I tapped the dashboard to make a sound. My ears seemed suffocated. Reaching out I shoved the plastic indicator stick on the steering column to sound the horn, but with the panic still trembling inside me I pushed the wrong one and the windscreen washers spurted two jets of water across the glass. Cursing, I jabbed the other control and the horn

bayed into the deserted street so loudly that I let go immediately and it stopped. The water dribbled and sagged down the windscreen, chopping the view of the shops, pavement, shadows, sun, car, car's shadow, into distorted slivers, glistening even clearer. It was all very real and present.

I got out of the car, letting the door swing back and slam shut with a metallic clang which followed the noise the horn had made, spreading away along the street in both directions and being echoed and absorbed as it went.

The sun was now quite hot. I stood on the tarmac looking at the car in the middle of the road, not wanting to go any closer. It was a red Datsun. If it had been left suddenly, wouldn't the doors be open? What the hell. I walked up to it and stared in cautiously, shading my eyes. There was nobody there. I opened the driver's door. Ignition still switched on; petrol run dry; batteries weak. The gear was in neutral; he'd stopped at the intersection. The handbrake wasn't on. It was very hot inside the car and I lifted myself off the edge of the seat and stood up to test the door, to see if it would close by itself if left. It stayed open. As I leaned on the door I looked down at the driver's seat and saw the seatbelt, *still fastened*, stretching loosely across the seat. I slammed the door and stepped back several paces. My first instinct was to run for the Marina and get away. But I stopped the impulse. Many people never use their seatbelts. They leave them strewn all over and never notice. *Fastened?* Yes, why not? People are strange. Do odd things. There are always explanations. What, then? For all this? A set for film? An experiment? It's a Civil Defence exercise, and nobody told me. I'm a stranger; they forgot. The real thing? A disaster, everyone gone, evacuated, they forgot me. Lots of explanations.

Back at my car I revved the engine loudly and then set off to drive round the town. No signs or clues at the police station or post office. No people anywhere, not even in the residential streets. The houses were all closed and shuttered. Empty cars stood in odd places across some roads. I checked two or three, then drove past the others. The sound of my horn in the streets brought no response. I accelerated back to the main street and parked where I had stopped before. I would have to find a transistor radio. There was an electrical goods shop nearby.

The door was locked. In the window a digital clock showed 06.12. My eyes flicked away quickly from it. I went back, got a tyre lever from the car and smashed the glass door. The noise was a shattering attack on the emptiness. It roused nothing. I waited, listening. There were not even any bird or animal sounds. My feet crunched on broken glass as I stepped into the shop. And I shivered, suddenly, in the coolness.

There was a telephone. I picked it up and listened for a dial tone but it was totally extinct. Selecting a handy portable radio I checked to see it had batteries and then switched it on and ran the dial round all the way on medium wave from 530 to 1600 kHz. There was nothing but static. With the volume up so high that the crackling and hissing sounded like the abrasions of barbed wire across heavy sandpaper, still nothing. After rechecking connections and trying again, I switched off.

A larger portable was next. The moment I pressed the first top button it howled music and my hand jerked back. The sound of Handel's *Messiah* rolled against the walls and surged into the street, alive, thunderous with voices. My skin went warm; there was a slackening of all the tensed muscles inside me. A broadcast, a radio station transmitting!

The relief made me suddenly pathetic and grateful. I wanted to apologise, to make amends for the hollowness of my life and its frightening silences left empty of whatever was needed from me, as though the fear of the last half hour had been made for me, to shake and change me. However late. I wanted to say, I will try to understand what went wrong.

I knew this only for one moment. Then I looked down. The cogs of a cassette tape were churning away behind a plastic panel. It wasn't a radio broadcast. Just a tape. The printing showed: *Selections. London Philharmonic: Thy Rebuke Has Broken His Heart. He Was Cut Off From The Land Of The Living. But Thou Didst Not Leave His Soul In Hell. Hallelujah. I Know That My Redeemer Liveth.*

My fist banged down on the switches. The music cut off, then the radio frequencies glowed in a pale green. The static surged from the speaker. I pressed shortwave and ran the red line up and down at full volume. Nothing, again, except a long-distance surge of falling and rising and fading static, like surf breaking over the planet in huge spaces. Long wave, medium; no other sound. Beneath my breath all the time I was saying, *please, anything, please*, with a bile of anger keeping back the panic. Useless. My fingers wobbled over the dials and buttons, trembling to switch off and stop the hissing.

Silence, then. A vacuum as strong as the light outside, and it seemed to force its way in and flex its strength as though it fed on any hint of noise. To stop the fear in me I crossed my arms over my chest and pressed my hands under my armpits. My heart and lungs were pounding. I felt I had to hold them in, harder, to hold myself together.

What's happened? Any, any explanation would dam the panic. Is there really a force that can make everything vanish, that could hear or sense me now, track me down, attack me? I struggled to be objective. After a few minutes I stepped out of the broken door and stood on the pavement. No, I had no feeling of being watched. Perhaps I could have defended myself against that more easily. An enormous isolation and loneliness, a sensation not of being observed but of being ignored, totally abandoned, was all I could separate from the confusion and fear. And this seemed all the more insidious because even now it was recognisable, I could feel my mind shoving blindly against its shape, a distended growth out of feelings I'd always had.

But my brain still works. This is not a dream. I am alive. This is happening. What can I do?

The sun had moved onto my car. I opened the windows. The inside was like a furnace. I sat down on the edge of the pavement in the shade. A peculiar apathy began to come over me. I felt very thirsty. I would have to break into a shop and get a drink.

Standing, I turned and re-entered the radio shop, now feeling guilty about the damage. A part of me insisted that people would soon be back and that I had better make amends. Conventional sensations reappeared. I felt in my pockets for money to recompense for the mess, but all I had was my chequebook. I took it out, got a biro and wrote a cheque for fifty dollars, cash. I even put my address on the back. Thinking, maybe fifty dollars is too much, I then took a torch from a display and put it in my car.

Ten minutes later I was sitting in the office of a filling station at the end of the street, tipping warm lemonade into my mouth. The heat and light compressed a pain inside my skull into a tight headache. I leaned back and stared up. My watch ticked uselessly away, the only sound.

After thirty years, what did I have or know that could help? No point in wondering, could I cope? No choice. I have to. *I have to go and look in those houses.* Break in, go from room to room, and see what's there. In spite of the fear sticking in my spine like ice.

The dead have no power. They can't harm. Can anyone be more than dead? My head came down and I looked through my image reflected on the glass of the window. No power? I know better than that.

Beyond the window, my car wavered in the heat, marks of evaporated water down the dust of its windscreen, like teardrops squeezed from a machine.

CHAPTER THREE

I walked towards the door of the first house I had selected; an ordinary suburban weatherboard with a neat garden. The occupants of all these houses had obviously not gone anywhere. Their milk was uncollected, festering in hot letterboxes; their doors were closed and locked. It could only follow, therefore, that the inhabitants were still inside, in an abnormal condition.

I stopped. What if it was a disease, a plague? No; I must be immune. I won't be harmed. Go in. Not knowing is worse.

I banged on the door. Only small windows were open and all the blinds were closed. The door was nineteen-fiftyish ground glass panel etched with a scene of a kingfisher and some mallards. I had brought a large hammer from the garage; I stood back and hurled it at the glass. The mallards shattered. I hung back, waiting. The conventional instinct made me wonder why I hadn't tried the back door. I looked around. Even under normal circumstances there were strong taboos on entering other people's houses. It was another sign of what I was increasingly coming to fear as a dangerous confusion in my mind, that having smashed somebody's front door I should feel it was improper now to enter. I found myself leaning into the hallway and shouting, 'Hello? Anybody there?'

Silence. I picked up the hammer and stepped in. Speckled brown carpet, flowery wallpaper, a telephone on a small wrought-iron stand, a framed picture of waves breaking with sunlight shining through the front wave. The far end of the hall was darkish and the various doors which led off on each side were closed.

The air had the distinctive fusty smell of a closed house, a compound of old carpet and faded cooking, a jumble sale, second-hand, dust-under-beds staleness.

I wondered whether to knock on any of the doors. The first one was on my right. Perhaps surprise would be best. Holding up the hammer in my left hand, I tensed, then pulled the door handle with my right. A heavy white thing rushed out at me, taller than me, falling onto my chest. I made the kind of noise you only make in nightmares, a whimpering attempt at a cry, and I flailed at the thing with the hammer, falling backwards over the telephone table, sprawling wildly.

Then I heaved myself up, cutting two fingers on a shard of glass. The blood ran down my hand. I dropped the hammer and sucked at the wound. With some nervous cursing I wrapped my handkerchief round the bloodstain. My heart was pounding like mad. I did not think I had ever been so appallingly frightened in my entire waking life.

I had opened the door of an airing cupboard and a large sheet had fallen on me.

The panic subsided. Thank God nobody could see me. But if I have to go through anything worse, let it happen straight away as long as there is some explanation.

Anything. Anything I can understand.

I picked up the hammer and advanced to the next door on the right. It swung open easily as I pushed it, and I peered into a bedroom darkened by closed curtains. The sheets and coverings on the double bed were crumpled, but even in the gloomy light I could discern no shapes beneath them, no heads on the pillows. After a moment I walked into the room and drew the curtains open. The bedclothes had not been flung back; they lay irregularly drawn up to the pillows, and each pillow had an indentation as if recently rested upon by somebody. Had the bedclothes been thrown aside, it would merely have looked like an ordinary unmade bed. I balked at throwing them back, but the light gave me enough confidence. There was nothing beneath them. On one side of the bed, a man's clothes were draped over a chair; socks and shoes by the edge of the red tufted bedside carpet. A woman's clothes lay rather more neatly on a bamboo chair on the other side of the bed. I turned away, feeling even more like an intruder than before. My eyes rested on the alarm clock beneath the bedside lamp: 6.12. Yes, of course. But my mind, having almost swallowed this consistent idiocy, finally choked on it. I stood in the bedroom looking at all the normal disorder, and beyond the contradictory impulses of relief and fear at not finding any people, I detected the first tiny anomaly in the pattern of events. It was a triumphant revelation; for a moment it cancelled every other aspect of the puzzle and I had to restrain myself from shouting out loud like a child who suddenly sees through a mystery all at once. Of course! Why hadn't I thought of it before! It was simply this: *The clocks have not merely stopped; some have been altered and then stopped.*

At any given moment, normally, it would be almost impossible to find half a dozen clocks and watches all showing the same time. The clock in my car was always a few minutes fast each day, and I would adjust it when the difference became noticeable. If this had been my alarm clock, here, I would have expected it to be ten minutes fast as I always set it ahead a bit. But so far today I had not seen a single timepiece which had stopped at anything other than precisely 6.12. Surely a few might have shown, well, 6.09 or 6.15, according to whether they were slow or fast? Whatever force had stopped them had also had the power to enforce a unified time on them. This suggested something more than mere paralysis of moving parts.

I strode out of the bedroom back into the hall and explored the other rooms. There was a teenager's bedroom with posters all over the walls and jeans and T-shirts on a chair, and a children's room with two bunk beds, and clothes festooned amongst toys. The beds were all in the same state, as though the occupants had vanished instantly whilst asleep and with no disturbance. In the kitchen I found another clock at 6.12, propped on top of an old refrigerator. The fridge had defrosted and when I drew the venetian blinds the daylight gleamed on the pool of water on the patterned lino flooring. Some shelves in the living room held badly framed photographs of the family: a formal black-and-white studio picture of a couple in late-nineteen-fifties styles on their wedding day, and several garish coloured photos of children squinting towards the camera on bright sunny days in back gardens and on beaches, the sky turquoise Kodak. I looked at the photos with a heavy feeling, a sensation of having been excluded from all the processes which had operated these people, of being as separate as a creature from another planet, unable to divide the ordinary from the extraordinary. I feared that although these people might not be dead, might not have ceased to live in any ordinary sense, nevertheless they would almost certainly not be coming back here. The arrangement of objects in the bedrooms seemed to be hard evidence of something irrevocable, of an event which was irreversible as well as mysterious, just as all photographs show an unreachable past.

The images of people from my own life who might have vanished held me fixed there for a while.

wondered if they now only existed in my mind. I was unnerved, briefly, by not being able to feel any very powerful emotion about that, and by a deeper disturbance in my memory relating to Auckland and the past which had no apparent cause. I turned away from the photographs. Was everything irrevocable? A force which can stop clocks is one thing; a force which fixes all timepieces to one setting is quite something else. It has a purpose, surely?

There was a dull, heavy thudding and rustling noise from the kitchen. I tensed and crouched behind an armchair, estimating the distance to the door which led to the hallway. No, to get out that way I would have to turn my back towards the kitchen, and I had left the kitchen door open. I waited, holding my breath, holding the hammer even tighter. Nothing happened. Slowly I stood up and advanced. There was no sign of anything in the kitchen. After a long pause I kicked the door wide open. The same thud and then a slithering came from inside the fridge. I walked across and opened the fridge door. A mass of melting ice fell out onto the lino. A large block, shaped with the ridges like a mould of the cooling unit, sagged onto the plastic tray on the top shelf. Water dripped down. A faintly unpleasant odour hung in the air, a cheesy, meaty staleness which would be the beginning of the decomposition. I closed the door hard against the slush. Microbes? The decay of meat was a process involving living cells. People had vanished leaving no trace, but meat remained and was decaying normally.

I unlocked the back door and walked out into the strong, hot sunlight. There were some scraggy rose bushes in the back garden, red oleanders, the inevitable marigolds, and the white buds of a magnolia opening like poultices. Screwing my eyes up against the powerful light I wandered around examining the flowers. There were no aphids or insects on them; none, at any rate, that I could see. A spade was leaning against the corrugated iron fence; I put my hammer down and got the spade and began to heave aside lumps of the dry rock-hard earth. It wasn't easy. The earth I uncovered seemed as dead as sand. There were stabs of pain from my cut fingers. Sweating, I blundered back into the kitchen and turned on the taps over the sink; the water pressure was low but the dribblings soon filled a small basin I picked up from the draining board. I took the water outside and splashed it on the soil. After two or three trips the soil had darkened and become softer. The spade sank in more easily. When about twenty centimetres of soil had been levered out I fetched more water and poured it into the hole. It formed a slurry with the loose earth. I stirred and prodded at the sides of the hole as the water sank away.

Suddenly, into the mud, there was a movement, a writhing. I laughed out loud. Carefully lowering the tip of the spade into the hole I edged it into the mud and lifted up part of the dark mass like a goldminer peering for a glint of something precious. And there it was! Wriggling, bluish-pink, coiled enormously alive: an earthworm.

I released the earth gently and knelt in the heat of the early afternoon watching the only other living creature I had found or detected in six hours of searching. A common or garden worm. I laughed again. The worm burrowed out of sight. I said, 'Hey!' out loud, putting my hand down to part the earth. My companion crawled off in another direction. I watched it go. Don't start talking to worms, thought.

I sat there for perhaps five or ten minutes, the strain ebbing away, a sick weariness mixing with the elation, until the sun on the back of my neck drove me to the shade of the carport.

So: I was not alone. The effect, or whatever, had not eradicated the microbes which made meat decay, and it had not removed life beneath the surface of the soil. I felt sure now that there was a detectable pattern to the Effect (I consciously christened it there and then) and that I would be able to

make deductions, as a scientist, and that sooner or later some sense, if not some cause or explanation would emerge. There *must* be a pattern; there always was, to any process. Perhaps normality would return, reassert itself, by degrees. Normal processes would continue; entropy still applied, growth and decay seemed unaffected. I lifted my roughly bandaged hand to wipe the itch of sweat from my face, and then stopped the movement because my fingers were caked with the earth I had unburied. I dashed it off on my trousers, convulsively, walking back into the kitchen and turning on the taps to wash my hand, to clean the cuts and run water over my fingers and wash and wipe them until they emerged from the rubbing of dishcloth and towel quite clean, scrubbed blue and pink.

CHAPTER FOUR

I drove at random around the streets in the afternoon, occasionally stopping to enter a house and walk quickly through its rooms. It became easier to do. The clocks all showed 6.12. The houses were all void of human beings or animals. All pets had vanished. Milk in saucers lay curdling on kitchen floors, turning into blue and yellow liquid.

In one house I was startled to find the bedclothes thrown back as though the occupant had got up; in the kitchen there was evidence of a breakfast in progress, and, most chillingly of all, a loaf of bread on the formica bench with a breadknife halfway down a slice. I thought, for the first time, of the *Mary Celeste*, the abandoned ship with its half-eaten meals on the table. No doubt there were more grotesque sights in store for me. I removed the knife. The bread had begun to dry and curl. If the people returned, would they reappear at the same points in space? Was I interfering with the conditions for their precise reappearance? An academic question. Whatever I did would alter some aspect of this frozen six-twelve moment.

Less academic was the worry about my cut hand. There didn't seem to be any slivers of glass or traces of earth in the wound. What would happen if I became ill?

What if I got tetanus? In one house I found a first-aid kit in the bathroom. I bathed antiseptic onto my fingers and sealed the cuts with band-aid. Each closed house held its own distinctive staleness. I held my breath against the smell of beer and ashtrays, remnants of exhausted Friday nights; bedrooms heavy with dead sweat and cheap scent, the curtains drawn to preserve the secretions; children's rooms full of the breath of highly flavoured sweets, toothpaste, chewing gum, and stale urine. There were bathroom scents, soapy, antiseptic; chemical lavender disinfectant and the sharpness of chlorine scouring powder in obsessively neat houses where none of the surfaces had traces of human beings or them. One older house was filled with a feral air of animals and damp newspaper; another, unbearably like the inside of a diseased lung, sweet, tubercular, breathed to the death of all its oxygen several times over, every door and window shut tight. I had to stop. A revulsion I had always felt about the physical secrecy of other people, the solid, hidden strangeness of their lives, formed into a nausea with these smells, the almost tangible presence of people who had sweated what they had eaten all their lives: dead mutton, sour milk.

Should I go to Auckland? Now? I didn't want to decide. I wandered around gardens checking for insects. Even the woodlice, the slaters normally crawling frantically under old lumps of wood or large stones, had gone. No aphids, greenfly, codling moths, slugs, snails, wasps, mosquitoes, mice or rats: a dream for gardeners.

But also no butterflies or honeybees, no spiders, no background hiss of cicadas. The silence was stark, absolute and terrible, the gardens like cemeteries for the deaf. I wondered if nature could survive for

long without insects as pollinators or without the complicated interlock of predators and victims. Surely it couldn't? They would *have* to restore themselves. It was too vast a disturbance.

I discovered that my mind had begun to adapt its functions to the new conditions automatically, as though an unknown set of evolutionary switches had tripped, closing some circuits as temporarily useless, sending others into overload and short circuit, and activating new areas. It was reassuring to realise this. Whenever my progress from one house and garden to another was stalled by these vague and at times dangerous speculations which threatened to branch out into unpleasant conclusions and fear about the enormity of what was going on, then my mind would close down those circuits and redirect me to the sheer physical effort of going on, of not stopping still. The resilience of this mind amazed me; it was almost a separate phenomenon, a part of myself which had instinctively sought to protect itself from breakdown and to prepare defences to ensure its own survival as an organism. The question of whether I was really seeing what I seemed to be seeing kept recurring. I might be mad. This was met with a dodging agility. Madness is a deviation from what is normal, I thought; it is abnormal for people to disappear; I have not disappeared; I *am* now normality. *I think, therefore I am*

Me: and the worms? No, madness didn't need witnesses any more than heroics needed onlookers. If a tree falls in a forest where there are no ears to hear it, then you can argue whether it makes a noise, but whether it makes a noise or not, it still falls.

What will you do tonight?—a demand from my mind, overriding the contradictory impulses with a insistence on practical action. Was there any danger that if I fell asleep I might be scooped up by the Effect? What would happen when 6.12 came round again? Should I go back to the motel room or get out into the countryside?

I drove the car aimlessly along the main street again and then on impulse decided to go up to the lookout on the hill overlooking the town. The road curved up past closed, silent houses and emerged on a small car park at the top of the hill next to a large tower-like structure. I got out of the car and looked across the town in the late afternoon sun. The houses, churches, gardens, garages and streets lay below; there were greyish mudflats beyond, then the glittering spread of water, and on the far side the distant hills, blue, insubstantial. Beyond the hills would be Auckland. Empty?

For more than half an hour I sat on the steps leading up to the tower and gazed at the immense lifelessness of the scene. It did not even seem to have acknowledged the change which had come over it; there were no visible clues as to what had happened, and no sense of any further imminent change. The stunned clarity of the landscape seemed almost insulting; but even this was only like an extension of the indifference it had always radiated. I had felt it often when driving through remote hills in the past, on deserted roads. The clear light which scrubbed the hills into such precise definition, which polished seas and rinsed distance from time as well as space, had not changed. The nothingness stretching over huge sections of land infinitely had extended itself everywhere; it had penetrated towns, cars, houses, rooms, an irresistible, magnified vacuum. I had once driven through enormities of emptiness towards the south-east coast of the North Island, to Cape Turnagain. All the way the loneliness had dilated and rebounded from the vacant ranges of hills setting up a frightening reverberation. The beach was being sandblasted by a ferocious north Antarctic wind pressing back the curling tops of the breakers as if trying to cancel and dissipate their energy. There were no human beings in sight. The atmosphere seemed hostile to any kind of vitality that was not destructive; the wind and clear light beating down forced raw, instant, hard reactions, did not allow rest or thinking, denied something that was essential to your humanity. The landscape held no possibilities other than those of that moment. You felt you had seen it all forever. It had no psychic resonance, no memories.

no past; nothing human had ever happened there. That was not unusual for parts of New Zealand. But that place also had no potential, no projections from ahead; its future gaped into nothingness too. It was inconceivable that humans should ever settle there and endow it with traces of their lives. I had been chilled, appalled, at the boldness and ferocity with which it revealed its nature. Even then I had wondered as I drove away from it what would happen if that emptiness set up an echo, or found reverberations inside the people who nominally laid claim to the land; what would happen if you were insidiously affected by it, and weakened, losing the power of resisting it, until you might find yourself trapped in the same kind of abhuman present, transparent, unending?

I returned to the motel, stopping en route to recheck the radio wavebands. I had once read that the ionosphere undergoes alterations in the evening. But there was only static again. The motel was as I had left it. The door to my unit was still open. As I walked in, I felt a thickening sadness and depression. It was as if everything there belonged to another life, penetrated by the act of opening the blind that morning, fractured finally and beyond help by the most casual exit from the door I had just re-entered. I had intended to investigate the room to try to see if it contained any clues as to my escape from the Effect, and perhaps to lie down and reconstruct my movements from the moment I had awoken, like the re-enactment of a crime, to unearth, possibly, a missing link, a detail forgotten. Instead I slumped on the unmade bed, choking on feelings for that finished life all around, its closeness pressing against its remoteness. The ceiling was covered with a roughcast stipple of some sprayed, congealed composition, and the softer late sunlight revealed glints of gold and silver specks mixed in with the stipple.

Then the light slid into new shapes and the surface liquefied and trembled. Reflections flicked about on the upper surface of the liquid becoming quick and brilliant. I was floating beneath the surface with a hissing in my ears, the kind of hollow sea sound which comes from the pale bone of a shell held close to the coil of your ear, covering all other sounds. I pushed my hands down to try to rise but it had no effect. The terror was beginning. Slowly, as if going through space, I felt myself being turned. The hissing stopped and there was silence, dead, total. A face came drifting into view, the face of a person dead under water. The eyes were open, the nostrils flared, the mouth gaping fishlike, the long tendrils of hair slowly moving like saliva in a tide of greenish water round a pale drowned face. I could not move. The sound came back in echoes of human voices, very distant. But I couldn't reach them or speak for help.

I woke up, staring at the ceiling. It was not yet dark but the sun had set. Perhaps I had only been asleep a short while. The voices in the distance had woken me but they were not real, only part of the dream. I went to the window and stared out. The sky was turquoise and gold towards the sunset and a deep indigo overhead, into which the stars were beginning to glint. The universe was still there. The same.

Having had nothing to eat all day I now felt hungry. The sick feelings of panic and depression had gone, leaving a hollow. I decided not to venture back into town. I would stay here for the night. It wouldn't be possible to cook anything but I had some fruit with me and the motel milk was still drinkable. Before the evening became completely dark I went down and looted the motel office and rooms, getting some packets of salted nuts and potato chips, a lump of cheese, two cans of orange juice, a tin of pineapple cubes and a transistor radio. Then, with the car safely locked, I took all this and the torch I had obtained from the shop earlier, and went up and locked myself in the motel room. I decided to barricade the door, and heaved the spare twin bed against it. With all the curtains and blinds closed I felt reasonably secure. It was now deathly dark and the silence was pressing in, but th

was easier to deal with at night since it was usually quiet at night.

Yes. Usually quiet.

I ate by the torchlight, stopping every few minutes to freeze and listen intently for the faintest suspicion of a sound. Nothing, not even a breeze to rustle the trees at the back; in fact with the door and windows closed the humid evening was doubly oppressive. Should I drive up to the lookout and see if there are any lights in the distance? No, better not. I would not like to go out there.

It will not, I thought, be easy to sleep. The dreams are bad and I am afraid to go to sleep.

Perhaps even the dreams would have been better than what followed. I switched off the torch; the darkness was as complete as the silence. It was all very well to think that it was usually quiet at night but in my desire to stay awake for as long as I could, I found myself sitting listening to the silence, holding my breath, hearing even my own heartbeats, in the effort to hear something. I felt sure that I had heard some kind of noise from the direction of the car park below at the back of the motel. It was something moving, and when I listened intently it stopped as if conscious of being detected. For what seemed ages I strained to hear, but when there was nothing further I decided I had imagined it and relaxed, wiping the sweat off my face with a towel in the bathroom. Whilst I was doing this the noise briefly penetrated the room again, furtively. I stood petrified. The hairs on the back of my neck crawled like insects. There was something outside. There, again. This time it was a movement on the loose gravel of the parking area.

I cursed that I hadn't picked up a gun or any weapons from the sporting goods shops in town. Creeping quietly back into the kitchen, slowly in the dark, feeling my way along the edges of objects gently withdrew the cutlery drawer and fumbled around until I touched the large breadknife. With this in one hand I stood by the back kitchen window steeling my nerves to the action of carefully, slowly, lifting the end of the blind away from the window by no more than a centimetre. From this angle I could see along the balcony by the dim starlight (there was no moon) but it was not possible to see down into the car park or to see the steps which led up to the first-floor units on my left, out of my angle of vision. The steps would be visible from the other end of the window but to lift the blind slightly there and look out through that narrow gap, I would have to climb on top of the electric cooker, and this would be precarious and might make too much noise.

Nothing happened, and I seemed to stand there for ages, aching in one position. The sweat made it way endlessly down my face. Whatever was outside must know I was here. And it must be evil. There was a furtive slyness about the sounds. I was sure that was not imagination. I could sense it.

The steps up to the balcony vibrated, as if someone, or something, had advanced onto the first step and paused. The vibration was detectable because the steel framework of the stairway was attached to the wall of the motel and the iron handrail acted like a tuning fork. But again, after the agony of waiting, nothing else happened, and I could feel numbness in my hands and feet as cramp began to sear round the tensed muscles and veins. I realised that I had been exerting every cell in my brain towards the thought, directed at the steps, that no object of any kind should come one centimetre closer to me. The totality of this effort to repel and prevent seemed to have drained away all the resources which usually fed oxygen to nerve centres and muscles, so the slightest relaxation meant a lapse into instant weariness. At one point I must have been asleep, or unconscious, or hypnotised into a staring dream condition, for how long I couldn't tell, perhaps only for microseconds, maybe for several minutes, until another slight sound brought me back to the full intensity of listening and concentrating again. And then I was not sure if there had been another sound or whether I had created the sound in the

reflex of returning suddenly to total wakefulness in an instant. I had never before in my life passed through such a condition of terror, and to find this peculiar hyper-sleep or super-consciousness on the far side of fear was unbelievable.

After another huge void of starlight and dark and waiting, I moved very slowly from the window and slid down to sit on the kitchen floor with my back against the sink unit. The lino was cool. I held the knife in my left hand. The silence seemed to have taken on its former solidity, and instead of being threatening it now felt protective. But I wanted to avoid thinking that the noises outside had gone away or been defeated; I was afraid that any relaxation of that kind would somehow provoke a response from whatever was out there.

Sure enough, there was another sound: the crunch and rustle of loose stones again. The stairs had been abandoned, then, and it was back in the car park. I could hardly move, but I dragged myself up and gently lifted one slat of the venetian blind. It was not possible to see anything. After only a few minutes, the same sound of gravel, but further away and to the right, beyond my angle of vision. Was it going away, or trying another route? I strained to see, then carefully let the blind go and stood in the silence for a while. It could have been entirely my imagination, but I believed I could actually sense a lessening in the feeling of evil which had earlier been so oppressive it was almost touchable.

Groping my way across the room I sat down in an armchair by the door to the bathroom. A slight trembling and shivering came over me. The room had cooled. Against the fatigue which pushed me deeper into the chair, I tried to think about what had happened. The idea of an evil as some kind of personalised thing had not occurred to me during the day. I'd been scared in the first house I'd entered, but those were merely momentary shocks, irrelevant to the bigger puzzle, easily solved. The disappearance of every living object, the fixing of all time mechanisms at 6.12, the absence of radio transmissions from all wavebands surely couldn't be connected to an Effect which manifested itself as a specific thing corporeal enough to creep around and squat for hours on staircases? Perhaps there was nothing outside except a stray dog or cat or opossum, any odd animal which might have escaped the Effect like me?

The fact that I could consider this was, I realised, a sure sign that the menace outside had gone. No animal could have radiated malignancy like that. If I'd survived the Effect because of some freak or accidental immunity, then I might have a special resistance which something was trying to break down. There might be no logic to these phases, just a sequence of threats or attacks. I shall find out more, I thought. The dark lightened, my bravado increased. I know it's evil, it comes at night, and I *think* I can keep it at bay with my mind under control. If I hold that control I can survive.

When I woke up the sun was streaming in from the bright silence.

CHAPTER FIVE

For a few seconds of course I wanted to believe that everything would now be normal again. The absence of sounds defeated this idea even before I moved to peer through the blinds. The moment I moved, a succession of powerful muscular pains wrenched at my spine and shoulders, then at my leg. I remembered what had been happening and that it was acutely real. My bad dreams had never involved physical pain; they had been memorable for terror, the vertigo of falling or slipping down slopes towards chasms, or the impulse to run from some horror but not being able to, or the feeling of slow suffocation under deepening water; there had even been dreams in which I had to wander through strange buildings, opening doors of rooms which contained unrevealed horrors. But never physical pain.

I walked around the motel unit, wincing, looking out. Was it safe to go outside? All seemed clear. The word 'normal' would not do. I packed up my belongings and the food so that I could load the car quickly. The sooner I got away from here, the better. The Effect was so closely tied in my mind to this place that I thought its force might weaken the further away I went. The place to go, obviously, was Auckland. There were sure to be people there out of half a million. Surely.

Having moved the barricade from the door, I checked again and then unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped out onto the balcony. Nothing had changed. I went down the stairs and glanced at my car, turning round slowly as I moved, my eyes checking the other cars, the back fence, the motel doors, the exit road, the cars again. When I felt reasonably safe I unlocked the boot of the car and went back up to the room to get my things.

Five minutes later, sweating, slightly out of breath, I had packed and loaded everything I thought I might need, including some blankets, sheets and pillows from the motel beds, plus some pots and pans, cups, cutlery and plates. There was no question of leaving a cheque; yesterday's confusions seemed ages ago. Yet when I was ready to go, I found I was pausing, standing at the foot of the steps in the shade, trying to recollect something, reluctant to leave. I sat down on the steps and wiped my face with a handkerchief. As I pushed the handkerchief back into my pocket my arm banged against the iron railing of the stairs, and the whole rail vibrated. The sound came back from the darkness in the night. I realised I must be sitting exactly where the object had been; right there, the menace, the thing, the embodiment.

Once more, with an awareness now of following a repeated series of actions, I was leaping into my car, slamming the door and driving away from the motel onto the main road, a spit of loose stones under the wheels. And again I was heading into town, to the right, instead of away towards Auckland to the left. I was badly shaken. The tremor of the staircase had set up a resonance inside me which was acutely unnerving because it wasn't wholly accountable merely as the memory of last night, allied to

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