



Necessary
Secrets

Greg McGee

spring

I DON'T WANT to leave a mess. That would be unfair on Ellie, who'd no doubt be the one to discover me. Unless I leave a note on the bedroom door. *Don't come in, Ellie, phone for the ambulance.* But ambulances don't come for corpses. Best to keep it short. *I am dead.* Deceased? Why does Monty Python's parrot come to mind? *I am no more.* That's the essential problem: I am less, much less, than I used to be.

There's no guarantee this pistol will work. The armourer on that gig – what was his name? I have a feeling it began with B. Not Bob, Bill . . . on that shoot for . . . Was it biscuits? Mint creams? How could I have worked guns into a television commercial for mint creams? I wouldn't put it past me. Anyway, that armourer beginning with B on that shoot for, possibly, mint creams, gave me this snub-nosed Walther PPK. When I say 'gave', I mean I paid him several hundred for it. I told Bevan – Bevan! – I told Bevan I'd love to have it because it was James Bond's weapon of choice back in the days when Sean Connery *was* Bond. I haven't been able to watch any of those subsequent Bonds, those thoroughly wrong iterations. I persuaded that armourer whose name begins with B but is not Bob or Bill, against his better judgement, to leave one bullet in the magazine. B was nakedly greedy, and

open to monetary persuasion, as most people are. He could, I explained, take my cash, report it stolen to future-proof his, as I recall, considerable arse, *and* claim the insurance. His *additional* insurance, I told him, was that if I did anything silly with the pistol, he could deny selling or giving it to me and I would be prosecuted as a thief. I was good back then – when would that have been, the nineties perhaps? More likely the cowboy eighties, before Health and Safety started applying a tourniquet to our red-blooded mercenary endeavour. I was good at seeing the angle back then. Exploiting the crack the angle exposed. So here he is, my snub-nosed Walter, with his one bullet. My lead pill.

I did look at other options. Nembutal had its attractions: a glass of wine in accompaniment, being found asleep in one's bed. No mess. But I can't ask young Jeetan, my doctor, to compromise himself, with his brilliant career still in front of him. I would have to scurry around elsewhere. Exit might have helped in the procurement, but the police are on to them, with a woman recently arrested for doing exactly that.

The online option might have appealed. I do like online shopping. For shoes, mainly. I saw Paul Smith brogues with exposed stitching on sale for \$299 at that corner menswear shop. I went outside, sat on the bench under the pin oak with my iPhone and found an online retailer who was selling them at \$125. I bought two pairs as an up-yours to the rapacious margins of the locals. I will probably never get to wear them. I'm no longer on anyone's D list and don't leave the house much, except to do my rounds, clear the box, order a flat white, say hello to someone I know passing by, there's always someone – I used to know a lot of people, in a superficial way – sit in the sun, take home a sandwich. I always wear Nike Air Force 1s on my rounds, not as light as the modern

trainers, but robustly structured. They provide the pneumatic cushion my knee cartilages no longer manage. I have a dozen AF 1s, fly-knit, suede and leather mainly, trainers, Ultra Forces, LV8s, Premiums, all colours of the rainbow, enough to rotate so that my bunioned feet, gouted toes, heel spurs and plantar fasciitis don't deform the inner soles. I order them online from ASOS and they arrive from Vietnam or China or wherever within ten days, plenty long enough for me to forget having ordered them, or even what I've ordered, and when the courier delivers them I am like a child at Christmas, full of anticipation and delight as I unwrap my treasure. When I do my rounds in my Air Force 1s, I get knowing thumbs-up from sneaker-nerds, like Ethan, the Tokelauan barista. 'Old school!'

Vain probably, brand-Nazi certainly – how could I be other? It's what I did. I've always been an enthusiastic consumer, able to effortlessly believe my own hype, buy whatever I was selling and much else besides. Shopping used to be such a mindless pleasure, but Ellie threw a wobbly when those Paul Smiths turned up on the credit card bill. 'How can I get it through to you, Dad? We have no money!' That sounded overly dramatic, even by my standards. I'm a fish who is used to swimming in a sea of money; I've never read a budget that didn't have a bit of fat secreted here and there if you knew where to look. But it seems to be a sincerely held belief, as all Ellie's beliefs are. No more mystery boxes from China or Vietnam or wherever.

An online order for a fatal dose of Nembutal wouldn't have much attraction, no matter what sort of wrapping it came in. But I was seriously contemplating it, until a couple of pensioners got arrested for importing it from China and Mexico. It wasn't the prospect of being arrested that put me off, it was being publicly named, and my

intentions being known. When I go, it will be without a build-up. I'm determined there'll be no trailers before that feature, just a final video farewell after the fact, which I've already recorded and lodged deep in the pocket of my Rainbird jacket. It has no cumbersome fleece lining, just a thin-skinned waterproofing, protection enough for an Auckland spring, where squalls fly in from the west like children's tantrums, short and intense. I seldom venture out without it, so the little USB containing my last production should be eminently discoverable.

As is the way when necessity becomes the mother of intervention, I've become reconciled to Walter, my seventies artefact. It's begun to seem more appropriate to my own artefaction, to the life I have lived. My lead pill will be quick, dramatic and somehow noble in a way that shuffling off this mortal coil in a drugged stupor isn't. Brave rather than cowardly, I like to think. Active rather than passive. And, I have to confess, better in the telling. 'Old Den, eh. Never one to do anything by halves! Old school. What a dag.' A dead dag, of course – I'll not be around to hear any of it, but I can at least savour it in prospect.

When I was young, I lived in the future too much. The present really only imposed itself when Carol got sick. I was fifty when she died, in the first year of the new century. Much harder to calibrate is when I morphed from the present to the past and became a preterite. That was a slower process and harder to mark with a failing memory.

All this, naturally, isn't what it seems to be. It's not really what I try to present it as – a matter of rational choice. That's the lesser part of it. The larger part is a much more frightening driver: the logical end to inchoate terror.

It came again today. Whoever said it's not about forgetting

where your car keys are, it's about forgetting what the car keys are for . . . was right – metaphorically, at least. And cruel.

I hope no one who knows me, saw me. Sitting in the middle of the local strip with my hazard lights going. The cars banked up behind me, trying to swerve round me, until that most loathed uniform in urban Auckland walked across with his tyre chalk and asked if he could help me, sir. When I showed him that the starter button wouldn't go, there was zero ignition, obviously some dreadful electrical malfunction, he suggested I shift the auto from Drive to Park or Neutral and try again. When the engine started and I realised what I had done, I tried to smile at him as he said, 'No trouble, sir', but I could see the pity in his eyes, and my panic was subsumed by terror.

I've learnt nothing. That's as terrifying as the incident itself. That infernal iStop. I thought the engine had stalled and pressed the starter button, which did in fact stop it. So I pressed the starter button again and nothing happened, because it was still in drive. It looked like a complete electrical meltdown, I told Dr Jeetan. An easy mistake, surely? He said nothing, then asked me whether it had happened before? I conceded that it might have.

'How many times?'

'Twice,' I said. 'Or three times, maybe.' The truth is, I can't remember, but I don't want to tell him that. I need my licence, I love driving. When I can't sleep, I drive the perfectly canted sweepers from Murchison down the Buller Gorge to Reefton, or along the side-mirror squeezes of the Grande Corniche from Cap Martin to Nice, or the Big Sur from San Luis Obispo to Monterey, or along the cliffs of the Great Southern Ocean in Victoria, or my favourite road in all the world, from Fairlie across the Mackenzie Country to Omarama and over the Lindis to Wanaka, the stunning mix of

land and lake, burnt sepia and snow-fed blue, with the Southern Alps overlooking it all. I was determined to drive that road again before I die, but I now know I won't get the chance. Dr Jeetan wants a brain scan. Precautionary, he says. But I know the black room that's waiting for me. I've been there before.

I stand in my eyrie contemplating my end. Revelling in the power. I admire the right-to-die brigade, the euthanasia advocates, but they've got it wrong. It's not so much a right as a power. Power is taken, you don't ask permission of your fellows to exercise it. I will not be denied.

My view of the world is powerful and privileged, I know. Carol and I took a punt on this wonderfully odd run-down transition villa, which had a long history as a boarding house and flats. At our big house-warming party, all kinds of people, film-makers, musos, actors, students, told us they had lived or partied here. There used to be lots of old ruins like it all around this suburb, peopled by penniless itinerants of various descriptions, before the monied eastern suburbs cottoned on to its proximity to city and to sea and reclaimed it. Carol was a voracious reader. Years later she found words that perfectly described our feelings when we first saw this loft, up in the shallow gables, crystallising *'those blissful Jungian dreams that everyone has, of finding in the house another room that you didn't know was there, high up under the roof, an extra storey, unused or neglected, but with more windows, sunshine pouring in, a glorious view, and more space than you've ever had before or imagine you deserved. You can't wait to sweep it out and furnish it and begin to inhabit it – to expand into it.'* We did expand into it, Carol and I, and we've been here ever since. Carol often said we'd only leave when carried out feet first. That happened far too soon for her, but will nevertheless be true for both of us.

Necessary Secrets

THE barrel's cold against my temple. I put it in my mouth. It doesn't go in far. I warm it up like some old tart trying to suck life into a limp dick. What if I pulled the trigger now? What if the bullet ignited, or whatever bullets do, and it worked? Where would it go, exactly? What mess would it leave? I don't mind blood being found, and even a bit of brain tissue, but not popped eyes. I don't want to inflict that on Ellie, having some unattached eye on the carpet ogling her as she screams. Perhaps I could organise it so Ellie wasn't the one to find me. I should do that. It's the least I can do, give that some thought. I pocket Walter.

'Is that a pistol in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?'

Uh oh, she's back. It's been a while. I tell her I *am* pleased to see her, of course I'm pleased to see her, but it is indeed a pistol. I pull Walter back out of my pocket. When she asks me what on earth I'm going to do with it, I tell her it's my lead pill.

'You always had a flair for the dramatic,' she says.

'One bullet. I'll die at my convenience.'

'And everyone else's, I imagine, if it's sooner rather than later.'

That's the thing about Carol. She can be conjured, but not controlled. I might will her into existence, but once here, she is as she always was. That's her beauty and my curse. I tell her I won't suffer like she did, I won't put everyone through that.

'I suffered,' she points out, 'you endured. Isn't suicide a form of cowardice?'

I reframe cowardice to courage, ecological responsibility, saving the health system from wasting resources, as I put Walter back in the bottom cupboard of the kauri roll-top, in the concertina box-file under W.

‘Public spirited to the last!’ she chortles. I don’t remember her being quite this dyspeptic when she was alive. She didn’t chortle back then. Not at me. That I can remember. She looks suspiciously at the drawer where Walter is now hiding. ‘Will it work? Shouldn’t you do a test run?’ She seems to be inordinately entertained at the prospect of my violent demise. When I tell her I’ve only got the one bullet, she seems disappointed.

I suppose the Carol I conjured could have been a younger, more compliant Carol – the twenty-three-year-old postgrad journalism student I first met when she was working for one of the local giveaway rags, for instance. She interviewed me about Something Important, gender equality in the television commercial production industry or something. I didn’t really know what she was talking about. I looked around me at our production office, at the production coordinator, the line producer, the production accountant, all at their desks, while over at the big table, the director went through the script with an actress and her on-screen daughter. Behind them, other actresses were being measured and fitted by the wardrobe mistress who, I now recall, I might have been fucking. I was the only man in the room. I said nothing, but young Carol followed my gaze and began to laugh. She didn’t chortle in those days. It was, as they say, husky, sexy, unconstrained. As, I learnt, her opinions were. Are.

That twenty-three-year-old didn’t share our history, of course. This Carol comes to me forty-two years old, about two years before she was diagnosed. She wears the strapless summer print I always loved, white with red and purple impressionistic rose petals, that shows off the brown sheen of her skin. It presses tight over her breasts and belly and bum before releasing at her groin and swirling just above her bare, tanned knees and feet. That overrated bloom of

youth is gone, yes, and there are lovely little wrinkles of flesh just above her kneecaps, at her elbows, and where the bodice of the dress flattens the base of her breasts back towards her armpits. I loved her body and soul and remember everything about her, the things I cannot see: this is when she went unshaven, at her peak of sexual confidence, her areola looked huge, engorged, enlarged by the tugging lips of three children. I can scarcely bring myself to think about what became of those breasts, her body, in so short a time. But in this moment, she is perfect. She has laugh lines at the corners of her thinnish lips, and delicate striations running vertically from her top lip. I *think* I loved her body and soul. My disadvantage is that she, being so much younger, remembers everything with a clarity that sometimes dismays me, where I sometimes seem to be looking at the past through the sepia-tinted spectacles of age.

She is over at the balcony, looking down at the deck and pool below, where our children are gathering in the dusk for my seventieth birthday celebrations. ‘Do you think they’re waiting for you to die?’

‘Not Ellie!’

‘Not Ellie.’

‘Not Stan,’ I say.

‘Who would know what Stan’s thinking? Last and loveliest. Will?’

Oh. Will. ‘Would he wish me dead?’

‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad,’ she says, perhaps in Will’s defence.

‘I remember how that goes,’ I tell her. ‘You think he’s our fault?’

‘I was being diplomatic,’ she says. ‘I think he’s your fault.’

That stuns me. Before I can think of a defence, she says, ‘Cancer got him too.’

‘Who?’

‘Larkin.’

Her presence troubles me. If she’s my invention, how can she know stuff I don’t? How can she have so many divergent views? Are these cues, I ask myself, to some other reality? Metaphysics and spirituality were never my strong suits, but I was, they say, reasonably intuitive. Is that what’s happening? Or is it just another symptom of my decline? That she can remember what I used to know.

She turns from the balcony and beams at me, then nods towards Walter in his drawer. ‘You should do them a favour. We’d be together again, wouldn’t that be sweet?’

From her tone, I’m not at all sure. ‘Is that how it works? Death?’

But how would she know, being a figment of my imagination, apparently. She ignores me, staying out on the balcony, her tousled brown hair obscuring her profile, falling down almost to her breasts.

‘Tell Ellie,’ she says, ‘that I love her garden. My garden. She’s kept it just as it was. My Abraham Darby rose is in flower. I can still smell it.’

‘She’ll think I’m losing my faculties.’

‘Are you?’

Admit nothing! Cover with a joke. ‘I can’t remember.’ My tremolo gives me away.

She studies me seriously. ‘What if you forget you’ve got a pistol?’

‘I won’t risk waiting for a last moment of insight.’

I retrieve a big joint, freshly rolled, from the top drawer of the roll-top kauri that’s full of everything I need.

‘That won’t help,’ she says. ‘I’m surprised you still smoke.’

I thought I’d lit up before in front of her, but clearly not. ‘Ellie disapproves.’

‘Of course she does. She saw her smoking mother die of breast cancer.’

I tell her I don’t care any more. I search for a light, and out of habit, or nervous twitch, ask her if she’s got a match.

‘If I had a match for you I’d start a circus.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘It’s one of yours.’

‘Groucho Marx’s, actually.’

‘Whatever. Like you, it hasn’t aged well.’

‘Have I not?’ I turn and trap myself long-shot in the en-suite mirror. I see a portly shape with a full head of hair haloing my skull like an emeritus professor, I like to think. Carol isn’t finished with me.

‘When you were thirty,’ she says, ‘it was the new twenty. Forty was the new thirty. Time’s finally caught up and passed you, Den. Your seventy is the new eighty.’

‘Eighty?’

‘At least you got a chance at it.’

I’m so completely at a loss that she takes pity on me, I think. She comes very close, so close I swear I can smell her perfume, Chanel, as always. Her hair falls past me, over me. My favourite position was her on top, with her hair enveloping me, her lips on mine, our tongues entwined, the world shut out. I can sense her hair, but not feel it. I try to kiss her lips but they’re not corporeal. And yet. She breathes on my joint, I swear, and the end glows with sudden heat. When I draw on it, the smoke and chemicals hit the back of my throat. I hold it there and stare into her dirt-brown eyes.

‘This joint is real,’ I tell her, still trying to hold it in. ‘You’re not. How does that work?’

I can’t hold it in any longer and exhale. She becomes a circling wreath of smoke and disappears.

MARIJUANA takes the edge off my anxiety about the forthcoming celebration. I used to love being the centre of attention, now I quail at the prospect – even, or particularly, of my family. I think I knew even before Carol died that she was the beating heart of us. When she was gone, we became thrashing limbs looking for connection and direction.

I look out at the inner harbour, a salt river full of traffic and interest, magnified if necessary by my Konuspot 80, waiting patiently on its tripod. Directly across the water at the Chelsea wharf, the plimsoll of the sugar freighter from Queensland lifts, bow first then stern, as the augur relentlessly sucks the raw crystals into the refinery. Earlier, when the sun was still glancing off the water, there were ferries, water taxis, evening after-work yacht races, upright paddlers, kayakers, and the occasional jet-boat giving the tourists a thrill with a 360 wake-whirl. A sense of life going on, at a comfortable remove. I may not be an active part of it any more, but I've liked knowing it's there.

One of the best things about my kingdom by the sea is that I have no neighbours. Well, of course I have people living adjacent, but none I have to engage with. There's a primary school to the south, the back boundary, and on weekdays I can measure my day by the arrival of children and parents clogging the end of my shingle driveway, and by the raucous joy of the children at morning interval. At precisely 10.45 the nuns' hospice further up the hill asserts itself with bells summoning the sisters for matins or whatever, and I break for a cup of espresso from the Rocket, a relic of the old Flame production office kitchen. The school kids wake me from my midday nap with their afternoon break, then just before three,

the armada of parental black SUVs returns to whisk them away.

The other boundaries are obfuscated by mature trees and a dense wall of pseudopanax between. I can see nothing of the neighbours' backyards to the north as I look over them to the sea, and even to the west, where there are three storeys of concrete-block apartments, I see only the lights of the windows at night, glimpsed through the foliage like a montage of small television screens, and hear phantom chords from a Spanish guitar, or lines from a play being rehearsed into meaninglessness, or babies crying. Very occasionally I hear voices raised in anger, male and female, in a language I don't recognise. They stay at a ghostly remove, my neighbours: thankfully there's no prospect of awkward small talk, or of any social intercourse at all.

Marijuana also burns the bleach from old eyes. I can see Will having an evening dip, ploughing up and down the pool, bifurcating the blue. Ellie and I haven't braved the water yet – it's still carrying too much winter – but Will has always been warmed by an inner fire. He has an audience, a woman in a yellow floral dress and matching enormous brimmed sunhat, sitting primly on the end of a lounge. Can that be Claudia? If it is, where are the children, my two grandchildren, Kristin, the five-year-old, and . . . the toddler, the boy. I seem to remember something about them being separated, Will and Claudia. I could be wrong. I do remember asking her when they announced their engagement, 'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' She didn't appreciate it at the time, but she might now. Unless I'm projecting, thinking wishfully. But I don't want that for Kristin and whatshisname, I don't wish that on them.

'You've been at it again,' she says, sniffing the air as she enters behind me. 'You're a terrible old degenerate.'

Ellie's smiling. She fusses over me, buttoning up my button-

downs. 'Why do they make the holes so small?'

'As the bishop said to the actress.'

'In his dreams. Now,' she says, 'a warning. Will is here with a new friend.'

'I saw. Of the female persuasion.'

'He *is* separated.'

'What about the kids?'

'You can ask him. Glasses?'

I look around hopelessly. The truth is I need my glasses to find my glasses. Ellie produces them. I put them on, peer about. 'My watch. I have a special app on my iPhone which will locate—'

'Dad, you're wearing it.'

I look at my treacherous wrist. Can I really have done that?

'Easily done,' she says. Did I unknowingly articulate that last thought? 'And Jackson's disappeared, no idea where. I don't want to get him into trouble, but I'll have to ring his case officer.'

I try to reassure her, ask her to give Jackson the benefit of the doubt. I wax eloquent in Jackson's defence, that he's a good kid, the best foster we've had, that there's something about him, a sense of humility and respect for his elders that I can't recall having at his age.

She asks me if I'm okay. I wonder why she thinks I'm not. Does she think I'm not? I can't ask.

Ellie's the fag-end of Generation X, a demographic I used to know a lot about. I studied it in a predatory way, like a lion sizing up a herd of antelope. Too late to be a slacker, Ellie nevertheless adopted most of the accoutrements: the sexless flannel shirts and camo trou, the anti-establishment attitude, the endless sameness of the garage band riffs and relentless jangling faux naif of Flying Nun, but never the cynicism or the cigarettes. She was a non-conformist anti-capitalist, and I was always proud of her, even when she was

deeply embarrassed by having a father who made TV commercials to sell crap. She had a healthy disrespect for authority, but was never nihilistic. She wanted to live a long, healthy life. And, always, always, do good. She dresses differently these days – today, as most days, like a card-carrying Greenie, which she is – in khaki culottes and flat sandals, but is otherwise much the same as the teenager I remember from the nineties. Or think I remember.

‘Remember our secret sign, okay?’

It’s so secret I have no idea what she’s talking about. Ellie is holding one finger up.

‘Means we’ve heard this story before, change tack gracefully.’

I nod. ‘Change tack gracefully.’

Ellie holds two fingers up. ‘Means we’ve heard this story or joke more than once before. Bail immediately.’

I swallow my bile, try to nod. What new stories or jokes would I have at my age? Clearly what I need is a new audience. Ellie isn’t finished.

‘I’ll stay in your eye-line, so just give me a quick glance when you start on one of your monologues.’

‘Mum says to tell you,’ I say, desperate to change the subject, ‘that she loves the way you’ve kept her garden, she can smell the scent of the Abraham Darby.’

‘You’ve been talking to her again?’

I may have leapt from the frying pan into the fire, but I plunge on in my asbestos suit. ‘I can’t just ignore her.’

‘Does she talk back?’

‘Of course she bloody talks back – your mother always had a lot to say.’

Ellie looks at me curiously. It’s not a look I recognise. Is it new, or have I forgotten it?

‘Dad,’ she says, ‘I can tell it’s real for you, and if it gives you some comfort, fine. But it’s not something you should share, okay?’

Because if I do, they’ll all think I’m losing it. I get it. ‘Message understood. I’ll have a pee and be right down.’

Ellie goes. I wander towards the en-suite and catch myself in long-shot again. I still look okay, I think. From a distance. It’s the close-ups that don’t work any more.

The default expression on my face has always been a smile. I might have been worried, anxious, preoccupied or feeling neutral or nothing at all, but I looked happy. It’s always been my biggest asset. Until recently, when my smile seems to be getting lost in other crinkles. I’ve noticed that my beatific visage may be sending out different signals in old age: the bafflement of dotage, the harmless bewilderment of the elderly duffer. Like most writers – which is what I essentially consider myself to be, despite spending most of my career directing and co-producing – I’m a natural catastrophist, but an upbeat one. My glass was never half empty, always full to brimming, but threatening at any moment to explode in my face. I grew up down south, in a spare, wondrous landscape stretched across an alpine fault. At primary school, we were taught about earthquakes and practised diving under our desks as, in our imaginations, the earth rocked. We knew, as New Zealanders, that nothing was permanent: that we lived on the flotsam and jetsam of molten magma.

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Greg McGee

In all good bookstores now.

A funny and dark examination of modern family life in New Zealand, *Necessary Secrets* both delights and shocks as it shows just how rocky life can be.

From Herne Bay to Golden Bay, the four members of the Sparks family each get their own season to love, hate, hurt, laugh and be afraid of the future.

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