AFTERWORD

MANY OF THE STORIES in this collection have been concerned with dark and terrible events, with the effects that my knowledge and understanding of some of these things have on the way I see the world, the way I feel and think and imagine. The teller takes the tale and fashions it in the hope of making sense first of all for the teller, and then for whoever it is who listens. I said in the Introduction that the stories I write have a context in my own life, that I write what I write because I must. I didn't plan to write an Afterword; I thought that the last line of 'Major Butler's Kidneys' was a final and dreadful wound that would take a reader's imagination back into the other stories. But since I wrote that line, I have had reason to reflect on the fact that the last word is never really written, that the last story is never told. There is always *another* story.

I have written, fleetingly, of the murder of little children in Dunblane; I have written of the bombing in Oklahoma; I have quoted from a newspaper the words: 'If it can happen in Oklahoma, it can happen anywhere'. After thirty-five people were murdered at Port Arthur, on 28 April 1996, I kept telling myself that *AutomaticTeller* was finished, that I could write about Port Arthur later, in another book. But I became steadily more uncomfortable about the last line of 'Major Butler's Kidneys' being the last line of the book; I realised I had to speak about Port Arthur, however briefly.

I spent the first twenty-three years of my life in Tasmania. I always understood that Tasmania, however beautiful it might be, was the end of the earth, the edge of the civilised world. Australia was a bit ridiculous as far as the rest of the world was concerned; Tasmania was Australia's own small joke island. I had a sense that Tasmania didn't exist (this idea being strengthened by the fact that the island was routinely left off maps because it was much easier to draw a map without it.) So I grew up feeling that I was actually walking around in nowhere. This was kind of fun, and gave me terrific freedom to

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invent. I began collecting references to Tasmania in things I read when I was very young, finding the name was used by such people as Virginia Woolf and Nabokov to mean weird and funny and far away. I still collect these things, the latest being a full page advertisement in the *NewYorker* for an Italian fashion house which uses only Tasmanian wool. Maybe I'm over-sensitive about this, but I can detect the condescension in the ad.

I can never not be Tasmanian, but when I began to write and publish fiction, I discovered that there was a great unwisdom in revealing my Tasmanian origins. In the eighties in Australia it was still funny to say you were Tasmanian. I remember being at an Australia Council meeting where people laughed every time the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra was mentioned. I asked why this was so, and I was told that this was because the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra is a joke.

White history in Tasmania can be said to have begun in earnest when British criminals were sent there to settle the island as a penal colony. The early years of this period were ugly and violent and included the deliberate and largely sucessful attempt to kill off the native Tasmanian people. By the time I was growing up, these parts of the story had been suppressed. I was very interested in the convicts and the Aborigines, but I was advised by my teachers and my family to let sleeping dogs lie. As we know, sleeping dogs don't. I experienced Tasmania as a strange and haunted place.

If it can happen in Oklahoma, it can happen anywhere. Of course. And it did, and it will. In the heart of London, Tokyo, Tasmania. Although it is the end of the earth; although it is beautiful; although it is quiet and strange and funny, Tasmania is as vulnerable and as dark as anywhere else. That the murderer shot thirty-five people in a tourist park set in the ruins of a vile old prison in a place that resembles a little piece of paradise on a sunny Sunday in autumn is an evil, but not such a very surprising fact. Before this happened I used to look at the name 'Tasmania' with affection and a certain wry sadness; but now I can scarcely bear to see or hear the word. What I wrote about Oklahoma—that you can't say the name any more without the violent resonance—is true of Tasmania, freshly true. There is no getting around this. We must try to recover, but we can never forget. We weep at the thought of Port Arthur and the beauty that was stolen and destroyed.

I write this four weeks after the murders, and I find in the weekend newspaper two temporal ironies. The articles were written many weeks ago; one is a book review, and the other is about gardening. The book reviewer quotes a description of Port Arthur from *The Tasmanian Journal of William Smith O'Brien 1849-1853 :* 'to find a gaol in one of the loveliest spots formed by

the hand of Nature in one of her loneliest solitudes creates a revulsion of feeling which I cannot describe'. And the gardening writer rhapsodies about the glories of the roses which ramble over the ruins of Port Arthur. She saw a bridge that was 'almost submerged by the old rambler *Felicite et Perpetue*'.

As the teller of these tales I set out to move you, to stir your heart and your imagination. If I have sometimes done this, I am pleased, and I'm grateful for your attention, because there are three of us in this—the tale, the teller and the told. At least three—there are also the ones eating chocolate bars inside my head, and somebody planting roses that will bloom for centuries in sad and happy places.

Melbourne, 26 May 1996