

TAMARISK ROW

### CLEMENT KILLEATON LOOKS AT A CALENDAR

On one of the last days of December 1947 a nine-year-old boy named Clement Killeaton and his father, Augustine, look up for the first time at a calendar published by St Columban's Missionary Society. The first page of the calendar is headed *January 1948* and has a picture of Jesus and his parents resting on their journey from Palestine to Egypt. Below the picture, the page is divided by thick black lines into thirty-one yellow squares. Each of the squares is a day all over the plains of northern Victoria and over the city of Bassett where Clement and his parents set out and return home across the orange quartz gravel of footpaths and the black strips of bitumen in the centres of streets, only seldom remembering that high over a landscape of bright patterns of days the boy-hero of their religion looks out across journeys of people the size of fly-specks across paper the colour of sunlight in years he can never forget.

### BASSETT HEARS MUSIC FROM AMERICA

While the calendar for 1947 hangs out of sight beneath the new one, Clement Killeaton lifts a sheaf of pages and sees in the yellow squares the familiar shape of late-afternoon sunlight that he crosses to reach Mr Wallace's corner store. All around

Gerald Murnane

the blistered weatherboards of the Wallaces' shop and attached house are brightly painted signs whose consistent colours and unwavering lines are the work of a people who live far away beyond the blur of dust or haze at the farthest end of Killeaton's street, in the labyrinthine mansions with peacock-studded lawns that slope down towards dark-blue ponds. There in a room with enormous windows a man with a polka-dotted bow tie broadcasts radio programs to listeners all over the plains of northern Victoria, telling them about America where people are still celebrating the end of the war. He plays for his listeners a record that has just arrived in Australia. The last words of the song are – *in the hills of Idaho in the hills of Idaho*. While the record is still playing, the man walks to a window through which someone, perhaps an American soldier, once looked out, across a great distance, towards a few faint ridges of the real Idaho. Tears fill the man's eyes. When the music stops, thousands of people in Bassett and the country for miles around hear him blowing his nose and clearing his throat.

#### THE WALLACES' MARVELLOUS AVIARY

Clement opens the door of the grocer's shop and almost catches Mr Wallace doing something shameful behind a stack of biscuit-tins. The boy buys groceries for his mother and then asks politely may he look at Mr Wallace's aviary. The man shows him out through the back door. Past the crates of empty soft-drink bottles and the brittle tops of dead spear-grass are the towering walls of fine wire-netting. Behind the wire the dense shrubs and trees are planted in the shape of landscapes from every part of Australia. Hidden among the grasslands and scrub and forests and swamps and deserts are the nests of nearly every species of Australian bird. Somewhere past the dangling

black and yellow of regent honeyeaters and the elusive crimson and turquoise of paradise parrots Margaret Wallace, a girl no older than Clement, is building a bower like the satin bowerbird's – a velvety resting-place enclosing more secrets than any dome-shaped nest of wrens or burrow of pardalotes but open to the sky so that whatever is done within its walls will be remembered as happening by sunlight. But Clement is not able to search for the place. Behind him in the yard Margaret Wallace calls out to him to visit her in her playhouse made of boxes and cardboard. She sits under the sign *Old Dutch Cleaner Chases Dirt*, cramming into her mouth the lollies she has stolen from her father's shop. Clement peers through the door into the dim playhouse. He still hopes that one day the two of them will pull down each other's pants and stare at each other in a secluded place like an aviary. Margaret is more friendly than on other days. She offers him humbugs, musks, and Tarzan jubes. Her hands are brightly stained and sticky with sugar. Clement asks her has she noticed any birds mating and breeding in the aviary lately, but Margaret wants to talk about how soon her parents will have saved enough money to buy a house in a better part of Bassett and get away from their shop.

#### CLEMENT BUILDS A RACECOURSE

One Saturday morning in 1946 when the unsteady posts and rusted wire-netting of the lean-to back veranda at 42 Leslie Street are buried deep beneath a blue hill of wistaria blossoms, Clement Killeaton walks out through the back door and begins to collect small twigs and chips from all round the yard. When he has gathered a small bundle he takes them to the space between the lavatory and the lilac tree. Kneeling, he uses the sides of his hands to level and smooth the fine dirt and gravel.

With a piece of brick he hammers the first of the tiny lengths of wood upright into the hard earth. By lunchtime he has marked out an elliptical shape with two straight sides. After lunch he surrounds this with a second circuit of little posts parallel to the first. Late in the afternoon he searches for a longer, regular piece of wood. He chooses one of several likely pieces and drives it firmly into the ground at one end of the straight sides, between two posts of the inner series. As the shadows of the dense suckers of lilac reach the far side of his cleared space, Clement forms loose dirt into a long low mound beside the straight that is marked by the one taller post. Just before his mother calls him inside for the night he scratches with his fingernails in the hard-packed earth at the edge of his cleared place, shaping the first few yards of a road that will lead from the racecourse under the lilac tree, by way of leisurely loops and confusing junctions, past many unkempt shrubs and through tangles of weeds to the farthest corner where the tamarisks lean. He gouges out something that he thinks at first is a lump of gravel. It proves to be a whole round marble that must have been lying in the ground since before the Killeatons came to live in Leslie Street. While Clement is washing the marble at the gully trap, his mother calls him in for tea. He asks who might have owned the marble. She supposes that some boy who lived there before Clement must have lost it or just left it outside and forgotten it until the rain or the dust came and covered it up for all those years. Clement takes the marble to the kitchen window and holds it up against the setting sun. Far away in the heart of a silvery-white skein that seems to have no beginning and no end is an orange or scarlet glow. Next morning Clement shows the marble to one of the Glasscock boys from next door. The boy says – yes I remember that alley all right – it belongs to Frankie Silverstone the big kid that used to live here before you shifted here – he used to have hundreds

of precious alleys and that one was his favourite – if you give it to me I'll ask my mum where the Silverstones shifted to and post it to Frankie. Clement refuses to hand over the marble, but because he is frightened that Silverstone may hear about it he lets the Glasscock boy choose ten alleys to keep in return for saying no more about the one that turned up in the yard. Clement spends a long time near the lilac tree, wondering which parts of his yard he ought to build his roads across in the hope of turning up more marbles on the way from the racecourse to the tamarisks.

**THE PEOPLE BENEATH THE  
TAMARISKS LIVE FOR RACING**

One hot day after his racecourse has been built, Clement walks across his backyard towards the corner where the tall horny trunks of the tamarisks curve upwards from lumpy boles. On the lee side of the very last tamarisk, Clement conceals one of the farmhouses he has prepared for the owners of racehorses. The people who first settled years ago on that farm chose the row of tamarisks because someone had told them how of all trees that are famous for their hardiness the tamarisk can endure the fiercest heat and the driest desert soils, and how people who are setting out to cross desert country always know that when they have passed the last tamarisks they are entering the most desolate land of all. The lonely place beneath the tamarisks is the farthest of all farms from the racecourse. The husband and wife who live there look up every day at the brittle green spikes that give no shade or the pink wisps of blossom that they sometimes mistake for dust drifting in from the reddish land farther out. They remember how their grandparents, who must have travelled over great distances, stopped at last

at a place from which their children and grandchildren could still look further out but only towards a place that they dared not settle in. If the children and grandchildren wanted to go to live in places even lonelier than the land of the tamarisks, they would have to retrace the journeys of their ancestors, hoping to discover pockets of desert or bush that the first travellers did not notice or perhaps a district that they crossed and marked with roads but which has since been neglected or forgotten and lapsed back into a wilderness. On the walls of their lounge-room are coloured photographs of the finishes of races. In one photograph a powerful black stallion thrusts his massive head with gaping nostrils and unseeing eyes out from between a bunch of brown and chestnut geldings. High above a confused mass of coloured silken jackets and caps the right arm of the rider of the black horse is raised in what might be a gesture of triumph. The green silk of the sleeve has fallen away from the man's frail wrist. Gripped between his knuckles is a thin whip of dark leather that has curled itself backwards into a perfect arc. The writing under the picture explains that *Journey's End*, a black horse six years old, was beaten by half a head in the Gold Cup of that year. Late on a summer afternoon the parish priest knocks at the door. Although the day is hot and the house is almost wholly hidden by trees and hedges, the husband and wife are both decently dressed. To show that they have nothing to hide the man lets the priest in at once. The three people soon begin to talk about racing. The married couple tell the priest about the horse named after their property Tamarisk Row. He is the son of the old unlucky stallion *Journey's End* and they are training him carefully in secret for this year's Gold Cup. The priest reminds them that racing is neither good nor bad, that it neither pleases nor angers God to look down and see His children spending all their time and money in planning to win a big race, that racing is only sinful

when people are not content with the joy of seeing their horse get up in a close finish but use their winnings for other pleasures like eating and drinking huge meals in expensive hotels and night clubs or undressing their girlfriends or boyfriends in luxurious houses bought from the proceeds of successful plunges. The husband and wife assure the priest that they take their pleasure only from the racing itself. The husband even suggests that a married couple might get more joy from sharing in the ownership of a promising galloper than from any other pleasure of marriage, but the priest thinks that this would be giving to racing more importance than it really has in God's plan for the world.

#### **AUGUSTINE REMEMBERS HIS FOREFATHERS**

Every afternoon hundreds of years ago a gentle breeze blows misty rain across the many chimneys of the great house whose shape is beginning to fade at last from the silver watch-case in the leather stud-box in Augustine Killeaton's wardrobe. Augustine's grandfather arrives in Melbourne from Ireland and travels northwards until he reaches a town where the afternoon sun is an awesome orange colour behind the dust from the goldfields. Drunken Scotsmen and scheming Englishmen trick him out of his money just before he dies in a town the miners are leaving for other places where the veins of gold run more truly. Augustine's father straightens his back and looks across grey-green paddocks in south-western Victoria and watches Irish rain drifting in from the ocean. He quarries pale sandstone from a coastal hill and builds within sight of the cliffs that are the southern boundary of his farm a large house whose front gable is copied from one wing of the house in Ireland that his father was supposed to have lived in. Augustine Killeaton at



the age of twenty-five still lives in the Western District where he was born. He works on his father's farm on the coast near Kurringbar. He has never tasted strong drink or wanted a girl or been on a racecourse. Each summer when the first north winds arrive he plans a journey in the only direction that has ever attracted him – north across the miles of grazing lands, then past the sheep and wheat districts, and last through the dusty Mallee to the great inland zone that is coloured orange-red on maps. One morning Augustine sets out to see the annual Cup meeting at the Kurringbar racecourse. All the way from his father's farm to the races he sits tensely in the windy back seat of a neighbour's motorcar, fingering the leafless trees around the silvery house that his ancestors might have gambled away.

#### **AUGUSTINE MEETS A PROFESSIONAL PUNTER**

After the Kurringbar Cup has been run, many of the dairy-farmers from outlying districts quietly leave the course to be home in time for the evening milking. Augustine Killeaton stays on at the races. His brothers, who have never been to a race-meeting, have agreed to let him off the milking in return for a shilling each from Augustine's share of the wages that their father pays them all each month. Augustine's racing bank for the day is five pounds, all saved from his wages for months past. He makes no effort himself to pick winners, but follows unobtrusively a small group of men from Melbourne. The Kurringbar Cup meeting has attracted many Melbourne stables and their followers, but Augustine has singled out one little band of punters as the smartest of all. He tries to master their trick of whispering a bet to a bookmaker and then melting into the crowd to avoid being noticed, and he admires their way of watching each race impassively while the crowds around

them yell and gesticulate. After the last race Augustine has won nearly fifteen pounds, while the Melbourne punters have won hundreds between them. Augustine walks boldly up to the leader of the band and introduces himself. The punter shakes hands coolly and says his name is Len Goodchild. Augustine says – I was wondering Mr Goodchild Len if I could be of any use to you and your friends as an agent at Western District meetings. Goodchild thanks him and says – see me some Saturday at the races in Melbourne. As he walks away, Augustine hears two of Goodchild’s men talking. The men call Goodchild the Master. That night when his brothers ask him about the races, Augustine says – I won a few pounds myself but the Master told me he won a couple of hundred.

**AUGUSTINE REACHES BASSETT BY  
WAY OF INLAND AUSTRALIA**

Augustine visits Melbourne and stands at a discreet distance from Goodchild in the betting ring at Mentone. Goodchild beckons him over and pencils a few faint crosses in Augustine’s racebook. One of the marked horses wins. On the following Saturday Goodchild questions Augustine until he satisfies himself that Augustine is not connected with any other racing men in Melbourne or the Western District. A few days later at a country meeting Goodchild asks Augustine to stay out of the betting ring all day because a man that even Goodchild sometimes takes orders from is going to surprise the book-makers with a cash plunge and the sight of Goodchild’s men in the ring might give the game away. Augustine realises he is being tested. He stays all day in the bar sipping lemonade. After the races Goodchild offers him a seat in his car. The other men in the car talk of the hundreds they won