**TED**

I had been given leave to interview Ted. Leave as in expenses. No fees exactly but the hint of a monograph was in the offing. Also the rather obvious hint that AEG Corp would be very interested if I could find any of the etching plates from the 50s and somehow wriggle the deal.

The location of the estate where Ted was caretaker proved to be elusive. Despite the directions, I bought the three Ordinance survey maps needed to make the trip possible. I found the succession of minor roads getting smaller and smaller. At a particular turnoff, I approached the turning and slowed. The road was a succession of blind turns and with the threat of tractors and mud I slowed down to a crawl. The house was announced with a stark sign. I was to park and then find the studio behind. There was evidence of a Thirties bolthole in the country. Neat wild cultivation, a tidy English garden, none of the rotting agricultural junk of a working farm.

I clambered down the bank and walked over to the studio. It was a stark foursquare construction with immaculate thatch. Rounding the eastern side, they were two double doors up three steps. They were closed, but there was a note. I felt an intruder, although asked. As a city person in the country, I had the impression that I was being watched, that a figure with a broken shotgun would appear, clamp up the barrel and enquire upon my presence.

I read the note and reached for the school bell as directed, and rang tentatively. The sound seemed to fall away to the coast, to spread out to the trees. I stood there feeling foolish and out of place. The silence returned then there was a shuffle of sounds from the other end of the studio and I turned. I saw a set of antlers emerge from the wall.

Holding them, Ted emerged. His appearance was of faded layers; a coat added as the one underneath had failed. Boots sodden, the half cowboy half protection style worn by labourers. Steel tips in case you need to kick the reindeer. Ted approached slowly.

"Found them on the South run" he said as if that was to be expected. They swung open. "Boots" said Ted and with a curious half turn pulled off one of the boots and then with released foot clamped the toe of the other , released the second foot. I released my timberlands with more delicacy and they joined the pile by the door as if in a rural Buddhist temple.

Although we had exchanged letters, there was no speech so far. Instruction was by postcard, no telephone allowed. I wanted just decided to follow the ancient by instinct. Ted went to the gas ring above the orange propane gas. "Tea". I grunted acceptance, it was catching.

After two minutes I approached the topic: I wanted to know more about the change from representation to abstraction in the 50s but Ted was absent; staring into the diminishing glow to the east. There was a gloom to the interior, a dusty, not to be moved feeling to the place.

There were high shelves near the base of the thatch, coated with dust, obscure boxes and vases and specimen cases, baggage not moved in probably a generation or three. Ted had offered no history; I took it that he was a caretaker, probably a long association with the family that owned the estate. There was evidence of children and summer usage, various mattresses piled in one corner. Some summer equipment, half stalled, half ready.

Ted settled in a scuffed chair. Although it was, from usage, his dedicated spot, he seemed nervous or at least unready. I had some questions but even to get here was an intrusion for him. As for me I wanted to know so much, but to extract information I had to adjust to his pace. I decided to start to talk, uncertain how much prompting to introduce. I noticed his eyes flitting to the packages and artefacts and realised that he was suddenly defending the past, reluctant to go back. As if the boxes were failures; sorted, forgotten, but still there in a ghostlike way.

He eventually pulled out some of his grog, a beer heavy and sweet, the constituent ingredients on a shelf over the sink. I was to get used to this but with some reluctance. I abandoned formal note taking and switched on the Sony tape and settled down to listen.

His story was fitful and not an easy chronology. There was some success after the war, the early etchings of studio life models, the work that would go into group shows. The early approach to market, the carrots for the dealers. We both relaxed. They were extensive supplies of logs. One would have to rotate in the seats to heat another section of the body; there was always a draught at the back. He seemed to settle lower in the seat and became more able to tell his history.

I listened to narrative that got lost as the memories crossed several years, rivalries and rejections, something every artist should be trained for. He had tried various media: painting, etching, some attempts at that lithographic stone. He seemed to have some failure at each attempt resulting in sudden changes work pattern, a new depression and then a new advance. Perhaps some new fashion or an attempt to embrace a new trend.

I abandoned any art historical approach: that would have to be a sober analysis with much more in front of me and a proper chronology. I looked up at the boxes, now difficult to discern with only the logs and a filthy oil lamp to light the studio.

It was getting late. I was aware of the grog getting to me. There were long silences between reminiscences. Now I was becoming uncomfortable. I did not expect this to be easy and had planned for more than one visit. During one of the silences I said to Ted that I would like to return the next day. He seemed to be relieved at this. I had a last look at the studio. There was a half completed sketch of an owl on the drawing board: Not done in a sure hand. The dust and the dampness had saddened me. Drawings and prints would not last in this atmosphere. I doubt if Ted would last; there was work to do and I was not in a fit condition.

I arranged a time and made for the door slowly. The grog was worse than I thought. Outside the night was relieved by the stars. As I made my way to the car I slipped and fell against the summer barbecue. It was just an assembly of bricks without mortar. I fell over, dropping the Walkman and the notes.

I finally made it to the car, but I knew that I had had too much grog. Ted was still elusive. There was a new light. The black and white TV was illuminating a window and threw a flickering light onto the frosting grass. I put the car in gear but I was too far gone to drive back to the hotel. And too embarrassed to fall sleep here. I took the car slowly up the drive, clipping one of the stone pillars. To the right was an entrance to the field and I pulled over. I crawled to the back seat and fell asleep.

Ted let them talk and looked out of the window. The screen flickered; they were just talking heads discussing another Ted someone called Hughes, he was famous apparently. In the village they had asked him what it was like a winning prizes. He smiled and walked on when that happened. The window overlooking the fen was sealed shut by some newspaper inserted to stop the draft. There was a blue cast to the light. Soon it will be time to go out to see the owls. He was looking after the cottage for the owner. Not a lot to do. He would be told by letter when people will be coming down although "up" would be more appropriate. He would prepare the house, clean, start-up the fire as asked and move his sleeping bag to the "hide".

The hide an observation platform in planning speak, but Ted thought it more a tree house or maybe a studio. A pig would call it home. Ted would camp there for the weekend, log up the burner and paint what he thought the owl would look like. He had seen some in captivity but he was seeking a real one. At dusk he would go out and walk the outer part of the estate and listen. As the light went down he would observe the droppings, the marks, the secret evidence of the woods.

As night fell he would crouch and wait for the stars to gain focus. He knew the patterns, but not as an observer, not in the towny way. He saw patterns, shapes East and West, he knew the trees, the water, the path, sometimes even the repeated glow of the lighthouse if reflected on the crowds.

He woke up; there was still an image on the television, but blurry as the storm affected signal. He realised that he had fallen asleep. It was late now, too late to do the 90 acres. Maybe just a short walk, about a mile. The logs had died down, but he had a summer's cut in the outhouse; a vast stock of wood surrounded by cut wood in planks and crowned by a thatch his grandfather had laid by hand.

He switched the creamy image off. No sound. Was the night young or the day old? He preferred to live in the night. There was little to do in the day apart from the preparation of the house for the weekends. His time was the night; the walk, observation and then write a few words about the country. The sky, the tracks. He hesitated to call the words anything, not poems: just pretty notes, partly a diary.

Sometimes he copied out the words and sent them off to a friend in Australia; a real writer; someone he had known from the old town; they had kept in touch over the time of ageing and reflection.

He opened the double door to the fen. He banked up the logs and replaced the screen. Outside was the frost; his footprints could be traced in the morning.

There was a pattern for night vision: remove yourself from the light; stop and lets the retina adapt. He walked to the first post on the trail. He lent on the gate and waited for his eyes to adapt. Sometimes just close them and wait. Sometimes the blue light would come naturally. He closed his eyes and covered his ears: let the sensation come slowly.

The hearing would crystallise; maybe the cold would clear the tubes or just allow the blood to do its work. He could see the owl now, he could not see of course, the sound was the direction; the stars the map. He knew the path; he had planted the posts. He had handled the brass plaques with the Braille patterns. Curious, he had traced out the words from the booklet the aid worker had given him wondering what they said.

The sound was nearer now. The owl was searching for its prey. He froze to his own silence in order to listen. Lack of movement reminded him of the cold, he would turn back now. There was the faintest of change in the light. He realised it was much later than he thought. Better to turn back. He saw himself as an animal; disturbing the perfect lair. For the first time in this mighty prowl he felt some fear. Not that he was lost; more that he was disturbing a natural presence.

He remembered the logs, the pint of so of the grog that he would make each month; to satisfy the brainstorms and the cold and the ache of his life.

There was some disturbance; a rushing noise – deer? He knew they were in the area. He always saw traces. He felt somehow threatened. There was a distant crashing through the woods: on the floor; a concomitant explosion in the air. Upset at his intrusion; there was a reaction to his presence.

He must get back to the hide, recover the night and watch the dawn. He would make some notes inscribe the events; notes on the night. He retraced his steps. The glow; he could see the shape of the thatch, almost a path through the frost. Alone then he heard a commotion, a beating wings. He stopped from fear and the need to observe.

He realised in some way that he was being tracked rather than being a tracker, that to get back was of some urgency, a need to be safe. Ahead was the studio; he could now see the shape in the emerging dawn. The deer had started an exodus of flight. The open area by the doors, his footprints in the frost, the cold light, a glow from the remaining logs.

The frantic beat, a shadow across a glass, silence. He gained the door, the locks safe and sure the studio a complete chaos. The owl had flown through the window confused by the flickering light and proceeded to die amongst the watercolours in the studio.

Ted watched its death throes. The perfect object that he had wanted to paint now dead on the floor. He retreated to the log fire, closed the doors. There were some words to put on paper: but which? Could he raise them? Could he write? He thought not. More logs; the flames danced, there was a picture there too.

The logs: bird in flame

The bird died in glass

Ted watched, almost lame

Unable to create.