Victoria Challis

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Chester Eagle

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Trapped in her house, she watched him riding up the street. He knows everyone's name, she thought, and no one knows his.

Criss-crossing the road, he put letters in boxes. When he felt like it he blew his whistle. Something in the sound, and the fact that he still bothered to do it, made her feel a comment was intended. She took her mother's note from the table:

Darling I've booked the children in at Grammar and Saint Anne's. They knew Tony of course and Saint Anne's assured me they remembered you, but it's so important to have their names on the lists. Bring them over for dinner on Saturday if you're not doing anything else.

The children were in the room next to her, and from their voices it was clear that a quarrel was imminent. They'd burst in, each demanding that she take sides against the other. She slipped out of the house as quietly as she could. Opening the front gate, she wondered where she could go.

The postman was startled when she appeared beside him. 'Haven't collected your paper yet,' he said. Obediently she did so. 'Bit of a drama at Moyston. All over the front page.' She unrolled the paper.

DEADLY PASSION ENDS IN TEARS

POLICE WIFE SAYS SHE DIDN'T PLOT TO KILL HIM

There was a photo of a woman wearing dark glasses, with a stiff, pallid face, and another of the man who shot her husband, clinging to the hand of his wife.

I COULDN'T MURDER FOR LOVE, SAYS CONSTABLE

'I was up there for a couple of years,' said the postman. 'I know all the places in that story. Don't know the cops though, they were after my time.'

Abruptly she asked, 'What's your name?'

'That's a bit sudden,' he said, trying to stare her down. 'What's in a name, anyway?'

'Just about everything,' she whispered.

He handed her some letters. 'If you were right about that, I'd know all about you.' He shook his head. Shaded by plane trees, they stared at each other. She felt that there was something unfulfilled, some need that had never found its object, in this man with navy trousers and a large plastic bag on his handlebars. There was also an insatiable curiosity, and she knew he'd guessed that she was on the verge of running away.

He stared at the big house, as if to remind her of what she had to lose. 'I'd better get on with my round,' he said. 'People are waiting for these.' He patted his bag. Was he trying to escape because something he wanted hidden had been seen? 'That's not very honest of you,' she said, retreating.

It was sunny on the porch. She sat on the cane lounge and read about the love triangle:

> Mrs McQuade told the jury yesterday that her marriage had been under a great deal of stress in recent years, and that she had begun a sexual relationship with Senior Constable Dennis Dixon when he was on relieving duties at Moyston in late 1984, She said that at one stage during her affair with Senior Constable Dixon she had separated from her husband and taken their two children to live in Melbourne. However, just before her husband's death, she had made a firm resolution to make her

13-year marriage work, and had told Senior Constable Dixon that she returned to her husband of her own free will.

Free will: the bloody children! What did she do but cater for their needs, to the point where she scarcely existed?

She said that initially her marriage had been very happy but after her husband was beaten up by a group of people while on duty several years ago, he had undergone a personality change and had become subject to depression and violent fits of temper. She said that he took his police duties very seriously and suffered a great deal of stress from his work.

They were calling her as they came downstairs. Even their futures were on the way to being determined, courtesy of her mother. A couple of years and she'd be getting 'Dear parent' letters; she gripped the paper firmly:

Mrs McQuade said that at about 7 p.m. on the night of her husband's death, she had answered a telephone call from Senior Constable Dixon, who, using a disguised voice, had told her to tell Senior Constable McQuade that lights had been seen in a deserted farmhouse in Stony Creek Road. Then, using his own voice, Senior Constable Dixon had said, 'I'm going to get him.' She answered, 'Don't be stupid, Dennis,' but he hung up, she said.

She loved her children and hated being a mother. It made her wince to hear the back door bang, and bang again as one of them thought to close it properly.

Mrs McQuade said her husband asked her what the message was, and she told him someone had reported seeing lights in the house, but said it was not important. 'Then I put my arms around him and tried to persuade him not to go.' She said that when her husband insisted on going she believed that at most there would be a fight between him and Senior Constable Dixon.

Two cats scrambled over the trellis that separated the back yard from the front, and settled, quivering, in hideaways near the gate. The dog woofed furiously while the children called 'Patchy! Patchy! Don't be cruel! Don't be mean!' Their voices were full of excitement from the scramble they'd caused in the back yard.

Half an hour later she was called to the house by Senior Constable Dixon on the police car radio, and went out to find him injured.

'I asked him "Where's Lindsay?" and he said "He's out the back."

It never occurred to me that Lindsay might have been hurt. I just thought Lindsay would be in trouble for shooting another policeman,' she said.

What were they going to be like, her two? Lindsay— she winced at having given him the name of the dead policeman—had to be protected from the lethal side of the male psyche. And Ellen … would she be clever enough not to be trapped?

The phone rang. Her mother. The children, hearing it, knew where she was, and rushed to seize her legs. Lindsay wanted her to pick him up; she had to ask her mother to repeat what she'd said. The purpose of the call was to change the arrangement. Her mother was going to a Gallery Society function on Saturday afternoon and it would tire her. Could they come over on Sunday?

She explained why this wasn't possible, with the children crying out that they wanted to go to grandma's straight away. 'This very instant!' Ellen said. She explained why this too was impossible. The sop to their disappointment was that they would all have lunch on the porch, where it was sunny. So sandwiches were cut, biscuits coated with butter and Vegemite, and drinks were put on a tray. Patch had to be allowed to join them, which meant that the cats made their way along the fence to the back yard. Lindsay licked the butter and Vegemite off his biscuits before crunching

them with powerful teeth. Ellen said he had bad manners. This was discussed. When their attention was on the dog again, she resumed her reading:

> Mrs McQuade said she had helped Senior Constable Dixon into his own car and had told him to go home to his wife, then had returned to her own home, expecting her husband to return soon after. When he had not returned after several hours, she rang the Ararat police station.

When lunch was finished, she said it was time for their midday sleep. For once there was no disagreement. When they'd settled, she took a pot of tea to the porch and studied the paper again, wondering why the story held such fascination for her.

When Fred got back to the post office, an argument was raging over a copy of the Sun. Jack Sparkes, the postmaster, was saying that the policeman's evidence was much more credible than the woman's. Eileen Dunn, who was in charge of the mail room, said, with her smoker's voice, that this was bullshit, that the stuff in the cop's evidence about Mrs McQuade wanting him to kill her husband was all a figment of his imagination, and that Jack, like the cop, wasn't taking any notice of what the woman was actually saying. And Jack—overweight and loud—said he'd read every word of the evidence and it was obvious the dead man's wife was conveniently forgetting things she didn't want to remember. Fred decided to break it up. 'There's something here that you two haven't noticed,' he said. They looked at him. He pointed to a paragraph:

> A country policeman at the centre of a love triangle was found guilty yesterday of having murdered a fellow officer.

'How can you be at the centre of a triangle if you're one of the sides?' he asked. 'If he was at the centre of a triangle, that means there were four people involved, so it wasn't a triangle.' He smiled triumphantly. They looked at him wearily. 'Ah Jeezus,' said Jack Sparkes. Eileen Dunn fixed him with the look she reserved for idiots. 'That reminds me. You left a parcel of letters behind. On your bike and deliver 'em before people start ringing up and complaining.'

So Fred went on his rounds again.

Delivering the last of the letters, he was summoned by Mrs Challis, owner of a clinker brick mansion on the highest point of his round. 'Postie,' she called. 'Could you come here for a moment?'

The Great Lady, as she was known in the mail room, said she wished to share a concern with him. There was—there had been for some time—a Peeping Tom. Mrs Challis had been troubled for years by the suspicion that someone was observing intimate moments of her life, and now her daughter was experiencing the same sensations. 'We're not imagining this,' she said. 'There's ... someone ... in the area.'

'You're pretty trusting,' Fred told her. 'How do you know it isn't me that's doing the watching?'

Mrs Challis surprised him. 'I thought it might have been. I wanted to see your reaction.' She smiled faintly. 'Your work lends itself to the observation of people.'

He felt he'd been too easily vanquished. 'Well it's not me,' he said. 'Never was and never will be. And the trouble with outsmarting people is that you put them off-side when you might need them one day.'

His animosity didn't trouble Mrs Challis. 'Do you know where my daughter lives?' She named the street and number. He felt this too was a trap. He'd spoken to her daughter that morning, and

sensed there was something wrong, but he wasn't saying anything about that to Mrs Challis. This woman, he thought, has spent her life manipulating people. 'Why do you tell me that?' he asked.

'Because I want you to keep an eye out for anybody ... hanging around ... the area who doesn't belong.' She gave him a condescending smile.

'You should talk to the police,' he said. 'That's what they're for.'

'I did that once,' she said, 'and I had the feeling that the man I spoke to was a voyeur himself.'

He wondered how she coped with a world so full of ambivalence.

'Did they do anything for you?'

'Oh yes. They patrolled for weeks. Cruising around at night with their lights off. I was relieved when they stopped.'

Some people are impossible to help, he thought. 'Just doing their job,' he said, but Mrs Challis, having no further need for him, was moving away. Riding back to the post office for the second time that day, he found himself wanting to prove to Mrs Challis that he was unlike other men, that he could be trusted, that the tendrils of her suspicious nature could find nothing in him to grip. He wanted to be perfect. Perfected, glowing, incapable of fault. His imagination, however, was lacking. He could think of no circumstances whereby this might happen. I'm doomed to the pavements till I retire, he thought. Age—forty-four.

The sentencing of the guilty couple in the Moyston murder preoccupied the media. More headlines. TV ran clips of the former lovers entering court. The scene of the shootout was shown again and again. The home of the dead man; his face. A city participated vicariously, blaming the wife for the most part. A group calling itself Coalition Against Sexist Representation demanded viewing time and got it. Their representative, a woman with emphatic voice and threatening smile, told the current affairs investigator that there was no action, no expression, no metaphor, no underlying assumption, that did not relate, at a fundamental level—if not an obvious one—to the efforts of males to define and control women. This had to end. Questioned, she said that the two policemen had trapped themselves in a definitional net of their own making; armed shootouts were not the only way to deal with problems. Questioned further, she said that she didn't know how, exactly, this situation would change, but she was confident. 'At least we know what's being done to us.'

Fred, watching alone in his bedroom, enjoyed the final exchange.

'You've got a long way to go, then, haven't you?'

'Care to join us?'

The next day he mentioned the program in the mail room. 'Wiped the smile off the bastard's face, didn't she?' None of the others except Eileen Dunn and Jack Sparkes had been watching. Eileen demanded to know why her boss had switched on a program that called for some intelligence; when he wouldn't say, she forced him to admit that he'd found his wife watching ...

'And you weren't game to leave the room because you didn't know what she might hear next,' said Eileen. 'Isn't that so?'

Jack blustered. He gave his wife a free rein, she was her own boss, he didn't try to run her life. The mail room smiled. Fred put his mail into bundles, slipping rubber bands around his deliveries. He could feel Jack's anger directed at his back. When he left, he winked at Eileen. Jack was back in his office. 'I'd love to know what goes on between him and Marj,' Eileen said. 'You wouldn't want to know about it, probably.'

When the postmaster got home, there was a note on the table. 'New Members Night at the Club. Casserole in the oven, only needs heating. Won't be late. Marj.'

He lit the oven and turned on the news. Same bloody feminist was talking about what she'd said last night. Frightened, he switched her off, went to the garage and opened his bricked-in security locker. He brought out his guns, one by one, took them apart on the bench and oiled them. Three months to duck opening.

By ten o'clock it had got to him. He rang the tennis club. 'Checking up, were we?' Marj said. 'You'll just have to relax a bit because there's a few of us going to have a hand of cards.' When she put the phone down she met the inquiring eyes of her friends. 'He's like a big kid, he's so insecure. He doesn't know what to do with himself when I'm not there.'

Driving home an hour later, she had a feeling of being followed. There was something familiar about the headlights behind her. She slowed; the vehicle behind her slowed. The next bit took courage. She waited for a break in the oncoming traffic, then swung the Mini Minor in an abrupt U-turn. Oncoming drivers tooted and flicked their headlights at her, but, despite her panic, she gained a clear view of the red and white Ford truck, the ungainly, powerful vehicle her husband had bought for his shooting expeditions.

She drove as fast as she could, but he beat her home. She felt the bonnet of the Ford. Hot! Furious with her husband, she opened the back door, turned on the kitchen light. In the bedroom they'd shared for twenty-seven years, her husband was pretending to be asleep. She could feel pity for him draining her strength. 'Jack,' she said, 'it's time we got a few things straight.'

He maintained the lie as long as he could, then burst into tears. She got in beside him. They lay on their backs, staring at the darkness. Eventually she said, 'Well?'

'I'm weak,' he said. 'I've known it for years. I'm ashamed of myself.' He cried some more, but she didn't touch him, or soften. 'I thought you'd leave me once the kids left home. I thought you'd see what I was, and reckon it wasn't worth staying.' She was relieved that he'd said it: it showed her a marriage held together by loyalty and habit. 'We're going to have to do something,' she said. They discussed it, and this time she did take his hand when he said they ought to have some barbecues, inviting new people. 'Try and get ourselves started again. Get a new life going.'

Among those asked to the first barbecue was Frederick Holyoake because, as Jack put it, he was so bloody odd that there must be something going on inside his head. 'And bring someone with you,' Jack said. 'We want a crowd.'

This posed a problem for Fred because he'd long been without a relationship. He had to overcome his fear of rejection to bring himself to ask the most attractive woman he saw on his rounds to go with him. Her name was Leanne Shaw and she worked for a firm of solicitors. He'd heard her mention her 'ex' and had a feeling she was still unattached.

Leanne lived near Fred, their houses separated by a creek and a railway line from the wealthy suburb to the west. On the day of the barbecue, when Fred arrived, they drank tea in her garden, two strangers linked by, and caught in, the social forms of going out. Fred spoke obliquely of his former wife, but Leanne was direct. She said her husband made every conceivable difficulty over the children. 'When he finally had to admit that when they were with him, he couldn't cope, and that it was best for them to be with me, he was so furious that I knew something would happen. It didn't take long. I had some friends here for drinks, and when they went to go, one of their tyres had been slashed. At least they were mobile when they put on the spare. He cut three of my tyres. I had to get a taxi to work in the morning. The tyre people had to come here and fix it, then bring me the car. It cost me three hundred dollars. And I had to pretend to the children that it had been done by vandals because I couldn't tell them it was Gerry. Their father!'

Why do men do it, Fred thought: have I got that sort of stuff in me? To cover his discomfort, he asked, 'How did you get mixed up with someone like that?'

She looked at him. 'I was twenty when I got married. Got pregnant straight away. I didn't know much. And he could be very nice. We had a lot of fun in those early years. We started up a shop together, young people's clothes. Gerry had a good eye for things that made people look good. I did all the books, wrote all the letters. He was hopeless. The fact was, he could hardly read or write. He needed me to cover his weaknesses, and when I did, instead of being grateful, he was resentful. Really unpleasant. That was when the rot set in.'

Leanne refilled their cups. Lit a cigarette. 'The neighbour told me the next day she'd seen someone in my drive. She's new there, she doesn't know Gerry, but when she described his build, and the way he walked, it was him to a T. But I knew anyway. I knew something like that was coming. The trouble is, there's not much I can do about it. If I accuse him, he'll deny it, and then he'll do something else. I can't move out of the area because it's handy to work and the children's schools. And anyhow, he has to know where his kids are. I can't escape him by moving.'

Fred considered her problem; his in reverse. In the division of human characteristics, males had appropriated almost everything they thought valuable. It was as if they'd been allowed to choose the cards before a game, with the paradoxical result that they'd dealt themselves a losing hand.

'What will you do then?'

Leanne said she'd decided to ask a cop she knew to go around to Gerry's and tell him he'd been seen in an area where damage had been reported and if he was seen in the area again, charges would be laid. 'I think he needs a fright,' she said. 'He needs to know he's dealing with more than me.'

They were opening the gate at the Sparkeses' place when a car drew up. 'Where is Saint Malo Street?' the driver called. He sounded European, and he seemed to expect them to cross the road. Leanne stood her ground, but Fred went some of the way towards the brisk, carefully groomed man in a car that looked beneath him. 'Someone give you wrong directions? This is Marlo Street. Haven't you got a directory?'

'It's a hire car,' the man said, waiting to be told.

'You're on the wrong side of the tracks,' Fred told him, 'See that underpass? Go through there. Left, then right. Then you climb the hill to the very top.' He was aware that Leanne, though she'd moved a few paces up the drive, was listening. 'What number in Saint Malo are you looking for?'

'Seven.'

'It's on your right. Big elms leaning over the fence. Clinker brick, you can't miss it.' When he rejoined Leanne he said, 'He's going to visit Mrs Challis. I have to say he's a cut above some of the creeps she sees.'

Leanne saw that he was pleased with himself. 'Doesn't it worry you that you know too much about people?'

He studied her. 'Doing what I do, I can't help forming an idea of the lives people lead in the houses I go past. There's nothing wrong with that. It's benign. I'm not like …'

He stopped. She felt he'd been on the verge of giving something away. 'What aren't you like?'

'This Mrs Challis he's going to see tried to trap me the other day because she claimed she'd been spied on for years. It made me angry.'

'She thought it was you?'

'She thought it might have been. She was trying me out,'

Leanne wished the subject hadn't come up. The foreign driver, she noticed, hadn't gone. The sounds of the barbecue reached them as they stood, uncertain of each other, in the drive. 'Let's forget it,' she said. 'It's just that I find people who are cut off from others a bit scary. I want to know why it is they can't join in.'

'I think,' he said, still wanting to declare himself, 'that if people have trouble joining in, it may be that they only want to do it on very special terms.'

This made Leanne frown. 'You remind me of someone,' she said. His eyes asked the question. 'But I don't know who it is.'

'What is it about me that makes you think of this other person?'

'I don't know. If I could say what it was, I'd know who the other person is. Sorry. But it's uncanny.' He waited. She felt he had the patience to outlast her. 'Come on,' she said, 'we're supposed to be partying.'

They went through the carport. The smell of steak and sausages assailed them. Jack Sparkes's voice was the most penetrating in the yard. He was wearing a HERS apron, slicing bread and spreading it with garlic butter. Marj was at the flames, smiling self-consciously, looking diminutive in a HIS apron, tending the meat with giant prongs. 'Notice my role reversal?' Jack called, noisy as ever. Leanne realised she'd left her sunglasses in the car. 'Don't tell me she's leaving before I get an introduction!' said Jack. Fred smiled faintly, and they watched his companion as she strode away—thin legs, pale, straight hair bouncing at every stride, poised and direct. Marj studied her husband. He, aware of what he might once have said, bent over the bread, feeling he'd outwitted his wife. 'You haven't changed a bit,' she said.

The man was still sitting in his hire car outside the Sparkeses' place. When Leanne straightened, sunglasses hand, he beckoned: a sexual command. Angered, wondering how often he tried that tactic, she put on her glasses, assuming the advantage of a mask. He, trying to sit her out, lit a cigarette and gave her an appraising look. Not with me you swine, she thought, watching him from behind her car until, conceding, he started his engine. Unsettled by the incident, she went back to the carport, unready to face a crowd of strangers.

Marj, seeing the isolated figure, waved a large, black, fake-Maori spoon. 'Come'n give's a hand!' And Leanne, neat, her white cuffs and collar trimming a pink jacket, came to her side. 'How many have you still got to feed?'

Marj felt gratified at the ease with which she'd brought the stranger to her. 'Just a few. Don't get too close, this thing spits. And you'll get smoke in your clothes.' When Jack came back from taking a tray of bread around, he saw that the stranger, instead of joining the man who'd brought her, had attached herself to his wife's activities. Fred saw it too, and felt empty, having imagined that the job of fitting her in would be his. The women joined them briefly, offered them steak and salad, then took themselves inside. 'Bloody amazing,' said Jack. 'The pair of them, gone off and left us.'

They talked in the kitchen, Marj released by being with someone who didn't know her as part of a marriage. She found Leanne's mixture of directness and uncertainty appealing; she hoped there would be, in this boyish figure, some need, some lack, for which she could provide. Shyly, against the noises of the crowd in the garden, they questioned each other.

Then Fred came in.

'Hi, Hollyhock!' Marj called, friendly, insulting; she knew about the nickname from Jack, who said it was everyone's way of coping with an oddball. 'My reputation goes before me,' said Fred. He remained standing until Leanne moved on the bench, then sat, realising that a bond had been forming and he'd interrupted. By way of apology he said, 'I thought there might have been a few

people in here. The glass is reflecting, you can't see in.' The three of them looked out. T-shirts, shorts. Thongs. Paunches, bra straps. A Magnolia grandiflora. 'You looking at my tree?' said Marj. 'I don't know who planted it. Must have been a long time ago. I'd say it must have been someone from up on the hill. This bit around here was all part of an estate, you know. There's a few of those trees around. I reckon someone must have planted them down the bottom of their property, where there was a bit more water.' They considered the tree, older than any of them. 'There's another tree behind the sports ground,' Marj went on, 'that's got a big piece of the bark cut out for a canoe. It's dead now but you can still see where they cut it. It makes you wonder how they did it, without axes and stuff. I suppose they were clever in their own way.' They talked about the Aboriginal people. 'It makes you feel funny,' Marj said, 'to think that where we are now, there was nothing but bush, and blackfellows roaming around.' She paused, uncertain of her ground. 'I suppose it's a bit of a miracle, really, everything we've done.'

A helicopter crossed the sky. 'Cops are after someone,' Marj said. 'Can't be a bank job, they're all closed today.' Then Jack came in. 'Choppers!' he roared. 'I feel like getting a gun and shooting 'em!' The helicopter doubled back. 'They're calling your bluff,' said his wife. 'We're paying taxes to keep those bastards spying on us,' Jack said. There was a silence. The silence continued, then Marj moved along her bench.

Jack, sitting down, felt he was giving up his right to bluster. 'Cosy little group' was the best he could manage. Still self-conscious, he swung his head to look out. 'Seem to be getting on all right, anyway.' Marj waited for him to say What are we drinking?

'What are we drinking?'

She smiled, the wrinkles rearranging themselves, and got him a can of beer from the fridge. She knew what was coming.

'What are you laughing at?'

Fred chuckled, and Leanne's eyes made contact with Marj. 'You're making me feel surrounded,' he said. Needing to assert his status, he concentrated on Fred. 'We're going to have to rearrange some of the rounds, Hollyhock. You still want to do the nobs?' Fred said he did.

'Beats me why you like going up there. You're not a bit of a sicker ... a, er, sycophant, are you? By any chance?'

Fred smiled. 'Not at all. Those people might think they're superior. I can't see anything superior about them. I'm waiting for them to challenge me.'

'What do you expect to happen? You're only a bloody postie.'

'Nothing wrong with being a postie,' Marj said, doing what hostesses do.

'Ah God,' said her husband. 'Posties are just messenger boys. Years ago, if they could have trained dogs to do the job, they would have. Fair dinkum.'

Marj was about to intervene again, but Fred said he didn't mind. 'That's what I like about the job. I like having no status. There's nothing to maintain. I'm among those people every day. They know nothing about me, it's as close as you can come to being invisible. It pleases them to ignore me, and it pleases me to be there on my own terms.'

Again Leanne felt troubled. What was it about him? There seemed to be something missing, as if he could only disclose one side of himself. She didn't want him next to her. 'I left my cigarettes in the car,' she said. 'Would you mind?' Marj offered to ask around the yard, but Leanne said she only smoked one brand, and handed Fred her keys.

Walking to the car, he felt there'd been a finality in her action. She'd seen something unacceptable in him and he didn't know what it was. He'd been hoping for a relationship with her, and it

clearly wasn't going to be on. He got her cigarettes, then, wanting to reconcile himself to what had happened, he walked to the end of the street and stared idly at the underpass with its graffiti and outdated political slogans.

PIGIRON BOB

Small children were playing among the weeds, trying to persuade one of their number to pull down her pants and piss, but when the group became aware of an adult, they trooped off towards a large, rundown house further along the line. Fred felt even more sorry for himself. Nobody likes watchers.

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of a creamy white Jaguar, coming from the hill. It seemed as if it would come through the opening, but at the last moment it swung to follow the railway. Before it had disappeared, Fred recognised the man who'd been looking for Saint Malo Street, and beside him, a passenger in her own car, was Mrs Challis.

She was wondering what to give the children for dinner when the phone rang.

'Darling, why don't you bring the children over? They could sleep here tonight, and you could go out. Is Tony there?'

She explained that he was in Perth.

'What's he doing there?'

There were so many answers. He was big-noting himself. He was on Party business. He was keeping as far from his family as possible. He was drinking expensive free grog. He was doing anything he could to avoid introspection.

'Darling? Are you there?'

He was pretending, to an ever-changing audience, that he was real. He was practising having emotions he could show in public. He was murdering the language ... yes, that was his worst crime, because in turning bright, clear words into veils that covered meaning, he was breaking down language's capacity to convey what people felt.

'Vicky?'

She told her mother she'd bring the children over in a few minutes, and she'd see a film if she could get someone to go with her.

She rang around.

She packed the children, their pyjamas, their clothes for the next day and their toys and bears into the car. She drove the few blocks to her mother's house, hidden from the street by elms. The sun was setting and the windscreen was dusty. She drove slowly, her apprehension rising as she approached what had been her home as a child. When her mother wanted to do something for her there was always a price to be paid. It came in the form of an artless, apparently unobjectionable request that concealed a trap.

The request came as they were putting the children to bed. Ellen and Lindsay wanted to sleep in grandma's bed. Mrs Challis was unexpectedly agreeable. 'I'll move them upstairs later, when they're asleep,' she told her daughter, but was disconcerted when the children noticed a brandy glass on the floor beside the bed. 'Did you sleep on this side last night, Grandma?' Ellen asked.

'No dear,' said Mrs Challis. 'I'll take that away.' Avoiding her daughter's eyes, she took the glass to the kitchen. When she came back she said brightly, 'Alain wants to see the gallery. I wonder if you'd like to take him around. You know the collection so much better than I do.'

It was so far from the truth it couldn't be logically contested.

'You see, he feels that if he knows what's in our major collections, he'll understand what sorts of things are in the country, and the questions he's likely to be asked.'

Why was her mother trying to foist this lover of a week—a night?—onto her? She searched her position, her past, for unguarded openings.

'It's simply a part of his work. He'll have a few days in each of our capitals, valuing things, answering queries. Then he'll come back to follow up a few leads. He won't be in the country very long.'

The wistfulness pervading her last sentence made her daughter angry. It was shameful for her mother to accept men like this Alain who expected, no doubt, to find a Mrs Challis in every city. And where was the crooked part of it? This dealing, this creation of provenances, this tracing the movements of foreign artists in Europe, and their sales, if any, in distant capitals, must surely be a front for something else.

'What's the name of his organisation?'

'Oh, he's not the owner, he's one of a network of people. It's called La Société Dédale. It means a maze, you know ...' She moved her fingers to suggest a diagram in the air.

She suspected her mother of wanting her to be attracted to, perhaps to sleep with, this dubious figure so they could have a shared secret from Tony; so that a vicious game of jealousy and rivalry could be set up; so that, whatever happened, their respective ages, their relationship to each other, could be reasserted. Mother, child. Anger and an associated unsteadiness threatened to consume her. She flushed.

'You'd only need a few hours one afternoon. I'll look after the children. I think it would be best to start with the European section, then the Australian. The Asian, the glass ...' An unproblematical richness was the illusion her mother created. She felt herself choking, wanted to vomit; she rushed into the kitchen, got herself a glass of water and slipped outside. The tennis court. The pool. All inimical. There was a chair under a rhododendron. Snails had slimed the cushion. She pushed it off and sat down.

Refusal was out of the question. She'd have to take this man around, and since he'd be clever, she'd have to be more so. But this wasn't possible unless she had a counter-goal, something she wanted to achieve, which would frustrate or overturn this Monsieur Alain and Madame within, with her trailing tendrils of psyche changing everything they touched. What did she want to show the two of them, do to them, how could she manage things so that at the end she was up and they were down?

She didn't know. She went inside, telling her mother she'd show Alain the gallery the day after next. She considered ringing her friend to cancel the arrangement but decided to go on with it. The film was enjoyable but she felt too subdued for coffee afterwards. She drove back to the silence of her house, read a few pages of Albertine Disparue, and turned out the light.

Tony got in from Perth at 5 a.m. The red-eye special. A big day in front of him and he hadn't slept. He needed breakfast and a shower. Most of all, he needed a few days off the treadmill. The children weren't in their rooms, what was going on? Why didn't his wife come out and talk? Make coffee for him as dawn lit up the garden? Get him something to eat? Even the tin in the pantry that had cake in it when he went away was empty except for some Gladwrap and crumbs. He was furious with his wife. Why couldn't she bloody well cater for his needs? She needed to realise how little she did for him!

Then, on another shelf in the pantry, he saw something she'd cut from a paper—an account of a murder trial, two policemen and the wife of one of them. There was a photo of the other wife who

seemed, amazingly, to have forgiven her husband for what he'd done—his infidelity, the shooting of his lover's husband. For a self-regarding moment Tony wondered what he was doing, reading about a shoot-out, at 6 a.m. in a pantry with no cake; then compassion swept through him, despite his tiredness. The poor bastards, out of their depth, guns the only solution. He felt ashamed of being angry with his wife. Then something he hadn't seen before caught his attention—there was a nick a few paragraphs from the end of the story; she'd started to cut off the last few lines, but had decided to leave them:

> Mrs McQuade said she had told lies to police investigating the killing because she was afraid of the scandal over her relationship with Senior Constable Dixon.
>
> 'I realised that if I hadn't had a relationship with Dennis Dixon, Lindsay would still be alive,' Mrs McQuade said.
>
> 'Despite our troubles, we didn't amount to much without each other and our kids.'
>
> 'I never intended for my husband to be killed and I am not guilty of such a crime,' Mrs McQuade said.

A rush of sentiment came over him. He'd take his wife a cup of coffee and kiss her. Then it struck him that he'd read the thing too literally, as a declaration of faith in their marriage, perhaps also of faith in him. But she'd thought of cutting it off, and if she hadn't, it must have been because she wanted to grapple with the implications of those lines. He'd been heartless to read the report for what it said about him, while two of the principal actors were in prison and one was dead. He filled the jug, pressed the switch. Dawn was already in the trees. The darkness of the garden was lightening. Again he thought of the second wife, the helpless one who'd been unable to shape events; he studied her face in the photo, wondering what it was he wanted to know.

Tony asked people at Party headquarters to find out about La Société Dédale. In bed that night he told his wife, 'The art business is a front. It's connected to a bunch of arms dealers. They sell anything to anybody. Iraq, Iran, Contras, you name it. The art bit is expected to pay for itself but its real value is in tracing networks of top people in each country. And it's a cover for sending people places.'

It was no more than she'd expected.

'What's he doing here?'

'Couldn't say. Sussing things out. Just be careful of what you say in front of him.'

He had no idea that the dangers she saw in the encounter were different, but he could feel, though she lay still, that she was removing herself.

'What is it?'

'I don't want to talk about it. I'll tell you about him when I've handed him back to Mother.'

'Is that going to be a problem?'

It angered her that in putting the question he spoke from the distance of someone who cared professionally but not personally. His self-protection was only too obvious.

'One of your problems is that you are unable to imagine—you don't even try to imagine—what it's like to be me.'

Answering her, he felt both smug, and troubled.

'I can't know about you—I can't even guess—unless I ask you questions, and you get angry when I do.'

The impossibility of their situation settled on them like a canopy. She said, 'Could you sleep in Ellen's bed and put her in here?'

Taking it as a revocation of rights, he sat up, earnest, ready to talk. She shrivelled. Why, before their marriage, had she never imagined that this point might lie ahead? She thought of the troubled, exquisite uncertainties of two students meeting in the Luxembourg Gardens, of a coach rolling down the valley of the Loire, visiting chateaux, days when she had complete imaginative engagement with everything she saw, and of Tony, all idealism and naivety, torn between wanting to travel forever, and wanting to start his adult life.

'Vicky?'

The hated name. She said nothing.

'Whatever's got into you?'

'There's somewhere I need to get back to,' she said. 'There's something wrong with the basis of our situation. I don't know what it is so I don't know what to do about it. I don't want to talk about it. Get Ellen. You sleep in her bed. Please.'

If my constituency knew about this, he thought, and thought also of several admirers, women who wanted to rise in the Party, whose attentions he felt he could call on ... he was often on his own ...

Feeling guilty about these thoughts, he said, 'Do you realise the seriousness of what you're doing?'

Hating him, wondering why she had to live with an episode of 'Dallas', she turned away.

Trying to convince himself that he was rejecting her, and not vice versa, Tony put their daughter in his place. Fitting himself into the single bed, he swore he'd take a room in the city, the kids could stay with him sometimes, they'd think it was fun ...

The bed was too short. His feet poked over the end. This is impossible, he called out, and took himself back, rolling his daughter towards his wife. He wanted to continue the argument but the child would wake up. Neatly gagged, he thought, the Labor people would laugh if they knew.

Hours later, Ellen woke. Exploring the unusual warmth, she touched, and recognised, the bodies of her parents. When Tony woke for his morning run, she was pressed against him.

It was foggy outside. The trees in the garden were dripping. He closed the kitchen door and switched on the radio. A cheery voice said, 'There'll be some early morning fog patches. Some drizzle on and south of the ranges. Clearing later, should be mostly sunny. Expected top temperature twenty-six. Enjoy your day, catch you later!'

He ran. First light illuminated the mist. Slipping through familiar streets, he felt both master and servant of the people in the darkened houses whose fences marked the boundaries of their sub-domains. He liked to get back before the papers were delivered because they tempted him to stop and read, and a political analysis broke into the only period of freedom in his day. He liked to go down the hill and up again; if he paced himself properly he could almost maintain the same speed on the way back because he was into his rhythm by then.

At the underpass, the turning point in his route, he noticed a figure in blue taking a short cut through the weed patch. 'Good morning, Mr Decker,' this figure said.

'Morning,' Tony called, waving, wondering—though he was used to being greeted by constituents—about something in the man's voice, some element of amusement at him for what he was doing, perhaps something obvious to others which he couldn't see.

His wife was in the kitchen when he got back. He told her about the voice that greeted him and his reaction. She wanted to say that he couldn't stand people not admiring him, or needing him,

that he didn't want doubt to enter ... but there was something else about him; he was, for once, genuinely asking, and in the semi-darkness of the kitchen—she hadn't turned the light on— they felt a bonding that, for the moment at least, seemed deeper than the animosity of the previous night. The mist was slow to clear. At separate windows they looked into it, treating it as a third presence mediating between them. She turned shyly and said, 'Were you thinking of ... ?' and he nodded. 'I was.'

The turrets of Saumur faded in a mist, became clear. They tramped through the drizzle over the long bridge crossing the Loire, stopping to dry themselves in a grotty café operated, not by a sturdy madame, but by two teenage girls who appraised the tourists from the bar. The one who'd made herself blonde showed her friend by a gleam in the eye that she'd serve the tall, uncertain man in the raincoat; turning away from Tony after taking their order, she bent her head so that he caught her perfume, then, returning the pad to her darker companion, she disappeared through a curtain. This attempt at seduction, recognised by Tony and the woman he was to marry, put an edge on their already high excitement. They found their way through ancient streets, through the turrets, towers and balconies of the castle, surrounded by mist, which, enveloping them, then retreating to let them glimpse enough of the countryside to imagine mediaeval armies, seemed to be their ally in a foreign land, attending to them, perhaps choosing to deceive them, but focusing on them as they were focused on each other. It had been hard to leave the last tower, yet they had known that if they tried to prolong the illumination they would soon have become wet and miserable.

'It'd be nice to stay home today,' Tony said. She said, 'Put Ellen back in her bed and we can be together for a while.'

She would have preferred to meet Alain at the gallery, but he called in the Jaguar, which he drove expertly, using short cuts her mother took. She commented on this. 'Your mother knows this city back to front.' 'Her part of it,' she corrected. He said he studied maps before visiting new places. 'They give me my first inkling of what I might be going to find.' His English was excellent; she thought of her halting German and Italian. In Saint Kilda Road he asked, 'Why is there dust on the road?' She explained, hoping he wouldn't associate her with the ancient technology, that tram drivers had to drop sand on their wheels to stop in wet weather. Following trams ground the sand into powder. He smiled. She felt he would mention it, smiling again, in other cities, and that he enjoyed the humiliation he imposed on her by finding this local practice quaint. As they passed the Shrine, he said, 'I believe there's a large hollow space under there. It could be needed one day.' She looked at him. 'As a shelter.'

The unsteadiness she feared, the inner turbulence, began to appear. Appendage to the arms trade, he had the presumption to say this so coolly. She felt him as evil, and also as more realistic than she was, or her friends. It seemed more mature to acknowledge terrible forces, even to use them, than to put them out of one's mind, yet she said, 'I wish those bombs had never been exploded.'

'But they have,' he said. 'Lots of them. Only two on people ...' She wanted to fling it at him that his country was testing in her region, but he was going on '... but nuclear technology has developed since then. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs are like your trams.' He pointed at one, clattering past. 'We have protesters in my country—no doubt you have them too—who rage at bombs that were dropped forty years ago and power stations that were designed thirty years ago. They don't

know what's happening now. They're out of date.' He summed up with steely satisfaction. 'If you're not contemporary, your mind's a museum.'

Despite her hostility, she was amused. 'We're supposed to be looking at a museum this afternoon.' He lifted his hands from the wheel in a quick gesture. 'Oh well, it's my job. And my pleasure.'

He was genuinely curious about what he'd see. Only the thought of her mother's 'I do hope you get on well, darling, he's got so much to offer' prevented her from softening a little. The resistance was against her, she noticed, not him.

They parked. Walking under the plane trees, she told him that possums came down from them at night. 'I brought my children to see them once,' she said, wishing that the ghastly statues could have been put out of sight for the occasion.

He studied the gallery as they crossed the road. 'Formidable,' he said, watching her reaction; an astutely controlled but rapacious desire was central to the man. He paused, turning, on the footpath, to look at the southern edge of the city, the parkland belt, and the wide road joining the city to its beach, as if invoking these features full of openness and light to condemn the sulky monolith that housed officially collected art. He pointed with approval at a youth in wet jeans who was collecting coins in the moat. As they approached the water screen that was the gallery's substitute for an entrance, he sensed, from her hesitation, that she was fearful of going any further. She was pale, and lagging behind. She looked unsupported as she stood, elegantly dressed, against a background of gelati vans and uncouthly carved red-gum monsters. A cruel streak and a feeling of imminent possession prevented him from asking her what was wrong. 'Shall we go in?' he said, and she obeyed.

Rodin. Moore. The disastrous middle courtyard. Talkative attendants. People—the public—directed this way and that. Short sleeves. She said to him, 'Let's do Europe first.'

It was where he had the greatest advantage. Sensing her resistance, he showed amusement. 'I'm in your hands.' She made him walk in front, feeling she was going to have to apologise for what was on show.

Escalators. At the entry, a Spanish limestone Madonna. 'Nice logo,' he said. She waved him forward. Madonna, Madonna, breast and child. The infant Jesus looking at a book. He sensed in a moment that the gallery was an educative institution, bent on improving public taste. 'No,' he said. 'No, but take me on.'

A Flemish triptych, circa 1500. He walked around it carefully. The marriage at Cana, the miracle of loaves and fishes, the resurrection of Lazarus. She told him about the gallery's finances, its one big bequest. Saint Peter and the keys of heaven. Angels watching Jesus and his mother from a strangely bending tree.

The Antwerp altarpiece. Deposition, resurrection, the annunciation. Christ before Pilate, the flagellation. Christ on his donkey entering Jerusalem. The crown of thorns. The circumcision of God's son. Christ crucified, the pain of his mother, holding him. The woodcarvers had made her bigger than the vanquished emissary from heaven whose body she had brought into the world in a stable. The wise men, the kings, in adoration. The disciples, the treacherous kiss of Judas, Christ praying in the garden. 'It was only put on display fairly recently,' she said. 'It was in storage for years. I can't get used to it, it's so out of place on a stand, with blazing lights.' He looked at her, and she felt, as she never felt with her husband and her mother, that she was being taken seriously.

'No,' he said. 'I think you're lucky to be able to get a thing like that away from its support systems. If you put spotlights on it you can find new ways of seeing the story. It was never our story anyway. We got it from Palestine and we've been using it to beat the Arabs and the Jews ever since. Rather presumptuous, don't you think? But a very successful appropriation. Their story, our truth.'

This idea excited her. 'How do you think that truth was constructed?' Could there be some way of undoing Europe's grip on the world's imagination? Would she be brave enough to take it, if she knew? She felt weak, and hanging on his reply.

'It doesn't much matter how it was done. What matters is what we can do with it now. Do we use it, or forget it? We're on top of the story now, it doesn't surround us any more. It's just one of the many stories available, though it's a good one. Lots of delicious detail.' He pointed to the intricate Dutch carving, an outsize, meaningful toy.

'Doesn't that put us in the position of picking over debris?' she said. 'We've broken down something that unified the culture and we can't put it together again?'

'Humpty Dumpty? No, our second position,' he said, 'as a civilisation, is stronger than our first because we have the power that was generated by all those centuries of belief without the restraints that belief imposed.' She felt frightened of him again. 'We're free of the old mythologies. We can make new ones, any time, any sort we want.'

'It's rather frightening. There's no security.'

'There never was. Only illusory tales. People thought there was another life. The taletellers offered them heaven and hell, and frightened them. Terrifying the common people made them powerful. They even frightened kings! I hear people in this country say they don't like offshore control of their economy. What about off-planet control? What sort of world is ruled by a being that no one can see except visionaries and hysterical nuns? Of course we're better off. The priests can't burn us.'

He offered her a skeletal smile; seduction by agreement, she saw, wondering quite how far she'd been made complicit in his views. 'Are all these things, then,' she put to him, 'only relics to pick over? We're in a big box stuffed with relics, is that really all?'

He extended his hand, smiling, until she thought he was going to touch her. 'I wouldn't mind being able to sell some of these relics,' he said. 'An afternoon on the phone and I'd be smiling.' He withdrew his hand. 'But seriously, relics aren't dead. They're full of meaning, but it's the meaning we choose to give them. We're in control now. The meaning has to be made everywhere, at every moment. So we have to be very responsible. We've pulled the gods out of heaven and we've taken on their status. That's frightening. And we've no guidance from the past because no one's been in our position before.'

He looked at her intently. The grip of his concentration made her want to escape. 'Everything you say seems to be centred on power. Control.' He raised his eyebrows, challenging her to name something that mattered more. She wondered if she'd be able to get through the afternoon. 'Let's go on,' he said. 'I'm sure there's plenty to see.'

She went along one wall, he went along the other. She stopped in front of a carefully painted Van der Vliet cathedral which she liked for its even, un-Gothic light. At a focal point of the picture a man with a spade was digging, for no obvious reason, a hole in the floor of the church. This was one of a chain of little details, scattered through the gallery, that she looked for when she didn't feel like accepting the weight of the works on display. In Canaletto's Venice there was a man sitting on a flat box with chooks poking their heads through the wooden slats of their cage. These incidentals meant so much more to her than the fully wrought intentions of artists who made statements

which, once you had understood them, you could only accept or reject. I could live in those backgrounds, she thought, leading a horse, lighting a lamp ... She felt a prickling sensation in her neck; Alain was behind her. 'What do you think he's doing?' he said. 'Digging for relics?'

She'd let her guard down and he was inside her defences. She stood quietly, trembling. Into her mind came the memory of a walk she'd taken in Venice, with Tony. They'd agreed to marry; he'd told her he intended to enter politics; she'd told him that if he got a seat in parliament she wouldn't sit on platforms or go to functions as the member's wife. He said he understood her need for privacy and that plenty of politicians' wives felt the same. She knew he'd misunderstood; it wasn't privacy she needed, but a barrier around herself. The need for privacy could be satisfied, given sufficient time to oneself, but what she couldn't make him understand, because he needed the presence, the demands and the acclaim of other people to bring him to life, was that the eyes and minds of others were, for her, more than intrusive, they were dangerous. They took over her existence and prevented her from owning her life. In their hotel room, in the silence that followed her comprehension and his incomprehension of this, a tension had built up which she could only resolve by suggesting a walk.

They went to the Piazza San Marco. A sign advertised an exhibition, *Da Tiziano ad El Greco*. Climbing the stairs, uncertain how to find the paintings, they blundered into the Doge's palace. No one put them out or made them pay. They crossed a vast room, Tony wondering how the roof was held up, to a row of windows. The sun was gaining power in the haze that had enveloped the city since their arrival. Sky and water were, as they looked out, still a seamless whole, but at a point where, they judged, the horizon should have been, glimmering white and gleaming gold suggested the presence of architectural features. Columns, pediments, cupolas and cones materialised. A bell spoke and Palladio's campanile became visible. Heroic figures, winged, holding flags, gesturing in triumph, floated, their pedestals unattached to earth. The Church of the Salute was next to be reborn. Tony was impressed, but didn't know what to do with his feelings. He wanted to stand at the edge of the water. She felt they were already at the heart of the experience, but followed him; crossing the piazzetta, he said, 'This is where they put traitors to death. Choked them. Put their eyes out. They did it to the guy who gave away the secret of glass-making.' She took him by the hand, not answering.

It was clammy, despite the warmth. She wanted to go back. Then the world moaned, a sound without a source. A low building, at the very point of land, came into being. The sun strengthening, it gave itself a golden dome, then a weathervane sketched itself in the honey-coloured air. The moan again, coming from the left. A ship, a dark blob painted by Turner, was approaching, pulled by four brushmarks low on the water. She feared for the moment when this idea of a ship, this ship of dream, would be close. Tony refrained from his usual special-moment response of putting his arms around her from behind; he seemed as transfixed as she was. The vision veered to remain in deep water, and in that moment became as much a part of the world as anything storied can be. Dribbles of rust, tiny figures on deck, water belching from holes in the side. Clattering chains. A holy light touching masts, cables and bridge. The miracle of the thing was that even as it reached its full size in front of them and made its horn announce, again, that it was within the city, it brought with it the dimension from which it had been born.

She studied the man digging in the painting. It occurred to her that he must be digging a grave for someone important enough to be buried in the church. She could hear Alain breathing, close behind. She half expected that if he touched her she'd regain an awareness she'd lost in marrying and having children, of things being both tangible and numinous, made by the people you saw

making them and created by their own desire to bring themselves into being. What had she made besides two children and a home? Why did she feel inadequate instead of part of that mysterious force? She didn't want him to touch her, he was a man and men thought they were that mysterious force. She could be free of this possessive power he was trying to wield over her, but at the expense of letting go what it was in that moment of dream, of vision, that she desperately wanted to keep. A terrible sadness came over her. Alain realised she was crying. 'There must be somewhere you can get a drink,' he said. 'I'll go with you, then I'll leave you alone.' Civilisation, she thought. Impeccable manners, masking realities, changing nothing. 'No,' she said, 'I'm quite able to go on.'

Jack Sparkes had a stroke. Eileen Dunn found him, sprawled on the table, telephone where he'd dropped it. He was trying to talk. She loosened his collar, rang a doctor and the ambulance. The posties who were back from their rounds stood around, waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

Leanne's cop came to see her. He stood stiffly on the porch and called her Mrs Shaw. He wanted to know if her husband, in the days when they lived together, had gone out on his own at night. At first she said he hadn't, then she remembered that he'd been a regular jogger. She hadn't thought of his runs as 'going out'. 'He was never away much more than an hour,' she said. 'I think he had a regular route.' Something in the policeman's eyes told her he thought so too.

'What did he wear?'

Gerry's dark green tracksuit was still in the house; she didn't know what he wore if he still went on runs. She told him.

'Can I see it?'

'Do you mind if I see where the children are first? I don't want them to know you're here.' Who was she protecting? The children were in the garage. He was allowed in briefly to inspect the tracksuit. When Leanne had him back on the porch, she asked him what it was all about.

'We've had persistent reports for years of a prowler. From the top of the hill down, on the other side of the line. The reports vary a lot, but it's the same people who ring us, all the time.'

'Is it still going on?'

'It stopped for a year or so. Lately it's started again,'

She wanted to say it couldn't be Gerry, but something held her back. The policeman watched her closely. 'Did he ever give you reason to think his runs were more than exercise?' She shook her head. He clearly didn't believe her, but he left, taking off his cap as he got into the car. Leanne went back to the lounge and sat in a dark leather chair. When the children came in, they found her unapproachable. She saw too much of her husband in their faces, and in their bodies too. She remembered that there had been a discernible edge of excitement about Gerry if she'd been in bed when he got back from his run. If she'd ever commented on this he would say, in the days when they'd joked together, 'This keeping fit gets you ready for action!' She began to wonder what activities had got him ready and how far they'd corrupted her.

Marj visited Jack every day in the rehabilitation ward. 'What sort of reports are they giving you?' he asked, convinced that his wife must know things the nurses weren't prepared to tell him. She wondered how long she'd have him on her hands.

When Alain left for Brisbane, Mrs Challis joined the Liberal Party. Tony wanted to know what was going on. His wife was silent for days. There was only one opportunity to take it up with her—in bed, late at night. But it was the time when she wanted the closest possible intimacy, and he spoke too loudly; they quarrelled. She asked him to leave. He told her not to be silly. She said he didn't really want to live with her, he needed the institution of marriage to make him look like a normal human being. 'Your life is quite detached from this house,' she said. 'You're not contributing anything.' Since he'd bought Lindsay a tricycle the day before he felt this was unjust. 'You want to be able to mention your family when you're sitting in a meeting in an attempt to convince people you've got a life outside politics. You haven't!' He got angry. He wasn't empty. He had feelings as much as she did. 'Like most women who are educated enough to complain about men,' he said, 'you are in fact doing very nicely.' He felt her stiffen, but made the mistake of going on. 'I know you aren't going to admit it, but what I just told you is a fact!'

A shaft of moonlight caught her nightdress, and her hair, as she got out of bed. It was as he remembered her from the early days of their marriage, and he felt that if only she'd control her animosity then a tender reconciliation might take place.

But she was gone. Cracking sounds from down the passage told him she was getting kindling from the basket and lighting a fire. Then he heard the squeaking door of the cupboard under the stairs; she was getting blankets. He wanted to go and argue with her, but the next sound was the door of the lounge room closing.

The quietness defeated him. He wanted her to shout so he could shout back, and in the flare of anger something could be resolved. In his experience people needed the chance to rage at you so you could give them some of what they wanted, defusing them, and winning at least a little of their support, or respect, in the process. Her determination frightened him, but if there wasn't an offer, if she wouldn't say what it was she wanted, then he couldn't do anything for her. Pity, but also a fact.

The lounge door opened. He heard her bare feet in the hall. She was at the door. 'I'm going to sleep down there. Tomorrow I'm going to rearrange the furniture. I'll put the sofa-bed in your office.' The fact that he couldn't see her, that he had to listen to a disembodied voice, gave her an authority he couldn't counter. 'That's ridiculous!' he said. 'Just say what you want instead of giving me all your bloody sullen silences.' Again he couldn't stop. 'Why's your mother joined the Party? Am I going to have her on one side of me and you on the other?' She said, ignoring the question, 'What I want to live with is someone who knows my state of mind intuitively, without having to probe, who respects me totally, who is always on my side. I want to live with someone who can make me happy without me even realising that they're trying.'

'You mean,' he said, 'you want a layer of protection around you all the time. You're never going to get it. It doesn't happen. People are never that good with each other. Life's rougher than that.' The darkness he was speaking into felt less hostile. He felt he might be getting through. 'Vicky, don't ask for more than I can give!'

He heard the bare feet on the carpet, and the lounge door closing again. She'd be pulling the sofa-bed near the fire. She'd stoke the fire, and squat on the floor, staring into the flames, thinking ... He didn't know what she'd be thinking, but he knew her analysis always subverted his position.

Fred had a bush cottage at Glenmaggie, a little way back from the lake. It had been bought in his bachelor days and used for weekends and parties. That came to an end when, two Saturdays in a row, fatal accidents occurred on the road back to Maffra. The police warned him that they held him responsible and that if he had so much as a glass of beer he'd better take a taxi because they'd get him. After that, in the years before he moved to Moyston, he only went there by day. Mostly he rented it to holiday-makers. His wife hadn't liked what she called camping, but since his divorce the place had become important to him. He'd put a trellis on either side and planted vines so there were shady places to sit in summer.

Groups had gone down with him, fishing and bushwalking, but, back in Melbourne, he'd felt let down; there was something about the place he couldn't bring to life. His friends told him he couldn't have his twenties again; why not sell it? Go for a trip? But Fred thought something was still possible, and hung on.

Leanne went through her photos. The wedding, the engagement party. Bikinis on a beach. Gerry holding his first baby, Gerry holding her holding their second. The two of them seated, he very solemn, each holding a child. A blurry one of Gerry teaching his son to ride a bike. The shop on the day they opened it; Gerry's car with the top down was parked in front and she was on the bonnet. That one made her wince; she'd known, that time, that she was being used. Inside the shop, the day of their first big sale. The place was crammed. Gerry had slipped into the office and pushed the lens through the curtain; where else had he done that, she wondered? Repressing an urge to burn the pictures, she left them on the table, waiting for the children's reaction. She sorted clothes, started ironing. When they came in, they laughed at each other as babies. 'You look real young, Mum! So does Dad!' They said their father wanted to take them camping at Wilsons Prom. She said it was all right so long as they were back early on Sunday night ...

'... because we have to go to school on Monday!' They riffled through the last few photos. Then they dashed outside. She was grateful for their ignorant, natural happiness. Their father was only what they knew about him. The other knowledge was her burden, and it puzzled her, as well as making her bitter, that he could be something, acting outwards from himself, while the pain of knowing it, the pain of knowing him for what he was, was hers.

A leadership challenge was brewing in the Party. Tony was never home. His phone rang continuously until she switched it to the answering device. She asked him why people who wanted him should be able to break into her life via the phone. Another tense scene over breakfast. He said it was part of his job to be available, and she could help him if she wanted to, but since she wasn't prepared to, he'd leave the phone taking messages when he wasn't in the room.

The next day she started getting calls on the silent number, her number. Some of them were from senior members of the Party. She could hear the anger in their voices when she told them to use Tony's number, not hers. It got back to him and he attacked her. This time the argument was in the garden. He said that if she 'talked like that' to 'people like that', it could do him a lot of damage. She asked him if he'd ever asked himself what damage it might do her to be lumped with the work of his secretary. They shouted at each other. The next day, without telling him, she changed her silent number. She rang her friends to let them know.

The problem was her mother. She had to tell her the new number, and her mother would tell Tony. And the political calls would start again. She rang her mother, and made an arrangement to take the children over the following afternoon.

Her mother was dressed to go out. She was awfully sorry but she'd remembered that Friends of the Opera were having an afternoon with producers and designers talking about the coming season, and she'd tried to alter the arrangement but Tony's phone was only taking messages and the silent line was saying 'The number you have called is unavailable'. So what was she to do? She suggested her daughter take the children to the zoo, the butterfly house was supposed to be marvellous, and had she reported the fault to Telecom?

She told her mother about the phones and got the expected reaction. 'But darling, he's your husband, and he has to be able to reach you if he needs you!' She felt humiliated. Her mother kept looking at her watch. It was a long lesson in submission. Her mother was going on. 'I mean, if you deny him access ... ah, during the day ... it's a form of separation, isn't it? Are you really thinking of separating? If you do, for goodness' sake don't do it over a few phone calls!'

Her mother's face filled with the sweet simplicity which was her ultimate form of falsehood: She flushed. An interruption from the children would for once have been welcome. She wanted to cry. Her mother wanted her to cry, with the reconciliation on Mother's terms. Loving, loving submission.

'Some of those bastards tried to get rid of Tony at the last preselection. Now they want his vote!'

'It's a treacherous world, politics. He's going to need a lot of support.' Her mother picked up her bag, and in that moment she recognised that she was facing her enemy. Her mother wanted to bind her to Tony and the Party apparatus so she couldn't escape. Her mother hadn't escaped and she couldn't bear to see her daughter escape. Loving, loving submission. What a fate! 'I'll take the children to the zoo,' she said bitterly. 'You'd better hurry, you'll be late.'

The rehabilitation staff said Jack was recovering but motor coordination was impaired and short-term memory reduced, as was his ability to handle new information. Going back to his job was out of the question. He should be kept active and not allowed to brood. This prognosis reached the post office. Fred rang Marj to offer her the Glenmaggie cottage. She thought Jack might like it, but the loss of sensitivity in his fingers would mean he wouldn't be successful at fishing ... but he'd enjoy time out in a boat ... but she'd have to go with him, and she didn't know anything about engines ... and he couldn't be allowed to take guns ...

Fred offered to go down with them and set them up. She said it was good of him, but she was going to be lonely, and she was afraid that Jack might like it too much and she'd be stuck there. She'd think it over.

Fred rang Leanne, who said that most of the things Marj was worried about were things she was going to have to cope with anyway, and the central problem was loneliness. She said, 'If she agrees to go, and you get them set up, I could go down the next weekend. My kids want to go camping, but Gerry's changed his mind so as usual it comes back to me.'

So Fred found himself, a week later, sitting between Marj and Jack in the cabin of the Ford. When Jack nodded off, Marj said, 'I'm worried about him. He keeps thinking he's going to get lost in the bush.' Fred said there were plenty of landmarks, so long as Jack didn't go too far from the

house the first few days, and Marj said, 'Course it's not just the bush. He's scared of going on. He's told me a couple of times he wishes it had finished him off.'

Fred felt he'd made a mistake in persuading her to use the bush retreat. She was going to try to rebuild her husband's desire to live, and that meant she was recommitting herself to him at a time when she'd started to win a little freedom.

He wanted to say this, but she seemed self-contained as she drove through town after town, paying for petrol, checking tyres. They bought a week's supplies in the last town, enjoying themselves in the confusion of not having a list. Jack called kilograms pounds, and Marj rushed back into the shop for cornflakes, and again for milk, and this time Fred felt envious of them, and a corresponding emptiness. They're starting out again, he thought, in the only way they can.

Jack was alert as they drove north from Heyfield. 'Ironbarks!' he called as they passed through a dark, pure stand. Fred recognised the tree around which one of his friends had wrapped his car. Marj noticed his mood. 'Taking you back a bit, are we?' He'd never realised how strong she was. She drove the truck as if she was unrolling a ribbon, and she was going to lead it to a weatherboard house, very much in need of paint, with a rusty, faded green roof of corrugated iron, set in a small paddock of tea tree and regrowth stringybark, and she was going to berth the truck in the shed as if it was hers; she was going to say 'Come on, Jack, make yourself useful' as she unpacked the tray, and Fred would do some dusting, and she'd get a fire started in the stove and tell Jack to get another one started in the front room, and she'd help him, or get Fred to help him when he couldn't do it, and she'd somehow have established in twenty minutes what he, Fred, hadn't been able to establish in years.

Fred told her about the accidents, years ago. 'You drive carefully when you take this thing back,' she said. 'And what's all this about you coming back on Sunday? Why don't you come on Friday when Leanne and the kids come down?'

There were so many answers. It wasn't as simple as that. From the way Leanne had made the proposal it was clear that she assumed he wouldn't be there; he'd be part of the transport arrangements, not her companion. Marj's notion of how men and women attached themselves to each other was the expression of a social norm from which he'd become estranged. He knew he'd shown Leanne some aspect of himself which disconcerted her. In creating visions of an exciting relationship, his imagination had run far ahead of reality; he was afraid to ask her what she actually wanted ...

'Well, why don't you?'

He checked to see that Jack was asleep before explaining. Leanne would come down in her car on Friday and on Sunday he'd bring the Ford back to the Sparkeses. He wasn't picking up Leanne, he was getting a ride back with her. Marj wasn't convinced. 'You're really grieving over something, aren't you? Either that or you're plain simple scared.'

Considering his life, he felt he'd never gone into a relationship without keeping something back. If things didn't go as he wanted, he could withdraw. Disappear ...

'Which is it?'

He said simply, 'Both.'

'I thought so. What are you going to do about it?'

He had never imagined that you did something about your problems. He felt it was more normal to mask the difficulties embedded in your character. He tried to explain this.

'You're a back-mover Fred. You want other people to bring everything to you, for you to decide what you'll do with them. It's not fair, is it?' He was hesitant. 'You know it's not.'

'What do you think I should do?'

Jack mumbled; they hoped he wouldn't wake up. 'I wouldn't know what you should do because I don't understand your type. But you've got to put your cards on the table. I bet if I asked Leanne she'd say she didn't know what you were up to. I'll bet you haven't really talked to her yet.'

He stared at the lake, coming into view for the first time. There were caravans and boats among the trees by the shore. 'I can't just march up to people and be open with them. I need to be sure of them first.'

'And how are they supposed to be sure of you?' He shook his head. 'Don't you hurt Leanne,' she said. 'She's too precious for that.' She said it with such emphasis that he was suddenly curious.

'She's precious for you, is she?'

It irritated her to have her statement treated as a disclosure. 'What about it? It's how I feel.' He waited. 'You really are a back-mover, Fred. Aren't you! All right, here it is. I wish I lived with her in a big house, her and her kids. And Jack could be there too, somewhere.' She lifted her left hand from the wheel. 'And I'd have a room on my own, and sometimes, if she felt special, she'd slip in and hold me. That'd do me. She's got so much vitality in that skinny body of hers and I'd like to feel it.' She glanced at him. 'What she'd get from me I wouldn't know.'

'I feel the same,' he said, 'but I don't think being hugged occasionally would satisfy me. I'd want to go further than that.' He flushed. 'Sorry if that's embarrassing.'

'Can't embarrass me,' she said. 'I've lived with him for thirty years.' Fred signalled the turn-off. Stones hit the inside of the mudguards. Jack woke up. 'What's this?' he said, voice indistinct. 'Where are we?' Marj changed gear. 'Just about there, Jack.' There was something strained in her voice. Fred said to her, 'You were going to say men, weren't you?' She looked at him. 'I was. And I suppose I'll be saying it for a long time yet.'

'And what would you have meant by that?'

Jack, confused, said, 'What's all this? What're you talking about?' Answering her husband as much as Fred, Marj said, 'I would have meant that you're always trying to see how far you can go, and what you can get away with, instead of what people can do when they don't put up barriers of mine and yours. I would have meant you want to walk all over us because you think you own everything. I might have meant a lot more but that'll do to go on with.' She smiled. 'It is your house we're going to, after all.'

Leanne's boss gave her the afternoon off. It felt strange to be slipping out of Melbourne when she should have been getting letters signed and filing everything that had come in during the week. She wanted to ask the children if they felt strange, but they were reading, oblivious to the traffic and the foreign suburbs. She put the radio on quietly. Speeding past VFL Park, she found her attention caught by a song:

Now when I was a young man I carried me pack,
And I lived the free life of the rover.
From the Murray's green basin to the dusty outback
Well I waltzed my Matilda all over.
'Well I waltzed my Matilda all over.' The song was new to her but the children were joining in.

Then in nineteen fifteen, my country said, Son!

The two light voices, the boy's unbroken, sang as if it applied equally to both of them, or neither. She turned the volume up. 'It's about going off to war,' she said over her shoulder. 'We know,' the children said. 'What'd you think it was about?'

And the band played Waltzing Matilda,

As the ship rolled away from the quay,

And midst all the cheers, the flagwaving and tears,

We sailed off for Gallipoli.

'Gal-lip-o-li! They were happy, going on holiday when they should have been at school. She wanted to tell Jessica it wasn't her song, and she wanted to tell Mark to be careful because it was about fighting and the fact that men thought this was their business. She didn't, because she knew they'd say 'We know' and she'd have ruined a moment when they were close. She was glad Gerry wasn't there because he'd have joined in, and then it would have been a different moment, heavier for his presence, and because he would have said something to Mark about thinking very carefully before making a big decision, and weighing up the consequences, and there'd have been an element of hypocrisy in this parenting which she wouldn't have understood until the policeman's visit the other day. Why do I have to carry this knowledge around, she thought, and why can't I do anything with it?

The turn-off was easily found, and Marj was outside to greet them. 'Welcome to Therapy Farm!' Leanne got out, laughing. She introduced Mark and Jessica. Marj told them to put their things inside, and then to go exploring. 'There's an old car in the shed,' she said. 'I cleaned it out ready for you; there aren't any spiders. Your Mum and I are going to have a cup of tea. You must be ready for it,' she said to Leanne. 'Did you have a good trip?'

'It was great! We sang a lot of the time, when they played songs we knew.' Jessica and Mark said they knew more songs than their mum. Leanne said she was out of touch because she couldn't have the radio playing in the office as she had when she had the shop. 'With Dad,' they added. 'He knows lots of songs.' Leanne explained to Marj that Gerry was renovating houses and could have his radio going, but she annoyed Mark by referring to his father as her 'ex'. 'Don't say that, Mum,' the boy said. 'It makes him sound like he's dead.'

This started Jessica off. 'The funeral of the late Gerald Shaw will leave from the Pink Panther Parlours at half past four in the morning ...' 'Oh stop it,' said her mother. 'Stop showing off. Go on, take your things inside and we'll go for a walk in a minute.'

They went in. Jessica and Mark had a brief spat over where they were going to sleep, then they ran to the sheds. 'Pink Panther Parlours,' said Marj. 'It sounds like something else.'

Leanne told her how there had been a parlour of that sort a few doors from the shop. 'This guy came in when I was working back. He wanted me to work for him. I said you've got to be joking but he wouldn't get out when I told him to. I had to pick up the phone and start dialling the cops. Even then he said he'd be back.'

'That's what they do. They try to frighten you.'

'I told Gerry we ought to have the place closed down, but he said police cars used to pull up round the back. Coming and going all night. Well, that's what he claimed. He said we'd have no hope. I was actually quite glad to get rid of the shop. It was making money, but what with coping with Gerry, and this other stuff, it wasn't worth it.'

Marj made the tea from a heavy iron kettle. Flames flickered when she lifted it off the opening. 'Bet it's a while since you had it made like this.'

'This is the first time I've been in a house with a wood stove.'

'Makes the room cosy. But they're terrible in summer. Flies come down the chimneys. I couldn't live here long, but for a while it's good.'

They talked about Jack. 'He does an awful lot of walking. I was worried at first, and I used to hammer it into him that he wasn't to stray off the tracks, but he seems okay. We'll stay here for a few weeks, I think. When we've got the truck we'll be able to go for drives.'

They talked about Fred. Leanne said he puzzled her. Although they'd been out together, and he'd done all he could to be pleasant, she felt he wanted to be somewhere else. Or with someone else. 'It's as if he's going through the motions because he feels he ought to.' Then she added, 'One thing he said was interesting. He said that everything in his house made him feel what a mess he'd made of his marriage. He wanted to move everything out and start again. I told him he'd be better off to move, but he didn't seem to want to. I couldn't get out of him why not.'

'Of course he lives near us, doesn't he?'

'Very close.' She tried to make it sound neutral.

'How long do you think you'll keep seeing him?'

'Until he realises he doesn't really want me; I don't want to say it to him, though. I don't want to hurt him.'

Marj told Jessica and Mark to go ahead and find Jack. 'Just tell him who you are. He knows you're coming. When you see him, make a bit of noise or something so he thinks he's seen you first. That way he won't get confused.'

They ran ahead. Marj and their mother watched them skipping down the track, Mark lean, head forward, in a hurry, and Jessica jumping, running, sometimes ahead of her brother, sometimes behind. 'Oh they're beautiful,' Marj said, wishing she weren't so much older than her friend. She hoped they'd go for another walk after dinner, using torches to find wallabies and possums. She wished she knew the names of the local flowers, and she wished the weekend, begun so happily, could stretch for as long as she was in Fred's house. She knew that when Leanne left she was going to say 'Please come down again soon, it's been wonderful having you.'

Jessica and Mark were embarrassed when they saw Jack. He was using his right arm to prop himself against a tree. His fly was open, and a stream of piss was issuing from his penis. While they watched, he slumped against the tree, then slid to the ground. He rolled on his back, the piss falling back to a dribble.

Marj stayed while her visitors went for help. Mark had to go back with a blanket and a pillow. Leanne found some people with a van who drove him to Sale hospital, Marj beside him in the back. Leanne rang Fred from the hospital and asked him to bring the Ford down the next day. He said he'd leave at once and be there in three hours. Leanne felt relieved. He could stay with the children while she went to the hospital to be with Marj. Marj started nodding as soon as Leanne began explaining these arrangements. She was stressed and fearful. 'I hardly know you and you're doing all this for me.'

So the cottage, a box of darkness with four lighted windows, was where Leanne and the children waited. Mark brought in firewood. Then he pointed his torch into the trees to find possums. Leanne felt she was a disappointment to her children because she didn't know anything about the bush animals. She didn't even know the names of any stars.

She made tea and didn't drink it. She looked at her watch. It was an hour since she'd rung Fred. It crossed her mind that his birth certificate probably called him Frederick, so much grander than the appellation he received every day. He probably had another name, and a family tree which went backwards for centuries, ever widening in reference, across counties and countries, voyages and conquests, humble plots of land and moments of affected importance. She wondered about his surname; had there been a holy oak in some Druid-infested part of England? It struck her that she'd never been so curious about him before; her curiosity was born of need, not affection, but she was longing for the sound of his engine.

The people who'd driven Jack to hospital called in and spent the second hour with her. They offered to take the children for a run on the lake the next day. 'We'll teach 'em how to fish, they might come home with something for dinner!' She was glad of their company, and then she wanted to be alone. She mentioned that her friend would be with her soon, and they left, telling Mark—not Jessica, she noticed—where he could find them in the morning.

The leadership challenge fizzled. Vows were made of total support, confidence and loyalty. The shifty, foul-mouthed ex-estate agent who led the party was unquestionably the best man for the job and without doubt the state's next Premier. Tony's phone was less busy and the silent line was used only by friends.

And Mrs Challis. Alain was back for a few days, and she was having a dinner in his honour on Saturday night. Guests would be the Deckers, the Grinters and the Swifts. The Grinters would be dinner guests and the Swifts would drop in after their concert.

On the night, to her daughter's embarrassment, Mrs Challis wore a low-cut dress. Black. Pearls. She was wearing none of her rings. From her ears hung two art deco sphinxes, head and paws. Black. In the dining room the table had been turned so that whoever sat at the foot was looking into the mirror above the fireplace. Grinter, a dark-faced surgeon with heavy brows and patrician profile, was accompanied by a younger woman who had restless fingers and said to Mrs Challis 'I hope you'll ask me to play your piano.' Grinter introduced her as Yvonne, his wife's cousin; his wife was visiting relatives in America. Mrs Challis asked her daughter to help her bring in the drinks; in the kitchen she said she was furious with the surgeon for turning up with a mistress: 'He never said anything about his wife being in America when I rang him!' She said she wanted her daughter to take the foot of the table and Tony the head. 'I'll sit beside you. He can sit up with Tony and ...' She refused to say the other woman's name.

They argued about the seating. 'Surely there's only one way to have it. Alain's the guest of honour ...' How she hated the silly term. 'He sits at the head, it's your house, you sit facing him.'

'You just don't want to have to see yourself in the mirror all night!'

It was true. She knew it. Her mother knew it. Had the table been moved for the purpose of creating this confrontation?

'I'll sit at the foot of the table if you turn it back the way it was.'

'Oh don't be stupid, Vicky! How can we go in there and shift everything at this stage? Take in the drinks. I'll get the savouries out of the oven.'

A moment later Mrs Challis was asking Yvonne what she was going to play for them. Yvonne offered something by Chopin. Alain was asked if he would like something by Chopin.

'I would very much like something by Chopin, and I would like something by Bach even more.'

Yvonne raised her head as if showing a camera the profile of an artist, and said, 'We shall have both, then. Tony ...' She ran her fingers down his lapel '... will tell us when he thinks we should have music' Mrs Challis was furious with this woman queening it in her lounge. 'No moment like the present,' said the politician. His wife wondered why he couldn't have redirected the evening. The Chopin had scarcely begun when the children came down. She told them they could listen if they were very still, but Lindsay wanted to be beside Yvonne because when they came to grandma's he wasn't allowed to touch the piano. He said he wanted to help Yvonne play, and got up to do it. His mother picked him up and headed for the door. Lindsay started to cry. Ellen stage-whispered 'I'll come up when it's finished, Mum.' On the stairs, her child in her arms, she felt how bitter he was at not being able to touch the gleaming keys. 'I'll lie down with you and tell you stories,' she said; the boy said he hated her, he wanted to be with daddy and grandma. 'Ellen's allowed!' God we get the shit jobs, she thought. She felt like letting him go down and bugger up their music while she lay on a bed. Her mother and the fucking table!

She held the boy tightly. A little of the music came through the door. She said that when he was bigger he could have some lessons, and if he was good—'really really good'—she'd buy a piano for their house. Not that she wanted this to happen; she had no wish to force him to practise as her mother had forced her until she was old enough to refuse. Lindsay didn't soften. He was hard in her arms. She was the child's gaoler and hated the situation as much as he hated her.

Ellen came up, impressed. 'You should've seen her hands, Mum.' She didn't answer. 'Mum!'

'Yes?'

'You should've seen her hands. She's got real big nails. She turned her hand side-on and whizzed it right down the keys. And she didn't break her nails because I went and had a look.' Lindsay cried some more.

When she went downstairs, they were at the table, her mother facing the mirror. Alain was filling glasses. Tony was holding forth on venture capital and negative gearing. Her mother had found time to put a ring on her wedding finger, a rebuke, she presumed, for Grinter and his friend. Was it going to be a night of signals? What were the bloody ear pendants supposed to mean? Who was being got at by them?

The empty chair was on Alain's right, next to Grinter. Opposite was Yvonne, listening to Tony as if her future depended on him. He'll succumb, she thought. The flattery will start in a minute. Grinter filled her bowl with a few deft movements of a ladle.

The tureen had been bought in Siena. When Mrs Challis had realised, from her daughter's letters, what sort of liaison was forming, she'd made her way to Europe, landing in London. They were in Athens. Phone calls and telegrams. Cards. She said she wanted to join them, but went on a trip to the Lakes District. She flew to Paris, then diverted to Limoges. There was an arrangement to meet in Rome, but when they got to their hotel there was a message cancelling the arrangement; she'd gone on a tour of Normandy. They waited a week in Rome. No communication. Tony had been confused; he didn't want his new friend's mother with them but supposed that it couldn't be avoided if they were going to marry. He'd asked what all this uncertainty was about and she'd told him, 'You're going to get used to this.' That had set him wondering if it was wise to go on with it; how much of the mother was in the daughter? He'd asked her this. 'Lots. I'm never going to be

capable of much until I get over that particular legacy. I'm warning you, you're going to put up with a lot. Not just from her. From me.'

So he'd had his chance to pull out and he'd chosen to go on. He was young enough to think that faults could be fixed, or righted, if you were determined, and worked on getting rid of them. She was pessimistic. She said your inheritance was your destiny and you had to live with it, trying to control those things in you that worked against yourself, capitalising on what you'd received that was good, and—and this had frightened him—escaping from yourself if you got the chance.

They'd left Rome for Assisi, leaving a forwarding address. When they left for Florence, they left another forwarding address, and then they'd let the track grow cold. They'd almost forgotten the existence of Mrs Challis in Europe when she called to them, waving gaily, in the great campo of Siena. 'Vickeee! Vicky darling! And Tony! Tony!' Tony had been amazed and she'd felt her heart sinking. Mrs Challis had taken Tony in her arms as if they were going to spend the rest of their lives adoring each other, and she'd allowed her daughter to take her hands as if, the embodiment of grace, she was conferring some kindness on a servant. They asked her how she'd found them.

'I followed your trail to Florence, and I knew that if you'd been in Florence you'd have to come here ...' She waved at the brown city '... and if you came here, you'd have to come *here*!' Her gesture encompassed, seemed almost to describe, the paved field, the tower, the souvenir sellers, town hall, Japanese tourists, the city's mediaeval heart ... She'd stayed—in a different hotel—for three days, then made her way back to London, leaving them feeling blessed, intruded upon, analysed, and somehow altered for her having been there.

And she'd bought the tureen, and spent more on having it packed, posted and insured than she'd paid for the thing itself.

It was full of seafood soup, rich in shellfish. 'This is my Alicante special,' said Mrs Challis, as much to the mirror as to her guests. Yvonne took the opportunity to say, 'And you've added a few drops of Alicante sherry. It's a triumph!' Mrs Challis and her reflection allowed some pleasure to show on their faces. Grinter wondered what he'd let loose. 'What was the name of that piece you played?' he said. 'I don't believe I've heard it before.'

His lover said, 'I've never played it to you before. I played it *when* I played it because Tony wanted it, and I played *what* I played because Emily ...'

She pointed to her hostess, who hated people using her name before she asked them to.

'... wanted me to play.' She took a sip of the wine. 'What is this?' she asked, idly; at the other end of the table Mrs Challis was fuming. She hadn't wanted this woman to touch the piano at all. It had led her grandson to cry! And her daughter to be upstairs, soothing the children, when she should have been getting the gathering started ...

'Tony!' she cried. Her son-in-law took his eyes off Yvonne for a moment. 'I'm not happy with the Party!'

'According to the latest polls,' he said, 'a majority of voters feel the same way. So what do we have to do to please you?'

'You don't have to please me. I'm a member of the Party too.' Satisfied smile. 'But you need to listen, and do what I say.' This'll be why she joined the Party, he thought. His wife felt anxiety, a sure sign that something was going to go wrong.

'The branch structure isn't working. Where I go, so many of them are there for social reasons. They're not a good source of advice.'

A pretty standard gambit, he thought, but since what Mrs Challis called social reasons dominated much of what she herself did, what was she up to?

‘Each of your shadow ministers needs a panel with expertise, real up-to-date inside knowledge. That’s most important ...’

‘A think-tank?’

‘Nothing so vulgar, I think I mean nothing so public, as that. You want to get all the key people, the top people, those that are sympathetic, locked in behind you. Organised. But not so that the media find out. Meet privately. Use their influence.’

She’s recruiting for the Société Dédale, he saw.

‘Well, in a very informal way—and I happen to think that’s best—I suppose we do all that already.’ He beckoned to Alain to fill his glass. As his mother-in-law’s lover bent over him, he had a flash of hatred for him, and sympathy for his wife, who’d had to take the creep to the gallery. ‘Drink up, darling,’ he told her. ‘It’s really excellent.’ Alain moved to the side of his wife, who put her hand over her glass, feeling that the main cards hadn’t yet been played.

Mrs Challis exuded an artificial exuberance. ‘Drink up, everybody. In vino veritas!’ She studied her daughter’s glass. ‘You must have some, darling, it won’t make you do anything foolish!’

The hidden message was that there was some mistake her mother wanted her to make. She was being issued some sort of invitation. She knew what her mother would say next.

‘Unless it’s inside you already, waiting to break out. That’s the veritas in the vino!’ Tony and Grinter were taken aback by the challenge in her voice. Tony looked at his wife. Pale. Hands lifeless. They’d be cold; he knew this mood, when she was being taken over by someone else’s will. He wanted to say something comforting, but the gleam in Alain’s eye told him who was behind what was happening. He wanted to attack the visitor but Mrs Challis got in first.

‘Now, Tony, you say you’re doing it already, but you’re not successful, otherwise you’d be in government. You need to be really professional about this. Alain will show you how to do it. Begin with the arts, because that’s his field, and when you see how well it works, you can spread into other areas.’ Tony felt like punching Alain’s nose, but Mrs Challis was going on:

‘And you, Vicky, with all your contacts, you could be very influential. I want you to work with Alain. Now don’t look at me like that. People are saying that you don’t do anything to help your husband’s career, and it’s going to tell against him when he becomes more senior. You owe it to him to come out of your shell and do something for the community.’

Her rage was going inward, destroying her. Her mother was so desperate to keep her lover in the country that she was prepared to use her daughter as a bait. Alain began producing civilities. He’d be very happy to work with Mrs Decker. His eyes asked for more. She found his proximity unbearable. Tony took his mother-in-law to task. He and Vicky had agreed before they married that she wouldn’t be involved in public, political life. They’d kept to this agreement, it had worked well so far, and it would only change if Vicky herself wanted it to change.

All he needs is a microphone, she thought remembering the row over the phone calls. He was supporting her ... but how dare he, and her mother have this conversation about her, walking all over her, talking about her, trying to shape and guide her, without even noticing that she’d hardly said a word since she sat at table. She looked around, afraid, yet determined. There was no help in Yvonne’s eyes. Grinter was confused and embarrassed; the night was a disaster and they hadn’t got past the soup!

A child’s voice cried from upstairs. ‘Mum, I think I’m going to be sick!’

It could have been her way out, but she told Tony, ‘You go. There’s a plastic basin in the bathroom. Towels are in the cupboard.’ Tony put his serviette down so hastily that it curled into his soup. They could hear his feet pounding on the stairs. ‘Coming Ellen, hold on if you can!’

She looked at the four people left at the table, unrecognised by any of them. Unimportant, a sexual pawn. She took the wine she hadn't touched before, and drank it, so resolutely, at one go, that the others stared at her. In the silence she'd created, she filled the glass, and emptied it again. 'I'll pay for that later, I know,' she said. 'Vicky!' cried her mother, trying to reassert herself. 'I'm going home now,' she said. 'I'm sorry I won't be able to hear your Bach,' she told Yvonne. 'Bach was always beyond me, and I was looking forward to it. Tony can sleep up there tonight,' she told her mother, 'unless you want to lend him your car. Good night.'

She let herself out the side door, into the drive. On the way home she drove carefully, afraid, excited, adrift. They'd put her in an intolerable position. What they did next was their problem. Hers was to find a space, a place in life, where she wasn't owned by others' expectations. She was also intensely curious to know why her mother was as she was. It was as if she was carrying some curse, and had to project it, to see it lived out in the lives of others. Alain would be gone soon, she'd work on her mother to find out. The emptiness of her house, when she got there, the clatter of her feet in the hall where the new carpet was still to be laid, were welcoming. She slept almost at once, waking only when Tony, disobeying her wish that he should sleep on the sofa-bed in his office, crept in beside her. When he touched her, she stiffened. She assumed he'd brought the children; there weren't any sounds from their rooms.

The house was still silent when she woke. No hangover from that foolish gulping of wine. Wanting to be free of what had happened, she went for a walk, taking a downhill route, unconsciously taking, had she known it, the route her husband took when he went jogging.

Terracotta tiles and autumn leaves glowed in the dawn light. This is a very beautiful moment, she thought. I feel precious to myself. At the bottom of the hill she saw the underpass. She hadn't been through in years. She picked her way through a patch of weeds on a thin, winding track. Children. Passing to the other side of the line, she felt she'd entered another dimension, like Alice going through the looking glass. She walked, feeling released, past houses and houses, all in darkness. She was wondering how long she could wander in this way, and what, if anything, could ever make her want to turn back, when she saw a man pruning roses. There were four bushes—red, white, red, white, and he was kneeling by the first. She wondered why he was up so early, and walked in his direction, meaning to ask, but to her surprise he lifted his head so she could see his face for the first time, and said, 'Good morning, Mrs Decker.'

The power of being known! For once she didn't mind. She had a feeling of inevitability, as if this meeting had always been going to happen.

What's your name?

Frederick Holyoake.

Is this your house?

It belongs to my boss. He's had two strokes. I'm helping his wife keep things going.

Why are you up so early?

I have to be at the post office by six on week mornings. In the weekends, I can't break the habit.

Do you always wake up at dawn?

He said he did. They shared the moment with wattlebirds. In the distance, a siren wailed.

Where do you live?

A couple of blocks away.

Show me where you live.

They walked. When they passed Leanne's, he saw her car in the drive.

A friend of mine lives there.

It was a woman's car, or a student's.

Is she important to you?

I'm not important to her. I've been wasting her time.

Is she nice?

She's very nice. I'd like her to have someone who's right for her.

What's your house like?

It's absolutely empty. I'm embarrassed, but I'll show it to you.

Why are you embarrassed?

I've just had it painted. The walls are bare. Every room is white, white, white.

He showed her through.

As you see, it's all still to happen.

She repeated his words:

It's all still to happen.

Let's sit in the garden.

They sat under an old, spreading magnolia.

There's quite a few of these in the area. People say they were planted by someone who owned a mansion on the hill. I think some nurseryman bought up a lot of them so he had to persuade people they'd do well.

It was dark under the tree; lighter and lighter outside.

Can I have a cup of tea? I've got a disastrous night to get over. Or perhaps it was a very tiny little triumph.

I'll put the jug on. I'd love to hear about your night.

Her mother wanted her blood, her apologies, her subjection. She wanted Tony to humiliate his wife, she wanted Alain to make her crave his presence, the touch of his hands on her body. The male as vengeance!

Alain left.

Mrs Challis, in her rage, went to her accountant. How could they unpick the family trust her late husband had set up?

The accountant explained, taking her through the complexities, that it was in everyone's interest to leave things as they were. The tax advantages were considerable …

Mrs Challis, succumbing to his arguments, looked for another way. An old friend. A true, tried, trusty friend.

Uncle Hendry.

Hendry rang shortly after lunch on the day the children had announced that they were too grown-up to need a midday sleep. No one was in a good mood. Patch had an infected ear and had to be taken to the vet. Ellen had had her first dental inspection and was anxious because Doctor Williams had wanted to see her again in six weeks.

'He just wants to make sure your teeth are growing in the right places,' she told her daughter, wondering what instabilities were being transmitted; unknown to either of them, through her reassurances.

She wanted to be free of her mother.

She told Hendry he'd rung at a bad time, and she'd get back to him. Soon.

When Tony came home, she saw the children through meals, baths and into pajamas. Then she told her husband to read them stories because she felt like going for a walk.

It didn't take long. Down the hill. The house with the roses. The house with the bashed-up blue Torana. The house with the white rooms. She knocked. He opened.

Come through. Let's sit under the tree.

As the autumn session wore on, Tony said they'd go for a family holiday the moment it was over. There'd been too much tension and he couldn't understand what was going wrong. He believed he was putting as much into his marriage as his work permitted, but, he said, a fortnight together, boating, walking along the beach, camping, cooking on an open fire, would bring them all so much closer.

She thought it sounded ghastly. No privacy, no retreat. He started looking at camping equipment. Tents as big as a small house. Powerful vehicles that could store all their gear and pull a boat. She wondered why everything had to be done in a big way, but couldn't bring herself to subvert the zest he felt for the idea. She talked about it with her friend.

You can have my other house.

I didn't know you had another house.

He told her about his house in the bush, about the lake and the mountains and the years when he was younger. When she walked up the hill that night, she felt light. In the house with white rooms, the empty place she was going to help him fill, she'd found the hideaway and the secret companion she'd always wanted.

The next night she told Tony she'd been offered the use of a house near a lake where he could go boating.

'Where is it?'

She told him.

'Who owns it?'

'Our postman.'

'How did you find out about it?'

'I talk to him.'

Saying it made her feel strong. He sensed something new about her he couldn't identify.

'What's his name?'

'Does it matter?'

'I was going to ring him up. Ask him how much he wants. Ask him about facilities, hiring boats, that sort of thing. Why are you looking at me like that?'

'If we use his house, I'll make the arrangements.'

Her husband felt perplexed. Frustrated. This holiday was supposed to make them united, Happy together. Now the cancer had crept in, right at the planning stage. When the children came to him, wanting to hear new things about their trip, he answered them glumly, 'I don't know. Ask your mother.'

She had to prepare for the years when the children were older. Mothering wouldn't last for ever. In her own estimation she had few talents and little drive, but of what was in her, photography might be a possibility. She enrolled in a course. Two half days a week, with printing at night because

full-time students used the darkrooms during the day. She bought secondhand cameras because it seemed absurd to load yourself up with costly equipment that was more sophisticated than the user. She was embarrassed when Tony bought a leather box for her gear because it seemed to enshrine this activity, about which she felt tentative, as a major fact in her life. The children were waiting for her to produce pictures.

She needed someone to come in while she was on the course. She advertised in the local paper. Nine people rang, some of whom were hopeless. She doubted the motives of others.

Marj got the job. She was frank at the interview. 'I need the escape. My sister'll come and look after Jack and I wouldn't mind giving her just about all of what you pay me, just so I've got a part of my life that isn't tied up with him.'

A creeping sensation came over her when Marj told her where she lived. 'I've been past your house,' she said. 'You've got a friend who does your garden.'

'That's Fred,' Marj said cheerily. 'He's your postie. You must have seen him. He's been on this round for years. Jack offered him a change but he didn't want it.' She was pleased to have something in common with this withdrawn, hesitant-seeming woman who was going to be her employer.

'You call him Fred?'

'Everyone calls him Fred. That or Hollyhock, that's his nickname. The boys at the office all call him that.'

Events were creeping behind her, entwining her. This cheery, working-class woman, who seemed to have great needs unsatisfied within her, but kept up a deceptively simply front of good nature and optimism, would form a bond, a sort of familial bond, between her and the house with white rooms. For a moment she was scared. She studied the stranger in her house intently.

'Have I said something wrong? That's what they call him.'

She knew she wouldn't be able to keep secret from Marj what was happening, and she felt sure that the older woman could be trusted. Her tension faded. She smiled.

'Sorry. It doesn't matter. I'll be very happy to have you with the children. And with me.'

'Well that's really good,' said Marj. 'Now. How you want me to call you is up to you, but I want you to call me Marj. And the kids are to call me that too. If they start calling me Mrs Sparkes I'm going to feel like a real old grannie. Well, I suppose it won't be all that long before I am, but I don't want to feel like that up here. With you people.'

Warmth ran between them. The children put their heads around the door. She called them to meet Marj, then realised that there was something she hadn't said.

'You'd better call me Vicky. Actually, I'd prefer it if you didn't call me anything.'

'What's wrong with Vicky, if it's your name?'

'It makes me sound like an adolescent. I was christened Victoria, which is no doubt a good name for a queen, but hardly my style.' Her embarrassment showed. Marj pushed on. 'You could change it. Give yourself another name.' In the silence that followed, she hoped she hadn't gone too far.

'I don't deserve another name. I am an adolescent, and it's my mother, as you'll see when you meet her, who carries on like a queen. If I knew what else I was, picking a name would be easy.'

Marj told Leanne about her new job. '*He* ...' She looked so intensely into Leanne's eyes that she had to look away '... is a member of parliament. The Honourable, no, the Right Honourable Mister Anthony Decker. And she, *she*, is a real refined lady, and boy, has she got problems!'

Having said it, she felt ashamed. She was gossiping, and she'd grasped, in her brief interview with her new employer, that she put a high value on trust.

'But she's beautiful, Leanne, and she said a funny thing. She said she'd been past my house, and she knew about Fred doing my garden.'

'How did she know that?'

'She didn't say. But when I said his name, she went a bit funny. Have you seen him lately?'

'He came around the other night, and he was in a funny mood too. He was very apologetic, and he seemed excited as well.'

'What did he want?'

'He said that when he first asked me out—it was to your barbecue, remember—he'd been hoping we'd form a relationship ...'

'One way of putting it.'

'... and he felt he'd been pressing me for more than I wanted to give, and he'd been taking up time he hadn't had the right to ask for, and he admired me, and wanted to maintain the friendship.'

'Oh yes.'

'It was what I said to you before. He was letting himself out. He wanted to be somewhere else. Well, I shouldn't complain, I wanted this to happen, but ...'

'Something's going on.' They considered, without meeting each other's eyes, what might be going on, and what they would feel about it if it were. Marj broke the silence. 'He's out of his league. Someone's going to get hurt. Something's going to go wrong, if it hasn't already.'

'You realise we're only guessing.'

'Well, maybe. I don't know. Something tells me we're not.'

'Actually,' said Leanne, 'I'm sorry we started to talk about it. This is just another thing I don't want to know.' Trapped by their suspicions, they didn't know how, with any decency, to rid themselves of their discomfort.

'I'm not sure that I want that job now. I suppose I've got to go on with it. Just wait and see.'

'I'm starting to think,' said Leanne, 'that it might have been better if I'd taken him on for a while. No one would have got too knocked about.' Marj said, 'You don't mean that, you know.' Leanne nodded, feeling well out of it. They looked at each other, then away. It wasn't good to know too much in advance. 'Poor Fred,' said Marj.

Leanne added, 'Poor ... what's her name?' 'That's another thing,' said Marj.

Leanne sometimes had lunch with Cheryl, who worked in Tony's electorate office. They talked about the complaints that came in, the bastardry that went on, and devious attempts to secure the politician's support. Some of the same men had dealings with Leanne's bosses. Cheryl particularly disliked a man called Hendry Larter who, she gathered, was a relative by marriage of Mr Decker. 'I always keep something between us when he's in the office.' Hendry Larter was something of a specialist in zoning changes who was forever introducing developers to councillors. 'He's trying to sell Mr D a holiday house somewhere on the Great Ocean Road. I don't know who owns this house but there's something fishy about it, I can tell. And he asks after Mr D's wife as if he's trying

to find out something.' Leanne said nothing. 'Imagine being married to a politician. Never home. Oh well, plenty of opportunities if you want 'em. Do you know, he's got pictures of his kids on his desk, but he hasn't got one of her. I've never seen her. She's never been into the office once.'

Leanne told her about Marj working for the Deckers. 'Fascinating,' said Cheryl. 'And she's a friend of yours?' Leanne felt embarrassed, and protective of this woman she'd never met. She felt she owed this shadow, this idea of a person she'd put together from scraps of information, her respectful silence.

They sat under the magnolia, rubbing knees.

How long will this last?

Do you mean us, or the weather?

They laughed. There was no end to them, they'd barely begun.

I want to read you a poem.

I'd love that.

She read him Valery's La ceinture.

What's that last word mean? It sounds important.

Linçeul. Shroud. Gravecloth.

Do they give a translation?

Yes, but it isn't any good.

They smiled, enfolded in each other.

Tell me what you think it means.

It's written in a man's voice. He's having a perfect, sensuous response to the coming of evening. The colours. Time standing still. Then he sees a shadow—*une ombre*—before him, with a loose belt. Girdle. Sash. It's probably best to think of it as a sash.

She was wearing a belt herself, curving downwards from her hips, the buckle glowing in the light that found its way under the canopy.

This shadow is about to be seized by the night. It's going to take her back into itself. The next bit's hard. He feels his connection with the world start to tremble. You feel he wants to follow her. And be swallowed up too. That's when he says *Absent, présent* ... I'm not here, I am here. I'm all alone. And that's when he refers to the *ceinture*, the sash, as a *linçeul*. Gravecloth.

He waited for her to finish.

I suppose it means he's ready to go with her. Or he could go. She laughed. So you see, it's all very very. She stood up. The buckle of her belt was near his face. Why the poem? He felt it characterised her in some way. Was she trying to warn him? He took the buckle and unclasped it.

That's what I wanted you to do.

She lifted her jumper and put his hands under.

Are they too cold?

No, they're just right. I hate people with warm hands.

It was a mild autumn night. She moved her body against his fingers.

Let's go inside.

When they came out, she got a bottle from her bag. He went back for glasses, putting them on an old marble table. They sat, squeezing each other's knees.

This will always be one of our places.

Will you come to my bush house? I'll take you into the mountains.

Yes I'll come as soon as I can.

He filled with delight.

I'll be riding past your house tomorrow.

Blow your whistle a few doors before my place, and a few doors after, and that little space will be ours.

Tell your children to listen for me.

There was so much happiness that she wanted to share it, involve them.

I will!

He blew the whistle at nine minutes to eleven, moving briskly up the street. A minute later, he blew it again.

'What's so funny, Mum?'

Having someone conscious of her happiness meant she couldn't restrain it. What had been a flushed smile turned into laughter.

'Mum? Is it because Lindsay's got Vegemite on his face?'

'Has he? I was laughing at the postman's whistle, he blew it so hard.'

'Why did he do that?'

'Because he wanted us to know he was around.'

'To let us know he'd been?'

'Yes.'

'Will we go and see if there's any letters?'

'Let's.'

She was going to photograph him. Showing Tony the prints would be her way of letting him realise how things were.

Cheryl was leaving Tony's office to be married. Her fiancé was an accountant and he'd been offered a job on the Gold Coast. She asked Leanne if she wanted to take her place. They talked about it. Slightly better money. Plenty of variety because you never knew what was coming next, and more your own boss because Mr Decker was in and out and never stayed long. 'Actually, Lee,' Cheryl said, 'I feel like I'm the member of parliament sometimes. I ring up and say Mr Decker wants to know such and such, or why hasn't Mrs Somebody's pension been paid? I tell you, they take more notice than if it was you or me. And I know I could get you the job. Mr D says he can't be bothered advertising and having interviews. So long as he gets the right person.'

Leanne said she'd think it over. She wanted to take it, but felt uncomfortable about moving closer to the problematical situation she and Marj were aware of.

Then she took herself to task. Why should she give up something she wanted because of other people? She remembered an incident from her last year at school. The literature students were studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and were going to stage some of its scenes on Parents' Night, but there was no one who wasn't too big and awkward to play Puck. Dr Quinlan, their teacher, asked them to pick someone from another class who had the right body. A boy, another girl and Leanne were suggested. Dr Quinlan asked them to read some of Puck's lines to the class. Annette, a withdrawn, unpopular girl, read woodenly. Leanne was asked to read the long speech 'My mis-

tress with a monster is in love'; the class was soon restless. She'd been through the play and knew there were wonderful lines, and she wanted to dart about the stage with her body that had hardly changed in puberty. But Dr Quinlan asked her to stand aside. Roger, producing a scrap of paper, said, 'Can I pick my bit?', knelt on the floor and commanded Annette to sit on his back. 'I am that merry wanderer of the night,' he began. Leanne could see some of the boys looking at each other.

The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale,

Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me,

Then slip I from her bum, down topples she …

Roger wriggled aside, Annette, who hadn't known what was coming, fell, and the class, particularly the boys, laughed. Roger got the part. She'd gone to Dr Quinlan to say it wasn't fair. He said he'd promised his class that they could choose, and they'd chosen. She said, feeling hurt, 'Some of those boys put him up to it. It was a trick.' Dr Quinlan gave her an exasperated look, said 'How simple do you think I am? I can't change everything just for you', and walked away. That was when she learned that nothing would ever be changed. Just for her.

At college, she'd met the wrong man, seven years older …

She rang Cheryl and asked her to arrange a meeting with Mr Decker.

They liked each other straight away. Each was what the other had expected. Leanne's knowledge of what the job entailed. Tony's suit. Her voice, so obviously good for the phone. His air of knowing what influential people were about. It was soon decided. She was to start on a Thursday, to have overlap with Cheryl. On the Friday he took them to lunch. When they got back there was a large box, wrapped with expensive simplicity, on Cheryl's desk. She wanted to open it. Leanne said it was a wedding present, she shouldn't open it till the day. Tony said, 'I think we could call it a going-away present that would be useful for someone getting married. But we don't need to undo the wrapping because I can show you what's inside.' He produced a Royal Doulton catalogue. 'Just a little coffee set. Concord Gold!' He made it sound very special. Cheryl kissed her ex-boss. 'I told you he was good to work for,' she said. 'I don't want to go now, Mr D, I know I won't get a job like this in Queensland.'

On the Monday, Tony was different. He entered his office by the side door, made himself coffee, and settled to study the latest research figures. Seats. Swings. Issues. When he spoke, his voice was aggressive, jaunty, and hollow.

'D'you know how we're going to win the next election, Leanne?'

She waited. He was studying her, but not meeting her eye.

'We're going to *hound* them. Attack where they're vulnerable. And by God that's just about everywhere.'

'And what about here, Mr Decker, in your seat?'

He rapped his desk with the knuckles of his right hand. 'We're unbeatable here. This is one of the safest seats in the state!' He stood up, and as if needing to compel confidence, or exert his power, he walked to the front of her desk. I'm just a backbencher, Leanne. In opposition. But wait.' He tapped her desk. 'I'll be a shadow minister soon, then we'll win government, and that's when you—you—will really start going places!'

It was too early in their partnership to do anything but humour him.

'I'm looking forward to it, Mr D.'

His wife rang later in the morning. Tony was out, Leanne took the call. Mrs Decker was going on a photographic assignment, then there'd be printing to do, she'd be late. She'd arranged for Marj to stay with the children. If Tony got back first he could run Marj home. It was only a short trip, first street past the railway line.

Leanne couldn't stop herself.

'Near me.'

'Near you? Isn't that Cheryl?'

'No, Mrs Decker, Leanne.'

Silence.

'Cheryl's left, she's getting married and moving to Queensland. I've taken over, as from this morning.'

Leanne could feel shyness, and curiosity, at the other end of the line. 'I hope I meet you some time.' Leanne felt privileged; she liked the lightness of Mrs Decker's voice, and the feeling that she'd meant what she said. This happiness lasted until Fred brought the mail. He was amazed to find her in the MP's office and his discomfort gave her an unpleasant awareness of being trapped in other people's circumstances. 'Bit of a step up,' he said, trying to keep it light. She studied him coldly. 'We've got some talking to do, some time.' He waved airily. 'Any time you like.' A minute later she could hear him in the residential area behind the shops, blowing his whistle more than was necessary. Nerves? Bravado? Defiance? Mockery, and if mockery, of whom? She didn't want her employer to come back and she didn't like being on her own. Cool efficiency was her defence. She answered calls, made appointments, took notes, referred people to appropriate departments, all the time feeling a heaviness that none of this activity could dispel.

Kiss my breasts.

Sing!

She punched him. I wish I could.

They spent the afternoon telling each other about their lives.

I've got to take some photographs. Are you coming?

Come on top again and then we'll go.

She had to take photos of trees—for their form, their texture, colour, ambience; trees alone, trees in groups, trees being used.

Our lecturer says they're a hard subject. Most people's trees won't make a picture. He says trees need help, like the dark oak with graves, or the slum street with one little twig trying to grow, but pictures like that are only clichés.

Daunting!

We'll have to drive around.

They spiralled through their city, stopping, snapping. People asked them what they were doing, suggested streets, trees, asked them to come inside. They heard stories, were shown photos of old people when they were woodcutters, pushing crosscut saws into trunks thicker than chimneys. They saw riders sheltering in the burnt out butts of trees, long since felled, whose canopies were forever imaginable, streaming in the winds of another century. Children asked her to take their pictures, and she did. At sunset, they were in the street outside her mother's house.

It's like a homing instinct. I hope this doesn't embarrass you.

He said it didn't. She moved about, trying to find in the elms the welcoming, protective resonance they'd had when she was small.

Now some of you.

He said the side lighting would be too strong, his face would be disfigured by shadows.

Squat down against that wall.

Bathed in reflected light, he watched while she moved the lens to examine him. He looked into her hair, looked at the fingers he wanted, now, never to be without. Soft hair, tender fingers, eyes of love. Except the lens. He laughed and put his hands in front of his face.

Okay, I don't blame you. I've got a few. And I won't let you take any of me because I hate to have my picture taken. Not very fair I know.

Heavy with love, light with love, they put their arms around each other. The car. Down the hill to his house.

Where are we having dinner?

Anywhere. Something cheap and simple.

They had dinner, lay beside each other.

I've never been in love like this before.

She whispered it so quietly to his pillow that he barely caught the words. She was talking to herself and he knew that no one had ever heard her before. He could catch the words you and you're in her soliloquy of love; he ran his fingers feather-light across her body until he needed to push aside her pillow so he could be beneath those lips, that outpouring. They looked with lens-less eyes into each other, through each other, holding each other, held by an impermanent force that it was unthinkable to imagine would ever leave them.

Love of loves.

They touched shyly at the door.

I've brought you some sheets.

Inside, they traced the patterns.

They're beautiful. Where did you get them?

They're Italian. You're not allowed to ask what they cost.

He loved them; they were too good for what he'd been, but perfect for what he felt he was becoming.

When we're in bed on sunny afternoons, we'll be able to pull them over us and look up.

Let's try it.

They undressed.

They're ours. You're not allowed to share them with anyone else.

Laughing at the impossibility, they rushed to be together, stroking their cool lovers' bodies, warming.

Kiss my breasts.

They lost the afternoon in each other.

Please can I have some tea?

She went outside to wait for him.

I'm going to buy you a tray.

Don't spend too much on me.

I want to. I want you to tell me why you emptied the house. I want to be here all the time. I can't, but I want to. You won't let anyone else come here, will you?

He shook his head.

Are you sure you don't want someone else?

I couldn't possibly have anyone else.

I think I've got next weekend organised. You can take me to your bush house.

She touched him.

Love of loves.

In his excitement, he felt a strand of doubt, of caution.

What is it, darling?

I've got this fear that it's all going to blow up. When other people find out, for instance.

They'll find out in good time. Bugger them, we're going on.

He smiled, feeling weak, admiring her determination.

You're not used to taking risks.

He nodded, accepting.

They think I'm taking photos. Well, I will be. But a couple of weeks later I'll have to take the family there.

He nodded.

You don't mind?

You can have anything you like from me.

I'm leading a double life. It's most uncomfortable.

He told her about Leanne, and how she and Marj were friendly.

Things are closing in.

He waited.

You're right. There is going to be a blow-up. Oh

He felt her tension, then her softening.

Do you want me to hold you for a while?

Just sit with me.

They touched knees.

When I print those photos, I'll leave them around. He won't know who you are.

Won't he ask?

He's not curious. He'll think you're someone on the course with me. But one day he'll be in his office when you bring the mail, and he'll wake up. Be ready. He might flare up at you, but he's more likely to wait for me.

When that happens, come down here.

I'm not shifting the children. I'll sit him out. If doesn't like it, he can go.

You are more courageous than me.

We have to be. Sorry darling. Love of loves.

She rubbed his leg. He bent his head humbly.

I can't give you anything. Except trouble. I want to say—give me up, go back to how you were—but I can't bring myself to say it. Actually, I'm relying on your courage to bring us through. Sorry if that's too heavy.

Let's not talk about it. Tell me where we're going

On the way out of Melbourne they picked their way through a road-widening project; Australia forever being remade. She drove fast, leaving everything but a patrol car behind. The freeway curved through farm country like a racing track.

Strange how easy it is.

Once you make up your mind.

Are we driving away from, or driving to?

It has to be both.

She knew none of the towns.

We can leave the highway here.

At the top of a rise, near a level crossing, they got their first wide view, pointed straight at the mountains He named them.

Do you love them more than people?

I did.

They bought supplies at the shop where Marj had stopped.

She's minding my kids some of the time. Tony's doing a bit. And my mother.

You said she was your enemy.

She is. It's something I'll have to come to terms with some day.

They stopped at the tree where his friend had been killed.

I want to know everything about you. Even things you're ashamed of. I can cope. It's not just because I'm in love. You see, I'm afraid so much of the time that I'm used to it. I can take difficult stuff head on. It's the only way I can deal with being desperate.

Each clung to the tree with one arm, leaning against each other, holding.

I stood here sixteen years ago, feeling wretched. I never dreamed this lay ahead of me.

I was a schoolgirl. Doing plenty of dreaming, but not about you!

They laughed. He felt her absorbing the dark trunk: the grey foliage, light sky.

It's all so big and open. Yet it's closed and mysterious too. Don't let me get lost!

They lit two fires, in the stove and the front room.

The water gets hot from the stove. Madame's toilet can include a bath.

Is there a big bed?

We'll have to push two together.

You visit me and I'll visit you.

No falling down the middle!

For the first time, passion was stronger than excitement. It poured rain while they were making love They lay listening to the sound dying, and watching the light change as the clouds moved away.

It feels like morning, but it'll be night soon.

This is a good time to go for a walk.

There were puddles on the track, and the trees gave off their clean, penetrating smell.

He pointed.

This is where we found Jack. Just there.

For the second time they stood by a tree, thinking about the fate of others.

Darling darling?

Mm?

What time is it?

Don't know. About midnight.

Hold me.

When he rolled back, he almost fell through.

You pushed the beds apart.

I didn't, it was you.

She punched him. They laughed.

I never get tired.

It's as if energy comes from somewhere and finds us.

The morning was cold. He got up to light a fire. While he was puffing at the reluctant flame, kneeling on the worn mat, she came out, wrapped in a rug, to kneel beside him.

Where are we going today, darling?

Two lives were never more perfectly entwined. He put his head on her shoulder.

I'm your Siamese twin. I can feel everything that's happening inside you.

It was their necks, and hair, that were touching. She laughed.

I feel as if this rug is my only skin!

The flame in the fireplace dwindled, almost failed, then decided to join them in their joy. The kindling became noisy. The smoke, like a ghost deciding it was useless to hang around haunting it if was going to be ignored, spiralled up the chimney to signal that there was life in the shabby weatherboard with its rusty green roof. Mist from the lake incorporated this message in its morning announcement; the sun, above the horizon, but not yet privy to the valleys in the north, was stirring all the moisture in leaf and blade to get up, as if these tiny drops had no right to an individual existence, but should be aloft in one big, corporate, happy, communal cloud!

The road north, bitumen as it was, behaved like a bullock track, finding easy saddles between the low hills where it coasted on or near the top. Then, having joined the river, it flicked in and out of gullies, stepping over culverts, gutters, pipes and bridges. Red and blue parrots flitted lightly between the trees. She drove sensuously, feeling the earth through the wheels of her car. His busy, pointing fingers gave wattles, rock strata, cockatoos, willy wagtails, stretches of splashing water and Trespassers Prosecuted signs their entry. Sheets of corrugated iron, the union bosses of his orchestra, told them not to shoot. They got petrol at the last settlement.

Ready to go up?

They slid into her car, now his. They climbed. Steep grades and narrow cuttings. They went on. Thickets of mountain ash explained that foresters had sprinkled seed too liberally, and now there was a struggle to be members of the mature forest. The air on the plateau told them to put on more clothes. They stopped and went on. The ranges were separated by cottonwool, vast cartoon-balloons of it, waiting for words. The mountains said they'd been there long before the sombre Finn, Sibelius, had written parts for the trombone, or Brahms the horn. They suggested to the visitors, the woman and the man in a costly German car, that they might like to step out and walk.

There are marvellous places for you to see.

The selected spot was shown them by a kindly, middle-aged mountain, very tall.

I once had a fine head of hair like you, young lady. Now I'm bald.

The path had been made, centuries before. It was rock. It had been neglected, and there were places where a careless ankle could be twisted. Fallen bark and branches had been allowed

to collect, but the original design, a simple one, could still be discerned. Snow gums, from tiny seedlings to hoary old abseilers that should have known better than to cling where they did, had been planted in ranks which they'd long since broken. For contrast, a range of dainty flowers had been provided—wild, primitive things, lean, sinuous, crisp as the snow that came to sit on the mountain. These delightful creatures, having never heard of horticulture or nurserymen, had no sense of needing improvement.

Please don't tread on us as you pass!

But you can carry us, or put us in your hair!

They did as they'd been invited.

They came upon a bulldozer track. The forgiving bush had grown over it. They held hands where the driver had given up. Wombats had dug holes in his last pile of dirt.

He couldn't find a way around me, but keep climbing and you'll see.

They discovered that their host was Chinese. His rocks were lichen-covered, and his last remaining trees, twisted and broken, were of finely polished timber. He was in playful mood and had spread white daisies in the grass.

He warned them to lie down because there was a breeze coming, and clouds were going to hide the sun for a moment.

I'm quivering. Not because it's cold.

It's a very special place.

The shadow passed, and they jumped up.

This was where their identities seized them.

I'm only a postman.

You're not only anything.

He waited. She held the key to his value.

I'm nothing either.

You're rich.

My father left me money. I'm nothing.

You're too confident to be nothing.

I'm afraid of that confidence. There's nothing substantial beneath it. It's the confidence of a class. Once I move out of that class, those circles, I'm nothing.

What's wrong with us that we want to be things? Standing here, with all this around us, who needs a class? A career? Who even needs an identity?

The mountains rumbled their agreement.

Thunder!

The clouds had lowered dark veils in the next valley but one.

Raining over there.

But not here! She seized him. Darling darling!

The daisies laughed. The old trees wanted to be moved to the happy couple's garden.

Let's say what we want.

I want us to go on forever.

Commonsense says we haven't got a hope.

Then we'll live by an uncommon principle.

She was thoughtful.

Say what you want, darling.

I'm all caught up in you. I'm out of control. I'm so full of energy and I'm so much in love I could do anything. But my big blazes don't last. I want to translate this—us—into something we can live with. I want to make a life that's got us at the centre.

The trees had their doubts. The daisies started to wonder.

But I don't want to break things down. I've made a house for my kids. Even Tony treats it with respect at times, though he's so clumsy it makes me angry.

You must have been in love when you married.

I was. And I thought I could control him. But I was wrong on both counts. I don't want him near me any more, and he doesn't take his bearings from me these days, he takes them from the last person he talked to. I wish he'd go away.

The trees were disturbed. Senior mountains, feeling that this conversation, so important to the humans, was irritating, rumbled angrily.

Do you think we should go back to the car?

No, let's sit it out and see what happens.

The words, hanging in the air, made them look at each other. Were they talking about the weather, or themselves?

Did we just make a decision?

I think we did.

The plateau approved. The wise old trees thought it was the best they could do. The daisies asked for and received a shaft of light. The immovable rocks called on the winds for a gesture of support, and the air became still.

We're so alone. Do you feel in danger, darling?

If you mean us, yes. If you mean something happening to us here, no. I could die here, and not care at all.

Why darling?

I feel that if I died here, then I'd be going back to where we must all have come from. We're nothing, then we're alive, then we're dirt again, rather nasty dirt, in the ground. Up here, I feel in touch with all other life. I feel limitless. If I could be dissolved into all this, I'd be happy to go. Nothing would have been lost.

The snowgrass tussocks didn't care for what he was saying. They didn't want his bones lying around.

I'd have lost you, darling. I couldn't bear it.

Then what I've been saying is silly. I couldn't go away from you either, and I'm not into suicide pacts or melodrama like that. I suppose I think we owe it to life to let it have its way with us, and being here with you, although it makes me feel exalted, makes me also accept that there's an end.

Some theatrical clouds moved around the edge of this dialogue, swirling their capes of rain. A short-circuit in the celestial wiring caused some startling flashes, yet the noises that followed them, very loud, perhaps, at their point of origin, were pianissimo tympani by the time they rolled up the Chinese mountain. A flirtatious breeze ruffled her fair, curly hair.

Someone up there loves you, young lady.

Why are you crying, darling?

This is a point of perfection for you. It's an absolute. It's a point of perfection for me too, but it's not an absolute, not final. It's a point we're passing through. There are no absolutes. We just like to pretend there are by using words like kingdom or …

She was momentarily afraid to say it.

... death.

It struck him hard.

God. Extinction. Those things are not absolutes. They're part of a process whereby everything is done away with, to be replaced by something new. If we commit ourselves to this process we're subverting our own position. If we don't commit ourselves to it we're swept away anyhow. It's a no-win situation. So you have to align yourself with what's going to do away with you. For a woman, that means that the child is more important than the adult, even though—isn't this stupid—the child will eventually become an adult.

He felt that what she'd said would become a decision one day.

The rocks kept very quiet. The birds chose not to approach.

She took his hand.

I think I've frightened you. Don't be frightened. I could never do anything to hurt you.

The mountain felt it was time to help.

Some of my friends are waiting for you. See them over there?

They made their way down the grassy incline, sliding on their bottoms. Soon they were at the bulldozer track, then the rocky way. Soon they were at the car.

Goodbye mountain.

Take care, gentle people. Come back if you can.

The next mountains were a wild lot. Proud precipice-gazers, vista-people, profligate with daisies and degrees of vision, needing a cloak of storm to make them fully dressed.

Will we camp out tonight, darling, or go back to your house?

Stay here?

That's what I want to do.

They pitched their tent near a stream.

If it gets windy we'll hear the roar of the trees up there, and we'll be snug down here.

We'll need a fire.

They foraged for dry wood, amazing themselves with their energy.

This could be a bonfire!

It'd all be gone in an hour. Let's be canny Scots and keep it going all night.

She hugged him.

So long as it's a big one!

The crags, eminences and crests considered their visitors.

Will we let them stay?

Watch them and listen.

They tended their fire carefully. She got water. They sat in two folding chairs, the thrones of their love.

If we watch it, it won't boil.

Let's watch it, then, and make it take forever.

The dragon-backed mountains felt this was a good start.

Tell me about your life. Things you haven't told me before. From the inside.

He unzipped his jacket and looked down. They laughed, the willingness was so strong.

Will I sing it, or tell it as a tale?

Anything you like, darling, but bring the story here to us.

The repetiteur, a rabbit, looked out of its log.

He began.

Once upon a time . . .

They grabbed each other, laughing wildly. The fire blazed, cracking and popping. The birds did everything birds do—snipped insects with their beaks; soared; flitted, calling, from tree to tree in the light blue, light brown forest.

... there was a man ...

Ein mensch.

... who thought he could never put himself together.

Is this a magical tale, darling?

Only at the end.

He touched her hand.

Have I made things right for you?

Yes.

How did I do it?

You accepted me. You see, I think men resolve most things through their women. Their lives and their bodies.

Did your wife let you do that?

No. And we split.

I don't let Tony do it to me any more.

Can we avoid it?

She became abstracted, distant. Where was she? He wanted her back.

What have I done for you, darling? Can you say?

Yes. You give me honest answers. You don't try to be anything you aren't. Above all, you recognise me.

Remember that first morning, by the roses?

I've never been so perfectly comprehended. I knew it would be safe to be with you because you wouldn't try to distort me, or interfere with me. You want for me what I want for myself. That's very precious. And rare. And, I have to say, that you're my hideaway. I come to you to be made happy. That's another rare gift you've got.

No one else has ever said so.

Then they didn't understand you.

He felt she was validating, retrospectively, his earlier years of manhood. If he accepted this, would he be letting himself off too lightly, now that he was perfect? Something else was nagging.

What were you thinking about, a moment ago, when you were quiet?

I was asking myself if I had accepted you, and I have. I've taken you into my very centre. And I was trying to look ten, five years ahead, and I couldn't see any thing. That means I'm going on without hope.

Who was the Greek woman who always knew the future?

Cassandra.

Do you think she really knew, or did she just project her fears?

She ran the tips of her fingers along the back of his hand. Hold me darling.

They stood up. He unzipped the front of the tent.

Are you afraid you've made a mistake?

I haven't made a mistake. I'm here because I need to be.

It was on the second night that Tony began to feel something was wrong. It was in the quality of the silence. She hadn't rung. She'd left no notes on the fridge or by the stove. He told the children she'd gone to fix up the place where they were going to stay, and to take pictures, but he didn't convince himself. They wanted to know when she was coming back, and he realised she hadn't told him. Without letting the children see what he was doing, he searched the house. No notes. Nothing in her typewriter. She hadn't left her diary. Her clothes hung in the wardrobe, empty of her. Her books stood on their shelves, as motionless as if they'd never been read. Her bed was as she'd left it. A towel hung over a chair. She'd got up, dressed, and disappeared. He thought of the Cheshire cat that vanished, leaving only its grin behind. She'd left nothing.

Then he remembered the newspaper cutting he'd found, one morning, in the pantry. It was still there, but mixed with the booklets and guarantees of their electrical appliances; Marj had been tidying. There were two cuttings; he only remembered one. He took them to his office—his room, now that he slept on the sofa-bed—and pushed the door till it was almost shut; he wanted to hear the children if they came.

There it was—the mark of her scissors where she'd wanted to cut it short:

> Mrs McQuade said she told lies to police investigating the killing because she was afraid of the scandal ...
>
> 'I realised that if I hadn't had a relationship with Dennis Dixon, Lindsay would still be alive,' she said.
>
> 'Despite our troubles, we didn't amount to much without each other and our kids ...'
>
> 'I never intended for my husband to be killed and I am not guilty of such a crime ...'

Tony felt he was uncovering part of her mystery. She couldn't have known these people? She'd never been to Moyston. He looked at the cutting he hadn't seen before. He had to force himself to read slowly.

> Questioned by his counsel, Mr Ted Ormonde QC, Senior Constable Dixon said it was the second time he and Mrs McQuade had led her husband into a trap; on the first occasion, too, he was not able to bring himself to kill the other man.

It occurred to Tony that his wife might have gone away with another man; he tried to put it out of his head.

> He said that ten days before the final confrontation he had rung Senior Constable McQuade at the Moyston police station and told him there was a suspicious looking car in Rogerson Road that he should look at. Senior Constable Dixon, armed with a shotgun and wearing a balaclava, had waited at Rogerson Road, but when the other man arrived, he pulled off the balaclava, threw down the gun, and cried.

The children came down the passage. Tony put a folder over what he was reading. Ellen put her face around the door. 'Me and Lindsay'—the name made him wince—'are going to play out the front with Patch. Let's in when we bang.'

> Two days later, Mrs McQuade had telephoned him in Melbourne and asked him why things had gone wrong.
>
> 'She said it was hopeless, that we couldn't be together, but that she still loved me and wanted to be with me; I felt the same,' Senior Constable Dixon said.

Patch and the children scampered across the verandah, knocking over Lindsay's tricycle. Tony felt a pang of protectiveness, as if his wife was dead, and he alone had care of them.

> Senior Constable Dixon said he formulated a second plan, to get Mrs McQuade to send her husband to the derelict farmhouse in Stony Creek Road, Moyston, where he would be waiting for him. 'But I knew I couldn't shoot him—I was there for that purpose but I knew I couldn't,' he said.
>
> Senior Constable Dixon said that when Senior Constable McQuade arrived at the farmhouse, he (Senior Constable Dixon) said, 'It's me again.'

A bloody silly thing to say, Tony thought, then wondered what he'd have done himself. I'd never have got into the situation, he decided, letting himself out.

> 'I had the shotgun in the crook of my arm, pointing down. He didn't answer. The only thing I can remember is the sound of a gun going off. I think he fired twice before I fired ... I didn't feel the bullets. I went down.
>
> Questioned by Mr Michael O'Mara, for Mrs McQuade, Senior Constable Dixon denied he was trying to put all the blame for what had happened on Mrs McQuade. 'We were both to blame,' he said.
>
> Mr O'Mara: 'You have told the jury that you once loved her to distraction—that's all gone now, hasn't it?'
>
> Senior Constable Dixon: 'Yes, it's all gone.'

Tony studied the faces in the photos. He assumed his wife had done the same. What did it all mean for her? He felt inadequate; he knew that when he discussed it with her—which presupposed that she was going to reappear—she would think him stupid if all he could say was that these poor bastards had got themselves into such a mess that death for one or all of them was the only way out.

He tried to put himself inside their minds, to analyse rather than react. Was death a way out?

For one cop, yes. Carted out in a box.

For the others?

Yes. They didn't want each other any more. Dixon's wife seemed to have forgiven him.

Why did it all have to blow up like this?

He thought about it. They'd taken their passion too seriously. If you put more value on something than your circumstances allowed, then you were struggling. If you refused to go under, you had to keep raising the stakes to prove you meant it. The highest stake was ...

... BANG!

He noticed a point he'd missed before:

> 'I saw Lindsay (McQuade) lying on the ground but I couldn't bring myself to go near him.'

The children pummelled the door. They wanted to bring Patch in. Badly needing their affection, he said they could, but only until the new carpet was laid in the hall. 'We shouldn't really be letting her in because when the new carpet's laid we'll have to teach her all over again that she can't come inside.' Ellen said they'd teach her, they'd tell her and she'd understand. Tony had a feeling the dog was in forever. A strange result of a murder trial, he thought, wondering where his wife had put their photos; he wanted to study her face.

No word. Nine o'clock Sunday night. He rang her mother.

'Ah *Tony*. How delightful.'

He said he didn't know Marj's second name or phone number and he needed to get in touch with her.

'No darling, I'm having the children tomorrow. Didn't Vicky tell you? That other person you're talking about has a sick husband to care for.'

He hated to look foolish. Was there such a word as matronising?

'I'll pick them up, first thing in the morning. We'll have a delightful day, and of course, when Vicky gets home, I'll really want to know ... what she feels she's achieved!'

Who owns her? he thought; she's my wife. Practised as a manager of people's affairs, he was acutely aware of being managed himself. He wanted to be free of this linking of women who sustained, supported his children and, at a fundamental level, himself. They needed to know who was boss.

'And *Tony*, forgive me intruding, but why are you going to that out-of-the-way place for your holiday? There can't be anything there at Maggie Glen. Why don't you go to the New South Wales south coast? Merimbula. Why don't you fly up to Queensland, one of those beautiful islands ...?'

Why not, indeed.

'It's Vicky's idea. As for Queensland, Vicky hates anything lush and tropical. I've got no chance of getting her there.'

'You're going to have to learn to assert yourself, Tony. Things can't go on the way they are.'

He considered this statement warily.

'I suppose there has to be give and take. I've got the career I want.'

'Up to a certain point. But your confidence is being hollowed out. You're not nearly as sure of yourself as you used to be.'

'I suppose that's what happens after a few years in politics. You're hearing other opinions all the time, you become less sure of your own.'

Mrs Challis wasn't to be diverted. 'That's as may be. No doubt a broad mind is better than a narrow one. But no, what I mean is the confidence that comes from having a rock-solid relationship. That's clearly lacking in your life at the moment.'

Whose side was the old bitch on? 'I wouldn't put it like that. We're going through a difficult patch at the moment.'

'How do you know it's not a permanent shift in the relationship? A steady deterioration? You're letting her get away with withdrawing. With running away. Opting out. Never quite there to be counted.'

'I sometimes think Vicky's better able to confront unpalatable truths than I am.'

'Tony dear, what you mean is that she's aware of them. She thinks about them. That's not the same as dealing with them. Let me tell you something she did when she was sixteen.'

She knew it would make him curious. 'What I'm going to tell you is something that she doesn't know that I know. I found out quite by chance.' She works on complicity, he thought. She's sucked me in already; where do I get out?

'Vicky was learning music. Piano, theory and composition. I had a special teacher.

'And about the same time, a couple of years after my husband died, I acquired a friend ... a ... ah ... companion.

'He was very rich. There are a number of buildings in the city that wouldn't be there today but for the vision, determination, and the entrepreneurial skills of my ... ah ...'

'Admirer,' Tony supplied.

'Precisely. Well, he got a call one morning to go to Sydney to look at a project. So he got the next available flight. At Sydney airport, imagine his surprise when he saw Vicky, who should have

been at school, coming out of another gate lounge. So he followed her. She had no luggage to pick up, she went straight to the taxi rank and took a cab.

'An hour or so later, he saw her in Martin Place.

'And round about the middle of the day, when he was on his way to lunch, he saw her again, entering a cinema.

'I remember the day well because she came home just a little later than usual, looking radiant. She'd been dreading her music exams and she'd been pale for days. And then she walked in looking lovely, went straight to the piano, and played, beautifully, this piece by Scarlatti that had been troubling her.

'I went into the room and said "Have you had a good day, darling?" and she just smiled and played something else.

'It wasn't for some days that I heard where she'd been.'

Tony was taken aback. 'Did you tackle her about what she'd done?'

'Tackle her? No, I already knew what she'd done. Why she did it was something I'd only learn by observation, and reflection.'

He didn't know what to say to that.

'So you see, she simply disappears. What you have to do, Tony, is to be ready for the moment when she comes back. You must make sure that the return is on your terms.'

Tony felt it had been a revelation; and it made him squeamish.

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because she won't lead a normal life, a happy, fulfilled life, until she gives up running away. Believe me, I'm right. But I was never successful in stopping her. So it's over to you. You're her husband, after all.'

After a fashion, he thought, realising that his mother-in-law didn't know about the separate beds. He took the plunge and told her.

'So it's gone much further than I thought! I'm afraid, Tony, that you're in trouble. She's got to be rescued, I but I don't know how to do it. Give me time to think.'

They hung up. Christ, he thought, what am I married to? Some bloody sprite, some genie that pops in and out of a bottle?

As the German car wound through the foothills, the senior mountains, eminent, bluff, craggy and cresting with pride, called on them to come back. Inside their warm capsule they spoke confidently of places they'd visit next time. The world was still a day and a night away, and the buffer, the shelter from the future, was a weatherboard house longing to have its fires lit.

Live in me, fill me with lives!

They lit the fires.

They walked. Wattles were on the verge of flowering. She said that when she was there in a fortnight with her family—she called them her caravan—she'd put wattle blossom in the house, and he'd be with her again. He showed her where white heath and red heath were growing in a corner of his block.

Put them in the bedroom, some of each colour, and we'll truly be together.

Which is your colour and which is mine?

They talked about the meanings attached to colours— how white was for virgins, and meant purity, while red meant blood and anger—and how stupid, how restricting, these notions were.

He told her about a man who worked with him—also called Tony.

He went to the Philippines to find a wife, but he spent his whole holiday with bar girls. When he came back, he went straight to a VD clinic. They told him he didn't have anything, and he started saving for his next trip. He tells us about it all the time. And of course he's got photos of these girls, some of them dressed, some of them not.

She saw that he found it as repulsive as she did, but the difficulty was that he, as a male, had the opportunity to act in the same way. What stopped him? She didn't want him to touch her until she knew.

She looked at the flowers, and the brown earth they sprang from.

Do you love me?

He said he loved her, but felt the gap.

Why do you love me?

Because with you I'm what I always wanted to be, in my own imagination. That's the selfish side of it. And it gives me the keenest pleasure to see you excited and happy. To match one love with another is the best thing we're capable of.

The flowers, listening, were delighted to be as different from each other as red is from white.

Can I have some time to myself, darling? I'll come to you in the house. I need to be alone for a minute.

Certain of her, because of the absoluteness of their love, he withdrew. The flowers, neither virgin nor blood-filled, waited for her to move.

She stood still, trying to resolve the pulls inside her.

She could get in the car and drive away. No, that was unthinkable.

She could hide and hope he'd find her. No, that was childish.

She could insist they drive to Melbourne at once. No, he'd be sitting beside her, puzzled and in pain, and she'd have twisted a perfect love.

She could do nothing, and wait for something outside her to happen.

She stood still. The familiar pains of her twenty-nine years presented themselves—self-doubt, fear, the wish to be recognised, the wish to remain invisible. Fear of being only an extension of someone else, fear of being trapped in a publicly recognised identity. She turned, looking timidly about her. A loose assembly of *Epacris impressa*, kin to the flowers at her feet, stretched beyond the fence of his block and into the forest, as far as she could see.

We can't be anything but what we are. Why are you so tense?

She ran her hand, almost closed, along a wavering stem of heath. The tiny leaves prickled her palm.

Why am I such a coward?

She turned again. A puff of smoke issued from the kitchen chimney; he was stirring, or adding to, the fire. A light air blew the smoke—a ball, almost undisturbed—over the bush to where she stood. She felt it had come to claim her.

You'll never be happier than now. Go inside, and put away those fears.

Looking through the kitchen window, he saw her veiled in the turning wisps of blue, as if she'd just materialised. To his relief, he saw her move through the smoke towards him. When she came to the door, he held himself back, restrained, to be whatever she wanted.

You never keep me waiting, do you darling? I'm sorry about that.

He waited.

I want you to hold me.

Undressing, they put their clothes on the only chair. When he put his shirt on hers, she laughed. Then their underpants made companions of each other.

It's going to be cold. You get in first.

He got in. She rubbed herself.

I want my hands to be warm to touch you.

She wriggled in beside him.

I love your hands, they're so fine.

They're not big enough, that's why I gave up the piano. And I didn't want to be my mother's showpiece every time she had visitors.

His smoothing hand came to a stop in the middle of her back.

How did we get her in bed with us?

They laughed so loudly that the house opened one eye to see what they were up to.

If I ever manage to get you into her house—God knows how we'll manage that—I'll play something for you. By Scarlatti.

Great. Why Scarlatti?

She told him about her day in Sydney as a schoolgirl, and what she'd done on her return.

He started to laugh at the way she'd fooled her mother—fooled everybody, really—and then grew quiet.

What is it, darling?

It's just amazing. It's rather wonderful. It's a freedom you'd like to think everyone could have, but ...

Go on, darling.

... am I a sort of Sydney for you, or are you actually here?

I think you were. But you're in my centre now, and I'm not letting go. I'm not letting you out.

I don't want to be out. I don't want to escape. I want to be there forever.

Hold me darling.

They swept into each other, merged. They felt the enormous force of each other, demanding, giving everything in return. They kissed and unkissed, hurrying each other with their hands. They moved their legs, inside each other's, outside each other's, driving for their final union. Their separate spasms, combining, formed a wave which overtook his mind. She rolled their double-body over, head shaking, eyes closed, driven by pleasure to the point of pain, then—the force in its first split second of weakening—she rolled them again until she lay beneath, whispering faintly, far away.

I'm yours. I only want you. I want to have your child.

Jack Sparkes felt his time was running out. His next stroke would finish him. He told Marj to sell the red and white Ford and buy a campervan so they could make a trip around Australia. Marj didn't want to give up work with the Deckers but Jack put the pressure on; it'd be the last big thing she'd do for him. She agreed, but said he'd have to wait.

'I can't go until Mrs Decker finishes her photography course.'

'When's that going to be?'

'I don't know. I'll have to ask.'

The next time she had the children, it was Tony who got home first.

'Evening, Marj.'

'Evening, Mr D.'

Marj was reading Ellen and Lindsay a story from the *Arabian Nights*. The three of them were on the sofa. Tony smiled. This was how children should be brought up.

'When's Vicky coming home, do you know?'

'Couldn't say, Mr D.'

The children giggled.

'Daddy daddy D!'

'Sssh, listen to your story. I've got some phone calls to make.' He went to his office. Marj read.

The back door opened. The children's attention wavered. When their mother came in, Marj recognised the flushed, full cheeks and the happiness in her eyes. An hour later, when she was being driven home, Marj saw that her employer was still distracted.

'Gone past it, Vick!'

The big car had to be reversed. Bit of a giveaway, Marj thought; she was heading back to Fred's.

They stopped by Marj's low brick fence, with its four rose bushes. Marj felt this was the time to raise the matter of her trip, but she found the younger woman looking at her, smiling.

'Force of habit.'

'How do you mean?' Marj began, pretending. She knew she must have shown, somehow, that she knew what was going on, and didn't disapprove. Then, though she felt awkward, she said, 'How did you know I knew?'

'One night when I was supposed to be printing, I left my bag of films behind, and you didn't say anything. But I'd already sensed that you knew. I don't know how. Does it upset you?'

'I feel embarrassed.'

'Is there something you want to say about it? I'm pretty dependent on you if I want to get out.'

Marj squirmed, wanting to get away from these questions.

'You are troubled. I've upset you. What is it?'

'You've got me in a terrible muddle, Vicky. You see I have to go away soon. I've promised Jack to take him on a trip around the country. He's desperate for something to do. He thinks he's going to die. And he might, if he has another stroke ... so I've got to do it. But that's leaving you in the lurch. What I could do is ask my sister to fill in for me. I know you need someone. I feel pretty terrible about this.'

Even the interior smell of the car made Marj feel she was out of her territory.

'No, don't bother your sister. I'll manage. How long will you be away?'

'Three or four months.'

'Well, if I can't get out so much, he can come to my house.'

'Fred?'

It seemed worse, to Marj, to have him in than to go out for whatever was missing in her life.

They studied each other.

'Do you know, I never call him by his name. You've just made me realise. And he never calls me by mine. It's strange, isn't it? And marvellous. It's liberating.'

'Not to call each other anything?'

'Yes You aren't pinned down. If I say Marj to you ... see, you look up. I've gripped your attention.'

'But we need to do that to each other.'

'Most of the time I think we'd be better off without it.'

'What about when we really need each other?'

'That's when the struggle begins.'

Marj felt puzzled, fascinated, repelled.

'Are you having a struggle?'

'All the time.'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'I'm going to his place for a few minutes before I go back.'

'But you've just come from there.

'I wish I'd never left.'

'What about your children?'

'I wish I didn't have them. I wish I could start all over again, and get it right this time, instead of the mess I'm in.'

'It's not possible, you know that. You can't start again. Look at me and Jack.'

'Yes indeed. Do you want to go on this trip?'

'No, I want to stay with you. I love your kids and I think ...'

'You think I need you.'

Marj said a silent yes.

'So why are you going?'

'I suppose I feel that ... I married him, I have to see it through. I've got kids too, older than yours; they expect it of me. I expect it of myself.'

'That's the trap, isn't it?'

Marj felt awkward. Every time she stated a simple obvious truth, this other person surrounded it with words. Alternatives.

'It wouldn't be a trap if we were still young and excited about each other. As it is, I have to make the best of it. He's pretty helpless without me.' In the cabin of the German car she told, for

only the second time in her life, the story of how, when she was out, her husband used to get in the Ford to find out where she was.

'So you see, Vicky, that's what I had to put up with.'

'You're a bit sorry for yourself, aren't you?'

'No, because I've always been the boss. Always was, always will be.'

'Can you really say that?'

'Nothing surer.'

Marj found her hand—the hand she felt was coarse, and had to be apologised for—touched by a fine, cool hand, and in that touch she felt the other's disbelief, and even, yes, even compassion,

'Don't you believe me?'

'I don't know. I really don't know what to believe. That's another part of the mess I'm in.'

Leanne got a card from Cheryl. On the front, a picture of Surfers Paradise, all high-rise towers and rolling sea; on the back:

> It's as good as it looks. This'll do me any day. How's it going at the office? I'll write to you when we've got an address to write back to. Love to Tony D. When you get a holiday, come and see us, bring the kids, we'll have a great time. XX Cheryl

Leanne pinned it in the corner of the noticeboard. She'd see it when she reached for the phone books. A few days later a second card came, with an address; she wrote back:

> This job's growing on me. I didn't think it would be so different from my last one, but it is. And I feel different about the people. I'm getting to think I'm responsible for them. Did you think about them when you got home after work? I'll take you up on that offer of a holiday. Love, L.

The next morning, Tony spotted the giant pineapple and the view of Surfers, and asked after Cheryl. He sounds like he was a bit keen on her, thought Leanne, wondering if the biggest of the problems that came across her desk mightn't be those of her boss. Could he separate his work from his home life? She'd soon be finding out.

'I'll send you a card from Lakes Entrance, if my wife lets us get that far. I doubt if they'll have cards at this little place she's organised for us.'

Leanne played it safe, pretending to know nothing. 'I'd really appreciate a card. I'll put it up with these two.'

'You might fill the board one day,' said Tony, trying to be hearty. 'Are you interested in travel yourself?'

'One of these days I'll want to travel. Maybe when the children are off my hands. But right now, I want to know your electorate back to front. I want to have a contact for every call that comes in. I don't like saying "Sorry, I don't think we can help you with that". We're not here to be useless.'

She stopped, feeling that saying we had been presumptuous, but Tony seemed not to have noticed.

'We're servants of the people,' he replied, standing before her desk. 'People have a right to believe that there's somewhere where they're listened to. As members of parliament—the people who are privileged to enact the political debate—we have a duty to lead the electorate, and a duty to be responsive to its wishes. It's a fine balance. If we get it right, we win power. If we get it wrong, we're history.'

She hoped he didn't make speeches very often. He picked up his diary from her desk.

'I've marked in your holiday,' she told him. 'I'm making sure we don't write anything in there,'

He put it down. 'Just write in sailing, fishing, open fires. Walks. And healing, yes, I think a little healing is going to take place.'

She took it the only way she felt was safe.

'You need a break, Mr Decker.'

'What's this Mr Decker business? Call me Tony. We're a team. A winning team, and from what you were saying before, I can see we're going to keep it that way.'

A senior member of the Party was getting ready to retire. There would have to be a by-election and a promotion into the shadow cabinet. The leader—the foul-mouthed ex-estate agent who aspired to be Premier—sounded out Tony on his interest in being spokesman on ethnic affairs. Tony assured him of his enthusiasm for the job.

He said nothing of this possible elevation to his wife until they were established in the Glenmaggie cottage, which struck him as being a dump in an uninviting locale. But he bided his time, and when they were on the lake in the launch he'd rented, the engine turned off and three lines dangling—his wife preferring to read—he told her. She asked him who was doing the job now, and what it involved, then went back to her book.

He could scarcely contain his rage at her indifference. He wanted to grab the book and throw it in the water, and his wife too, for good measure; at least he'd get a reaction.

'What *are* you reading?'

'*One Hundred Years of Solitude*.'

He made a sneering sound.

'Very fitting.'

Hypersensitive to aggression, she looked at him angrily.

'Would you like to say what you mean by that?'

'I certainly would. How long are you giving me?'

She looked at the wide, calm lake.

'There seems to be plenty of time.'

He let her see his glance take in the children.

'Perhaps it's not the occasion.'

'Your courage is failing you, is it?'

He wanted to kill her there and then. Push her in. Hold her head under, he was strong enough to do it. But the children. He remembered his suspicions.

'Why are you so keen on this place?' He jabbed a thumb in the direction of the house he didn't like.

She wondered where this line would lead. If, she decided, it took them to their breaking point, then so be it.

'It's unpretentious. If we were sufficient for each other, it would do us very well.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that you want to be in a luxury hotel, with service laid on, so you can feel important. It's your vanity, and it's more than that. You can't relate to me any more except from a position of perceived importance. Perceived by you, and accepted as such by everyone who knows you, par-

ticularly me. You're going to get a move up in the parliament. What you want is for me to treat you as more important, instead of less because actually you're moving away from me.'

'How am I moving away from you?'

'You need me less and less, except as a figure to be there, like those token wives coming down the steps of planes with their prime minister husbands. Platform wives.'

He decided to throw it at her.

'Were you on your own, when you were down here before?'

She wondered how he'd handle it.

'No.'

'There was someone with you?'

Silence.

'Who was it?'

'The owner of the house.'

'The owner of the house?'

He felt sick. He also felt disbelief, rage, curiosity. Most of all, he felt ashamed. The bloody postman!

'That is utterly, absolutely and totally ridiculous!'

She wanted to provoke him.

'So I must be out of my mind?'

'Absolutely stark, staring, raving mad! What in the name of God possessed you?'

'What's possessed me is a passion that's brought me to life again. I was slowly dying until this happened. You can rage about it if you must—I suppose I have to expect that—but you'd better learn to take it seriously, and to treat it with the greatest respect, pretty quickly, or your usefulness for me will be over.'

He felt the urge to drown her rising in him again, more savagely than before.

She read his mind.

'Don't do it. There's no easy, spectacular way out for any of us. We're just going to have to work it through. Keep dramas to a minimum and see what happens.'

He sneered again.

'How did this fellow get onto you, excuse the pun?'

'I don't excuse the pun. You'll have to take him seriously too. He's committed to me. He wants me. I don't want to fail him. I don't particularly want to fail anybody.'

'You don't, perhaps, consider that, by doing what you're doing ... I mean, that the situation being what it is ...'

He was getting tangled, and having difficulty keeping his voice down so the argument didn't reach the children. She knew what he wanted to say but chose not to give him the words. He struggled on:

'... our situation, I mean. I mean my situation, now that you're doing this. And the children's situation, if their mother's going to desert them ...'

She looked at him with contempt.

'Get a grip on yourself. I've no intention of deserting my children. What put that in your head? Don't imagine you're going to force me out. I told you, there's no easy way for any of us. You're going to have to live with it. If you can't, you have to go.'

He felt it was the cruellest thing he'd heard. And why should misery strike him in the middle of a lake? He couldn't pace up and down, he couldn't go for a walk to think about it. He was stuck. Her eyes were unwavering.

'Don't bloody well look at me like that!'

'Do you want to go back to shore?'

He nodded, but felt too weak to stand.

'Stay there. I'll do it.'

She started the engine. The children looked up in surprise. She told them to pull in their lines. They swung them in, a couple of metres of thread with a hook and a worm.

'Didn't get anything, Mum!'

She drove the boat towards the shore, the only one of them looking forward. Tony sat listlessly in the stern, his line dragging. The children commented on this; she looked indifferently over her shoulder. She knew she'd pay for what she was doing, later, when her strength deserted her and she felt weak.

The children were impressed by the way she throttled back the engine, drifted against the jetty, and tied the boat with a rope. 'Did Daddy show you what to do?' Ellen asked. She ignored the question. Tony still sat in the stern, pale and slumped. The children told him to pull in his line. Without shifting, he did as he was told. To the children's great excitement, there was a fish on the line; as he pulled it closer to the boat it swam wildly, this way and that, trying to escape. 'Pull it in, pull it in!' the children called. Tony pulled until the fish hung over the stern, a small thing no longer than his hand, suspended in the air by the hook in its mouth. The children were upset by the hook but felt that once it was removed they could take the fish home and have it in a bowl in their bedroom, or perhaps the kitchen. Their mother's reaction struck them as heartless.

'Throw it back. It's undersize. You're not allowed to keep them when they're only that big.'

Leanne got her card from Lakes Entrance. The picture on the front was of the Ninety Mile Beach on a day of brilliant sunshine, with white waves rolling in, and swimmers and fishermen facing the ocean. On the back was the curt message: 'Look after things for me, best wishes, Tony D.' The curious thing was that he'd forgotten to put a stamp on the card, but somehow it had got through. The writing was hasty and careless. Something's gone wrong, she thought, guessing what it was.

Feeling uncomfortable with her knowledge, she pinned the card next to the two from Queensland. It was only when she heard the sound of a whistle in the street behind the office, a long street that climbed the hill to the homes of the wealthy, that she made the connection: Frederick Holyoake, the cause of the trouble, had been in the office a moment before, but only for a moment, to hand her a bundle of mail held by an elastic band, and she'd been on the phone and hadn't thought of him as Mrs Decker's lover. She felt angry, and was still angry when she rang him at half past five.

'I need to talk to you. Could you come around?'

'Am I going to get a talking to?'

'You certainly are.'

'Sounds bad.'

'It is. You'd better come to dinner.'

The meal over, Leanne's children settled in the lounge with TV, while her house partner got on the phone in the dining room and her daughter occupied the kitchen table with a project.

'We'd better go in my room.'

Leanne got a radiator and the cask of white wine and they sat on the end of the bed, the bed which, a few short weeks before, he'd been longing to share with her.

'How did all this start?'

He told her.

'Doesn't it strike you as pretty odd?'

'That's the glory of it.'

She told him about the postcard, and what she felt had caused it.

'It had to happen eventually.'

'You sound pretty cool. What about them? What do you think they're going through?'

'They're going through the same as me. I'm not cool, Leanne. I've never been so stirred up in my life.'

She felt a stubbornness in him, and a refusal to face reality.

'There can't be any future in it. It's going to end in pain all round. Can't you see that?'

'No I can't see that. What I can see is what you're going to say. You're going to tell me to pull out now. Cut my losses. You're going to say that I don't belong in the lives of those people, that I ought to sit down here and mix with my own sort, whoever they might bloody well be!'

Strange, she thought, I like him now that he's open, instead of being guarded and trying to second-guess me.

'Have a drink, Fred. I'll join you. But we'd better not have too much or God knows what we'll say to each other.'

They drank. It was only bulk white, and he wanted something elegant, unforgettable.

He felt her, in her silence, growing more sympathetic. He wanted to say to her, Let's go to a pub and get all the best wine they've got and I'll fill the night telling you why I'm feeling marvellous!

She could feel the turmoil inside him, and the manic excitement of the possessed.

'Are you angry with me, Fred?'

'No I'm not. I'm pleased to be with you. You see, there's been no one I could tell about what was happening to me. Do you realise, this is the peak of my life and when I'm not with her, I'm utterly alone. That's how my feelings are at the moment—pretty extreme.'

'You are a bit angry with me then.'

'Well, I suppose I am. You're trying to restrain me when I don't want to be restrained. I want to be encouraged. I need people on my side. Do you know, she went to see a marriage guidance counsellor the other day, and this person talked about what's happening between us as an event in the life of her marriage, an intrusion into a marriage. I wanted to smash that counsellor, which is, I suppose, what people want to do to family court judges. Which means—I know—that I'm out of control. Well, I am out of control, and what's driving me is the strongest, finest force I've ever felt. What's marriage? It's an arrangement. People have a primitive, superstitious idea about it—that it can't, mustn't, shouldn't be broken. What's so binding about marriage? Arrangements can end. You and I have been married. Our marriages didn't work; we got out of them. What's the sense in building so much on a feeling, an attraction, between two people that they can never escape from it? You heap a block of land, and a house, and a houseful of furniture, and an extended family, and a circle of friends and a vast network of obligations, and yes, you add a child or two to the pile that's all balancing on a fragile affection. Madness! It puts an intolerable load on people's feelings. People ... I'm sorry, I know I'm going on ...'

She filled his glass, added a little to her own.

'People get to the point where their responsibilities far outweigh anything they may still feel for each other. Or their responsibilities are actually contradicted by the feelings which are supposed to give life to the whole arrangement. So people live lies. They twist! They're caught up in an endless cycle of things they don't really want to be doing, and that's when they buckle. That's when they go under. That's when they go soft-headed—and I'm sorry about this bit, Leanne, because I really respect you, and actually I rather admire you for having the guts to grab me and tell me what you think—and that's when they start to give people advice which really means *accept*. This is the way it is. Be reconciled to your situation. Pull out. Don't go on. Things can't be any different. Or even—you're right of course but you'll never persuade enough people to go with you, so you're wrong! So you be soft-headed too!

She turned to face him full on.

'I'm not soft-headed, Frederick Holyoake. Don't be so arrogant. All those fine feelings of yours are all very well, but what about the pain that comes from them? Even I feel it. What's it going to be like for me when Tony Decker comes out and sees you in his office? What's it going to be like for him? And for that matter, what's it going to be like for you? Can you answer me that?'

'You know the answer as well as I do. It'll be bloody uncomfortable for you, horrible for him, and something I'd much prefer to avoid ...'

'Because you're a coward.'

'I'm not a coward. I know it's awful for him. But he's a politician so I can't help him, because he spouts versions of the truth all the time. I'm living it! It's like being a filament in a globe. Blazing, but vulnerable, a knock and you're gone. If I start accepting hypocrisies, or compromises, or bit-of-this-bit-of-that arrangements, I'm done! Do you realise that? That's all I've got going for me, that certainty that my feelings are fine ones. True ones. That's all I've got on my side of the balance. I can't give up a single scrap of what I feel because if I settle for less I've taken away the very fineness, the perfection, of what's between us!'

He studied her.

'I haven't convinced you, have I?'

She looked into her wine.

'Leanne, I was only a nuisance to you when we went out together. But you've given me the chance to say some of the things that are going on inside me, and that makes me value you. I'm not trying to win you over when you shouldn't be. Decker's your boss, you feel you should be loyal to him. He's in a mess, he needs friends. But I need friends too, you know. It's not very easy to go through this alone, except for those moments, those hours, which are so wonderful that I can't begin to tell you about them.'

'We'd better join the others,' she said. 'You can ring me, or come around, if you need me.'

He stood up, grateful. Humbled.

'There's an old saying that's been going through my head over and over again, these last few weeks. "Gamble for more than you can afford to lose, and you'll win!" And that's what I'm doing. You'll say it's too dangerous, and I'll say that nothing else in life is worth doing.'

When he got home, her car was in the drive.

Where've you been?

Leanne's. She wanted to tick me off for what we're doing. I gave her ... it wasn't a speech, it was an outburst!

Does her opinion matter to you?

Not in any important way. But she's someone I've been attracted to, and I still like, and she works in Tony's office. I can't shut out things she says.

What did she say?

I didn't let her say much because I anticipated most of what was coming. I don't belong with you. All I'm doing is causing pain. Discomfort all around. There's no future in it. It's going to be a disaster. I should get back down here at the bottom of the hill where I belong. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera!

I love you when you get angry, darling. Why don't you ever get angry with me?

I do get upset sometimes, but only when I'm on my own. When I'm with you, it's so perfect I couldn't be angry about anything.

I don't mind if you're angry, so long as I know what's happening inside you.

He felt he should be welcoming her, but she'd already lit the fire in the lounge, the white room that now held two paintings she'd bought for him. For them.

What's all this about a postcard? From Lakes Entrance?

She didn't know what he meant.

Leanne told me ...

He explained.

I've put Tony on notice.

Can you stand being with him?

Not much longer.

Does he really want to be with you?

He hates me.

Perfection opened before him.

Tell him to go.

I don't want to order him out. He's got to realise for himself that he wants to go and that it'd be best if he did.

You want me to wait?

There's nothing else to do.

When Mrs Challis found out she decided to make trouble. She rang the post office to complain that her postman was late, lazy, incompetent and rude. If he couldn't be sacked at once he had to be put on another round.

Eileen Dunn, who took the call, fobbed her off, but when the posties were coming back from their rounds she took him aside.

'How did you get on the wrong side of the Great Lady?'

'Do you really want me to tell you?'

'I've had a shit of a morning. Why not amuse me?'

'Excuse the cliché, Eileen; at this point I have to take a deep breath.'

'Well, take it and tell me.'

'I'm in love with her daughter, and believe it or not, vice versa. For Christ's sake don't spread it. I assume Her Ladyship has heard and is out to get me.'

'She wants you sacked, or shifted.'

'She'll have the cops on me next. There's been a prowler in the area for years.'

'Not you, I presume.'

He shook his head.

'Oddly enough, I'm pretty sure I know who it is. It's the former husband of a friend of mine ...'

'Another one, Fred?'

'Don't tease me, I'm pretty raw. She knows it's him but doesn't want it to get out because she doesn't want her kids to know about their father. She lives near me. He still lives somewhere around. Handy to the hill, as you might say.'

'Makes you bleed for 'em, doesn't it. Hey! The Great Lady's daughter! You're in love with Tony Decker's wife!'

'Ten out of ten.'

Eileen put her arm around him.

'And you're not even a Liberal voter, are you Fred?'

'I'm not in love with him, either. The friend I was telling you about works in his office. She says he's pompous but she likes him. So I suppose he's an ordinary empty, confused poor bastard who says what he has to say to keep everyone happy.'

'When we describe other people it often turns out to be a self-portrait, you know.'

He looked at her sternly, wanting to protect himself.

'I'm not empty, Eileen. I'm not confused. Someone once said that everyone's got one book in their lives. This is mine, and I'm living it.' He took her hand. 'Don't spread it, will you?'

'I won't spread it.' She nodded in the direction of the mail room. 'You don't need that mob making remarks. I just hope your book has a happy ending, Fred.'

It was after midnight when he left her house, warm and certain in their love. He was almost at the underpass when a police car stopped beside him.

'Out for a stroll?'

'I've been at a friend's place.'

'Up on the hill?'

Their disbelief was clear.

'Where's your friend live?'

'I don't think I have to tell you that.'

'Might be wise if you did.'

'And why would that be?'

'If you've really been at a friend's place, you're probably not the man we're looking for.'

'You're after the prowler.'

The cops looked at each other.

'Know about the prowler, do you?'

'Yes, I know about the prowler, and I'm not the prowler. What a silly word, it makes him sound like a feral animal ...'

'It's not a silly word, mate, that's what he is.'

The cops studied him carefully—clothes, build, features.

'What's your name?'

When he told them, he felt a current of understanding run between the men in the car.

'You're the postman.' Again, a feeling of significance in the voice.

'Yes, I am.'

‘Hop in the back. I think we need to talk to you.’

It took him an hour at the police station to convince them that he wasn’t the prowler. When they seemed satisfied, they offered to run him home.

‘I wouldn’t go roaming around that area at night, if I was you. We’re under a lot of pressure to get this guy. Next blokes that grab you mightn’t be so easy to convince. Could get nasty. Better stay at home. Walk in the other direction. Okay, good night. By the way, who’d you say your friend was?’

‘If you remember, I didn’t say.’

The cop in the passenger seat gave the dry laugh of people who play with other people, said ‘See you again, Mister Postman’, and wound up his window as the car drove off.

He felt cold and lonely as he entered his house. A shower didn’t change his mood. Climbing into bed, he wanted to ring her, but her husband would be back from wherever he’d been, and he had a feeling that his life was going to be shadowed, now, by a figure more intrusive, more dangerous to his psyche than the plastic man, as he thought of him, who represented the hill and its environs in parliament.

Leanne read Fred’s mood as soon as he entered the office.

‘Something happened?’

‘I need to talk to you.’

She glanced at the MP’s door.

‘He could be out any minute. Ring me tonight. Come around if you want to.’

He went around. They sat on the bed again. The wine cask was where she’d left it. She switched on the radiator.

‘What is it?’

He told her about the previous night.

‘So they’re after Gerry and they got you.’

‘That’s right. Well, there’s a simple explanation for that. They already had my name, and they must have got it from ...’

He paused.

‘... her mother.’

Something about this irritated Leanne.

‘Why don’t you ever say her name, Fred? Isn’t she called Vicky?’

She noticed his face tighten.

‘We never say each other’s names. Where we meet, there are no names.’

Leanne, still annoyed, said, ‘Well, go on.’

‘I think I managed to persuade them that I wasn’t ... who they wanted. But there’s something else about it that worries me. A couple of nights recently, when I’ve been walking home, feeling ...’

‘On top of the world?’

‘Off the planet, whatever you like, I’ve suddenly had this feeling of being watched. It was very strong.’

‘You think he’s shadowing you?’

‘I know it. I’ve never even seen the man, but I know it. And it’s eating into me. I feel I’ve got this voyeur trying to participate—no, actually participating—in my life, and I have to throw him off. Get rid of him. Get him out of something beautiful where he doesn’t belong.’

It was Leanne’s turn to be tight.

'Stop there. First, have you got any proof?'

'No.'

She considered.

'You're probably right though. It's the sort of thing he'd do, I can just imagine it. All right, what are you going to do about it?'

'I'm not going to dob him in. I have to fight him myself. I have to wrestle him out of my life. But I don't know how to do it. If I try to be cunning, use back lanes and that sort of thing, he'll outsmart me. That's his game. So I don't know what to do. Can you suggest anything?'

'You could go to the police. Once they knew who they were after, they could set some kind of trap. It wouldn't be hard.'

Her voice was full of strain.

'I know you don't want me to do that.' He pointed to the lounge.

'You're right, I don't. But if it's a case of you or him, and he's hurting you, or if he starts to annoy ... the person you love ... and I wouldn't put it past him, then I guess it's your right to go for him. Put him in.'

'You'd never forgive me.'

'Yes, I'd forgive you. I'd hate it, but I'd know why you did it.'

'You really want him protected, though, don't you?'

'Half of me wants to see him exposed, and half of me wants to protect him. What I really want is to get rid of the mark he's left on me. In me. If you've got any ideas, I'd be very grateful.'

'Funny how we need each other now, isn't it?'

'Not very. Are you going to her place tonight?'

She felt his pride before he spoke.

'Yes.'

'You're going to crash, Fred, but in a way I envy you. Have a drink before you go.'

As he reached his door, the phone rang. He took it up boldly.

Hello my love, how are you?

How did you know it was me?

There were so many answers. There was such an aura around their lives …

Are you coming up? I've got dinner on. The children have had theirs. I'm just going to read them a story.

I'll come straight away. How are you?

Good. I've had a beautiful day. Tony's in Perth again. You can stay the night.

Who's going to get me out of bed in time for work?

I'll roll you down the hill.

He was halfway there when he sensed he was being followed. He knew he mustn't turn or stop to fiddle with his laces because that would tell Gerry Shaw—it had to be him—that he knew he was there, and then it would be a game of I-know-that-you-know, and he'd have admitted that the prowler—he didn't scoff at the word any more—was inside his mind.

A few doors from her house—at the spot where he blew his whistle so she'd know he was near—the prickling sensation faded from his neck. Gerry Shaw had slipped away.

His hand was shaking as he unlocked the gate. When he shut it, he pushed the bolt home for extra security.

He opened the front door with a second key and made his way down the hall on the thick new carpet, surrounded by the most splendid music he'd ever heard, coming from the lounge where he knew she'd have the fire lit and be waiting for him. A deep, deep voice was singing. As the orchestral uproar settled, a tenor continued, humbly. She'd be in the dark, eyes closed, in communion with these people who lived in another world. He wanted to be beside her, walking in that world, but stayed at the door, unfit to enter.

Then an oboe produced a melody so fine, so enchanted, that it might have been made from his love; he felt himself trembling. The two voices went on, an old man and a young man; the elder seemed to be correcting the younger. When he felt he was inside the music, he pushed the door and crossed the room silently to be beside her. As she took his hand, eyes still closed, the deep voice was singing:

> Das merkt nun Halm und Blume auf den Auen,
> dass heut des Menschen Fuss sie nicht zertritt,
> doch wohl, wie Gott mit himmlischer Geduld
> sich sein erbarmt' und fur ihn litt,
> der Mensch auch heur in frommer Huld
> sie schont mit sanftem Schritt.*

When the music changed to a heavy, pounding rhythm, she opened her eyes.

Kiss me, darling.

They shared the music, flames, the cushions. The same air surrounded them. Her hands lay lightly in his.

This is the transformation scene.

They listened to the end. He found the solemnity of it overwhelming. In the silence that followed, he sat, almost frozen, until she put his fingers to her lips.

It's ideologically unsound but I love it!

Tell me what it is.

She told him the story.

Where did I come in?

She told him.

Even if we never listen to it again we'll always have that moment.

We'll listen to it again. Every Good Friday.

He felt it as such a promise, beckoning him down the years, that if she'd asked for his life he'd have given it. But she put her hand up his jumper to tickle him.

I'll serve up now, you must be hungry.

They ate, she went to make coffee.

As he sat by the fire, trying to recall those splendid, unfamiliar sounds, he felt the return of the prickling sensation in his neck; slight, but there. Surely not? Unsettled, he looked around.

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* Now grasses and flowers in the meadow know
that today the foot of man will not tread them down,
but, as God with divine patience
pitied him and suffered for him,
so man today in devout grace
will spare them with soft tread.

Two penetrating eyes were watching him from low down in the doorway. Ellen, the five-year-old, had slipped out of bed to see what was happening. He wondered how he stood up to her appraisal. Did it trouble her that he wasn't her father?

Come by the fire.

She came, watching him silently.

Put a piece of wood on.

She did so.

You can sit on my knee if you want to.

She climbed on him as if he was an interesting piece of playground equipment, then relaxed. Her mother was singing in the kitchen. Not the opera, he noticed. Ellen, eyes still on the fire, reached a hand backwards to feel his face. He brushed her fingertips with his own. She turned so that he could play with her toes. When he did, she pushed her face into his jumper. Feeling that she wanted to sleep, he held her motionless, letting his breathing and the child's find the same rhythm. When the singing stopped and the coffee came in, he was drowsy and the child was asleep. The flames and the candles on the table lit them.

Darling?

He woke suddenly.

Mm?

There's someone outside.

What time is it?

Why do you want to know?

Is it about the time I usually go home? . She felt on the bedside table for her watch.

Quarter past twelve.

Spot on.

What do you mean?

He told her about Gerry Shaw following him. How he'd slashed Leanne's tyres. How she wanted to protect her children from knowing about their father.

He's been prowling this area for years. I'm sure of it.

How old would he be?

About my age I think.

Someone used to look in on my mother when she was first married. And he's been coming back ever since.

If it's been him all the time he must have started as a teenager. Fourteen or fifteen.

They lay still, breathing quietly.

Where do you think he is?

On the back verandah.

Your dog should have barked.

There was a strand of fear in the turmoil she felt starting within her.

He'd better not have done anything to hurt her.

How can we get a look at him?

Through the kitchen window. Go through the lounge and the dining room. I'll count thirty, then I'll turn on the security lights in the garden.

Where's the switch?

In the hall. Just out there.

Naked, he crept through the house, counting as he went. At twenty-seven he was in position in the kitchen. He wondered if the intruder's neck—Gerry Shaw's neck—was prickling with the awareness of being watched. Suddenly he felt in danger. He moved behind the fridge. A big bowl of fruit had been placed on top of it. He could see without being seen.

At thirty—her count exactly matching his own—a brilliant light flooded the verandah. The intruder was fiddling with the door. To his surprise, the intruder showed no sign of alarm. Instead, he walked to the window and pressed his face against the glass, using the light that had surprised him to see in. Seeing no one, he skipped silently down the steps and across the floodlit garden. He treated the fence as familiarly as an exercise bar and disappeared in the darkness of the lane.

Suddenly she was beside him, naked too.

Did you see him?

He told her what had happened.

She listened, head down, trying to focus on her feelings.

It makes me feel sick, but I think I'm relieved.

She was shaking, but he could feel her determination forming.

Would you recognise him again?

Absolutely.

I'll ring the police.

They'll have to be quick. He'll beat them home. Which reminds me, we don't know where he lives.

Look in the phone book while I ring the police.

There was no G. Shaw anywhere in the area.

What did they say?

They're calling the nearest car straight away. I told them to watch that underpass.

That was cunning, darling, but I think he'd be too smart to go through there.

Probably. Do you want a cup of coffee? Build up the fire, I don't feel like going back to bed straight away.

What about the lights? Do you want to turn them off?

They can stay on. I don't care what it costs. This house has had a fright.

He smiled at the way she put it.

Get some rugs, darling. That's what I do when I need to sit up by myself.

The lights were still on when he left. As he closed the gate—the useless gate, as it had turned out—the street was black. He was to see her at his house that afternoon. They were going to look for curtain material.

Walking to work, he kept his left hand pressed in his pocket. Closed. He was protecting the kiss she'd pressed on his palm. She'd told him not to touch anything with the hand until he had to start sorting. He felt that the kiss, in turn, protected him; until he had to open the hand, part of him was still in the warmth of her bed. Their bed. He felt there was magic enclosed in his fingers, then smiled at himself; people had thought you could repel vampires with a cross!

Passing the second street light, the prickling sensation returned. Christ! He turned angrily but there was no one in sight. Where was the bastard? Hadn't he gone home? Did he have places where he hid?

The sensation stayed with him all the way to the shopping centre; stayed with him even when he entered the mail room. Then it hit him that the sensation came from within him; had he, in some way, accepted Gerry Shaw's identity as his own?

He asked the other posties if they knew a Gerry Shaw, and where he lived. One of them said he did.

'He lives in Hinde Street. His missus—his ex-missus— is in the MP's office. The skinny blonde. Leanne, don't pretend you don't know her.'

He ignored this.

'Why isn't Shaw in the phone book?'

'Course he is.'

They went to the phone book. The other man showed him an entry for GW Shore, 19 Hinde Street.

'That's not how he spells his name. Well, it's not how she spells hers. She spells her name S-H-A-W.'

The other man was grinning.

'How do you know, Fred?'

'She gets stuff addressed to her, at the office.'

'Oh is that how you know? Tell me, what's Gerry been up to? Has he been following you around?'

He said nothing, not knowing what he might give away.

'Has he been following you up the hill?'

This made him angry.

'You know him, I see. And he talks, does he?'

'Yes, I know him. He's a dirty bastard. Peeping Tom. A perv, I suppose you'd say. But interesting. And he lets out a bit, yes. Why? Are your planning to dob him in? He's too smart to get caught. I wouldn't dob him in, if I was you, he'll get back at you somehow.'

'Since I don't own a car these days, he won't be able to slash my tyres, will he?'

The other postman studied him warily.

'She told you about that, did she?'

'He told you about it, did he?'

The other man looked sheepish.

'Yeah, he did. Not the sort of thing you want to know. Prick of a thing to do, actually. That's why you want to watch out for him. Best thing's to ignore him. He'll get interested in someone else after a while.'

'Bullshit. He's been watching some of the same people for thirty years.'

'Is that right? Sounds like you know more about him than I do.'

He sorted mail and started his round. At the MP's office he questioned Leanne as he handed her a bundle of letters.

'Why does Gerry spell his name S-H-O-R-E?'

'He doesn't.'

'It's in the phone book.'

She looked angrily at the MP's door. Couldn't he take a hint?

'Well, I never look him up in the phone book!'

Her eyes flicked to the street door, warning him to go. Then Tony came out of his office, a dictaphone microphone dangling from his neck, and carrying papers. He headed for the file, rummaged, filed what he'd brought out, found something else, then realised who was in his office.

He stared at, he saw, for the first time, his wife's lover.

He froze.

His first sensation, when it came, was of the ordinariness of the situation. He felt no hatred. The man seemed decent enough. He had penetrating eyes. He gave off no hostility. It was hardly going to be possible to characterise him as the enemy, now that he'd seen him. More embarrassed than anything else, he went back to his office. Then a petulant feeling came over him. Why was it *he* who'd retreated? He didn't want the man walking into his office as apparently he did at the house. He picked up the phone and rang the postmaster, telling him that the man on the round was unacceptable.

The postmaster called in Eileen Dunn, and they rearranged the rounds.

In Saint Malo Street, the sound of an approaching whistle could be heard, shrilling among the elms. Mrs Challis, crossing the road after talking to a neighbour, hurried out of sight. The man she wanted to avoid saw her hasty movements before she slammed the heavy gate, and gave his whistle an impudent blast. He had a feeling that he was going to pay for his cheek; he wondered if offering the prowler's name and address would put him in the Great Lady's good books.

Her mother's favour?

Putting mail in Mrs Challis's letterbox—the slit which was the only opening in her defensive walls—he felt a rush of compassion for this person who, more than Tony Decker, was his enemy. He wanted to say to her, I exist, I have a great deal to give. Your daughter is richer from my love than she is from her father's inheritance, which you share. Share with me. Not money, since I need little, but share a willingness, an acceptance. If you won't, you're guilty of the worst crime of the rich—that you won't acknowledge the humanity of classes other than your own.

He gave her letterbox—the slit—a knock of acknowledgement with his half-closed left hand, and rode away, reflecting that he could hardly blame Mrs Challis for not knowing that the palm of the hand that had knocked still tingled, for him, with the impress of her daughter's lips. Her love.

The photography course ended. Marj and Jack Sparkes took off on their trip. The lovers rang each other all the time, met almost every night. Tony received his elevation—opposition spokesperson on ethnic affairs. Leanne buried herself in her job. The first card came back from Merimbula.

On the front it showed fishing boats, dancing on blue water. On the back, Marj reported:

> Dear V and kids, How are you? So far our trip's been great. Jack's like a kid again. I can't get him away from the beach. He walks for miles and just when I think he'll never stop, he sits down, puffs a cigarette, and goes to sleep. When he wakes up he makes these great heaps of sand. I tell him he's getting back to the sandcastle stage but it doesn't have any effect. You should see 'em!! Lots of love, Marj.

Leanne got the next card, from Bermagui. On the front, a giant shark, surrounded by triumphant fishermen. On the back:

> Leanne, Hello darling, excuse the familiarity. I'm lucky to be alive! Jack talked these guys into taking us out in their shark boat. You should've seen some of the waves, I thought my last day had come! There's a lovely Samoan boy here who's going to take us out just a little way and I've asked him to see if he can put a fish on Jack's line without him knowing. Loveya. Marj XXX

She pinned it to the board, but something seemed wrong. Then she rearranged the cards so they'd be in the right places if the board had been a map. Such a long way for the stricken man and his wife to go! She looked at her watch, wondering what they might be doing—bundling up their things before they left a caravan park and took the highway north? Sydney ahead and the tropics! She looked at the electorate map, so tiny by comparison. The phone rang. And rang. She could handle most of the problems but some of the calls required her to leave a message for Tony. On busy days, if he was out, the corner of his desk near the phone became covered with yellow, stick-down squares of paper. She preferred him to be busy, or out. She hadn't forgiven him for using his position to have Fred moved. It was only what Fred might have expected if he hadn't been so absorbed in himself, but she resented the swiftness of the way it was done. The sight of his replacement getting ready to ride up the street behind her, the long rising street, was a reminder, and a warning. If you annoy us, you'll go too. She had come to realise—and her employer hadn't—that she felt competitive about what he believed was his electorate. He had the status, but what would he be without those who did his work for him?

Fred came around to see Leanne.

'On your own tonight?'

'Her mother's taken her to listen to some accountant explain how their considerable fortune can be made larger. Via negative gearing, I gather.'

'Doesn't that get to you, Fred?'

'Why should it?'

'None of it'll ever come your way.'

'She spends quite a bit on me. And tells me how to spend on myself.'

'Things for your house?'

He nodded.

'Do you want to see it?'

'Now?'

'Why not?'

'I'll tell the children where I'm going.'

They walked. He told her the police had Gerry's name and address; how he'd been trying to get into the house the night the lights had been turned on; and how the police had combed the district but hadn't been able to find him before he got home.

'I'm sorry about it, Leanne, but there was nothing else to do.'

'You say he came up to the window and looked in?'

'It was frightening. I was glad he couldn't see me.'

Stopping, she looked up and down the street cautiously.

'I think I should be with the children.'

He was startled.

'Do you think he's going to do something to them?'

'No. But he will do something, and that's where I feel secure. With them. And strong enough.'

'You really want to go back now?'

'Yes I do. Sorry Fred, I'll see your house another time.'

'Do you want me to walk back with you?'

'No. Funny isn't it? I'm not afraid of him. What he tries to do is to get at you. He's more likely to tell the kids some lies than to go for me physically.'

'Well, I'm sorry I was the cause of it all coming to a head.'

He felt she'd gone grey, and cold.

'It hasn't come to a head yet, but it will. Goodnight Fred, sorry about this.' She moved away without looking back.

The prickling sensation started as soon as he entered his street, but when he stood in front of his house, one of a row of white, 1920s brick cottages, built as part of an estate, it was replaced by a feeling of apprehension. He'd never got into the habit of locking his house; what would he find?

He didn't see it straight away. The bedroom was as he'd left it—her sheets, the quilt they'd bought together, the Afghan rug just big enough for the two of them to stand on while they undressed, the low Danish chair where they put their clothes. Seeing these things made him warm and welcomed, as much by his house as by ...

He spoke as if she were there.

... my love.

Moving through the house, he stopped, and listened.

No one.

It was in the lounge. Black lines joined the two paintings. Edges of the graffiti protruded from the wall space covered by the paintings. Sickened, he took them down.

Very funny, Gerry Shaw, very fucking funny.

On the left, a man's scrotum, surmounted by what was recognisably his face. On the right, an open oval, tilted to the vertical, through which passed the penis which joined the two pieces of spraycan art. This penis then became the female body, with arms, nipples, and heavily lidded eyes in a face which was recognisably ...

... hers.

In a rage, he rushed to the shed. There was still some paint in the bottom of the tin. He grabbed the roller and tray, dragged furniture out of the way, flung newspapers on the floor, and partially obscured the drawing with a first coat of paint.

He propped a fan heater on a chair to dry the paint quickly so he could put on another coat, and another.

He went outside and sat under the tree, their place of purity; that was something Gerry Shaw hadn't defiled. It gave him some comfort, but he was restless, and went back in.

He could still see the graffiti, despite his paint. He put on a second coat, and then the can was empty. What next? Ring the cops? Go around to Hinde Street and confront the swine?

He rang Leanne. She said she was disgusted, but not surprised. She didn't want to see it. He felt she was distancing herself, letting the problem be his. As, he supposed, it was.

He rang the police. An hour later, a car arrived. A man and a woman looked at the wall, were sympathetic, made notes, and left.

He rang the station again, and asked for the cop with the dry laugh who'd picked him up in the street, walking down the hill. After considerable delay, this man came to the phone.

'Struck a bit closer to home, has he?'

'Very much so.'

'Anything to identify him?'

There were so many answers. He knew. Shaw knew he knew. He'd only been out of the house for half an hour, talking to the bastard's former wife ...

'Nothing.'

'Do you want us to go around and sort him out?'

It'd be lifting the stakes ... but they were going to be lifted anyhow.

'Why not? No! No, there's some mistake he has to make yet. I don't know what it is, but I feel he's going to put a foot wrong soon. Don't beat him up. Just wait.'

'Beat him up? Whoever said anything about beating him up? We're not in the business of beating people up. You don't want to say things like that.'

'No. Sorry. Okay, I'll let you know if anything else happens.'

He felt like sleeping outside. Putting up the tent again. Going off to a motel. The half-obscured graffiti was like a sickness, a wound, that he wanted to have healed at once. Each time he woke during the night he went to look at it, sickened, but unable to push it out of his mind. When he got to work in the morning he asked Eileen Dunn if she'd go to the hardware as soon as she got a break, and buy him some paint.

'What's the hurry?'

He told her what had happened.

'The dirty bastard! Yes, I'll get the paint. Why don't you get a few of the boys to go around and visit this bloke?'

'I don't want to do that. It's playing him at his own game.'

'Only way to beat him. What're your friends for? They're pretty rough diamonds, some of them, but they'd stick by you. They'd fix him for you.'

'I don't like it, Eileen. There's got to be another way out.'

'Have it your own way, Fred. I just hope he doesn't come back for another go.'

The next card came from Katoomba. On the front, in the foreground, a waratah in bloom; in the middle distance, the Three Sisters; in the background, a long vista of flat-topped mountains. On the back:

> Dear V and kids, If Jack doesn't get lost in the bush it'll be a miracle. He wants to walk and walk. The scenery's great but I have to keep making sure he's in sight. The flowers are beautiful. This afternoon we're going on a cable car and I'm terrified. I keep thinking I'm going to end up on tonight's news. You're stuck out in midair in a cage that dangles off a wire. Jack's forgotten how to be scared. Seeya (I hope) Marj XXX

She put the card above the fireplace. The children wanted to know where Marj was, so she got the atlas.

'Can we go there, Mum?'

'One of these days.'

'No, now.'

'Not today. Grandma's taking you to see a puppet show.'

Her mother noticed the card as soon as she entered the room.

'Your father and I went there for our honeymoon.'

'Katoomba?'

'Oh yes, it was fashionable, there, for a little while.'

'Why did you choose Katoomba?'

'To get away from the Olympic Games. People wouldn't stop talking about them. Our hotel was quite grand, and I don't think it had a single TV set.'

The children were interested in this.

'What did you do while they were cooking your dinner?'

'We drank sherry, or gin and tonic, and talked.'

The children lost interest. Grown-ups were always talking.

'Of course, Vicky, you flew to Europe for yours. The first time I went to Europe, it was by ship.'

'Cruise ships are back in fashion these days.'

'Oh, but what sort of cruises? You can imagine what they do all the time. They pitch all the advertising at *singles*, I'm glad there was no such thing in my day.' They fell silent, reaching backwards in their thoughts, Mrs Challis remembering her husband's confidence as he drove his gleaming Citroën to New South Wales, his hand on her leg when he didn't need it for driving, and her relief that he never asked about those parts of her past that he didn't know. That way, two rapes and the indecencies of Uncle Hendry could be swept into the past.

It had been almost dark, the first time she and her husband walked the long street to the famous view. It was only then, alone with him, that she realised she was married. The wedding had been a blur and the reception so packed with embracing people, and dancing, and listening to speeches without hearing a word, that she hadn't had a moment to reflect on what she was doing. But at the vantage point, wondering where in this darkened wilderness were the Three Sisters, and what actual sisters they'd been named for, she'd had a moment of realisation—that thousands of people had stood where she was standing, and yet she was unique, and this was the most important, binding moment of her life.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her daughter looked at her, eyes putting a question.

'I married him for life, and he only lived another fourteen years.'

Her mother's tears moved her. She'd thought about her father on her wedding day, and her wedding night. She'd wanted him, at the church. And in the hotel room they'd occupied for a night before they flew out to London, she'd realised she was doing what every generation did—starting out, taking the risk, repeating the parents' pattern. She'd told Tony, and he'd said he understood. The excitement of travel had sustained them, the first few days; it wasn't until they got to Spain, new to both of them, that his limitations became apparent. He was being entertained by what he saw—cathedrals, villages, castles, galleries—but he wasn't going to change in response to them. When he went home he was going to be the same man, with more things he could refer to in conversation, but with no new modes of being opened in him. In Seville, when they visited the Alcazar, he hadn't noticed, until she pointed it out, that much of what he admired was a Christian imposition on a Moorish achievement. How much of his insensitivity had been passed on to the children, playing on the floor under the dull grey eye of a TV that was switched off?

Her mother glanced at the children before saying, 'Show me where you're thinking of putting new curtains. I might be able to suggest something.' It was her call for a private conversation which could only be about one thing.

'It's in the upstairs sitting room.'

Leading the way to her home's best view—a vast spread of terracotta suburbs, and Melbourne's low hills, the Dandenongs, in the distance—she felt the familiar tightness coming on. She felt stiff and scarcely able to climb the stairs. Why couldn't her mother keep away?

The room was in a mess. She'd torn down the old curtains and thrown them in a heap. The windows needed washing. The doors to the children's rooms were open and there were toys everywhere. Two unmade beds could be seen.

Her mother stopped just inside the door, as if the room was as distasteful as what she had to say.

'I know you're disappointed in Tony, but I don't think you're being very fair.'

Keeping her back to her mother, she moved to the window. Thanks to her husband, who'd had the grace to apologise for his action, she wouldn't be standing here any more, watching someone whose whole being was available to her, zigzagging along the street, making her yearn for the moment in the afternoon, if they were lucky, or the night, when they could be together.

'Vicky?'

The name scarcely registered. The window was warm, and light was falling on her. From where her mother stood, her hair would be a bright aureole. She felt like laughing; the saint was in for a lecture on sin!

'It's no good sulking, the problem won't go away, you know.'

A postman rounded the corner. Not him, but what did it matter? The new man put letters in a box. Mrs Challis, sensing her daughter's attention, hurried to the window.

'It's not him, Mother. Tony had him shifted.'

'It was a wise move.'

'It wasn't. He's ashamed of himself.'

'Well, he doesn't need to be. You've browbeaten him in some way. Why shouldn't he take steps to protect …'

'You were going to say his marriage.'

'Yes I was!'

'I don't belong to him. I can be with anyone I want to.'

'Vicky, you're talking like a ... a hippy!'

'Don't call me by that silly name.'

'What am I supposed to call you?'

'Don't call me anything. Speak to me directly. Don't treat me as a role, or a construct. Above all, don't talk to me as an expectation.'

'What's wrong with it? We all expect things of each other.'

She ran her fingers over the warm glass, as if, by treating it with a lover's tenderness, she could dissolve it.

'I'm in love, Mother. I expect perfection, and I have it every time I'm with him.'

The new postman, a bulky man, looked up as he crossed the street. Presumably everyone at the post office knew what was going on: laughing, she raised her hand. The postman nodded, put something in her letter box, and pedalled on.

'Vicky, really. What on earth are you doing, waving to someone like that?'

'I'm in love with someone *like that*, as you put it.' Turning, her shoulder touched her mother's shoulder, and she stared into her mother's eyes.

'What you're asking me to give up is the very thing I've always wanted most. Something you never gave me, nor did father while he was alive. Complete autonomy. He ...'

She tapped the window.

'... makes the grand, and wrong, assumption, that I really know what I'm doing, that I'm on top of my life, that whatever I think and decide for myself is best for me.'

'You admit, then, that you're not wise.'

'I admit it because you know it anyway. What you don't know is the effect that him treating me like that, him thinking of me like that, has on me. It gives me power. I am everything I want to be.

All the cracks and divisions, the insecurities I've got, disappear. I'm whole and secure. You must be able to imagine how much I value that.1

'Yes, and at what cost to others do you get all this?'

'The children aren't suffering. They like him. They probably see more of him than they do of Tony.'

It was her mother's turn to tap the glass.

'You're driving him out of his own home.'

A flush of anger rose on her neck. This was the moment when her mother, knowing she was vulnerable, would want to strike. She had to keep talking calmly.

'You say you married father for life. You were lucky, then. We'd been married just over a fortnight when I knew it was going to come unstuck one day.'

'Yet you gave Tony those two beautiful children!'

'I didn't give them to him, I had them. Please let me tell you how I knew.'

'I don't know if I want to hear this.'

'You've been to the Alhambra, in Spain.'

'Yes, it was marvellous. Why are you changing the subject?'

'I'm not. That's where it happened.'

'What did he do that was so wrong?'

'He kept reading these guidebooks. He wanted to know all about it before he saw it.'

'It's a good idea to prepare yourself. You should have encouraged him.'

'When we got there, he started drinking beer with these English people, and talking politics. I went off by myself.'

Typical, thought her mother, but waited.

'I found this place, in one of the early rooms, where you look on to the old quarter. There's a steep drop right in front of you. The walls were covered with those wonderful patterns, and Arabic writing. And on either side of the window, facing each other, were two ceramic seats. I sat on one of them. At first I was happy being on my own, and then I started to sense the possibilities of having someone suitable ... with the proper awareness, I think I mean ... sitting opposite.'

Her mother softened.

'Really? I know that room you mean. You can almost reach out and touch those little white houses on the other side of the valley.'

'Did you go there with father?'

'Yes, we did. I was pregnant with you, but I didn't know it then. It must have only just happened.'

'Tell me what you remember about it.'

'The whole place was enchanting. And those gardens! It was raining when we were there but you could see how heavenly they'd be on a warm night.'

She knew her mother well.

'Did you wish for anything?'

'I hope that question's not some sort of trap, Vicky ... sorry ,.. but all right, I'll tell you. I wished I wasn't a tourist, I wished the whole palace was mine.'

'Yours? Did you want father there too, to own it with you?'

'Well of course if I'd owned it I'd have wanted him with me. What would be the good of being there on your own? But it was just a fantasy, a little escape into fairyland. A delightful little dream that kept me happy for a few hours.'

‘A few hours! Did you tell father what you were thinking?’

‘Of course I did. And he kissed me, and said we’d have our dream for the afternoon, and when we got home, we’d make something as good. It was when we got back that we had all those extensions done. It was quite a modest house until then.’

The house behind the elms had large interior spaces, but was tightly designed, with prominent fireplaces, dark panelling and rafters, and narrow leadlight windows in Australian-Tudor style. Even the front steps were clinker brick. A long way from the Alhambra dream, she thought, wondering why her mother didn’t say so.

‘But it isn’t as good, is it?’

Her mother stiffened, feeling she’d opened up too easily under her daughter’s questioning.

‘It’s been a wonderful home. You were very happy there as a child. I had an approach from an agent the other day, he asked me to name my own price. Some diplomat’s been admiring it.’

She couldn’t bear the thought of a sale. It would mean not having access to her beginnings.

‘You wouldn’t sell it, would you?’

Her mother smiled at her anxiety.

‘I certainly won’t. It was the first and only home of my marriage.’

‘You do think marriage is sacred, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do, and so should you.’

‘It’s only a social form. How can marriage be sacred unless *we’re* sacred? The people who marry are sacred?’

Her mother snorted.

‘You’ve only got to look around to see that most people are far from sacred.’

‘And marriage will improve them?’

‘It will if they put their hearts into it. Commit themselves. It’s not called a sacrament for nothing, you know.’

She felt they’d reached an impasse.

‘I was telling you how I felt, sitting on that seat.’

Her mother relented a little.

‘It’s called the Golden Room, that place you’re talking about, I remember now. I don’t know why, I thought there were other rooms that were more golden.’

She ignored this.

‘I went through the whole palace on my own. Sometimes I wanted it to go on for ever, and sometimes, because it was so exquisite that I found it painful, I wanted it to end. And when I’d been through the whole place, I went back to that seat.’

‘And you’re going to tell me that Tony was still off drinking beer.’

‘He was, but I’d forgotten him by then.’

She thought of the palace for a moment, and sensed that her mother was trying to visualise it too.

‘I tried to think my way into the mind of the architect, and then I realised he’d already thought his way into mine.’

Mrs Challis considered this idea of her daughter’s, her mind playing on the formal gardens, the archways, sensuous water, and the endless iteration of faith in the calligraphy on the walls, an insubstantial plaster writing that had been damaged and restored, but had somehow managed to survive through the centuries as few human statements had survived so lucidly, and felt self-satisfaction in that she had so keenly wished to possess it. Exquisite as the palace was, it was not over-

whelming; thus there was room, need, for a refined, superior human presence to give the building and its gardens life. She answered:

'Some people—not many, I'm sure, out of all those busloads of tourists who arrive there every day—some people would realise how much would be expected of anyone who lived there. If that's what you mean, I believe you're right.'

She took up her mother's words.

'What I think I'm trying to say is that those expectations are inbuilt. The building has an awareness. When I sat on that seat, looking at the empty seat, I knew it was the perfect place for conversation. I was sitting in that passageway of air, with that view on one side, and those wonderful rooms on the other, and I could feel that they were in dialogue because every time the light changed outside, something happened inside, so there was an opportunity—the seats gave you the opportunity—to talk across that flow of air and light, that interaction, and when you've been there a while, you realise that the building knows that you know what's going on, and expects you to act up to that perfection ...'

Her mother felt she was being subverted. She wanted to get back to her daughter's disgraceful behaviour.

'... so you've got to be good! You've got to be up to it! You've got to have that dimension of awareness, or else you fail the test. You're crass!'

Her mother felt it as both true, and an accusation.

'Don't get carried away, Vicky! And don't try to divert me from what I want to talk about! I'm here to talk about you and Tony!'

Eyes dry and face pale, she said, 'Well what on earth do you think I'm talking about? He found me sitting there, plonked himself on the other seat, told me some stuff he'd got out of a guidebook, and asked me to come back to talk to these people he'd met up with.'

Mrs Challis couldn't help allowing herself some sarcasm.

'And he smelt of beer?'

'Yes he did. But what did that matter? I realised that not only would he never have with me the understanding, the dialogue that I wanted, but that he would never even know what it was I wanted. There was a whole dimension lacking in him.'

Mrs Challis wouldn't give up.

'Then it was up to you—and it's still up to you; this is why I'm here today—to make up for that lack. To provide for him what he hasn't got in himself. And he has to do that for you. Couples do that for each other. They recognise their mutual dependence, and they make sure they satisfy each other's needs. If that doesn't come easily to you then you have to keep trying to adjust.'

She gathered as much of her strength as was left.

'If I stay with Tony, who's going to satisfy my needs?'

The low blue hills at the back of the view reminded her of the grander mountains, somewhere far behind, where she'd had the fulfilment, the exquisite dialogue, which her mother wanted her to abjure.

Mrs Challis, surprised at her daughter's failure to weaken, attacked again.

'If you do anything but stay with Tony, then you do it expressly and knowingly against my wishes.'

She knew that if it went on much longer, she'd crack.

'How can you stand there and say that? You wanted me to be with that slimy Frenchman—Alain—so you could use him as a way of getting at me. Of controlling me. Which is what you're trying to do now.'

Her mother was startled, then furious.

'I only asked you to show him some civility. Some interest. To add something, a little something, to his stay which I felt I couldn't provide. If you think I was asking for something else then your fantasies are clearly running away with you. And of course I'm trying to control you. Your life's in a mess. You need psychiatric care. I'm trying to make you see the need to re-order your life. Shouldn't I be doing that? If I don't do it, who else will, now that you've rejected Tony? Do you think some *postman* …'

She couldn't get quite enough venom into her voice.

'… will be able to give you a basis for your life? If you go on with this, you'll lose everything. You'll finish up with nothing. You're not taking my grandchildren down there to live.'

Her mother looked down the hill with contempt. The children could be heard coming up the stairs. Full of bitterness, she said:

'Take my children to their puppet show. Then take them back to your house and don't bring them back.'

Passing the children on the stairs, she told them she was going out. Her mother's car was in the street, waiting. She looked at it with hatred, then walked west, away from the railway line.

When he rang, the phone sounded in an empty house. It was an afternoon when they were going to be together. He rang every few minutes, trying to imagine what had happened. Feeling afraid, he retreated to his chair under the magnolia, as if that could secure him from whatever danger their relationship was in.

His phone rang; he rushed inside.

Hello.

Her voice was faint. Weak.

Hello darling, where are you? I've been ringing and ringing.

I'm in the city. I'm going to see a film.

He couldn't believe it. They'd been going to …

What film are you going to see?

I've no idea. I just want to sit in the dark with a few people around me that I don't know.

Why, what's happened?

I don't want to talk about it.

He didn't know what to say. The silence, which seemed endless, was painful for him but seemed to give her no difficulty. Was it only a silence? He felt she was vanishing and didn't know how to call her back.

She spoke.

I'm going to hang up now. I'll contact you later.

He retreated to the magnolia, but the associations of their two chairs, and the marble table where they put their glasses, were too painful. He decided to walk, making sure, this time, that he locked the door behind him.

There was only one way to go. Halfway up the hill he diverted, lacking the confidence to go straight to the house. In the street behind where she lived, he saw what appeared to be an elderly,

bearded man with a sprightly walk. For a moment he asked himself if it mightn't be his shadow, the graffitist, in disguise. The man's smile, and the charm of his greeting as they passed, made him feel ashamed.

He was angry with himself for being ashamed. The great change in him brought about by his love was that his pride, ludicrous in the past because he had nothing to be proud of, was now central to his living. Every contact with her had burnished that pride ...

... until today.

He had the keys to her house in his pocket, but why go in? Yet he felt that if he didn't, it would prove that he was afraid, which would mean that the unthinkable might be thinkable. He might lose his love.

He might already have lost her.

He walked slowly down the hill to his own house—my other house, she liked to call it—and lay on their bed, trying to establish mental contact.

Blank.

Uncoiling the extension cord, he brought the phone beside the bed, got under the quilt, and waited. Once or twice he slept. When it grew dark, the situation seemed more serious, but he was calmer. Eight o'clock passed. He took a glass of wine to the tree, rededicating himself, then lay down again. It was after nine when the phone rang.

Hello?

Her voice was soft.

Hello darling.

Where are you?

I'm at my mother's. She doesn't know I'm here.

Why are you there?

Come up and I'll tell you.

How'll I get in?

I'll meet you at the gate in twenty minutes.

Isn't she there?

She's entertaining someone, she'll be fully occupied.

Ah, by 'entertaining', I presume you mean what I think you mean?

That's what I mean.

They laughed, he smoothed the bed, and walked up the hill for the second time that day.

When she heard his footsteps, she opened the gate a handspan. At the sight of her, smiling but afraid of his reaction, he felt radiant, restored. They clutched each other, kissing, then moved back to see the wonder of each other's eyes.

Come in, I'll shut the gate.

The huge house was dark.

What's your mother doing?

She's in bed with the man who does the gardening.

What!

She'd tried to get him sacked because he, a postman, had dared ...

Ssssh. Isn't it a yell? I'll take you up where the children are.

She led him, with her fine hand, up the steps, past the urns, the trailing vines, to the ivy-covered porch. He grew nervous.

Isn't there a back stairway?

It's near her room. We'll go in here.

Crossing the entrance hall, he noticed how lightly she moved. She seemed scarcely to touch the steps as they went up. At the top of the stairs she turned, in a shaft of light from the street, and hugged him.

I'm so glad I've got you.

He wondered how she'd resolved her unexplained anguish from earlier in the day. Was it in what she was doing with him now? He was too relieved, excited, to ask questions.

Take off your things, I want to be near you.

They undressed at the top of the stairs. He couldn't see how many rooms there were.

I'll shift the children. We'll have the big bed.

She carried first one, then the other, sleepy child across the hall, her skin glowing in the patch of light. Then she came back for him.

Come in and shut the door.

She put a chair against it.

You go on that side. I want to be nearest the door.

Why?

In case she comes in.

He moved.

You must think all this is pretty silly. But she's my enemy. I have to keep us secure against her.

Okay. Tell me about it when we're sitting under our tree. I feel a bit surrounded by this place.

She kissed him.

It's oppressive. I always feel stifled when I sleep here. But it's good now I've got you. I never thought I'd manage it.

He laughed, and rubbed her leg madly.

One thing we can't do … you won't be able to play that piece …

By Scarlatti? Yes I can. I'm going to do just that.

It overwhelmed him. She rolled against him; they merged.

But how can you?

Kiss my breasts.

Bend down.

Darling.

He kissed one breast, she offered him the other.

I've never loved anyone like this before.

Neither have I. It's wonderful.

They loved for a long time, then lay drowsily beside each other. He touched her where she liked to be touched on the inside of her leg.

I don't want to make love again just yet, darling. I'm going to play for you now.

She got up.

Aren't you going to put anything on?

She laughed.

I haven't got a dressing gown.

Take a blanket.

I'll take your coat.

She slipped out of the room. He sat up, then lay back, waiting. Was he privileged, or in danger? To ease his tension, he started counting.

I want her to start before I get to thirty.

She raised the lid of the piano, trying not to make a sound. She wanted the music to be suddenly there in the house, as if the piano were playing itself.

Mrs Challis, sleeping beside her lover, dreamed that a police car was parked beneath her elms, blue light flashing. The policemen had her daugher in the back of the car. They'd brought her home. They said she'd won a prize. Nonsense, she told them, she isn't good at anything. But her smiling child showed her a framed certificate. Mrs Challis knew she was meant to be proud of it, but couldn't read it because the print was too fine. I'll have to get my glasses, she told the police.

She woke. The music sounded like the continuation of her dream. Vicky's won a prize for piano playing, she thought. Now she's showing me what she can do.

She woke properly. Her piano was producing familiar sounds. I should be scared, she thought, but no, there's nothing to be scared of. My daughter's letting me know she's home. She tried to identify the music, then it came to her; it was the piece she'd heard her daughter practising, badly, day in, day out, the piece she'd played perfectly once only, the day she'd spirited herself away to Sydney and reappeared to play, properly, Scarlatti in the lounge. Mrs Challis touched her cheek and found tears. It had been thirteen years ago, thirteen turbulent years. She'd been without a husband, her daughter had married someone she found irritating and pompous, she'd had a succession of demeaning lovers—like this Turkish engineer who could only find work beneath his station: she'd never really been happy in those years, and now they were ended. The music, so busy, so lovely when it reached its quiet section, was her daughter's bitter-sweet way of returning after their quarrel. The tears ceased. She slipped from the bed and made her way down the passage. She knew she mustn't spoil the moment by letting her daughter know she was there, but she wanted to catch a glimpse of this midnight music-making.

She was rewarded. In the corner of the room near the window, her back to her mother, wearing something dark, her daughter was moving her fingers across the keys she hadn't touched in years.

Mrs Challis crept back to her room, tempted to wait until the music had been over for a time, and then to climb the stairs as silently as she'd eavesdropped on the playing, and lie beside her daughter, but she restrained herself; what she'd been given was enough.

Darling?

He woke suddenly.

What, my love?

I'm feeling agitated. I've done something wrong.

What do you mean?

I don't know. I really don't know. I feel terrible. I need to be alone.

All right. What time is it?

She felt beside the bed for her watch.

Three twenty-eight.

What a dreadful hour!

She wanted to laugh, but felt inhibited.

I'm sorry, darling, I'm really sorry.

It's all right. I had to go some time before daybreak. Otherwise, she'd have had you, me and the gardener for breakfast.

This time she did manage a laugh, but was still impatient.

I'll come down with you.

She led him through the entrance hall, the ivy-covered porch, past the urns and trailing creepers to the gate. The elms were black. She opened the gate. He could feel the struggle inside her. They kissed. She clutched his hand.

Take me with you.

Misunderstanding her, he rubbed his cheek on hers.

Come down tomorrow, we'll be together again.

She came the next afternoon.

I'm in trouble.

What is it?

Mother wants to have a party because Tony's had a promotion.

You've always kept apart from his politics.

I've got to do it.

Where's it supposed to be?

At her place. We'll get caterers in. Mother's going to host it. I'm to provide decorative charm.

He sensed her moving away.

Don't do it.

It's only one night. When it's over I'll come to you. I need you, darling. Don't reject me. I wish I could have you there.

He reflected, glumly, that this would hardly be possible. She thought of something.

I want to have some of your flowers in the house. I'll put them somewhere where everybody will see them.

The red and white heath?

Can you buy it?

I don't know, I'll look around.

He got the next card from Marj. Coffs Harbour. Boats, the blue Pacific. On the back:

> Dear Fred, I've been wondering how you were. How's my garden? I'm going to write to Vicky in a minute. Jack said something nice this morning. He said he'd never understood me until he had his stroke. He's really happy. He says this is the biggest thing we've done together. I said weren't you around when we had the kids? He laughed at that. I think he's learning not to be selfish. Pretty late lesson. Take care, I've been worrying about you. Marj XXX

The next day, at work, he saw Jim Robards, the man who'd replaced him on his round, sorting a couple of postcards into his mail for delivery. He wanted to read them because he knew who they were for.

Leanne's card showed a stony mountain plateau, with snow gums and some patches of snow.

> Dear L, Not like this at the moment, fortunately. We're in Armidale. His highness suddenly decided he'd had enough of the sea. Mind you we're heading for Byron Bay next, then Mullumbimby. I'm

looking forward to Queensland. The van's going well. We sleep in it most nights. Occasionally we treat ourselves to a motel. We've got a gas cooker but Jack likes to light fires so we're always ducking down back roads. Lots of love, Marj.

Tony, noticing where she pinned the cards, grasped that she was imagining the board as a map.

'I'd like to go around Australia,' he told Leanne.

'Do you think you ever will?'

'That will depend,' he said grimly, 'on how many times I get married.'

She treated this warily; she'd already refused an invitation to have lunch with him.

'You haven't started planning your second, have you, when you're still on your first?'

'I'm not at all sure that I am still on my first,' he said sourly.

He saw the same card, with a different message, when he got home that night. She'd left it on the dining room table, with a book of poems open beneath it. He read the card, which didn't interest him, then the poem:

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite—
clean, lean, hungry country.

He felt it was there as an appeal to him. It made him feel agitated, because he didn't know what he was being asked, or why. He went to the pantry. The clippings about the shooting in Moyston weren't there any more. Something had changed. He wondered if she was asleep. He went back to the poem:

South of my days' circle,
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
Full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

What stories? He went to the door of her room.

'Tony?'

They'd hardly spoken in weeks. He sat on the end of the bed.

'I read the poem. It's terrific. Beautiful.'

'Is that all?'

'I know you're saying something to me, and I'm sorry because I'm too dense to hear it.'

He could hear her breathing; the sound seemed to condemn him.

'I'm not in touch with myself the way you are. I'm not so stupid that I don't know that. I suppose it's why I'm in politics. I need to be surrounded by people who want things from me. I listen to them, I work out how much it's possible for them to get. If I'm too fussy about myself, if I've got too many fine principles, I can't operate. I know I've disappointed you. I know there's a message in that poem. There was a message in that story about those cops shooting each other, but you'll have to give it to me directly. Please don't condemn me, just tell me, and try me out that way.' '

'You can sleep in here tonight. Don't touch me.'

He went to get his pajamas from his office.

Leanne sat down with Tony to go through the mail, and the items she'd marked in the papers. He commented that the mail was later in arriving these days. She said it was because the new man was slower in doing his sorting; the comparison, he saw, was to his disfavour.

'Did you know the last fellow very well?'

She said she did.

'Was he a friend of yours?'

'Still is.'

This was something else for him to face up to.

'I suppose you know why I did it?'

She said she did.

'It was a rotten thing to do. I've apologised to my wife. I'm apologising to you now. If you're talking to . . .'

He couldn't say the name.

'... please tell him I know I made a fool of myself. If you wouldn't mind.'

'I respect you for that, Tony.'

He felt she did; and they could go on.

'Oh well, who wants a slice of my life today?'

He'd been written to by the Boy Scouts, an expensive girls' school, the Antique Dealers Association, and by the Playing Card Collectors Society of Victoria, wanting him to open their annual bazaar and sale. Encouraged by her smile as she told him, he leaned back in his chair.

'The playing card collectors! Aren't people loony? What's it say about someone that they run around collecting … '

He started to laugh; she could feel hysteria coming on; should she tell him the next bit or not?

'They've even sent you one as encouragement.'

It was a Jack of Clubs; on the back, a black and silver art deco design. He held it up, turned it over and over, and laughed until he was, she could see, on the verge of crying. She decided she'd better relent about the lunch.

'Don't worry about them. I'll ring them and say you're too busy. And listen. When you're back from seeing those people at the Town Hall, we'll go and have that lunch you were talking about.'

He looked at her with a humility she hadn't seen in him before.

'Thanks, Leanne. Bless you. Thank God someone's accepting me for a human being at last.'

That night, sleeping badly and waking in the bed he had once thought his by right, he became aware that his wife was going through something painful. He heard her get up and make coffee, he heard her rebuild the fire in the lounge; when, finally, she lay down again, he sensed that she was doing so in abandonment to some terrible grief. At the risk of offending her yet again, he reached across and took her hand. She didn't withdraw it. She was shaking, later she became still; he felt it was a transition from pain to a state of helplessness. When he woke in the morning, for his run, her hands lay along her body, above the quilt, and her face was paler than he'd ever seen it. She might have died in the night but for the faint rise and fall of the bedding on her chest.

Cards came down from Lismore, the Gold Coast, and Gympie; the last showed a place called Tin Can Bay. He put it with the others above the fireplace. The cards she'd sent would be Marj's only

diary; he thought of retrieving them all and spreading them on her table the day she and Jack got back. He asked Leanne if she'd contribute; she agreed.

She passed on Tony's apology; he received it sullenly. Preparations for the promotion party were taking time and attention that could have been his. He caught himself hacking savagely at dead branches in Marj's garden, and swearing at minor discomforts; his resentment was finding places to express itself. He made himself think about his position. Gamble for more than you can afford to lose ... What if he lost? What if he went to his love one night and found the locks had been changed? He thought of Gerry Shaw, peering through the window, then slipping away—that strange man whose imagination came to life on his nocturnal excursions. Would he, he asked himself, be any better if his love, the source of his elation, was removed?

He wanted to test her, to ask for something which would prove where her commitment lay. He also knew that this was the way people brought about the undesired end. He had therefore to suppress his doubts, be available, be exactly what was asked, thus putting himself entirely in her hands, those delicate hands that stroked him with exquisite tenderness.

My love.

She came one night, unexpectedly, after telling him she wouldn't be able to see him. He was kneeling by the fire, putting wood on, when he heard the door open. He didn't dare to look. She came into the darkened room and knelt beside him.

I'm sorry it's been such a long time, darling.

Oh.

All he could express by his sigh was relief.

Am I wearing you out, darling? I am, aren't I? What you want is something secure, and all I do is put pressure on you. Pressure to be perfect for me.

Bemused, confused, he looked into her eyes.

She too was in a state of anxiety.

Bloody Tony and a whole roomful of his cronies turned up half an hour ago. I've told Tony he's not to have meetings in my house, but he said there was some muck-up and there wasn't anywhere they could meet. They're all in the lounge, with a fire I lit because I wanted to be alone. You've no idea how much I needed to be alone!

He wondered where the passion went, and if it went through him.

What's the meeting about?

Would you believe—multiculturalism? Those pompous shits, those fucking phonies, are sitting around and I could hear their voices all over the house. 'We want to forge a harmonious national identity out of our diversity of traditions and backgrounds. We want to ensure that our British inheritance, and the rule of law, are enriched, not diluted, by our acceptance of social diversification.' They sit there, drinking *my* cognac—which my mother's Uncle Hendry, who's a despicable old bastard, gave me last Christmas—and they mouth this rubbish at each other. Or that's how they start; it'll get dirtier as the night wears on.

He started to laugh. For a moment she couldn't join him, then she relaxed.

Fuck them. I told Tony I was sleeping down here. He's apparently got, would you believe, a working breakfast at eight. So I'll have to leave by seven, darling, to take over the kids. Imagine eating breakfast with all that crap in your ears. Play some music, darling, anything you like.

He pulled the sofa around by the fire.

Do you know—I'm sorry to keep going on, I'll stop in a minute—Tony's main concern, when I told him I was going, was who was going to iron his shirt. He's got a wardrobe full of shirts and he thinks I ought to iron them for him …

He stood by the record player.

What'll I put on?

Something really remote. Those Rumanian pan pipes … no, that Russian choir. It's all mumbo jumbo but it's nice to think someone believes in something. Sorry darling. Kiss me before you put it on.

When he got up in the morning, she was drowsy.

Darling, do you have to go to work now?

Yes bugger it. Yet again.

I'll stay here for another hour. In your bed. Could you set the alarm?

He put the clock beside her. Eyes closed, she smiled into the pillow. He rubbed the quilt where her bottom lifted it.

See you soon, darling.

She smiled, eyes still closed.

He went into the pale pink dawn, feeling there was no luckier person on earth.

Two nights later, feeling restless, unable to read, wanting the phone to ring, he took himself outside. There was the glow of a cigarette under the magnolia. As far as he knew, she didn't smoke. He went closer.

It was Gerry Shaw. A cold rage came over him.

'What are you doing here?'

'Waiting for you.'

'Well piss off.'

'It's time we talked.'

'What would you have to say that would interest me?'

'Quite a bit. I've been looking at that hill for years.'

'You won't be doing it much longer. The cops know who it is.'

'They found out too late. I had my last little look last night. Just doing the rounds of the locks.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Those people like to think if they spend money they can protect themselves. I worked for a security firm after I split up with you know who. I've got all the keys, I can open anything. I like to go around and open things. I don't pinch much. Mostly I just move things around so they know someone's been in. Then they change the locks. Until I leave the door open again, and they change the locks again.' He appeared to smile. 'Good for the economy.'

'Why are you here?'

'Your girlfriend's changed her locks. Or Decker has. Probably her. You won't be getting the new key.'

A chill went through him. It was just the sort of unilateral action—like having his round changed—that he feared. He wanted to sit down.

'Sorry it has to be me that brings you the news. I've been barracking for you, you know.'

He felt sick.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

‘I didn’t think you had any hope, but you were going so well I thought I might be wrong.’

He tried to fight back.

‘I’m not a violent man ...’

He wasn’t prepared to name him.

‘... but I’ve got an urge that’s telling me to throttle you.’

‘Isn’t that called shooting the messenger?’

This time the rage wouldn’t be controlled. He shouted:

‘You painted that filth on my walls! Our walls, you smeared the contents of your shitty mind under our paintings!’

The other man wasn’t fussed.

‘A bit over the top, I admit. I thought of offering to paint it over, but I checked a couple of nights later and you’d already done the job. Got to you, didn’t it?’

He felt tense.

‘Please go. I hate you being here. Especially there, where you’re sitting.’

The other man got up.

‘I was never your enemy, mate. Just curious.’

‘You won’t be able to give up perving!’

‘Probably not entirely. But I’m sick of the hill. You can’t beat ‘em. And that’s what fascinated me. I’ve seen some amazing things up there, and your girlfriend’s father would have to have been the worst of the lot ...’

It made him intensely curious.

‘Tell me about him. No, don’t!’

Shaw was amused.

‘Why did you change your mind?’

‘I’ll ask ... my friend. I don’t want anything that happens between us to be interpreted by anyone else.’

‘Then you’re in her hands, aren’t you?’

He felt cold and stiff.

‘I wouldn’t have it any other way.’

‘I guess that’s why I’ve got a sneaking admiration for you. You poor bastard.’

‘You’d better go.’

The other man moved to the edge of the magnolia’s spread.

‘You know where I am if you ever want to talk to me.’

He was suddenly curious again.

‘Why did you change your name?’

‘I didn’t, if you notice. Just the spelling. I don’t know, just a bit of duplicity. Just to amuse myself, I think. I don’t have anything else to do, do I? Leanne’s got the kids.’

‘Why did you slash her tyres?’

‘Because I’m the rotten dirty stinking bastard that she thinks I am. We all are, mate. We can’t escape it. None of us are any different, it’s just that some of us are good at hiding it. They’re smart. The dumb ones are the ones that hide it from themselves.’

‘Like me, is that what you’re trying to say?’

‘Ten out of ten, my boy. Precisely.’

‘Then I’m putting my whole life where I’ve put it to say that you are as wrong as wrong can be.’

Shaw laughed.

'If you get a key to the new lock, come and tell me and I'll eat shit.'

The rage came back, driven by fear:

'Get out, you're revolting!'

Shaw moved away.

'I'll go over the back fence, if you don't mind. I prefer dirty little lanes to the so called clean and decent streets. Seeya, mate. Don't take it too hard.'

He got a taxi to take him over the Westgate bridge.

'Go slow, would you? I want to see the view.'

The driver was garrulous.

'Haven't been across here for ages. Last time I did, there was a howling gale. Cops closed the bridge, later. When I came through they were stopping trucks and caravans. Cars were getting through at reduced speed. It bloody put the wind up me. I went home another way.'

There was enough wind to bend the smoke of factory chimneys almost horizontal. In the sky, clouds were moving quickly. Belts of light and shade flickered over the gigantic, gracious curve of the bridge. Above his right shoulder he could see the city, high and compact in the centre, its environs sprawling forever. Over his left shoulder, a ship was creeping across the horizon of the bay. What would it be like to see those things and know you weren't going to see them again? He was rehearsing. At the top of the concrete arch, he tried to guess how long it would take to fall; how many seconds between climbing over and oblivion? Would he feel anything, would he have thoughts?

He got himself dropped in Williamstown and walked by the water. No resolution. He was numb, but not with the final despair of suicide. He went back to the shops and found a taxi. The same taxi.

The driver guessed when he twisted suddenly in his seat at the summit of the span.

'Are ya thinkin' about what it would be like to jump?'

'How did you know what I was thinking?'

The driver chuckled.

'I used to drive in Sydney. Took a lot of people out to The Gap. Some of them'd sit in the cab and cry. If they cried and told me their story they were usually all right, I ended up taking them home. I tell you what, I reckon I've saved more lives than any bloody shrink, just sitting in the cab and listening. With the meter turned off because I didn't have the heart to leave it on. I worked out pretty early on not to try to talk 'em out of it. Just listen. They talked themselves out of it. Or rather they couldn't quite talk themselves into it. There was a couple that had their minds made up. I just dropped 'em and drove away. I felt sorry for the cops. Have you ever been there?'

He hadn't.

'It's rocky at the bottom, and the sea's washing over it most of the time. And there's ledges. Some of 'em land on a ledge, break a few bones, lie there calling out till someone hears 'em. Then the cops have to get down on ropes and get 'em up again. What a bastard of a job. Bloody dangerous. Still, I suppose you can't leave 'em, even if they did try to wipe 'emselves out'

They were down, now, on the approaches to the bridge. The driver started to speed up. He felt he had to assert himself.

'Stop! Just pull over, would you. You're trying to make up my mind for me. I need to walk back and think.'

The cab pulled over. Traffic swooshed past. He looked angrily at the driver who'd broken into his thoughts.

'How much?'

'Eight dollars sixty. And I won't get a fare between here and Saint Kilda, if you'd like to chuck in a bit extra.'

He gave him twenty.

'Thanks.'

The cab joined the rushing traffic. He wandered into the wasteland being converted to parkland at the feet of the bridge. The rivers of industrial cities are never attractive. Seagulls were picking over rubbish.

Why am I here?

Because she's moving away from me, and if the best of my life is over, I don't want to live any longer.

Not wanting to live is not the same as wanting to die. Do you want to die?

He looked at that other span, the gap between carriageway and water, a span so much harder to conceptualise than the stride-of-giants bridge, picking up the distant halves of a city, joining them.

Why can't I imagine it?

Because there would be nothing joining the two ends of that span but a falling you.

Me?

He knew he'd never do it. Even the thought of doing it as a last plunge of punishment in her heart wasn't enough. He'd never do it.

Desolate, feelings almost frozen, he made his way back to the freeway and walked, indifferent to his surroundings, towards the skyscrapers of confident capital. After a few minutes he realised that he was approaching a parked taxi. The driver was reading the paper. He got in.

'I didn't think you'd do it, I decided to hang around for a while.'

'Take me home.'

The engine started.

'The twenty you gave me should cover it.'

They rushed into the traffic again, meter turned off.

She thought of putting bandages on her fingers, on the night of the party, so she couldn't be asked to play, but her mother, dismissing earlier scruples about the relationship, had included Grinter, the surgeon, and his friend Yvonne on the guest list. They were among the first arrivals and Yvonne went straight to the keyboard. One of mother's little surprises.

The Party leader and his entourage also arrived early, and after shaking hands with Tony and Mrs Challis, inquired after Tony's wife—but she was upstairs with the children, hammering out a compromise. They could stay up for an hour, until all the guests had arrived, and they could not stay up to see them leave. They'd be asleep!

Mrs Challis went to the bottom of the stairs to meet her daughter coming down with the children, Ellen fair, Lindsay dark as his father, wrapped in dressing gowns and Lindsay hugging a bear. The children looked shyly at those who said hello to them, and Mrs Challis led her daughter to the leader and his wife. The leader said, over a South Pacific medley from Yvonne at the piano, that it was a pleasure to meet, finally, one of the quiet people of the Party. His profession, he said,

involved him in non-stop talking and listening—he touched his wife's elbow: 'I do listen sometimes, don't I dear?'—and it was salutary to be reminded of the need for privacy. Then he asked:

'Do you meditate?'

I try to stay in touch with myself.

The leader said that must be very beneficial.

It's very painful. I don't do it because I like it.

Mrs Challis observed Tony making a fuss over some people she'd never seen before: a woman in her thirties with two children dressed in what was obviously their best, purchased, Mrs Challis surmised, from among the more up-market booths in some giant Shoppingtown. The woman, in a suit of white and pale grey, wore her clothes like a model, collar and cuffs accentuating her neck and thin, long hands. She wore also an air of habitual deference, with something rebellious in her eyes. Her children pressed close to her. Mrs Challis wanted Tony beside his wife, presenting a picture of solidarity to his leader, and was about to call him when she herself was beckoned by the Turkish engineer, dressed in a chef's coat, who signalled an urgent need of her, 'It seems that I'm wanted in the kitchen,' she said. 'How infuriating. Darling, tell them how you met Tony in France. It was just a dream,' she told the leader. 'Young people are so fortunate these days. Excuse me a moment.'

The leader's wife wanted to know how she'd met Tony, but the leader's attention was quickly claimed by a couple of knights and the rapacious, ambitious young president of the Party ...

... a man whose obvious lack of scruple made me afraid.

Tony brought Leanne to her as soon as he could. She told her children to show Jessica and Mark around the house, and she asked Tony to get drinks. By the time he returned, he saw that his wife was already closer to his secretary than he'd ever be; feeling pleased with this, as if his choice of a worker would give him standing in his wife's eyes, he moved around the room, circulating, introducing. Talking. Listening.

Why do you like the job so much?

Leanne felt that for Mrs Decker, skirting around the truth wouldn't do.

'Have you ever been in to watch the parliament sitting?'

I've never even thought of going.

'Haven't you been curious?'

Never.

'It's actually quite interesting. They're like a lot of schoolboys. They sing out, and they wander around talking to each other, it's a wonder they don't throw paper darts.'

Is Tony like that?

'They all are. But I think the couple of times I've been in the gallery, he's behaved himself because he knew I was there.'

I'm glad he respects you that much.

'Are you surprised that he's taken me in?'

No.

'You don't mind?'

No. But go on with what you were saying.

'I got quite angry the first time I went. I thought, these ...'

Bastards.

'... are supposed to be running the state, and they carry on like this. And there's all those people out there who expect them to run the place properly, who need them to fix things up when they

go wrong. I take their calls and I read the letters they write. I know what's going on around that office. It's a nerve centre and I'm there all day. Your husband's smart, and he's good at working out what to do, but it's information he's dealing with, not feelings. People's feelings don't matter to him ... sorry.'

I think you know I have a lover.

'Fred.'

You and he went around together before he was with me, didn't you?

'Just for a while. We were never that close.'

I'm glad you were—I'm glad you are—a little bit close. It means I've got someone I can share him with.

'Don't you want it to be private?'

Very much so. It's not safe, otherwise. My mother wishes he'd drop dead. Tony can't cope with it, he just pushes it out of his mind. I have to carry it all myself.

'Is it a burden, to be in love like that?'

Weren't you ever in love?

'Not the way Fred is. Not the way you are.'

She took Leanne's slender hand.

Finish what you were saying.

Leanne flushed. The hand asked so much of her; she wanted to kiss it, kiss the lips of its owner.

'I was saying about people's feelings ... it's as if he's looking at a barometer. When things are getting stormy, he does something. It's as if he's empty, and the feelings are outside him. He only knows about them because he's made aware of them. That's my job. I feed him information. It's like being with a child. A grown-up, clever child. Sorry.'

What does that do to you?

'It makes me angry, and I want to scream at him. Scream at the lot of them, because he's not too bad, as they go. Then I get wary. Watchful. I don't say anything, because I've got the upper hand as long as I know what he is and he doesn't know what I am, except as ...'

She stopped, studied the MP's wife.

An object of desire?

'That's about it. We had lunch together one day, he keeps wanting to do it again, and he sort of casually mentions places he's going to, if he's going away.'

He hasn't had much of a time the last few months.

Their two hands still held each other.

'To be honest, I actually like him quite a lot. I find him attractive. But I know it'd be fatal to get involved with him because I'd have lost the advantage. And I'm not going to lose it because I love being in there at the centre of all those messages, even though a lot of them are so silly and so selfish you can't believe that's what people are like. But they are like that, and I know. That's why I like the job, and I'm never going to give it up!'

Are you in any sort of relationship?

'Only with my children.'

Here's my mother. By now she'll know who you are, so you'll get a little dollop of recognition. Don't let it bother you.

'I'm only staying a few minutes. We're going on to my brother's. This is really only a token appearance. Tony asked me to look in.'

Is that how he put it?

She nodded. 'Thanks for letting the children look around.'

Mrs Challis was beside them, talking brightly.

'I can imagine what you two are chatting about.'

Men.

'Well, that's an inexhaustible topic.' Addressing the stranger directly, she said, 'You must be Leanne?' The name, on her lips, seemed to come from a remote, uncouth part of the culture. 'Tony has been telling me how valuable you are, and how his work has lightened since he's had you.'

I raised an eyebrow to point out the double entendre. Mrs Challis corrected: 'Since you came to work with him.'

Leanne expressed admiration for the house, and asked Mrs Challis how long she'd lived there.

'Since I married, thirty-one years ago. My late husband bought it two years before that. I suppose you could say—I've never said this to you before, darling—that he bought it, and then looked around for someone to fill it.' She was gratified to see Leanne smile. 'There you are! There's my contribution on the subject of men!' Moving away, she said to Leanne: 'Do speak to me again before you leave.'

I laughed.

That's your dismissal.

I looked into her eyes and I could see she was asking herself how I stood it. Her eyes were unnaturally blue.

Are you wearing contact lenses?

'Blue ones. My eyes are blue, but the lenses exaggerate the colour. It's a funny form of make-up, I suppose it's a sort of mask.'

How else do you mask yourself?

'I don't know, I've never thought about it. Do you have ways of masking yourself?

I don't think I do. I think my way of protecting myself is to allow myself the right to withdraw. When all this is over, I'm going down—past your place, and Marj's—to be with him. He'll have a big fire built up, and he'll be in bed. He'll hear me come in, and he'll lie there quietly while I sit by the fire, sorting myself out, and then, when I'm ready to be with him—when I'm completely there—he'll be wonderful with me. I wish I was there now.

I could see she felt I was foolish.

'Do you think you'll ever live with him?'

This was very painful.

You don't live with an ideal. Ideals are what you have to make the situation you've got bearable. Have you ever noticed? The biggest passions people have are for someone that's impossible. Something tells them, very early on, that it's impossible. Or perhaps they've sought out the impossible. Either way, it's extremely desirable. Then they rage, they live wildly. Why do I say they? I'm talking about myself.

'Do you think he understands this? That you think this?'

I think he made himself blind so that he could be perfect. I think he'll suffer terribly.

Hearing it made Leanne cold.

'I can see why people come close to you.'

Can you tell me why?

The four children had returned to the lounge, Lindsay still holding his bear. Mark, the eldest, had a glass containing something dark. Leanne looked anxiously in his direction.

Can you tell me why?

She didn't want to go on with it, she wanted to gather her children and go.

I was desperate.

Can you tell me why?

'I think you must promise everything, I think you must take from people as if you're going to deliver, and I think you give yourself a loophole because you're not going to deliver. It's very dangerous.'

Struck down by a stranger.

Why am I like this?

She was making signals to the children.

Do you have any idea?

I couldn't blame her for being abrupt.

'Ask the people who've known you all your life. What would I know? I shouldn't have said anything. I'm only guessing.'

Your guess was spot on.

'Then that makes me dangerous too. Please give Fred a soft landing. I won't tell him anything we've said tonight. That's up to you if you want to.'

The children were close by now.

'Mark! What are you drinking?'

The boy said it was Coke, she suspected he'd laced it.

'We have to go now. Say goodnight to Mrs Decker. Say thank you for having us.'

The children said what they'd been told to say.

She kissed me formally, on both cheeks, but she didn't touch my hands this time. I felt shocking.

She went to say goodnight to Tony, who was with the leader again. I could see him flattering her, wondering if she had anything going with Tony. I wished she'd take bloody Tony and give him the time of his life. Then lose him …

… or make him worth living with.

I tried to make her feel my yearning. Take me with you. Drop me off at your house and I'll walk slowly, wrapped in myself, to a fire in a house that's silent for me; at my service, taking me as I present myself.

> Absent, présent … Je suis bien seul,
> Et sombre, ô suave linçeul!

She longed for those warm nights when they'd sat under the tree; when they'd had it all before them. She took the children upstairs, and lay beside them, talking, on the big bed, until they were drowsy.

She eased herself off the bed so as not to disturb them, and went to the window. Her choices were disappearing. She realised she felt strangely strong, yet there was hysteria, blind terror, lurking near.

She went down.

Her mother, positioned at the foot of the stairs so she could see the guests, took her arm.

‘Oh darling, by the way, I forgot to tell you. I had a letter from Alain. He’s coming back at the end of the month. For a few weeks.’

It was time to take her on.

What about whatshisface in the kitchen?

‘They don’t need to meet each other—if either of them is interested in me by then.’

She wanted to cry. She saw that her problem was an imprint, or mirror image, of something that was wrong with her mother.

No! You’re not having that creep in this house again!

Mrs Challis tried dignity mixed with sarcasm:

‘Ah, darling, may I point out that it’s mine? You have one of your own which you manage in a way that is, in my eyes at least, peculiarly your own.’

If you have him back, you won’t see me or the children again. I mean it.

‘You’re getting back at me because I gave you good advice. Or is it only because I realised that Tony needed a party?’

It’s much more than that. The thing that’s wrong with me is something I got from you. It’s an emotional sickness. You’ve lived with it for long enough, you must be able to say what it is. What is it? What’s wrong with you? Why have you got your gardener in the kitchen pretending he’s a chef? He’s not even a good gardener, he’s a lousy gardener in fact. Have you had a look at the roses lately? What’s he likely to do to the food for God’s sake? Why didn’t you let the caterers stay? They offered. Why can’t you openly admit his presence to your guests? Do you think these people are really any better than whatshisface?

‘Don’t call him that! His name is Ziya!’

Get rid of him too.

‘I must say,’ said Mrs Challis, her face and hands still sending smiles, waves and signals to those whose attention was open, ‘Vicky—yes, Vicky!—that you are being extraordinarily aggressive tonight. What on earth has got into you?’

That’s what I need to know. You’re my only source for an answer. Not Fred, though I sometimes think I’d rather die than hurt him. You’ve got to come clean!

‘Clean? Come clean? Have you been reading murder thrillers lately, Vicky?’

I wasn’t going to be trapped into biting at insults.

I want to break you down. And if it happens in front of all these people I don’t care.

But I was still whispering.

I need to see what you’re like when you’re cracked apart. There’s something in there I need to discover!

Mrs Challis, feeling her acts as hostess and mother being broken down, felt she had to get rid of her:

‘Darling, stop putting poison in my ear. Can’t you see that important people are getting ready to go? Do get over with Tony, if you never do anything else for him!”

So I joined my husband, the leader, and the unfortunate female who bravely made a life of propping up …

… the foul-mouthed ex-estate agent who hoped to be the state’s next Premier.

For all I knew, the day might come when Tony would stand in his shoes, and I in hers. That would be bravery indeed.

I’d let my mother off the hook, but not for long.

The leader decided, when the pale Mrs Decker joined her husband, that he would accept another drink. This was not lost on his wife.

'I've been saying, ah ...'

I could see Tony open his mouth to give him my adolescent name; I frowned.

I wondered if I would ever call myself Challis again.

'... Mrs Decker, that the quality of our public life is really a very good measure of the quality of our home lives. For those of us in public life, if we're fortunate enough to have a strong home situation, we can build on it. It gives us certainty, and an integrity that our opponents can never undermine. And if we're not fortunate enough to have that sort of base, we can, it's true, lead a form of double life—like one of my colleagues a few years ago, who used to bring cases full of suits and shirts to his office, and got drunk every night and slept in his office, and somehow managed to come into the House looking as if he'd just got back from his tailor's—we can lead a double life for a time, but inevitably there will come some crisis, some testing time, when, if we haven't got that strong base behind us, we'll fold up. We'll go to water. And our colleagues, who want us to be strong, will wonder why on earth we were weak.'

He smiled.

'What do you think about that?'

Those who live by duplicity recognise each other. I said:

Why don't we measure the quality of those in public life by what they're like at home? When they've got their suits off and they can't make a speech?

The leader smiled. A little gleam of amusement came into his eye, to be shared, I was pleased to see, by his wife.

'Do you really believe,' he said, 'that people in the business that your husband and I are in can ever stop making speeches?'

No. You made one a moment ago. You were talking at me, not to me. It's something Tony and I have had trouble with for years.

Tony mumbled something about never being home often enough to make any speeches. The leader's wife studied the three people she was with, wondering if the night, so carefully managed to this point, was going to blow up.

The leader preferred to keep it general:

'Well, I have to admit that there is an element of game-playing—acting, if you like—in all that we go on with, but believe me, we are pretty sincere in what we say, most of the time. I mean, I say some terrible things in the House about the people on the other side, and they give it back in good measure, and it's interesting, you know, we all mean it—we may mean it quite passionately—but we still have to deal with each other, talk to each other, sometimes drink with each other, as a means of making the House, as a human institution, actually work!'

He looked pleased with himself. He took his wife's hand. I felt he wanted me to tell him—since he'd recognised something about me—that he'd put on a good performance.

But doesn't that process—of being sincere, and then having to trade away some of what you were sincere about—hollow you out after a while? That's what I'd be afraid of.

For Tony's sake, since it was supposed to be his night, I didn't say that I saw it happening beside me every day to the point where ...

... the moment I could get away I'd be driving down the hill, through the underpass, to the house I was furnishing as my other place.

The leader was untroubled.

‘It does hollow you out, you’re quite right. And that’s a very necessary stage of development for a politician. You start out obsessed with yourself and all you’re going to achieve, and then you’re hollowed out in the way you describe, and then you’ve got room in yourself for the needs and ideas of others. You’re ready to actually be what you’re supposed to be. A servant of the people!’

On this note of triumph, he drew his wife closer and explained that they had to go to another function in his electorate, congratulated Tony yet again on his rise in the ranks, made the most deferential of farewells to my mother, glanced over his shoulder to see that his entourage had gathered, and left.

I looked at my husband.

Well, Mister hollow man?

‘I’ve been humbled, haven’t I? All right. Go whenever you like. I’ll sleep with the kids. Upstairs.’

And you don’t have a working breakfast, do you?

‘No. Take as long as you like.’

But it was three more hours before I could get away. The stayers had to be looked after, and then the lingerers. Yvonne played heavier music as the night wore on and was going to give us the Goldberg Variations until Grinter dragged her off. Then the waiting game began; mother didn’t want me there when she and Ziya went to bed, and I didn’t want them to see me make my exit. When she disappeared and Ziya started locking up, I went into what had been my father’s study and put on a record. Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto, an early LP; I wondered if father had bought it, or one of mother’s lovers. I set the time switch so the lamp would go off about the time the music ended, and slipped through the French windows, followed into the garden by an impish, delightful passage at the top of the keyboard. I felt sneaky, jubilant, and for the first time that night, untroubled.

But when I got to the car, my mood darkened. What right did I have to set up his house for myself when I wasn’t going to live there? To go to him was a betrayal, desperately as I wanted to.

It got worse. I saw that the love had become a fixed position, carrying its own responsibilities, and I had to be free of them if I was to face the truth of my position.

I sat for a long time, tempted to go back to the house I’d escaped from. Beethoven would have ended, the study would be dark …

The alternatives were intolerable. I wanted to disappear.

I wanted to be a living ghost, moving unattached among people, visible only when I chose to be.

But I had to go forward, or be stuck; imprisoned, on everyone’s terms but my own. I started the engine, the car drove itself. His front door was open, I had only to push it. I undressed by the fire and went in to him. He murmured happily, and I wanted him to hold me—and I wanted to tell him he couldn’t. When he began to touch me, in every way as I wanted, I was ashamed. And I was annoyed with him because for once he wilfully wouldn’t recognise what I was feeling. This wasn’t a fair judgment, because I wasn’t telling him, I was going in, in to those sacred intimacies we’d known, right from the start, how to make for each other. I was soft, I was trembling, I was excited; it was as tentative, uncertain and marvellous as the first time. I was helpless and in love. I didn’t want to be in love, it made me weak when I needed to be strong. The love had given me enough strength to stand on my own. I’d been given courage and wasn’t scared. Except of hurting. I was going to hurt him. I was ashamed.

It was a long time before we spoke. I didn't want to break the silence because it made things bearable. So I told him things with my thoughts, not speaking, wondering if his inner ear could catch them. If they'd been thoughts he wanted to hear, he'd have heard them. When I'd said it all, silently, I spoke:

Do you love me?

I wanted him to say he didn't, I wanted him to question me, but he must have been thinking too, because when he answered, it ran at a tangent to my question, though it came out so simply that I knew it came from some part of himself that hadn't been allowed to speak before.

There'll never be anyone else.

We were both shocked. Nothing more could be made of the moment. I told him about the party. He listened. I asked him to tell me everything about himself he hadn't told me before. He told me silly things, we laughed. When he told me it was impossible to be at the centre of a triangle, I punched him in the ribs and we fell about laughing. We drowsed. We made love again. We slept. We woke, nose to nose, eyes so close we couldn't focus on each other. We told each other things. He brought in a pot of tea. It was sunny in his bedroom. We snuggled under the sheets and traced the patterns.. We caressed each other and owned each other's bodies' without boundary. We could have been Siamese twins to each other except he wouldn't let himself know what I'd been telling him. If he wouldn't listen I didn't want to know either. We made love. We sat in the garden. Things were in flower everywhere. He came out to the car when I said I had to go and I saw that I'd done the best and the worst thing one person can do with another—I'd lifted his life to the pinnacle of his expectations, and I'd let him down.

I thought, as I saw him in the rear-vision mirror, just before I turned into the street that led to the underpass, that this might be the moment for him to die—his happiness complete; anger and disillusion not yet on him. I drove up the hill, remembering the poem I'd read him:

> Cette ceinture vagabonde
> Fait dans le souffle aérien
> Frémir le suprême lien
> De mon silence avec ce monde ...

The windows of my father's study had been bolted. I went around the house, trying everything. She'd been around before me. The terror that had been lurking suddenly gripped. I fell on the grass retching. She'd always known about my disappearances, and had been waiting ... to do the opposite of capture and control: to destroy me by shutting me out. The house, imbued with her sickness, hated me. Loathed me. Refused to acknowledge my existence. I'd never been properly brought to birth. I'd been hated before I began.

Screaming—but still silently—I crawled to her window. Tap it? Plead? I almost gave in. Then I saw what it led to. Humiliation, life-long. She'd turn my existence on and off; there'd be whole stretches of time when she wouldn't allow me anything. I'd be the victim of the unacknowledged resentments which had warped her. I got up.

I went to the car. Some blossom from the trees in his drive had caught in the windscreen wipers. Sadly I picked them out, another betrayal.

There was nowhere to run.

I went around the back. The chair under the rhododendron. I felt dizzy, I slipped to the ground.

There was a ladder against the wall, where Ziya had been painting. He was changing the window frames from white to sombre blue. It made the house more withdrawn. A house that held much and offered nothing. With a tennis court where no one played. A pavilion where no one changed, or sat, laughing, over drinks. A deep garden, full of trees, screening everything. The ladder was under the window of the room next to Tony and the children.

Putting her weight on the chair, she levered herself up. She crossed the lawn unsteadily until she could lean against the ladder. She climbed a few steps and clung.

When her hands were on the top rung, she studied the window.

Mother's error of omission.

The silence of the house accepted her. She hovered outside the children's door.

But they weren't mine yet, they weren't available until I'd gone through with it.

She made her way downstairs. The piano gleamed seductively in its sunny nook.

Mother's cognac—another Hendry bottle—was on the dining table; I took it into the sitting room where she wrote her letters.

She went through the papers in the bureau until she found it. *Par avion. Paris 91, 13 Rue Cujas, 75005 République Française*. She took the letter out of its envelope. She found her mother's matches, struck one, and applied it to the letter.

La Société Dédale.

The sound of a rough, masculine cough came through the wall.

You're next, Mister Turk.

But the weakness, the dizziness, returned, and the terror came close. She took a swig from the bottle.

It startled me, it made me gasp.

And another.

Now!

I put a chair at the end of the bed and studied them.

Ziya was a noisy sleeper. Why is it that when men grunt and snort near women you know they're claiming possession? Did he do it when they were awake?

I tugged the quilt gently till her shoulder was bare, and his hairy arm, riding across her elbow and settling near her middle.

When I pulled the cover further, the arm, in a reflex action, uncoiled and his dark, hairy hand—so right for a fascist salute—dragged the bedding back. Suddenly I felt on top—more than the cognac, surely? I gave them a minute and did it again.

That hand. How hateful to have it caressing you.

And again.

This time he woke. He sat bolt upright, glaring at me. Then his eyes moved, taking in the dangers. No one else, no weapons.

Me.

His steaming silence challenged me. I gripped near her feet with my left hand and on his side with my right, and pulled, ever so slowly. An arrogant look came over his face, as if he rather welcomed the prospect of being displayed, then he nudged his bed partner roughly. She lifted her head. I was still dragging the quilt. Mother woke quickly.

'Why, of all things on earth, are you doing this to me?'

Tell me what it means to you.

It means you're shameless … why are you intruding like this … you're no better than …'

She sat up. I could see the patch of hair that had been shaven for my birth. And the tops of her legs were uncovered.

Who are you thinking of?

She clutched the quilt as it neared her knees. I clutched it too, testing her. Then there was an awful moment, wonderful for me, when the terror left me ...

... and took its hold on mother.

It was horrible to witness, but I couldn't look away.

Who are you thinking of?

Her head fell forward. Guilt and shame flooded out in tears. She put her hands to her forehead.

'Take me away. Fix me. Punish me.'

I wasn't letting her get away with that. I gathered the last of the quilt to the end of the bed, where it slipped onto my feet. I looked at her, meaning to ask again ...

... but she sat upright, staring over my shoulder, at some vanished face or faces, and I knew she was reaching back beyond the years of hypocrisy ...

... to what had been done to her.

I waited.

The moustachio-ed dictator looked at her considerately; it surprised me. He said, 'I think you should give her clothes.' I picked up her dressing gown. She was shaking, I helped her put it on. Ziya looked at me, discreetly, hinting. Coffee. She had the burden now, I could leave.

Doing things in the kitchen, I decided it must have been my father. She'd repressed it too deeply for it to have been anyone else.

She came in, still afraid, with Ziya a pace behind in his jocks and singlet.

What did he do, Mother? Couldn't you help yourself?

She saw I'd guessed. She started:

'As you know ...'

There was a pause. 'Darling' refused to come out.

'... we've both been troubled by a man who watches us. No doubt he bothers others. But it's no accident that he comes to us.'

You mean he's been encouraged?

Ziya frowned, squeezing his eyes between bushy brows and moustache.

'I always liked to please your father, I tried very hard to be everything he wanted. It's what I felt a wife should be.' She was looking at the table, for a moment I thought she was going to tell me to get some better cups.

'It was a terrible mistake.'

She went on:

'You realise, when you've given your trust to someone, and it's been betrayed, that there's nothing secure in the world. I tried to stop that feeling spreading to you, but I think it got through ... we can't control our mental processes, children pick up things ...'

How did he betray you?

'He had a boy of fourteen or fifteen who did some work in the garden.' She touched Ziya's hand. 'This boy used to watch, he used to be *placed* so that he could watch, when I ...'

She was finding it very hard.

'... was giving my love to your father.'

How did you find out?

'When this boy came in one day, or perhaps he was in the house already, and did what you just did. With the blankets. He pulled them down and I can still remember the look of triumph he gave your father, as if he'd successfully interpreted his wishes. Your father sacked him, there and then, but I felt he'd been dismissed because he'd been indiscreet rather than fundamentally at fault.'

I'd been in awe of my father. I said:

Do I have to hate him now?

'No, it's not worth it. It only means the poison's been spread a little further. It has to be stopped.'

And you tried to do that?

I wasn't reproaching her.

'I tried to stop myself knowing. I shut it out. I thought I was mastering it, but it worked its way inside and got the better of me, in ways I didn't know.'

Ziya grunted. Trying to understand, not possess.

When he realised she wasn't coming back, he rang.

'This is a Telecom announcement…"

The silent number had been changed.

He rang on Tony's number—the phone in the office where he'd been relegated to sleep.

The call rang out.

He knew she hated to answer it. He rang every minute for a quarter of an hour. Finally the phone was picked up.

'Victoria Challis.'

He knew, finally, that he was done. He'd been ousted. Closed off from the miraculous source.

She listened to his angry silence.

'Do you have anything to say?'

His bitterness was so absolute that there were no words. She engaged him in a duel of silence, then she spoke:

'What you wanted from me was too great. Our love was so colossal that it demanded we build our lives on it. I wasn't able to do that. My love for you was a form of running away. I never made any secret of that. I couldn't build a life on running away.'

He said nothing.

'I'm home again. It's not all that marvellous but it's working well enough. I've grown up at last. I'm taking responsibility for everyone because that's what I have to do. I don't think you've ever known what it means to be responsible for half a dozen people.'

Half a dozen?

'Tony. Ellen. Lindsay. My mother. Ziya …'

And?

'… myself.'

Why have your reverted to your mother's name?

It's a way of rejoining her.

Is that what you've done?

I don't think you know what a big thing it is.

Who's Ziya?

She told him. His bitterness was compounded by envy. How had this Turk been accepted into the circle while he'd been cast out?

Because my mother has a need for someone. There's a gap in her life and there isn't one in mine, any more.

How long will he last?

I don't know that it's any business of yours, but I don't thing it'll be long.

Is the Frenchman coming back?

No.

Why are you so sure?

Because I burned his letter.

Are you running everyone's affairs at the moment?

Bitterness was boiling in him. She answered simply.

As well as I can.

For weeks his mind was full of argument.

We were going to live by an uncommon principle.

I'm doing that. You'll have to look after yourself.

He went around to Leanne's. She poured him a drink and gave him some cards from the travellers. He put them down and stared at the floor, moodily.

'You were going to put them on their table for the day they got back. Don't you remember?'

He remembered. There being nothing else to do, he looked at the cards. Mackay, Cairns, Normanton—a picture of the waters of the Gulf. Cloncurry, Mount Isa— a hole in the ground calling itself a mine. Tennant Creek, Katherine, Darwin. Some were addressed to Leanne, some to the Deckers. He looked at her, eyes putting the question.

'I told Tony about your idea, and he brought them to the office.'

'So I've got Marj and Jack to care for.'

She didn't know what he meant. 'He was trying to be helpful. He doesn't bear you any ill will, I can feel it.'

'Tell him to ring up and get me back on my proper round.'

'I won't do that. It's past, Fred, it really is past. You've got to make something else for yourself now.'

He turned the cards over. Wyndham. Hall's Creek— a photo taken by Marj or Jack of the pub, with some writing and a stamp on the back.

'She's gone into making her own cards.'

Derby, Broome.

I'm envious of them, Leanne, to tell you the truth.

'So am I. I'd love to take the children to those places.'

The last one was from Geraldton:

> Dearest Leanne, sorry for the gap. Jack had a bit of a turn. The doctor at Port Hedland kept him under observation for a few days. Jack was scared. Now he's OK again he's scared of finishing the trip. He says when we get to Adelaide we're going to turn around and go all the way back again. I tell him Melbourne isn't fatal! I've even promised to go to the footy with him but it doesn't convince him. He's scared of going on because it means he's going home. Seeya anyhow. XXXX Marj (Can someone be there when we get back?)

He got a card from Adelaide, another from the Barossa Valley. A long silence, then Alice Springs. Uluru. The Olgas. Leanne, watching over him, brought him more cards from Uluru and the Olgas, the spiritual heart of the land:

> Vicky, We're here at last. Jack's talking about his childhood all the time. He keeps telling me about an old guy who wrote ETERNITY on pavements. He wants to paint it on the rock. I tell him he'll get arrested. He laughs at me. What a loony idea. Have you ever been here? You must. It'll break your heart. It's too much. There's nothing you can do about it. We had one night at the motel. Cost us the earth. Jack said his swim was worth it. Maybe it was for him. See it if you can. XXX Marj

Leanne rang him one night to say she'd had a call from Adelaide. They were going to make stops at Murray Bridge, Horsham and Ballarat, and they expected to be home on Sunday night. She shopped with him on Saturday morning so there'd be supplies in the house, and she made a casserole and a pie so they wouldn't have to cook. He vacuumed the house and said he'd work in the garden in the morning.

By six he was in the garden. Trimming, pulling out weeds. He had fuel for the mower and was going to do the lawns when people were out of bed. He made himself a pot of tea and took it, with a folding chair, to the spot by the roses where the greatest excitement of his life had begun. Sorry for himself, full of wistfulness and nostalgia, he drank. He was refilling his cup when he saw a campervan come around the corner. Marj was alone in the cabin. She pulled up in front of the house opposite, and sat, staring down the road. He rushed across. The look on her face told him that a welcome would be inappropriate.

'Where's Jack?'

She pointed over her shoulder.

'Is he sick? What is it?'

Starting to shake, and cry, she gripped the steering wheel fiercely, as if it were the only thing in life that could be held on to, and turned her face towards him. He reached up and put his hands to her cheeks.

'Marj?'

She swallowed.

'Go and have a look at him. He'll be stiff by now. I laid him out the best way I could.'

'Did he have another stroke? Where did it happen?'

'We were boiling the billy near Bordertown. Jack said he felt a bit funny. I told him to lie down. I took him a cup of tea and he drank it okay. He said he was right to go on. I sat with him a while but he said to go on. He really seemed okay. So I packed up and went on. I was real scared. I wasn't game to stop. But I stopped at Nhill because it looked big enough to have a doctor. When I went in to look at him, he wasn't breathing. He was still. I tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but it didn't do any good. I found the doctor's, then I thought, I'm not going in here, I'm taking him home.'

She sobbed violently.

'I finished the job, Fred. I did, didn't I?'

He got her to cross the road and sit on his chair, where she could still see the van. He wrapped her in a rug because she was shaking. He urged her to drink some of the tea.

‘Ring the doctor, would you, Fred? We’ll wait a while till we ring my kids. I wouldn’t want to drop this on them at this hour of the morning.’

He rang the doctor, and a funeral parlour. Then they sat together in two chairs on the lawn, keeping a vigil.

He told her about people they knew. She noticed an important name missing from his inventory of what had been happening.

‘Doesn’t she come to you any more, Fred?’

‘No.’ It was the hardest thing he’d ever had to say.

She tried to think of something to say.

‘Do you want to look at Jack?’

He said he would. She watched him cross the road, open the van, and go in.

Ellen wanted to know if it was true that butterflies only lived for a day. She said she didn’t know. ‘If it is true, Mum,’ her daughter said, ‘how come in their house at the zoo there’s millions of them flying around? If they all die at the end of the day, where do the new ones come from?’

She thought she’d better ring the zoo, and ask.

‘If they all die at the end of the day, Mum, does that mean there’s no butterflies in the night? What happens till the new ones come in the morning?’

She felt foolish and ignorant. Why didn’t she know about butterflies? She said, ‘Ellen, would you mind getting Lindsay? I want to take a photo of you both.’

‘Why, Mum?’

‘Because I need to.’

‘Why do you need to, Mum?’

‘Because you won’t always be little. You’ll grow up, and it’ll remind me. And you’ll be able to show it to your children, one day, when they come.’

Ellen studied her mother.

‘Am I going to have children?’

‘Probably.’

The child rubbed her tummy, doubtfully.

‘Are you going to have more children, Mum? Are you?’

‘Would you like me to?’

The six-year-old wrinkled her nose.

‘Nuh. Lindsay’s enough. I don’t want any babies around. But are you going to, Mum? Are you?’

‘I don’t think so. I could, but I don’t think I want to, any more.’

‘What makes you want to, Mum? Mum?’

She changed the subject.

‘Get Lindsay and I’ll take this photo.’

‘Do we have to get dressed up?’

‘No.’

‘Are you going to wash our faces?’

‘Just as you are.’

Ellen went for her brother, calling loudly through the house. ‘Lindsay! Lindsay! Mum’s going to take our photos! Just as we are! We don’t have to wash our faces!’

She thought of the butterflies. It couldn't be true. There were never any dead ones lying around when they went to the beautiful glass house where they were kept. People couldn't possibly go around each morning picking up the dead ones before the public were let in. She felt confused, and suddenly irritated with Lindsay, who was probably hiding somewhere until she came to get him. She took the camera into the garden. She'd take the picture when they came to her. When they were ready.

The news of Jack's death reached them via Leanne. Tony thought they should go to the funeral. She, mindful of who else would be there, said they'd send a wreath. She told the florist to compose it entirely of white flowers, and signed the card 'Victoria, Tony, Ellen, Lindsay'. On the afternoon of the funeral, Tony spoke in the House. The leader praised his speech in the Party room two days later, but told him privately that he had still to prove that he could nail someone. Tony told his wife about it over dinner.

'Apparently I have to learn the gentle art of head kicking if I'm to reach the shadow cabinet.'

She asked him how far he wanted to go. Did he want to be leader of the Party? Premier?

'Why do you ask? Will it trouble you if I say I'm ambitious?'

She said that if he were to evolve into the sort of person who could carry, and exert, the full pressures of politics, then her evolution, her development as a person, would be affected, and since she was now in a process of personal re-formation, she needed to know.

'So far, my ambition is general rather than specific. As I become more senior I'll expect appropriate responsibilities, but I'm not aiming at any one thing. As far as I can see, I'm not the private with the field marshal's baton in his haversack. Does that answer your question?'

It did. He'd always be manageable. He didn't have the obsessive determination that made people trample others to reach a goal. If he stayed in opposition, he'd become a small L liberal—boring, decent, never too far from the sentient, thinking people he'd have the sense to stay in touch with. If he got into government, and held a ministry, he'd have to develop cunning and administrative skills he didn't currently possess. She hoped he'd stay in opposition.

'When are you speaking again?'

'The bill isn't through yet. They're accepting some of our amendments. I have carriage of that, and I have to brief some of the chaps who've yet to speak on our side. It's going to be a busy time, the next few days.'

He was at the office before Leanne, the next morning. When she came in, the kettle was steaming furiously; he'd switched it on, then got on the phone. She made him coffee and took it in. Feet on the desk, he nodded to her as she put it beside him. She offered him the milk carton. He took it from her, still talking, and added milk. Taking the carton back, she felt, as their fingers touched, that the pressure of his physical desire for her had been removed. She put the milk back in the fridge, then sat on her desk. The noticeboard was bare, the cards having gone back to their sender. She studied the electorate map—his electorate, with the hill and all it stood for at its heart. What were the years ahead going to be like, working with a man she wouldn't vote for? She knew, and it made her smile, that it would never cross his mind that when she voted, the best she would be able to do for him would be to put the number 2 next to DECKER, Anthony James Melrose.

The two women had almost finished hanging the new curtains when Tony's phone rang, and rang again a minute later. Her throat tightened.

'I never answer Tony's phone.'

‘People should ring him at his office. That’s why he has it. Which reminds me. Where did he get that attractive girl who works for him, the one who came to the party?’

‘She was a friend of Cheryl who was there before. She got Leanne the job. Leanne’s smart. He’s lucky to have her.’

‘You don’t think, perhaps, she might be a little bit keen on him?’

She was relieved that her mother no longer called her darling, a term she’d always found to contain considerable potential for menace.

‘It was the other way around for a while. But that’s over. What Tony doesn’t realise is that she’s a rival, but clever enough to disguise it. I wouldn’t be surprised if she went into politics herself some day. Not necessarily to stand against Tony. Council, perhaps. I don’t know.’

Her mother, stepping back to judge the effect of their work, trod on a bear.

‘Careful, Mother! I’m afraid I haven’t got Lindsay trained to be tidy yet.’

‘Isn’t it time we picked him up?’

‘In a while. He’s always happy at the Aldridges’. Heavens, what’s this?’

A dusty campervan stopped in the street beneath them, then reversed into the driveway of the house opposite so that it could be swung, neatly, with a practised hand at the wheel, against the kerb next to her gate. A tiny figure stepped down from the cabin.

‘It’s Marj. Excuse me Mother, I’ll have to go down and let her in. Her husband died last Sunday. Ask her to tell you about it. I think she’ll be ready to talk.’

Mrs Challis went to the kitchen to put the jug on. Victoria opened the gate and held out her arms.

‘Welcome back. And I’m sorry about Jack.’

Marj, who had been longing for those arms to hold her, accepted the embrace before she looked into the welcomer’s eyes.

‘The nice thing about you, Marj, is that I think you’re the only adult I’ve ever hugged who’s been smaller than me!’

The older woman stepped back, laughing. ‘Good to see you, Vicky. And it’s okay about Jack. I’ve finished mourning for him. Since he had his first stroke, it’s been one long period of mourning. We had a great trip, and he died in his bed. He never wanted to live at home again. So he went at the right time. And thanks for the flowers.’

‘I didn’t come to the service. It would have been painful.’

‘For you and Fred. I know about that. Where’s the kids?’

‘Ellen’s at school and Lindsay’s playing at a friend’s. They’ll both be home soon. Come in.’

‘Can we go and get ‘em, Vicky?’

‘Come and meet my mother. And when it’s time, we’ll all go. They’d love to see you.’

Mrs Challis was both queenly and gracious.

‘So this is Marj! I’ve heard so much about you from the children. Are you going to come back and work for my daughter?’

‘If she’ll have me. If she needs me.’

Victoria smiled. Her mother answered.

‘Of course she does. It’s the only way she can get any time to herself. And I need her too, sometimes.’

Mrs Challis insisted on knowing everywhere they’d stopped on their long journey.

‘You seem to have spent as much time as you could by the sea.’

'That was Jack. I think there must have been a frustrated sailor in him somewhere. Or maybe just a frustrated fisherman, because he never caught much, for all the hours he spent dangling a line.'

'I'd like to know how he died.'

Marj told them the story.

'He couldn't have had a better death. My husband died in agony.'

She looked at her mother in amazement, having always been told the opposite.

'In a car crash, coming back from Sydney. The only time he didn't fly. The police and the people at the hospital said he died at once. When my uncle Hendry insisted on going to the coroner's inquest, and on me staying away, I got suspicious. Anything Hendry said was bound to be the opposite of the truth. So I went to the Coroner's Court on my own, some time afterwards, and read the depositions. He'd been injured horribly, but he was conscious, and it took them a long time to cut him out. He died in the ambulance.'

'You've never told me that before.'

'It wouldn't have done you any good, Victoria, but we're not hiding anything from each other now, so I thought it was time to let you know.'

She paled; she'd have to imagine it fully before she could be reconciled to it. It would mean coming to terms, a second time, with the facts of her father's life. But not for now. In the silence of her mother's and Marj's attention, she breathed deeply, looking at the floor. Then she looked up. Marj, letting her curiosity get the better of her tact, said:

'Don't you call yourself Vicky any more?'

'Not any longer, but you can if you like.'

Marj tried out the new name.

'Victoria Challis?'

They all laughed.

Feeling accepted, Marj asked a favour.

'When we go to get the kids, can we go in the van? I'd like 'em to see it, and ride in it.'

'Let's go now.'

They finished their tea quickly. Mrs Challis started looking for her bag, then said, 'We'll all be coming back, won't we. I don't need it.'

The deadlock made a harsh sound as the front door closed. Marj observed that the roses by the path needed pruning.

'I have to train mother's friend Ziya before I'll let him do it.'

Mrs Challis smiled on her daughter.

'He's looking forward to the lesson. It means acceptance, in his eyes.'

Marj could feel the power running between them, and was delighted that she too had found acceptance. She waited for them to open, and then close, the gate, before stepping forward.

'All aboard! Calamity Van, I call it. You go in the middle, Vicky, sorry, Victoria, so I've got some room to work the gears. It's a little bit dusty there, Mrs Challis, let me wipe it down. I didn't know we were all going to be in it or I'd have cleaned out the cabin.'

Mrs Challis waited while the seat was wiped, then, raising her eyebrows as a signal that she didn't mind if they laughed, she took the high step up, hauling herself into the cabin. 'Ready to go around Australia!' she announced. Her daughter laughed.

'You should have let me get in first, Mother. Now I have to go around the other side.'

Marj thought not. 'Actually, it's a bit greasy there. Just hop up, and slide across your mum. It's all a bit rough and ready when you travel in a thing like this.'

The doors were slammed, Marj beamed on them, and the dusty van found its way through the busy streets to another hill a few kilometres away. Lindsay was picked up from the Aldridges', and sat on his grandmother's knee, but when Ellen had been found among the scores of neatly uniformed girls at the front of Saint Anne's, she insisted on being allowed to inspect the living quarters. This, she thought, was the nicest possible way of playing houses, and she persuaded Lindsay to make the journey with her in the back—'our flat' as she called it. Occasionally, on the way home, when their excitement was too great, or they were simply feeling mischievous, they pummelled with their small fists on the back of the driving cabin.