

Cloud of knowing

Other books by Chester Eagle

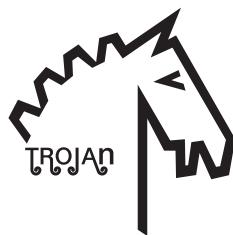
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Cloud of knowing

Chester Eagle



First published 2006 in this electronic edition by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 (within Australia) and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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Author's note

Some years ago I saw the photo of a girl above the fireplace in a house I visited frequently. There were numerous family photos on the walls, but this one was new to me, and it captured my interest. I was told that the young woman, in the uniform of her school, had been an earlier owner of the house I stood in. I returned to the picture, attracted by the beauty and unconscious vulnerability of those who, having reached their first maturity, have an awareness of life lying before them. What will the future bring? I also sensed that a book could be based on the feeling the picture gave me. A few weeks later, I saw the photo a second time, and a decision made itself. Two days later I began to write the book.

The book's other theme, the rising of cloud from a valley, was something I had heard about years before, when I lived in eastern Victoria, but had never seen; nor have I seen it now. I have taken the liberty of giving the cloud a purpose, that of clarifying the central character's mind. In some way the cloud accompanies my girl in a photo, whom I call Claire, from childhood to old age; Claire dies, but the cloud will surely form again, the implication being that it is always available for those ready to listen.

The book is, then, an improvisation on a photo and a cloud. The Claire of my book leads one of the many lives the girl in the photo might have had. No effort was made to research the life actually led by the person in the photo.

C.A.E.

1938

It was not her earliest memory, but it was the one that returned most frequently, giving her, on each occasion, a sense of certainty much stronger than the fear that came with it. At the school she'd just left, the headmaster, she remembered, had tried to inspire his girls by talking of the mystics' cloud of unknowing: she had clutched to herself, secretly, the knowledge that what had surrounded her in its overwhelming might, one morning when she was only six, was a cloud that brought knowing. In a way, she saw now, at seventeen, it had selected her, alone apart from her pony and dog, it had isolated her, that mysteriously cold grey cloud from the valley, moving steadily towards her as she watched. And yes, it had made her afraid, until she saw that what it told her was that if you knew what was happening then you had no need to fear, no matter how terrible it might be. To be aware and accepting was the best protection humans had.

Her mother was inside, making scones. Her father was in his smithy, forging a brand for the cattle that would be hers, now her mature membership of the family had arrived. Obedience to teachers lay behind, and the high country where the family ran its cattle was as much hers, now, as her brothers': she had come into her kingdom.

She decided to walk, rather than saddle a horse. Her dog Jiffy was excited when she unchained him. 'I might need someone to talk to, and you don't answer back, do you?' He jumped to be patted. She cuddled him, then they walked, young woman and dog, through the snowgums before the first of the open plains. She sang, in her clear, half-trained contralto, '*For behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be ...*', but stopped, forgetting her music, when a red and blue par-

rot flew across her path. ‘This is a wonderful place,’ she told the dog, or perhaps the world, ‘and it’s mine. I’m grown up now!’ Saying it made her realise what path she was on; she strode forward, unclear as to what she was doing until she reached the place where the cloud had come upon her, and looked into the valley from which it might come again. Today, there was nothing, but she felt it there, in readiness, and told it she was ready too.

She would never again be stronger than she was that morning.

Later, when cups had been emptied and filled, scones eaten and the smoke-puffs from the chimney reduced by her mother pushing the damper through the flue of the stove, her father announced, ‘I’m going to check on a mob, somewhere down the end of O’Reilly’s Plain. You coming Claire?’ She laughed, making her father proud of her. ‘Everybody, then!’ he said. ‘You too, mother!’ but Belle, his neat, determined wife, was ahead in her thoughts. ‘Come on boys,’ she said: ‘it’ll take the lot of us to find them, knowing the way these two will talk.’ Hats were picked up, horses were saddled, a gate opened, and the Pattersons were complete: the mobility of their bodies, moving easily on their horses, made them closer than if they had been walking, or on the bench seat of a truck. They were at the same time content, and restless. Claire saw her father looking to her, and sang:

There were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

A horse snorted; another ducked its head. Red and blue parrots fluttered through the trees. Claire went on:

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and they were sore afraid.

Belle was pleased with her daughter for being able to shape a moment that was important to them all.

Then the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour ...

Claire felt her throat tightening, and the corners of her eyes starting to moisten; she paused. Her brother Alexander, on his big black horse, lifted his head proudly in support. She went on:

... which is Christ the Lord. Claire felt a power entering her, and raised her arms, stretching them wide to every horizon:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying ...

'The next bit's a chorus,' Claire said, proud of what she'd done but unable to take it further. 'It says Glory to God in the highest.' This time the cracking in her voice overcame her; her father finished: 'and on earth peace, good will towards men.' He looked with certainty to his wife. She lifted her head in a way that had been passed to them all, ready to be thrown down if it pleased the Lord to do so, but never to be broken. She glanced at her daughter, well pleased that she was back.

A mile down the track they passed through a gate, and took themselves onto the plain. A breeze caressed the tussocks of grass. Light streamed from the heavens. This is a moment never to be repeated, Belle thought: did her husband recognise it? She thought he did. He led the party, then he flanked it, then he dropped back to be its rear-guard, but when his horse was level with Claire's, he felt his place had been found. 'Go ahead a bit, Scott!' Thomas Patterson called, 'and see if you can catch sight of them!' His wife said sharply, 'No! Stay together! They won't be going anywhere. We'll all see them at the same time, if we see them at all!' Scott, Alexander, Hugh, the three boys, were untroubled by this countermand; their parents often took control from each other. 'Whoever sees the track, takes the lead,' was their father's way of expressing policy: Belle Patterson rarely drew on sayings; life was lived on an edge, and humans failed, or fell, if they didn't concentrate as closely as they were able. That was why there was no room for showing off, or needless display, in any part of her life. Virtuoso performers, whether on horse or instrument, were asking to be humbled. It was wiser to keep low to the ground, and unobtrusive. The power that

strikes humans down, breaking them, should never be brought to notice those who were hers.

As were they all. The family made its way down the plain, ready to search when they reached where the land fell away into the valley of the Donaldson.

They paused, eyes ranging wide, then headed down. The bush thickened at once. Claire's father, spotting fresh dung, took the lead again. Within moments the vantage point where they had scanned the horizon was above them. They came to a rocky ledge, with water seeping out of the ground; the horses were nervous. Thomas dismounted, handing his reins to Belle, who spoke to her husband's horse, reassuring it while he put himself where he could look down. He studied the tops of trees, then said to his family, 'The mob's down there. Heading for the bottom. What's got into them I wouldn't know. I don't want them getting any further. Scott! Alec! Hugh! We'll get in front of them and push them up again. Claire! Go back to the shed and get a bag of salt, then meet us at the top.' He pointed. His wife handed him his reins, and he remounted. 'This'll take most of the afternoon.' He cast his eyes about for a way to get down, then set off, his sons following. Belle headed her horse up the slope. When Claire caught her mother, she heard her say, 'I've never liked watching them work in steep country.'

'They're good at it mother.'

'Nobody's good enough to be certain.'

Claire considered this. It was a comment, she felt, on much more than the events of the moment. How far was it valid? They rode in silence until they reached the top, where they saw smoke on the horizon, evidence that someone, many miles away, had set the bush on fire. Belle and Claire studied this change. 'There's not enough wind for it to get out of control,' Belle said, 'and if there were it wouldn't be coming in our direction. But it still makes me nervous.'

'There's never been a big fire through here,' Claire said to reassure her mother, and perhaps herself. 'We seem to be pretty well placed.' The lines on her mother's face seemed strained. 'When a big fire gets

the wind behind it, there's no safe place, except in heaven. The earth and everything that lives on it is consumed.' She studied her daughter, questioning the usefulness of all she'd learned while she'd been away, teaching her, if she could, the first of the lessons she'd need to understand. Her eyes turned again to the smoke. 'Who lit it? We can't say. How long will it burn? We can't say. We can't do anything about it.' Then she added, 'We're in God's hands.' Claire said awkwardly, 'They're the best hands'; her mother was unaccepting. 'We do well to fear the Lord. His ways are not our ways. Why does He ...'

'What, mother?'

Belle said sternly, and with finality, 'You've got your salt to get. I only feel secure at home. Why do I say that? Because that's where I've got something to defend.' Thirty years separated mother and daughter; what had they taught the older woman? Claire wondered whether she really wanted to know, or would she be happier if she never encountered this disconcerting knowledge?

The arrangements had been made before the school year ended. Jennifer, from 'Cooroke', in the west of the state, would take the train to the city, and stay with Emma, whose parents lived close to the school. Nancy would leave her north-eastern town, where her parents had the store, to meet up with the other girls, then they would catch the train to Crewe.

The Pattersons - Thomas, Belle and Claire - were on the platform, waving as the train drew in, greeting them with smiles (the parents) and frenzied hugs (Claire). The holiday was well begun. Thomas had fitted his car with a roof rack ('I knew they'd bring more than they needed!'), which meant there was almost enough room for the four girls to squeeze together in the back seat. Belle said one of the girls could sit between her and her husband, but, tightly as they fitted, they wanted to be together. Thomas, benign patriarch, named the mountains as they drove; he had the visitors craning forward as he guided their eyes. Emma, on her first trip away from the city, said, 'Isn't it lonely out there?' Thomas told

her benevolently, ‘You get used to it. It’s the best of lives, so long as you’re independent, and you need to be resourceful. That’s true, isn’t it Belle?’

His wife, thrilled to have given her daughter the opportunity to make friends of these girls, so fresh and full of life, said, ‘I was brought up in it. It never seemed strange to me. But when I see people that are new to it, I can see it takes a bit of getting used to.’ Then she said, ‘Now, tell me what you’re like at riding,’ and knew there would be novelty in everything they offered their visitors when Emma said, ‘You mean riding horses?’ while the other three laughed.

They drove through farming country before entering forest so unobtrusively forceful in imposing a mood that they fell silent without noticing. As the car pulled up a hill where the track was slippery Thomas suggested, ‘We might see a wallaby here,’ and a moment later, slowing the car a little, ‘Anyone see anything?’ Jennifer and Nancy saw it, but Emma caught only a black tail as it disappeared in the undergrowth. ‘Let me know earlier next time, please Mr Patterson, so I don’t miss it!’ They laughed. Thomas said, ‘The moment I see one I’ll point!’ They drove on, the mood of the bush gripping the visitors. Jennifer said, ‘This is your world we’re entering, Claire. At school, we all knew we came from different places, but none of us knew what those places were like. It’s strange, isn’t it, that I had to leave to learn that.’ Belle turned her head to look at her, and Thomas, too, she saw, was nodding at something in what she’d said.

When the car pulled in to Ben Avon, the Pattersons’ foothills home, the girls got out, and the visitors were amazed. Nancy said, ‘This beats anything we’ve got where I come from’, and Emma, curious and wanting to please, said to Claire’s father, ‘Is that Mount Hedley, Mr Patterson?’ He glanced where she was pointing. ‘No love, we call that The Hurdle. You’ll see Mount Hedley after we’ve got up to Cairngorm. It’s another day’s drive. I’ve got a few things I need to check on, here. We’ll head up for the real mountains tomorrow.’ He smiled on her confusion. ‘You’ve got two homes, Mr Patterson?’

'We're seasonal creatures! When the snow's approaching, up there, we come back here. And when the snow's flowing down the rivers, we resume our place in the high country.' Pride filled his voice, a man who felt the earth had nothing better to offer than this duality, the fitting embodiment of a marriage which, stormy as it sometimes was, gripped him with the certainty of God. My fate, my situation, he might have said, my life ... admits of no alternative, only this seasonal alternation. 'You'll see tomorrow,' he told the girls. 'It's a harder drive than the one we did today, but once seen you won't forget it, I promise you.' His wife, standing by the car, waiting for things to be lifted from the roof, said to her daughter's friends, 'He'll keep that promise tomorrow.' Solemnly she added her promise too. 'I give you my word on that!'

Claire felt the appraising, re-considering glances of the other girls. Her stocks had risen sharply in the last few moments. The dimensions of her background, something she'd taken for granted, and hardly mentioned in her years away, had been revealed to them, and they saw how little they knew of her; how much more she had to show they could hardly imagine. 'Gosh Claire,' Jennifer said, not daring to touch her, 'I had no idea ...' She let her eyes run around the mountains the Pattersons treated as the hills in their back yard: 'You never told us about this.'

On the morning when the young people were saddling for their first big ride, Belle didn't appear. Thomas went to the house, calling. 'Ready love? We're just about to head off!' His voice was loud, as if he knew there would be no answer.

She was by the stove, head in her hands. He stood behind her, rubbing her shoulders. 'I think of him too, Belle, but really, it's silly to let unhappy things spoil the good things. Come for the ride. A few minutes listening to those girls and you'll feel good again. Everything's new to them.' She said, 'You think I can't see that? I don't belong on their trip. We lost Andy the year before Claire was born. She's never driven away the feeling of loss I had. Fortunately I don't think she knows how it absorbs me. He was our first-born, Tom!' She would want him, he

knew, to sit with her most of the morning. ‘I’ll tell the girls you’re a little unwell, and I think I’d better be near you. They might enjoy themselves more on their own, the young ones.’

He went back to the saddling yard and told them that he and Belle - the generation before - wouldn’t be going with them. Claire said sadly, ‘It won’t be half as good without your stories, dad.’ He, pleased that she said this, offered, ‘You’ll have Scott, and Alec, and Hugh to tell you stories, and anyway, your memory’s as good as anyone’s, my girl.’ He turned to the visitors and pointed into the trees. ‘When you get down there a bit, ask Claire how she learned to ride. The boys’ll remind her if she’s forgetful.’ The family story, hinted at, ready for sharing, eased them through the moment, but when they’d mounted, the Patterson boys helping Claire’s friends onto their horses, and he’d opened the gate, encouraging each of the girls as she passed, and given the party a final wave, he closed the gate dejectedly, and went back to the house, savouring the sadness of parents, unable to share everything in the lives they give rise to.

For the first part of their ride Claire, missing her father, felt they were leaderless, but soon her brothers had attached themselves to the visitors, Alec with Jennifer, Scott with Emma and Hugh with Nancy. Claire felt left out, then realised that she, if anyone, was leading. She rode to the front of the party and took them onto the plain. As she broke out of the trees she glanced to the valley which released, when it wished, the cloud she regarded as hers. The ranges were the deep blue of morning, a blue she felt as warning people not to make mistakes, or they would be lost - a word that froze her heart - and searchers could probe the mountains for days without finding a thing. ‘Try to remember the colour of the mountains at different times of the day,’ she said to her friends. ‘Late in the afternoon they’ll be grey. They’ll still make you feel small, but it’s as if they do it more ... sympathetically.’ Alec, her brother nearest in age, objected: ‘You should be making it clear to your friends, Claire, that the last thing the mountains will give you is sympathy. Unless you have

water, you die. If there's snow, you freeze. If there's a fire, there's no place to run. We're on the edge of extinction all the time, and if we survive, it's because we've got our wits about us.' He looked at the girls who were new to the area. 'I'm not saying this to frighten you. I wouldn't exchange this for anything. But it's important to know the terms on which we have it. The terms are eternal vigilance, and suffering if we make a mistake.' The party stopped. Horses and humans turned their heads towards him. Alec went on, wanting to soften his sternness if he could: 'I don't know the places where you girls come from. I hope I get to see them one day. But I know that what I'm saying is just as true down there ...' he waved at the western horizon '... as it is up here. It's just that here you can see things more clearly.' The other girls looked to Claire; she said, 'He'd make a good headmaster, wouldn't he! But if you live up here, and absorb what it's got to teach, yes, I think we all have what Alec said inside us somewhere.' Scott and Hugh remained quiet. Emma's horse surprised her by putting his head down to nibble; the reins slipped from her hand. In a moment Scott was beside her, handing back the control she'd lost. Jennifer said, 'Where are you taking us, Claire?'

'We'll ride along Wallaby Spur, and follow it down to Jane's Gate. That's where my grandparents built a house, because it wasn't as cold in winter. It's not there now,' she added. 'It got burned down.' Everything about the place seemed impermanent to Nancy. It wasn't so much frightening, though she could see how fear would grip you if something went wrong, as endlessly reminding you, by a mockery you couldn't escape, that nothing you did could make much difference. You were too small to matter. These Pattersons, she decided, must build their lives, like a bridge over a gorge, to reach above this impossible terrain. She felt a surge of defiance. 'What does that name mean?' she demanded. Hugh, the youngest of the brothers, said, 'Jane's Gate? Well, it's a gate because you have to go through it if you want to get to Buckland. Or come back, of course.' Scott, the oldest, contradicted him, 'It's not that at all. The proper name is Janus's Gate, and Jane's Gate is only a corrup-

tion. Janus was the Roman god of doorways. Gateways, perhaps. And the doors of his temple were open in wartime and closed in peace.' He looked at them defiantly. Nancy lifted her hand in the sort of gesture she'd picked up from the Pattersons. 'Fascinating! But I think that'll do for the time being. Show us the way, Claire. Tell us things as we go.'

The party left the track at a point the visitors couldn't have found again, and rode at the well-timbered edge of a plain. In the course of the morning the visitors became aware of the unspoken rules of riding in a group, of being given the lead rather than taking it, of speaking to all only when the party was stopped, of conversation as a luxury of being dismounted, of respect for the inclinations of their horses. They rode for a time at the edge of a steep valley, with shadows flowing across the ridges in replication of what was happening above. They learned to find grandeur and swiftly moving activity in the sky over the mountains they were exploring. They sensed that one did not crowd a rider venturing near a drop. Realising that their movement was making them companions of the loneliness, they saw how for the Pattersons it was natural for limited, fallible humans to acquire some of the grandeur of their situation. The visitors realised, in the course of the morning, that though they were friends of Claire, the mountains were her companions, and, in a way they knew they couldn't understand, would matter more to her should she ever be forced into a choice. Who would she marry? Where would she find a partner, or would he come into her life simply by riding across her family's runs? The girls found themselves thinking of their own homes, their daily habits, and comparing them with what they were doing, in their party of seven. Home and the familiar felt precious, but reduced: exposure to sky and the drop they were skirting with their horses was like walking side by side with an uncomfortable but inescapable truth. Their friend - but not, now, their companion - had lived with this situation all her life. She had shared a schooling with them, and now was sharing the world that had made her. They felt humbled, and rivulets of uncertainty coursed through them, as if they

had been in some way shown up as limited. They studied their friend's brothers: proud, reserved, rivalrous, articulate, ignorant of much, but certain of this remote world because they too had been made by it. The party rode through a changing forest, dropping out of snowgums into a deep valley. The blues Claire had told them to study were above them now, not below. The plants growing on the bush floor, they were aware, in their unlearned state, were the citizens of a damper, darker world. At the bottom they reached running water, splashing over stones, and saw beside it, as if left by a previous civilisation, a plate, half-buried in the mud, missing pieces of its enamel, its rim, dirty as it was, still recognisably blue. 'Someone's been here before us!' Emma called.

They stopped, laughing. They glanced at the plate as if it might have something to tell. They rode along the stream until they found the rough hut that was all that stood, now, in the clearing where the first Pattersons had built a home of sorts to keep out the snow. It was here they built a fire, adding anything dry enough to burn, until it was too hot to go near, so that they had to let it die down before they could boil water. When the tea was made, Claire got cups from the bag on their pack horse, noting, though she said nothing, that there were two extra cups: her mother and father had planned to be with them. She sensed that her mother was not sick, but sad; I must understand her, Claire thought: I must know what she's going through if I'm to be a woman myself.

By the fire, eating their sandwiches, the Patterson boys and their sister told the visitors how the family had found its way into the mountains; how the first man had built a hut with the aid of two ex-miners; how he'd gone back to bring his wife and children to their home; how they'd ridden, with the children in front of their parents or in panniers on the side of a horse, through the days and into the darkness, until they were too tired, too saddle-sore, to go on, but their grandfather had forced his wife, his family, to continue; how he'd brought her, in a darkness as mystifying as the moral universe, to the house - no more than a hut, really - he'd made for them; and how, on that first night he lit a fire for his exhausted

family. ‘Where there’s a fire, there’s a hearth,’ Alec said grandly, ‘and where there’s a hearth, there’s a home!’

They might have returned, then, but Jennifer, who came from broad acres and a homestead with servants and a beautifully appointed table, was curious. ‘What happened to the house that was here? Who built it, and when? Is this your land, or don’t you own it any more? How did you find this place? Why did your grandparents, was it, come down here?’ She gestured to indicate that her questions could go on indefinitely. Claire said, ‘I don’t know that you’d say they found it, as if they were looking for a place and said yes, this’ll do! This is the route from the high country to Buckland. It’s as if - this’ll probably sound silly - they built their winter base just off the side of the road.’ She smiled; they looked into the enclosing bush, until Nancy tilted her head back. ‘Up on top,’ she said, ‘it seemed as if we were almost in the sky. You felt you could touch the clouds. But down here, everything’s closed! Look!’

They looked. The earth had been carved by the rivulet at their feet, cut into, as if the water, having fallen from the clouds, wanted to dig itself in as deeply, as far from the sky, as possible. ‘It’s strange,’ Jennifer said. ‘I’m used to broad horizons. Here, it’s like everything is locked away. It’s as if there’s no certain knowledge about anything. Let’s go back to my question, can we? Does your family still own this place?’

The Patterson brothers assured her that they did. ‘Well,’ she repeated, ‘how did you find it?’

‘My grandmother would have been the first to claim it,’ Scott said. ‘I think. You see, in ... I forget the year ... she became aware ... somebody must have told her, maybe some miner getting something at the little store she kept up there, at the house, though it wasn’t built at the time I’m talking about ...’ He paused. Jennifer frowned, trying to piece together the scraps of family history that he only half knew. ‘Somehow she found out that the land our family was using, and also the land that the Devines, that’s another family that were up there too, running a hotel of sorts, and some horses for a carting business, and a few head of cattle

... all this land was going to become available because one of the men that had the run wanted to get out of it, so my grandmother got someone to look after her children, I don't know who it would have been, some derelict old miner, probably, and she got on her horse and rode to Buckland. She must have taken quite a bit of money with her because the lease wouldn't have been cheap, and they wouldn't have given it to her on a promise, they'd need the money before they'd sign the papers. She rode through here, where we are now, on the way to Buckland, and up the far side there, and she got the papers signed by the partners of this chap that had told her he wanted to get out, and while she was riding back she ran into one of the Devines and he wanted to know where she'd been, and she told him, and he offered her an extra ten pounds ... that's right, I remember now, she'd got her lease for thirty pounds, and Devine offered her forty, but she wasn't budging. She'd got what she wanted. Absolutely!'

'Some of that's not quite right,' Hugh put in, claiming the attention of the visitors who, a few weeks before had been schoolgirls, 'but I suppose it's near enough for the moment. What I wanted to say, though, was that when grandpa got back and heard what she'd done - taken a lease on a big stretch of pastoral land - he wondered why the hell she'd done it. He was a miner, you see, not a cattle man. He never dreamed of running a cattle station like we do now. That was grandma's idea, and she got it, and she was offered money to buy her out of it, as Scott said, but she refused, and so, you see, the family's direction had been set.'

'By a woman,' Emma pointed out. 'Now who says we don't know anything?' She beamed at them, then added, 'And has it been happily ever after?'

'No,' said Alec, as if the question was, by some definition of character his. 'And I dare say it never will be. So all we can do is spare a thought for grandma as we ride back. She didn't bring us to the high country, and probably didn't want to come here, but, having arrived, she saw that the best thing to do was to make it her own. And that,' he said, fixing his sister's visitors with a beady eye, 'made us what we are today.'

It was the last night. Claire and Nancy took their pillows to the room where Emma and Jennifer had been sleeping. Head to toe, they settled for the holiday's summation. Claire said they had to come back; they swore they would. Jennifer said it had all been so unexpected; she was wondering what it would seem like when she was back in the place she'd known all her life. They talked about the war that everyone seemed to think was coming, and how it would affect their lives. 'What'll be the good of marrying? Husbands are supposed to protect us. They can't do that if they're overseas, fighting.' They wriggled in the beds that normally belonged to Scott and Alec, who'd removed themselves to the stockmen's quarters for the fortnight of the stay. Emma lit a candle, but a few minutes later Jennifer blew it out. 'It's easier to talk in the dark.'

'Why?'

'The things you say are thoughts, not your personality on display.'

They whispered. Each felt she was one of four fates, sheltered by the walls of the room with its door to the kitchen where Belle held sway. They giggled about things that had happened in their schooling, they talked seriously. 'We aren't very much if we haven't got ideals.' They talked about what happened to people when they married. 'They lose something. My parents run a shop. It's a big shop, they manage it well, they're respected. But I don't care what anyone says, they never have the excitement we've got here, talking about what we're going to do.'

'The trouble is, it's all out of our control. Will there be a war? We can't do anything about that. Nothing we say can make any difference to what's going to happen to the world.'

'Who cares about the world? It's the bit of it near me that I'm concerned with.' This was Jennifer, thinking she'd maintain her advantages.

Claire said, 'The trouble is, the bit near me is affected by the next bit, and it's affected by the bit after that, if you see what I mean. Also, there's big events that have a ripple effect. My dad was explaining to me about stockmarkets. Something happens that make wealthy people on the other side of the world get frightened, so they sell off things they

own. They start a ripple, and the wave goes around the world. Things that you and I might own, here in this country, lose value because someone half a world away loses confidence. And there's nothing we can do about it.'

Emma said, 'What can we do?' She said it so plaintively that it stirred them on the level of their worst insecurities. Nancy, who was in the same bed, said, 'We can tickle each other!' and took hold of Emma's foot. Emma squealed, Claire said, 'Ssshhh!' but Jennifer had her foot too, and in a moment Claire was writhing to get herself free of the tickling that was driving her mad with delight. In a convulsion that freed her from the bedding, she got her teeth onto the hand that had been tickling her, and was now still, and threatened, seriously, 'Let go!' Jennifer, testing her, released the foot of the friend who was, in some way neither of them could have explained, her rival. Claire slipped back to the other end of the bed and picked up the sheet and blanket that had been their covering. She put them in place. Jennifer, conniving, accepting the truce that both had seen was necessary in their rivalry, made her end tidy too. Emma said, trying to restore the balance that had been broken, 'What will you do, Claire, once we've gone?'

Only one thing came to Claire's mind. 'Cry,' she said. 'I'm going to cry my eyes out.'

'Don't say that. You're making me start to cry already.'

'I have to say it. I'm going to want to have you back.'

'We'll come back. I will, that's for sure.'

Nancy said, 'I'll come back. You ask me, Claire, and I'll come back. I really want to. I never dreamed that there was anything like this, and it's not even all that far away from where I live. Except ...' She lacked words for the difference between a mountain and a plain. But it was Jennifer's reaction Claire was waiting for. 'I'd love to come back. But do you think you could all come to my place first? It's so different. When we've had the comparison, we'll be able to talk about it really clearly. I think that'd be great.'

They agreed, the four girls, that their next time together would be at Cooroke. And then they talked, and whispered, until Emma, Nancy, Jennifer and Claire, each in turn, and eventually, were absorbed in sleep. In the morning, when Thomas lit the fire in the stove, it occurred to him to check on the girls, and he found, to his initial surprise, though he saw that it was the most delicate and moving of sights, that the four fates were lying head to toe, eyes closed, breathing lightly, their dreams banished by the dawn. He went outside to the horses.

Claire wrote to her friends. She got letters from Nancy and Emma, but nothing came from Cooroke. She wrote again. Months passed. At Ben Avon, the Pattersons were getting ready for the springtime trek to their mountain home when a letter came:

I'm announcing my engagement in next Thursday's papers. Thursday is the day the local paper is produced so that had to be the day. You'll be able to see it in the city papers, naturally. We're not waiting long between the engagement and the wedding. We feel that the world's too insecure to allow delay. Besides, I love Julian and I'm afraid that if we don't catch this wave at its fullest then we might make a false start of some sort. He's the only son of another grazing family. His parents are much older than mine and they want to see him set up so they can retire. They're going to live in the town for a year or two to make sure everything's going well on the property, then they'll travel for a while; they've been too busy to give themselves any chance to see the world.

Claire was amazed. What about the visit? She had a strange feeling, something quite new to her, of having been left behind. She'd assumed that her generation would move through the years together, maintaining their bonding, learning about life before they rushed into things ... It was inexplicable!

The engagement will be celebrated here at Cooroke, with the two families and immediate friends and connections invited for a dinner party in our own dining room, which I would like you to see one day. You took me into the heart of your family's life and I feel I should do as much for you, but events have overtaken my plan to have another summer holiday with my friends from

school. Would you let Emma and Nancy know why it is that that's no longer possible? I will have so many other things to do, and people to visit and organise, that I think I must leave that to you, if you wouldn't mind.

She felt as if she'd been turned into a servant, picking up someone else's jobs. Why couldn't Jennifer write to the other girls herself? It came to Claire at once; Emma and Nancy had been excised from Jennifer's life. They weren't important enough. From now on they - and people like them - would be ... she wanted a word ... invisible! The letter ended:

I would very much like you to be at the wedding. When the date is settled, I will send you an invitation. Please come.

Jennifer

Claire talked about it with her mother. Belle said, 'You could ask Nancy and Emma, but if Jennifer's not here, you'll be thinking about her. She'll spoil it for the rest of you. Your school days are ended. Get to know other people and bring them up here. Take them riding like you did last year. You think Jennifer's too young to get married, but she'll be the same age I was when I agreed to marry your father. My parents said I was too young, but they didn't stand in the way, and here we are today. Events are wiser than we are, sometimes.'

Claire went riding, so she could cry on her own. Feeling lonely, she went to the edge of the valley the cloud sometimes came from. It was a hot afternoon; there was no mystery beneath her when she looked down. She tried to think of everything she knew about marriage, and realised that most of what came to her mind had to do with duty, reciprocity, hard work, and ... It was the part she couldn't think of that she wanted to know about. The marriage ceremony was a door that changed you as you passed through. The partners became parents and then they were changed forever. Claire didn't want to be changed, but had a feeling that events that she couldn't stop happening would do it to her. Who would Nancy and Emma marry? How long would it be before they wrote her letters like Jennifer's? What would they be like when their turn came?

She wished she had sisters instead of brothers, so she could talk about it. Young men seemed to think that men simply became stronger, and, as they grew older, their compensation was wealth and power, strength in different forms. Yet she could tell, comparing her father with his sons, that he too had been changed by marrying: it had clearly made him better, even though he chafed at his wife's demands when she was forceful and he was passive. What sort of men would her brothers be, once they went through the door that changes people?

She looked about her. The sky was cloudless; the change was that there was no change, for once. The ranges were the blue of the mid-afternoon. Her horse was patient, dipping his head to nibble. She felt a stillness come over her; the cloud wouldn't come because the day was too hot, but something of its spirit took control of her. This is a moment of knowing, she realised: I don't quite know what it signifies, but I've passed through a moment of change. Jennifer's wedding plans, her refusal to rejoin the group of last summer, had caused a movement in her life. It happened without my knowing it, Claire saw. She rode slowly home. Passing the stockyard, she saw her father working on a gate. His sons were nowhere to be seen. 'Do you want a hand, father?' He straightened his back, smiling faintly. 'I've nearly finished. Did you go for a ride?' She nodded. 'Where did you go?' She told him. 'You probably think this isn't necessary, but would you mind, this summer at least, letting one of us know where you're going before you ride away? I'm worried about any of us being caught on our own.'

He'd never said anything like it before. 'Why are you worried father?'

'The bush is ready to burn. We don't notice it so much, up here, because it's open on the plains, but in the trees there's too much litter on the ground. It's hot. A fire could rip through here and leave it so you'd never believe it. It could be very sudden. You wouldn't want to be on your own, and nobody knowing where you were.' He felt she was unconvinced. 'When a fire gets rageing, with a wind behind it, it can jump miles in a moment. You haven't seen it, but I have. It's unbeliev-

able. Once you've seen it, you know there's no place that's safe. You can be staring at a cloud of smoke, and then, if it's hot enough and the wind's in the right direction, that fire you thought was miles away is blazing above your head. It's the most terrible thing, and I have a feeling we're going to see it this summer.'

She looked at him, disconcerted: 'How can you tell?'

Her father considered this question solemnly. 'I don't know how I can tell. If I say there's something in the air, it sounds silly. But there is. I don't know what we're going to see this summer, but I'm worried. So I'm going to say to your brothers, and to Norm and Jacko, don't ride anywhere alone. Make sure someone knows where you are.' He looked at his daughter. 'I don't want to take away your freedom. It's very precious. I'd just like you to let us know where you're going if you decide you want to be alone for a while.' She knew he was thinking of Jennifer's decision that the summer reunion wouldn't go ahead. He'd felt the sadness in her that had made her ride to the edge of the plain, and there was something in the tone of his address that told her that her father had perceived what had happened, and was making his adjustment too.

1939

Claire brooded glumly about not having a reunion - Emma and Nancy had been deeply hurt by the fact that news of Jennifer had to be relayed to them - and the year was already some days old before she noticed the apprehension in her home. Thomas was circumspect, waiting; Belle was strangely stiff, as if spontaneity had left her; their sons were argumentative, while Norm and Jacko seemed to be making themselves less noticeable with every passing day. Thomas rode, more often than before, to the valley of the Donaldson, saying nothing, wondering, Claire suspected when she was with him, how well he'd withstand the com-

ing test. Her mother was talking with uncomfortable regularity about ‘God’s will’: Claire grew tight, running through her mind the things she believed in, listing to herself the things she wanted from life, and the duties and obligations such a list implied if she was to be more, in God’s eyes, than an importuning beggar! Going into her mother’s room one day, she saw the photo of herself she’d brought home from school: the face was unproblematic, and shone with the certainty that those who obeyed rules would gain rewards. She knew she’d changed, and wanted to know how far this process had gone. She told her mother that she was going for a ride on Five Mile Plain to look at a cow that had been limping last time she’d seen it, and saddled her horse.

It was the cloud she wanted. It crossed her mind that it must only rise in certain atmospheric conditions, and she couldn’t have said what they were, but she felt sure it wouldn’t be there today. The day was too sullen. She rode to where the land dropped away, the place of the appointment, as she thought of it, and waited. When stillness settled on her, she decided that humans are no more than sets of impulses, prone to do almost anything, and it’s beliefs that hold them together. What do I believe in, she asked herself. The first answer came swiftly: ‘I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost ...’ She waited, her stillness increasing. I believe in my family, was the second of her pillars. We can do anything. She amended the idea. We can withstand anything. She thought momentarily of her father’s vigils, overlooking the valley on the other side of their holding. She asked herself, what else do I believe?

She waited, but the third pillar refused to become clear. She could tell it had to do with her. What did she believe about herself? The answer wouldn’t present itself, but she knew at least what the question was: she wanted to know what was going to happen, now that schooling was behind, and her brothers were away as often as they could manage, trying to find wives, though that was not how they would have put it, but she couldn’t help noticing that their business trips, their things that needed to be seen to were more likely to take them to certain places

than to others. Would they leave, and if they did, would she have to hold the place together as her parents grew old? She thought of Julian, the man Jennifer was going to marry, and then the lack of a circle of reliable people, so useful for comparisons, and the sharing and passing on of what passed for wisdom, troubled her. She looked into the valley and something fearful entered her: the next cloud she saw, down there where the truth originated, would be a cloud of billowing smoke, with tongues of fire beneath it. Into her mind came the words she knew in Handel's setting:

For He is like a refiner's fire ...

The sternness of it reminded her of her mother, and then a realisation came: each point in her mother that was stern, and grim, and relied on snatches from the Bible, was a point in her personality that had been so wounded that it had either died or had created a protective cover, so that it could live on, but never be expressed. What sort of way to live was that?

Morning brought the smell of smoke, and a sense that night may have increased their danger. The sight of flame would have been welcome because it would locate their enemy, but there was only wind and smoke. The men argued about where the cattle would be safest - at the bottom of deep valleys, on the open plains, or at the start of the inclines that led down to rivers. 'They'll panic when it comes, whatever we do,' Thomas said. 'They'll run, no matter where we leave them. They'll have to take their chance. What we have to do is find where they are now, so we've got an idea of where to look, once it's passed.' Claire knew she wouldn't be allowed to do any looking. Safety demanded that everything be done in pairs; she'd have to stay with her mother, who was grimmer with every passing hour. The men rode away. Belle and Claire filled buckets and tubs. Water and watchfulness were their only defences, Belle said; Claire - it was something about her youth - added, 'Luck?' Her mother glared at her. 'Who knows how to tap into that? You can't turn it your way by praying, and if it decided to bring you bad tidings, there'd be no escap-

ing. You hear me?' It was her mood she was trying to impose, and Claire felt that to survive, she had to resist. If she accepted her mother's way of receiving events, her life would be shaped in a way she'd hate. Her survival was an internal struggle as well as one with fire.

Its presence could be felt on every horizon. The night before, the Pattersons, attended by Norm and Jacko, had ridden to Claire's spot at the edge of Five Mile Plain, to find, from the glowing sky, where their dangers lay. They were all around. And now the wind was from the north, hot and hurrying. Claire hung out washing; it would be dry in moments. Belle went round the fence of her garden with a hoe, chipping out every blade of grass. Claire studied her mother, sensing that she had no idea how to prepare. She was visiting everything in her garden, getting it ready to die if fate - luck - so determined. Claire felt sorry for her mother, then angry with the men, who were riding around in vast circles, achieving nothing, then weak, because she knew no more than they did. 'Don't stand there!' her mother shouted. 'What's the good of you? Don't you care about what's going to happen?' Claire said shrilly above a clump of fuchsias, 'You're not thinking clearly, mother. Everything you've done is inside the fence. What's the good of that? Twenty feet from the house is a paddock of dry grass. We won't stop the fire jumping twenty feet! We have to stop it getting close. That's what I'm trying to think about. Shouldn't we burn the paddock now, before a fire gets here, so there's nothing to burn when it comes?' Her mother straightened, hatred - anger and fear - pouring from her eyes. 'You want to start a fire? The devil's got inside you. It's something he can't do unless you let him in, by weakness. We'll only save ourselves if we're strong! I never thought one of mine would be weak enough to go over to his side. Wrestle with him, girl, free yourself! You're more dangerous than what's blazing out of sight if you can't rid yourself of what's got hold of you!'

Rageing at her mother's foolishness, Claire went inside, but that was worse. She needed to see. Outside again, she wanted to ride, but the smoke was low to the earth and the sky only visible through momen-

tary gaps. She felt an uncontrollable wildness enter her: she wanted to ride with the wind, the smoke and fire, released from fear by running before it. She'd heard of people who were brave enough to run through flames and save themselves by that moment of bravery and danger, finding themselves, and their salvation, when they stood on the blackened earth behind the flame. Would she be brave enough? She wanted to give herself entirely to fear, to panic, to see if, exhausted by her terrors, her subjection to the worst of nightmares lived out in glaring day, she would find, at that moment of greatest weakness, the sudden strength, a jewel in her common clay, to turn, face the fury, and stride through unharmed, to stand where nothing else survived in the blackness beyond. A refiner's fire for her soul!

She went to her mother. 'There's still water in the well. We need to have it available, so we can use it without having to rely on that slow old pump when the fire's bearing down. What can we put it in?'

The night was divided into four watches. Claire and her mother had the hour either side of midnight, when, Thomas gauged, an eruption was least likely. Belle put a chair near the western gate of the garden, and didn't move. Claire prowled restlessly, despite her father's injunction to stay beside her mother. The air was still and oppressive. Both women felt that the earth was drawing breath before letting destruction loose. Claire went around the horses and dogs, soothing them. Binty, her horse, wouldn't touch the apple she offered. It was trembling when she rubbed it. 'You know we're in danger, don't you Binty,' she said. Her empty chair was beside her mother's, challenging, in some way: Belle knew that her daughter was defying her. She'll find out who's right, she thought, when a wall of fire comes out of the west. But Thomas had agreed that the run nearest the house should be burned; he'd given himself and Norm the watch from three in the morning till five, he'd have breakfast on the table when the others got up, he'd give them twenty minutes to eat, then he'd require them to take matches and light the grass according to the sequence he stipulated. 'There's only a short span

when there's enough light to see and no wind to take it out of control. We won't be able to put it out, so it'll be burning near us all day until the big blaze comes. We're reducing the danger from the grass; the trees we can't do anything about. The biggest danger is the gas that comes from the leaves, and I mean trees that are miles away. Hot currents of air suck the gas out and blow it anywhere. When it comes in contact with a flame, and that could be anywhere, up it goes! We can't control it. We have to fight it if it breaks out here at the house. The house is the central thing. We can rebuild our sheds or yards if we have to, but if it gets the house, I think we'd all feel our backs had been broken.'

The night crept by; after the hurried breakfast, the burning off was carried out. There had been no dew. The grass burned swiftly. Belle watched sourly; her mind was on the invisible bombs that would be spat-tered across their country later in the day, when the wind was whipping flame through the treetops, leaping plains and taking thunderous steps down valleys where a man on horse would need hours to travel. Her vengeful God was teaching humility to His people.

Norm and Jacko, who had nothing to lose but their lives, could see how difficult it was for the family that employed them to deal with their pride. They hated to show that they were afraid. Resentment was build-ing in them at the very possibility that they might be wiped out. The hired men couldn't have explained, but they could feel, that the idea of God - Belle's god - was part of the problem. Something unspeakable, something crippling, was occupying the Patterson's imaginations, and they could see that Claire, the youngest, not wholly assimilated, was resisting her identity as a Patterson. They couldn't see how she could avoid it, but wished her ... luck, was how they would have put it. She felt strapped to the house and her tension built as the day wore on.

It seemed to her inevitable that fire would make a direct attack, and that the danger would only apparently be through burning bush. The danger was in the apparently innocent air. Burning debris would be blown on the wind, and it would have to be extinguished the moment it arrived. That would require the keenest alertness, therefore the family

should be relaxed, rested ... and that was what the fires would not allow. The tension itself was exhausting. She went inside. The clock in the kitchen said it was seven minutes past ten. The day was racking them, weakening them, so that when the fire struck, they would be ready to give in. She lay on her bed, wondering what would come to her mind if she was at her spot, her point of truth at the edge of a valley. No voice spoke. The day's oppression crushed her; the sky filled again with smoke, this time from far away, not the local, almost controllable smoke of their burning off. It could be my last day, she realised. Some of us might die in this fire, when it comes, as surely it will. The inevitability that made her mother too heavy to bear was starting to creep into her. She tried to send messages with her mind to Jennifer, and Nancy and Emma. Emma would be safe, in the city, but the other two, especially Jennifer, might be surrounded by smoke and flame: she realised, only then, how cut off her family's station was. Their fate, or release from it, if that was how it was to be, would be experienced alone. Lying on her bed, knowing she must get up and appear to be doing something useful, she heard, suddenly, Handel's recitative in her mind:

For behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us.

Tears came into her eyes. Her faith had broken.

In the early afternoon the wind swung around, and a fire that had been burning deep in the valley of the Donaldson swept to the top, scorching the Pattersons' cattle, the smell of their bodies and the sound of their bellowing carried into the sky in a column of smoke. At the house, Thomas called everyone out. 'The next hour, the next ten minutes perhaps, will decide everything!' As he spoke, burning leaves fell on his smithy. Jacko rushed at it, beating the flames with bags tied to a pole. His horse reared, making him seem knightly. 'It's okay!' he called, 'but that's the way they're gonna come!' He swung his horse in a circle till he was with his masters again, the first experience of battle gained. Claire was stationed on a tankstand, watching one side of their home's roof;

ladders had been placed to give them access with buckets. Her mother was on the other side, with a guarantee that the men would rush if she called. The column of smoke from the advancing fire reached above the horizon, then flattened, bent to the earth by the wind bringing destruction. The Pattersons watched the sky. ‘There’s another!’ Their voices lost identity in the collective defence, warning each other as they formed a thinking, collaborative unit. Water was hurled onto the roof of the workmen’s quarters. Warnings were given to watch the yards. Grass not caught by the burning off began to flicker with invisible flames beside the shed where their gear was stored. Water was hurled on it, beaters slapping this treacherous grass until it was reduced to blackened slop. Buckets were filled as soon as emptied. ‘Use the beaters! Try not to waste the water!’ Thomas yelled. ‘We don’t know how long this is going to last!’

It lasted less than half an hour, then, although their vigilance could not be relaxed, the falling debris reduced. Everything that could be burned between the Donaldson and their home had been burned, or was burning quietly, the lethal impetus, the hysteria at the forefront of the fire, having left them behind.

They started to clean up.

Their stretch of discovery and mourning began.

The family was safe. Their dogs and horses were unharmed. Belle’s trees and bushes, though scorched, had lived through what had happened. The smouldering snowgums that surrounded Cairngorm had lost their leaves, but would sprout again, when the season invited, new shoots from unexpected places, the forest able to renew. ‘Get some tea on, mother,’ Tom said to his spouse. ‘We need something to drink, and time to think, before we look for the cattle. And see how the fences are, what’s left of them.’ Belle went inside, followed by Claire. The fire in the stove, at least, was where it should be. The kitchen was insufferably hot. ‘I want to open the door,’ Belle said, ‘but I can’t bear to have the smoke come in.’ Claire wondered why she said it; the house was full of smoke that had come down the chimneys, and under the doors.

'It doesn't feel very protected in here,' she said, setting cups on a tray. 'They'll want it outside,' Belle said, 'no matter what your father says about sitting down. He won't sit down till he drops.'

The tea was taken out, and drunk by the men, and the women, grouping themselves restlessly, eyes still watching for anything that might come on the wind to put a fire among their possessions. From time to time one of Claire's brothers, or the workmen, rushed at something still burning with a beater, slapping it for its inference of danger. Thomas moved to face his wife. 'We've still got a home, my love. We didn't do our life's work to have it wasted.' He smiled, though sternly, on his family, patriarch, servant, procreator, man giving thanks. He took off his hat and held it to his chest, closing his eyes. The rest of the group stood in silence as he whispered his gratitude. Claire stared at the ground. 'We're all still here,' Belle said. 'Thanks be to God!'

At the pub in Portree Norm and Jacko talked about their employers' daughter, so virtuous, as far as they could see, that no man had a hope! 'What's the good of a woman like that?' They thought her virtue should be tested. 'Someone's gotta get her outside. Teach her how to kiss, maybe do a few other things.' There was a dance at the quaint little hall in a month's time; Jacko said they should organise some of the fellas to dance with Claire Patterson. 'Soften her up a bit. Get her in the mood. That's all it'd take, I reckon.' Norm thought it was worth a try, would give them something to laugh about, but he didn't think it would succeed. 'First of all, Tom and Belle will be there, they wouldn't let her go to something without them. And then there's the nature of the beast. She's made for the long haul, somehow. Doesn't get excited about things in front of her.' The other men laughed. 'What if it stretches out to gain her attention, so to speak?' They laughed more loudly, having named their weapon in the battle of the sexes. How could she resist, even if she was a Patterson? They agreed that a few minutes after the Pattersons arrived, they'd get the leader of the band to strike up a progressive barn dance, so their allies could take it in turns to sum up the

young woman, work out which sort of man she liked, how likely she was to slip outside, and what it would take to get her to do it.

On the night of the dance, however, Claire was looking at her friend - or was it former friend? - Jennifer seated beside her husband of that afternoon, Julian Mitchell. Claire had kissed her outside the church. 'You're the first of our generation.' Jennifer had looked on her with limitless pride. At the reception, held in the town's oldest hotel, there were couples everywhere; Claire was seated at a table of young people, their single-ness almost a mark of lesser status. She studied Jennifer's older sister, and bridesmaid, at the top table. What happened to people when they married? Why did some rush into it, and others stand back, considering? Later in the evening, she talked to the sister, Marjorie, who said, 'If you ask yourself questions like that, then you're not one of the rush-in types. You're another type. What sort it is you've yet to find out. There are many types, and no, I don't know what type I am yet.'

The following day, as the two young women walked about the town, Marjorie leading Claire, wanting her to feel accepted, a perception came to Claire outside the Roman Catholic church. 'Jennifer wanted to get married before you did,' she said to Marjorie, both inquiring and asserting. 'It was a way of making a claim that you couldn't compete with. She wants the property. And she's got an ally. Julian will run the two properties as if they're one. You, if you're there at all, will be a helper. That's what it's about, isn't it?'

Marjorie's silence was an acceptance of what had been said. 'Some people would say that was a trick so she could get in front of me. I don't think of it like that. I think there was something that needed to happen. She sensed it, it suited her, and she did it. It didn't suit me. I wasn't thinking about it. I overlooked everything to do with it. Nobody sees everything. What we see, and what we do about it, that's what we are.'

Claire said to Marjorie, the following day, as she boarded the train that would take her away, 'You taught me something yesterday. I'd like to meet you again. Please write to me. I'll be writing to Jennifer but I don't think she'll have much to say to me, not for a few years anyway.'

Marjorie's eyes filled with tenderness, and some apprehension at what might be in store. 'Perhaps we won't know what she's doing until we get married ourselves. I wonder how long that will be?'

1940

The European powers had resumed their war. In the mountains, this meant little at first, though Thomas could tell that Norm and Jacko were asking themselves if they should enlist. His sons, he was pleased to see, said they'd defend their holdings with any weapon they could get hold of; at this stage, it was only bravado. Some newspapers said the Japanese were more dangerous than the Germans; this seemed hard to credit. They were tied up in China, and there were European bastions between them and the south. Re-fencing the runs was the Pattersons' priority.

When the winds grew colder, however, and the cattle were back at Ben Avon, the news of war was closer. Broadcasts could be picked up that weren't heard in the high country. Newspapers were dropped off three times a week. Headlines imprinted leaders and cities in the minds of all who read them. Thomas sheltered in his responsibilities, which were considerable. His sons were off courting as often as they could. As they rode away, or caught the mail van to take them into Portree, Belle knew that a vein of rare poetic feeling was swelling in her husband, and she touched him tenderly when she felt it wouldn't be obtrusive: the chamber of his love should only be entered when needed. That way they could always be new for each other. Claire felt alone, and longed for letters: one came, unexpectedly, from Jennifer's sister Marjorie:

I often think of you. Our understanding of each other came so quickly. But first, my news. Jennifer's going to have a baby. She hasn't told anybody yet but I can tell. It's in the way she moves, especially when she sits. Her mind is inside her body, marvelling at what's there. It's the loveliest thing. She's

no idea that I know, and nobody else knows, except maybe Julian: I don't know whether she's told even him, yet. As for me, I can't keep it to myself. Everything's become so serious lately with this war. I hate it, but nobody's allowed to say so. We have to be patriotic. It makes me feel like never going out, except that that means you've locked yourself in a prison of your own making. And I ask myself what's wrong with that when the world's gone mad, and everybody's being asked to do awful things to each other?

Riding high on The Hurdle, checking to see if cattle had strayed, Jacko kept a respectful distance from his boss's daughter, but as they came out of the timber he said, 'Are you going to the mid-winter dance, Miss Claire? Should be a good turn. I reckon we all need something to give us a lift!' There was no trace of mischief in his voice. She said to him, 'My parents are talking about it. I think we're going. I'm looking forward to it.' She felt there was something in his approach which she hadn't answered. 'It's been a terrible year.' He nodded, their horses moving on; the land fell away before them as far as the road in the centre of the valley. In full sunlight it was a consuming sight, never, one would have thought, to be rejected, but Jacko was saying, 'A few of us are thinking about joining up. Haven't made up our minds yet, but ...' He waited; she said nothing. 'Your dad and mum are good to work for, nothing I could complain about there, but ...' Again he paused, as if, lesser being, he had no right to lengthy utterance. 'I don't think I've got much of a future. Might as well get into something big, while it's there.' Again the pause. 'While I'm still fit, good reflexes ...' She saw that in some way this had to do with his question about the dance. He wanted to dance with her before he went away? She answered this time.

'You said a few of you. Who's that?'

He named the boys of the district whose names would, in a few years, be on a roll of honour in the tiny settlement. 'Norm, o'course.' Claire was surprised; she'd had no idea, from the impassive countenance of Norm, that he'd harboured thoughts of battle. 'Ronnie Watts. Wattsy'll be in anything. Doggy Timmins. Took a bit of talking to get

him interested. Willy.' This was Wayne Williams, the policeman's son. 'Chris Leveck and Bob Dahlitz. Name like that, you'd reckon he'd be on the other side, but he's keen to go.' She looked into his eyes. 'That's all, far as I know.'

She felt something being stripped away from the world she'd known, which had given strength and shape to her existence. 'So many young men! When are you joining up?'

'We dunno yet. Just an idea we're kickin' around. I haven't told your dad yet, but I guess he's got a right to know.' He was asking her to deliver the message. 'All right Jacko, I'll pass it on. If all you boys are getting ready to leave, that's a good reason for us to be at the dance?' Jacko smiled sweetly, as if he'd been granted something he wished for. 'I reckon, Miss Claire.' Their horses moved down the slope, The Hurdle behind them, clouds above, and a sky of brilliant blue.

She danced with them, under her parents' eyes. When the Pattersons arrived, Jacko had come up with a card, the names of the seven men written on it in their none-too-elegant hands. Jacko was last; as organiser, he'd given himself the role of offering his partner her supper.

During her first dance, with Willy, Claire wondered whether Jacko had nominated the order himself, or had them draw numbers. She asked. 'Out of a hat, miss,' Willy, browbeaten by his father's authority, told her. 'I drew the first. A couple minutes, and I'll be looking on.' She knew he'd never be anything, but felt a tinge of affection. 'Are you going off to the war? Jacko told me about the plan you boys had.' He nodded humbly. 'It was his idea, really. Rest of us just fitted in, I reckon. But yeah. I got nuthin better to do. Really.' That he could appraise himself so brutally, so lethally, gave him an appeal. 'But it'll be dangerous. You don't know what might happen.' He grinned, still humble. 'Reckon that's the idea, really.'

Next was Chris Leveck. She asked him about the name. 'You'll find this hard to believe, Miss Claire, but it's the froggy word for a bishop. Fair dinkum! And I'm not even a mick! I tellya what, it's a bit hard

to live up to!' He burst out laughing. She smiled weakly. 'Sorry Miss Claire. What're they going to give us? Highland Scottische! I'll have to concentrate, don't want to be jumpin' on your toes. How's it go now? Oh yes, I remember.' Claire enjoyed it, but at the same time felt herself losing something in the whirling of young people to the piano, the accordion, the violin and clarinet, the drums and bass that the musicians from Crewe had brought. Beneath the hanging lamps, she felt herself to be part of a generation, something much larger than her family, larger even than the cohort of her school, already well behind her, and these young men, she knew, were only waiting for an instigation to make the departure they were looking for seem inevitable. When would their country say it needed them? When would there be a poster they could point to, asking them what they greatly desired to be asked?

Bob Dahlitz told her about his family: 'Swedes, not Huns. That's just a story someone put around. None of our family ever went to Germany, even when they were still over there.' He meant the other side of the world. Did he really want to be there, or simply to get away? Was his likely death the price to be paid for a brief burst of freedom and a place in the world's action?

After Bob, it was Doggy, and then Ron; these two, Claire observed, were watched more closely by her parents than the others. What thefts of cattle, what sly removal of implements, or other unreliably reported misappropriations had been imputed to them? Instinct, she knew, was of doubtful trustworthiness, but her parents' instincts sent a warning which she respected. Then it was the silent Norm. 'Never thought I'd get to dance with you Miss Claire. Guess I'm in luck tonight.' She asked him. 'Whose idea was it to enlist?' 'We all had it in our heads,' he told her. 'But it was Jacko who came out with it, one night at the pub. I thought for a while it was just grog talking, but next time we got together, it was there. Each of us knew the others had it in their minds. Funny thing, you know. What's going on over there, Hitler and that, is pretty terrible. The funny thing is, it's an opportunity. If there wasn't some terrible things going on, we couldn't feel it was okay to go off and

deal with them. I mean ...’ He stood still, with Claire, in the moving crowd; she could feel the struggle in the quiet boy to find what he wanted to say. ‘If there wasn’t bad things going on, fellas like me couldn’t do any good things. There’d be no good things to do, you know?’ Her eyes softening, she took hold of him and swept him into the dance, part of her generation at last because she was admitting it. When Norm’s turn ended, she hung onto his arm until Jacko came up. ‘Bit keen on the silent Normy, Claire? Still waters run deep. My turn, Norm-oh! Don’t you know it’s been hard for me to wait while you boys all had your turn of pleasure? A waltz, Miss Claire, a waltz!’ He swung a leg stylishly and the musicians started up. ‘They were watching you!’ Claire said. ‘Are you running the whole show? Jacko, are you?’ He grinned. ‘Someone’s gotta take charge, Miss Claire. Otherwise you’d be leaving everything to chance!’

1941

Three of the young men joined up soon after the dance, but the others stayed in Portree until the Japanese entered the war, then were gone in days. The young Pattersons were deemed to be in a reserved occupation and moreover their attentions were, as far as possible, elsewhere. Scott, Alec and Hugh married in the span of thirteen months. Belle and Thomas oversaw their preparations, apportioning land to each, helping them to get the homes on these properties ready to live in. ‘The actual wedding arrangements belong to the brides’ families,’ Thomas told his daughter. ‘We have to make the circumstances after their weddings as propitious as possible.’ Claire noticed his choice of word. It wasn’t how he normally spoke. Did he feel he was losing control of his sons? Or was he simply adjusting his idea of the relationship? She asked him, ‘If I was getting married, father, what would you be doing?’ He looked

surprised. ‘Have you got someone in mind that your mother and I don’t know about?’

‘No. But I’m curious to know what alterations there’d be in the family arrangements if ... when ... I marry.’ She waited for him.

He took his time. His eyes, she felt, were assessing her when he said, ‘Daughters are more precious than sons, because you give your daughter to someone else, and a proud family doesn’t like to do that, unless you know they’ll be in good hands. Now I can tell by the look in your eyes that you don’t like something about what I just said, but you’d remember, I’m sure, the words in the wedding ceremony, “Who giveth this woman away?” A marriage is really a bit of dealing between two families, and we men get the better part of the bargain. But it is still a bargain, and the woman’s side wants to know that their demands are being met. Your mother and I would want everything favorable for you because you’re very precious to us. The boys are getting properties of their own, as you see at the moment. You’ll be getting most of what your mother and I are keeping, and it’s so important to us, it’s really the foundation of our family pride, that we’d like you to be certain before you take the step.’

He was both stern and humble - exposed, perhaps - because he was rarely brought to speak so candidly. She said to him, ‘You’re putting a lot on me to consider, before I get in too deep with anyone.’ He said, ‘It’s simpler for men. Men can always strike out in a new direction. Women have to continue things. Make sure they keep going. It’s harder, and I’m the first to admit it.’ She felt his love for her, his respect for her womanhood, and the imposition of a burden she was unwilling to carry. ‘Thank you, father. I’ll think about it.’

Now that there were three more women in the family, and three more homes, Claire could feel an attitudinal shift, a redefinition of who she was. When the family gathered, she was the unmarried one, having duties galore but no rights, except - the thing she least desired - as an object of respect. Virginity, the state by which the others knew her, was

something they had been happy to put behind. They have a secret, she saw, hinted at, talked about privately, when two of the same gender had a moment of intimacy, but not to be shared with her. She was included at the edge of a zone of exclusion. Yet they told her secrets, and things that were worrying them, things which, she suspected, they didn't tell their partners. Her brothers, and her father, dropped these confidences when they were riding with her, somewhere far from the house, or after a difficult climb, perhaps, while their horses were resting. Her mother, Belle, let out her confidences allusively, as conclusions to be reached after considering the implications of something murmured over dishes being washed, beds being made, or clothing darned. Her new sisters, married to the boys she'd grown up with, offered her what they had to say with eyes wide in the confidence that what they felt was new, or with eyes withdrawn, because they didn't know how far to trust her: they hadn't mapped the routes by which perceptions of each other moved through the life of their new family. That, if anywhere, Claire thought, is where I have an advantage, but it's also dangerous because they may lose trust in me, and I'll be hated.

She decided to ask each of the new wives to tell her about their families.

Her first chance came when her father was helping Hugh to move stock between two paddocks the family owned between Ben Avon and Crewe: a halfway post on the way to the railhead. Hugh's wife, Gwen, asked Claire to look at clothing with her, to see what would need mending, and what could be altered. 'I'd like to wear this,' Gwen said, picking up a dress, 'but it was given to me by my Aunt Jessica, and she's smaller in the waist than I am. Say I put it on and you can tell me where we need to let it out.' Claire helped her with it, then stood back. 'It's meant to be loose,' Gwen said. 'Where does it look as if I'm poking through?' She wriggled her body, as if to challenge the garment. Claire studied the hang of the cloth, then came up to examine the way it fitted Gwen's shoulders. 'It's tight here, and it's a little loose here.' Gwen swung her

head to glance out of the corner of her eye. ‘Do you want to put pins in, or can you remember?’

‘I can remember,’ Claire said. ‘I’m good at that.’

‘What about here?’ Gwen said. ‘Under the ribs, and the bottom of my tummy?’ Something about the way she touched herself told Claire what she was being told. She put her arms around her sister, as she would forever be, now that there was this new development, and caressed her lightly, with curiosity, amazement, and love, her touch more refined than the handed-on fabric. When she let her hand come to rest where the next of the Pattersons - boy or girl? - was starting, Gwen put her hand on Claire’s hand, and the two of them were bonded. ‘Is that how you tell people things?’ Claire said. ‘I try not to have to tell people things,’ Gwen said. ‘I like to arrange things so people know.’ She smiled, cheek low to her shoulder. Claire said, ‘Did Hugh know, or did you have to tell him?’ Gwen touched the dress with her other hand. ‘I haven’t told him yet. This’ - she meant the dress, which they were going to alter - ‘is how I’m going to let him know. Do you think he’ll realise? He will, won’t he, Claire?’

In Portree, Hilda was restless in the house she shared with Alec. The first time Claire visited, the house was too close to the river; next time, it was too far away. It was low in the valley and lost the late afternoon sun. Hilda kept the curtains closed at the front so people on the road couldn’t see in, yet she twitched them regularly to see if anyone was passing. She started gardening jobs but didn’t finish them, finding reasons that required Alec to do something conclusive. ‘He says,’ she told her sister in law, the third time she called, ‘that he loved me because I was an independent spirit. Well, he ought to take me with him, everywhere he goes.’ Claire considered this. ‘Is that a sign of independence?’ Hilda struggled with the idea. ‘If I was truly independent, I wouldn’t need to, would I? But I never was so independent. I took every freedom I could, but I always had my family there, backing me up. I made gestures of freedom. It was as if I was saying “I’m not free, but I could

be, you know!" And now I'm married, I can't be! It's not Alec's fault. He does anything I ask. A couple of weeks ago, when we were getting Alec's stock out of that paddock at your father's place, he sent me to ride along that ridge where the burned trees are, and he stayed at the bottom, and when I looked down I saw him waving, and I knew he didn't want to restrict me, but the trouble is, I feel I ought to restrict myself. Look at this *bloody* house ...'

Claire was startled. None of the women she knew ever swore. The house itself seemed changed by the way it had been described. They were standing in the passage: Claire had a feeling that front and back doors should be opened to let the resonance be carried out on the next breeze. A bloody house! What was wrong with marriage, that it had given cause for such a word? She said, 'So it's the state of being married, is that what's causing you pain?' She could think of no more tactful way of asking. Hilda snapped, 'Of course it's the state of marriage. What else could it be? It's the only thing that's changed in my life! There's something wrong with me, and I don't know what it is. Something's supposed to happen, and I'm not letting it happen. I'm resisting, and I don't know what I'm resisting, or why I'm doing it. You're supposed to change when you marry, and I don't want to change. I want to be what I've always been.' Claire noticed the lines on her face. 'No, even that's not right. Alec's given me a chance, by making me a married woman, and I don't know how to take it. It should be a whole new freedom, and I want to be the rebellious little girl I used to be, but you can't be rebellious unless you've got something to rebel against, and I've got all I need. It's just that I don't want it. This *bloody* house ...'

She waved at the walls as if they were moving to crush her. 'Hold me, Claire. I want to cry on someone's shoulder.' Claire led her to the front room of the home she didn't want to make for her husband, and they sat on the sofa. Unclear why she had to do it, Claire took Hilda in her arms. 'Say anything you want. It won't go any further. It's better to let things out than hold them in.' Hilda sobbed on her shoulder. 'I ought to be happy, but it's so difficult growing up. Alec loved the little

child in me. That was the freedom he saw. But that little child has to go, so I can grow up. What'll your brother think of the woman he's married when she throws away the part of her he loved? What'll be left of our marriage then, Claire? Claire? Can you tell me?"

Audrey was the third of the new young Patterson wives, and the closest to the house at Ben Avon. Audrey and Scott lived in a house acquired by Thomas's father when he was buying up, block by block, the land between the high saddle where Ben Avon stood and the bottom of the valley, many twists and turns away. The two homes, of Thomas and Belle, and Scott and Audrey, faced each other, divided by the road which brought travellers beneath their gaze. Nobody could pass without submitting to their inspection; it was widely believed that they thought themselves the owners of all places past their point, in a spiritual sense that is, since other settlers, miners, sawmillers and travellers passed regularly through the gap they dominated, the road winding to bring itself there, and twirling away again like a piece of rope, unable to be direct in its approach to the ranges that filled the eye. Placed where they were, the homes noted not only travellers but the winds, breezes, drifts of air, and storms that moved across the ranges. 'Father says we're more exposed here than in the high country,' Claire told Audrey, on a morning when she was helping her paint a room of her house. Audrey was kneeling on a mat to get into a corner with her brush; she had a scarf, hardly more than a rag, to keep paint out of her hair. She wore glasses, which had slipped to the end of her nose. 'And believe me, that is very exposed.' She told Audrey about the fires of two and a half years earlier. 'Where were you that day?'

Audrey had been in Crewe, not dreaming that her life's direction would turn to the hills. 'I never expected I'd marry a Patterson. I'd heard of you people, of course. Everyone had. But when Scott started to pay his attentions to me, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. People would say, "Oh, you're going out with a Patterson!" as if that made me special. And when I got to this valley, it didn't look anything much to

me.' She finished the corner with a few last dabs, then put the brush in turps. She stood up a little stiffly, and moved to the window, open to help the drying. Looking out, she added, 'And now I'm here, all the things I couldn't understand about the Pattersons' - she glanced at Claire, a demanding look - 'are slowly' - she searched for words - 'growing inside me. I'm turning into one of you. Can you feel it Claire?'

'I think so. Can you say some more about what you mean?'

'My father is a carrier,' Audrey said, 'and my mother runs her clothing shop. They'll never be wealthy, but I think they probably make more money in a year than your family does. But they'd never put themselves in the same class as you people. People don't even aim to be like you because they know they can't. You're on some level where nobody else can go. When we're here, you in your house and me in mine, everyone has to pass between us. We don't have to look at them, but they have to pass beneath our eyes. And that isn't all. We are not only the gateway, we're the space beyond. When people come to your house, or ...' she hesitated before she could say it '... mine, they may find that we're not here.' She pointed towards the northern sky. 'We're up on the plains.' She turned to Claire. 'We've got two levels to live our lives on. No, three. There's the ordinary lives that people lead in Crewe, or Portree, and then, if people come along that twisting road, they can find us here, high enough, but it's still only the lower level of our existence. They have to go a long way to find us at our higher level. It's a very special way to live, and it doesn't come easily to me, I have to tell you.' She took the rag from her head and pushed her glasses into position. 'I think what I'm trying to say is that you people have lived in a certain way for so long that you've stopped noticing how remarkable it is, and it's only an outsider like me that can see what it is.'

She started to move towards the kitchen, then she took her assistant by the arm. 'It won't be easy for you to bring a man into this family, Claire. People expect women to adapt to their new families, and it isn't always easy, I can tell you. One who knows! But it'll be harder for a man

because the Patterson men won't want to admit a man who isn't one of them. Choose wisely when you do choose, Claire. Claire?"

1944

When the approach of winter put the Pattersons in touch with news again, the war's fortunes had begun to turn. Soldiers of Empire were on French soil, pushing back the Germans. Russia was crushing them from the other side. In the ocean named Pacific, fighting was breaking the grip of the Japanese, who would soon be lying, entombed, in history's pages: men of victory or death. In guarded secrecy, American scientists were preparing a fearsome device: cities would be burned alive until the god-emperor pleaded for peace.

The events were so enormous, so destructive and fearful, that anyone not directly caught up could only feel minute. Of no significance. Then a strange thing happened. A young man, a stranger, asked Claire to marry him.

It was a mild autumn day. Belle was at Hugh and Gwen's house, helping with their second child. Thomas was on the far side of The Hurdle, moving stock. There was a knock at the door of Ben Avon, an uncommon event. Claire opened the door. An intense young man stood before her, hat in hand, apologising for intruding, but saying he needed help. His car had broken down a short distance from Ben Avon's gate. Could he use their telephone? Claire asked him in. He rang the office of his shire, and was told to leave the car and get a ride back on the mail van, which would pass through later in the day. He asked Claire when the van passed her house. She named a time in mid-afternoon; he had five hours to wait. He said he would wait by his car, but before he went, could she please let him have a glass of water?

Claire got it for him, then made tea. He introduced himself, very seriously, as Robert Mercombe. Claire asked him about the name. He traced it back a few generations; she, he felt, wasn't very interested. Then, when his cup had twice been refilled and emptied, something happened. Claire felt her vision changing. It was as if she saw, for the first time in her young life, what passionate people must see all the time. He was, or could be, her partner. Her parents were growing old. Their sons' marriages had produced four children of the generation to follow. Claire was at the side of the stream, unproductive. She would do more of the housework, and even the running of the properties, accepting her parents' advice, deferring, but carrying the load. Nobody made any space in her life for her to take a partner, though they all said they hoped she'd find someone, naming men who seemed unlikely to her.

She'd never asked herself what sort of man she wanted to marry. Confronted by this Robert Mercombe, she saw that she'd assumed that the man she would marry would approach via the channels of family. And now, alone with a stranger, who was lingering as long as he could, rather than sit by the roadside waiting for the mail van, she saw that if a passion caught you - and a passion was swelling in her, unrecognised, but strong enough to topple her - it might change your life and all the arrangements you thought you'd made securely.

Gasping, she stood, then sat down again.

Mercombe, an honorable young man, a surveyor, unimaginative but thorough, had even less idea of what was happening than Claire. Agitated, dry in the mouth, he said, 'Is something wrong?'

Claire, driven by something inexplicable, said, 'Could anything ever be right?'

He didn't know what to make of that. She couldn't have told him if he'd asked. He said, 'You've been good to me. Perhaps I should wait at my car.' She stared at him. 'In case another car comes along, before the mail van.' He added, 'If it did, I'd get back sooner.'

His idiotic words told her he was as connected to her as she was to him. How had this come about? She got up, went around the table,

and pulled him out of his chair. His cup clattered as it slipped from his fingers onto its saucer. Dregs slopped on the table. ‘Here,’ said Claire, putting her arms around him. ‘Let’s see what you’re really like!'

He thought she was wonderful, beautiful, desirable, but things didn’t happen in this way. This was madness. A disgraceful force had trapped them. They needed to get away from it; that meant outside, on the road, within sight of others who could quash the force with their disapproval. But she had him in her arms, and he wanted to give in. She was rubbing herself against him, she wanted to give herself to him - that was what people said - and he wanted to be the receiver of this gift, except he knew the gift never came without consequences. A child, marriage, two people bound for the rest of their lives, and afterwards, long after they were dead, still bound by what they’d done in their fertile years. He wanted to escape, yet he saw that what was happening was the best thing that could happen to two humans. Bringing his mouth to hers, he said fiercely, ‘We’ll have to marry. I want to marry you. If we go ahead with this, it’s what we’ll have to do. What’s your answer?’

For a moment she was released from what had swept them up. It was a second in which she could distinguish between the force of her passion and the unsuitability of its object. ‘People in my family don’t marry people who are nobody,’ she said. ‘You just walked in off the road.’ Contempt was the new form of the chameleon passion. ‘Hadn’t you better get back where you came from?’ It was enough for Robert Melcombe. He rushed from the room, and out the front door. She followed him, and shut the door with a bang.

Then she lay on her bed, sobbing, asking what it all meant.

An hour later she saw his hat in the kitchen. Deliberately, coldly, getting rid of the evidence, she took it to the road, and dropped it. If he saw it, he could pick it up.

1945

The war ended. The Pattersons prepared for their summer migration. Their mountain home had never seemed more blessed than on the day of their arrival. Belle and Thomas were energised, and Claire rushed in and out, carrying wood, opening windows, letting life back into the house that had endured a winter on its own. The boys were still on the track with their cattle stirring up dust anywhere the earth was bare. ‘Peace at last?’ Claire said to her mother. ‘My God I want this to last.’ Belle chided her for using the Lord’s name improperly. ‘He’s not to be invoked because you’re excited. You must respect Him!’

Claire pulled open the stove’s firebox, pushed in three bits of wood, then slammed the door with a bang. ‘Hell!’ she said loudly. ‘Just like in there! Burning, burning, burning.’ She laughed. ‘Don’t worry, mother. God won’t mind a bit of cheek! Look what he’s been doing to people all over the world!’ Argumentative Belle couldn’t resist. ‘What you’re talking about is what humans, who should know better, have been doing to each other. Just because it happens doesn’t mean it’s what God wants. He’s given us free will, although ...’ she started to weaken ‘... it might be better if He hadn’t.’ Claire laughed in triumph. She pushed the damper in the flue of the chimney. ‘Come on, mother. Let’s go for a ride!’

They rode to Five Mile Plain: Claire’s spot. The old lady looked about suspiciously. ‘It’s just the sort of day you get a cloud lifting out of the valley. We ought to go back.’ Her daughter, she could see, was resistant. ‘You won’t be able to see if the cloud swirls out of there.’ She gripped her reins firmly, ready to stir her horse. Claire looked across the ranges, full of yearning, and a need for decision. There were currents of rebellion in her, energies unreleased. Her life had reached a certain point, and stopped. She was as hobbled as a horse, and by the family

she was proud to belong to. It would take something outside herself, and outside them, to get her started again. She looked sympathetically at her mother, yet with defiance too.

‘You ride back, mother. If you want to. I’ll stay a bit longer.’

‘The moment you see that cloud rising, you head back home. Full gallop, you hear me?’

‘Yes mother.’ She’d heard, and refused to accept. She rode along the plateau, waiting. When she saw the cloud rising, she trotted back to the spot where she’d first met it, glanced at the rocks, the bushes and the undulations of the land to get her bearings, then bowed her head.

It enveloped her, cold, seething, mysterious. Binty, her horse, shivered, then neighed. The sound wouldn’t travel far. Claire waited. The message, when it came, wasn’t like a voice so much as a current of thought that passed through her brain. You have to divide, it said, to be whole. You must let go, in order to hold. You must resist nothing, in order to be free. You will have children, but not yet. You must wait, and let time bring what it will. You can do nothing by yourself. Then the message ended. ‘Come on Binty.’ Claire joggled the beast with her knees. ‘It’s said all it’s going to tell us today.’

When she got back to the house her father was anxiously saddling his horse, and her mother was angry at her for being so foolish. ‘I was never lost,’ Claire told them. ‘I don’t take my bearings from the things you look out for. I know in myself where I am. You don’t have to worry about me being lost. That will never happen. Fear not,’ she said, and her father and mother, who needed those visible landmarks she was talking about, told her she was claiming to be able to do what people couldn’t do. ‘There’s no way to find your way home when you can’t see a thing!’

Claire said, with irrefutable logic, ‘Well, I’m here, aren’t I? I’m not lost without a voice to tell me where I am!’

They sensed something mysterious, unexplained, in the words, yet didn’t know what they ought to ask. Sullenly they commanded her to come inside.

In their various ways the family felt unsettled. The young wives resented their men being away from them, or having to live with the parents' generation in a house without enough rooms. Managing small children is easier in one's own place. The isolation of the mountain home was a risk in itself. Belle's authority was not a thing she'd learned to share. Things had to be done her way. In the unstated but strongly felt ranking of status, Claire was lowliest when she had more strength than any. She rode faster, and sometimes more wildly, than her brothers by way of statement. Scott, Alec and Hugh began planning houses of their own. Walking in the belts of trees, each of them hammered in pegs to show where he would build. Costs were discussed. All this was adjustment to the underlying change: one family had become four, and when Claire had a partner, five. It was strong in Thomas' mind that the Pattersons must not be seen, and said, to have gone separate ways.

Hardest to deal with, however, was a feeling in all of them, and impossible to control, or shape, that life post-war would in some way be different. They'd been afraid of invasion, and now that the fear had been removed there was a gap in their souls. The fear, the underlying sense of being troubled, was something they'd learned to live with and they needed it still. Thomas said to his wife one night, as they lay in bed, 'Live with danger, and it becomes a part of you. Out riding, I've got an eye on the horizon, looking for smoke. I still do that. I'll do it on the last day of my life. But the Japs? I still expect to hear they're coming. I was ready to fight for this place, and they never came. That's good, but my readiness won't go away. You know what I mean?'

Claire listened, in the scraps of news that came from Portree, for clues to what had happened to the men who'd gone to war. Chris Leveck (the Bishop) bought himself a bush block not far from the town, and started to clear. Doggy and Ron Watts were back, working at the mill. Willy, the policeman's son, had disappeared. Bob Dahlitz had died in a Japanese camp. Norm was working in Crewe, but hadn't contacted the Pattersons; and Jacko was a mystery. Nobody knew anything about

him. ‘He’ll turn up one day, bright as a button,’ people said. ‘He’s too smart to get into something he can’t get out of.’ That was their faith in him, or their wish. Claire felt that a message would reach them one day, full of optimism, and an underlying need, if only to be taken seriously, to have his capacity for love and sorrow seen and understood.

She wrote to the friends she’d had at school, saddened by the knowledge that the innocent optimism they’d shared when their uniforms were only a few weeks behind them was now a stage they’d gone beyond. Emma, whose parents had lived in the inner city, had married an Albert Ironsides and moved to a developing suburb. And Nancy had married too. Her husband’s name was Andrew, and her surname now was Strong. Belle Patterson snorted when she heard these husbands’ names. ‘They sound like a couple of battleships!’ She beamed at the foolishness of people carrying such names. Claire wrote to Marjorie, Jennifer’s sister, but no answer came. She must have moved. Claire felt like writing to Jennifer – Jennifer Mitchell, now – but didn’t know what to say. The prewar world was behind them, their connection had somehow slipped away. Claire felt there would be a time when those connections would reappear, but didn’t know when or how it could be made to happen. She had the old sights around her every day, but their meaning had either been lost, or had changed, and the only way to get in contact with them was to change as well. The cloud had told her that, but how was it to be done?

1946

As they unpacked at Cairngorm, and lit a fire in the stove, Claire saw how her parents had slowed. Belle sat down earlier than had been her habit, and said to her daughter, ‘The first time I came up here, I was scared, and too proud to show it.’ They could hear Thomas in the next

room. ‘Your father had told me all about it, but what he couldn’t tell me was how isolated I’d feel. I’d been part of a big family, and suddenly I was alone. I’d brought everything your father told me I’d need, but there were women’s things that he didn’t know about. It seemed like months before I could get to the store at Portree.’ She smiled distantly, her mind somewhere back in the years. Ever so gently, Claire saw, responsibility was being handed on. The right of decision-making would stay with her parents, but executive responsibility would be hers. They would allow her to carry them when they needed it, expecting that she would be subtle enough to disguise their dependence. They depended on her for that!

When tea had been made, Belle called, ‘Thomas! Tea-oh!’ and when he entered the room, Belle pulled out the chair beside her, and said, ‘Tell Claire what you said when you met my mother the first time.’ He needed encouragement. She put a hand on his knee. ‘Don’t pretend you’ve forgotten, or I’ll have to remember for you.’

Thomas turned his head to his wife, and, watching them, Claire saw what it meant to be married; how much came to be shared, and how easily, back at the start, it might have gone some other way. ‘It was in the days when we lived up here all year,’ Thomas said to his daughter. ‘We didn’t have Ben Avon at that stage. I was a shy bush creature, I suppose. Not into the gallantries of pleasing women.’ Belle’s face was impassive: she was waiting for her daughter’s response. ‘Come to think of it, I didn’t know very many, outside my own family. Anyhow, I rode down to Portree with the pack horse, and my father had given me a an envelope to give to your mother’s father. Your uncle Bill. Well, he wasn’t at home, not that I expected him to be there, I thought he’d be out on the road, and your mother’s mother came to the door. They hadn’t been living in the town all that long, and I didn’t know they had a daughter. And while I’m standing at the front door, I see Belle, your mother, carrying a basket of cauliflowers ...’

Belle put in, ‘Beans, you silly man, you never remember that part properly!’

‘Well, beans if you want it that way, but I still think you’re wrong.’ His wife’s mouth showed how certain she was that she was right, and that it mattered, even if only as a register of their eternal conflict of wills, and compromise. ‘All right, beans. What’s the difference, after all these years. And I was rather taken by your mother,’ Thomas said to his daughter, ‘and I blurted out, “Gee, I wouldn’t mind a bit of what she’s carrying there!”, and Belle’s mother said, “That’s my daughter, and what she’s carrying was grown in my garden. Why don’t you go and help yourself?”’ He looked awkward; Belle was beaming, full of pride and the pleasure of an important memory. ‘And I,’ Thomas said, ‘took a step in the wrong direction ...’

‘The right direction,’ said his wife.

‘In the direction of the road, and Belle’s mother corrected me. “The garden’s this way, Mister Patterson,” she said. “Shall I show you where it is?” So I ...’

‘You were feeling pretty foolish,’ his wife said, ‘but you had no choice but to go where the beans were growing, and pick a nice parcel for your mother, all under the eye of my mother, who’d seen what direction you had the idea of going in. You’d given yourself away!’

‘Well, your dad gave you to me, and that was about the best thing that ever happened.’ He was faithful to what he’d done with his life, but his wife was in argumentative mode. ‘About? What do you mean about? What’s ever been more important to you, tell me that!’

‘We’ll be setting a bad example if we quarrel,’ Thomas said. ‘We want Claire to find someone, to take the family on a bit further.’ Claire found it touching, and also overpowering; they felt they had so much to hand on, and that she wasn’t quite ready for it. She was ready for the work of looking after them, of being the feeling heart of a practical family, the recipient of memories and even, perhaps, the teller of tales, but she wouldn’t, in their eyes, be strong enough to do it all until she had a man. Her father’s simple tale was a piece of advice, she saw. Follow your impulse and don’t let anything get in the way. That was all very well, but what if the impulse hadn’t registered yet, except in the foolish-

ness she'd felt with the surveyor who'd come to Ben Avon, and that was something she needed to keep suppressed. Where would her answer come from, and when?

1948

Belle said, 'Sometimes we had no shoes for our children.' Looking dour, she was pleased with herself. 'They were hard times, but we came through.' Her pride was stronger as she became more fallible. 'Your father ...' Claire felt uncomfortable when she heard her mother praise the man she'd spent her life opposing: their two wills had locked them together even more powerfully than the desires of their bodies. 'Your father would be up before the sun, in the smithy, working with a lantern, or out on the ranges, riding round the cattle.' The daughter of this paragon said, 'I don't think I can ever remember being without shoes, except of course when I wanted to be.' Sunlit summers ran between them. 'No,' her mother said, 'things were better by the time you came along. But your brothers ... sometimes I'd feel their feet when I was tucking them into bed, and really, the soles were as tough as leather. I used to say they were like blackfellers. They never knew what I meant.'

'What did you mean, actually?'

Her mother was surprised; surely it was obvious?

'What did I mean? Well, the blackfellers never had any shoes, they developed hard skin on their feet. You imagine yourself walking in rocky places without any shoes on ...'

Claire said, 'The boys were tough little characters, yes. But we had a man come to our school, once, to give us a talk, and he told us that the way to study the aboriginal people was not to try and work out their boundaries, because, he said, they were always fluid. The thing to do, he said, was to track the movement of their messages. He said knowledge

moved around the country on the same lines as the goods they traded, and he said that when they talked about spirits and devils, what they really meant was forces they could feel in the land. Some places were good places to be, and others were places to avoid. It was very interesting. I'd like to have talked to him afterwards, but he had to go. Now I've even forgotten his name. But I remember what he said because it's partly the way I feel about the places we own.'

Belle felt the moment, and the meanings that could be exercised in it, had been taken from her by her daughter. 'I've no memory of ever seeing any black people up here,' she said. 'I don't know why you're talking about them.' She moved a kettle by way of putting a stop to the foolishness. But Claire was not to be restrained.

'The land outlasts us. People die, but the mountains and rivers go on. Mountains and rivers don't have knowledge, but they must surely have experience. It must be ingrained by the centuries that they exist for. Don't you think? There must be ways of tapping into that experience, and extending the powers of our minds?'

Belle considered this surprising child: her fifth, and the only girl. 'All I know about the land is that it makes you work hard if you want to survive. It never gives you something for nothing!' She felt vindicated, and stood up, having delivered the last word. Outside, though, and an hour later, Claire said to herself, 'Mother's knowledge is only the knowledge of those who came first. I'm later in the chain, so I have to find things that mother's generation locked out to make themselves secure.' She looked around. Light filled the trees, glistening on their leaves. A tower of cloud told those on earth that an updraft was having its way with water vapour. The red and blue parrots that Claire adored swept between the trees in surges. Water exuded from the earth, creeping downwards into valleys filled with ferns and trees that liked the depths. Undulating lines, with occasional prominences, marked where earth ended and sky began. I am very happy, Claire told herself, knowing what I know, but I'm incomplete. There are layers of me, forces in me, that haven't been sighted yet, except when I've felt foolish about

myself. Her friends, and indeed her brothers, were married now, and had brought children into the world, while she was barren? Unfulfilled? Trapped?

She kicked a stone, and laughed. She'd never been a barefoot child. She wasn't trapped. None of those words fitted. Yet she still had far to go. She thought of the young men who'd been caught up in the war. The violence of European countries made waves for them to be caught on; caught because they wanted to be caught, even if it meant an early death. No waves of history, or national powers, she felt, were ever going to sweep her up, though she couldn't live unaffected by them. Some other force had to come her way before the stillness, the isolation that imprisoned her, became a current moving her to a fate, a future, which she could inscribe for herself until she, in experiencing it, discovered that it had always been set down for her.

1949

Alec's house had been built, and occupied. On New Year's Eve the family gathered in it, talking quietly, until, at midnight, they crossed to the old house for supper. Then the three boys, their wives and little ones, returned to Alec's house. Claire stayed with her parents, in the bed that had always been hers. The children would have their heads on their pillows, now, in the new house a hundred yards through the bush. What dreams would visit them, what fears, anxieties and hopes? She reached for the pillow beside her pillow, with no head to press it. Chained to a tradition, she had no choice but to explore it

In the morning, she rode with her father. New Year brought nothing that was new, except time: time and opportunity. And that was where she was defeated, because the only opportunity was marriage. Her father commented, 'You see more than the boys do. You see at least as much

as I do, and I've got forty years more experience. Your mother doesn't see a quarter of what you see, riding around.' He thought. 'Weather patterns, growth of grass, shelter for the cattle, you know it all. You read the country like a book. It's rare. Lots of men never learn it. Norm and Jacko, for instance. They were the best of the men I had up here, but you could get'em lost if you wanted to. And they had no imagination when it came to the cattle. They couldn't tell what the animals were going to do, because they couldn't relate to what the animals were feeling. We lose control of our lives if we don't control our imaginations, but then again, if we don't use our imaginations, we don't know where we are. You know?' He wondered what his daughter would say.

She surprised him. 'People used to say the earth was flat. Up here, it's obvious that it isn't, but eventually our race realised the earth was round. That was a step forward, I suppose, but not a very big one. What's more important than what shape the earth is, is the answer to a question I've been carrying in my head for quite a while.'

Thomas Patterson felt he was going to be privileged by whatever his daughter said.

'And here it is. It's simple enough. What is the shape of a life? Or, if a life doesn't have a shape, how can you say what it's like? How well it's going? What it needs to fix it? And, last question, what shape should a life take, and if your life isn't in that shape, what can you do about it? I said that was the last question, but lots of others are crowding into my mind, so I'll stop there. It's enough to go on with, don't you think?'

Thomas Patterson moved forward easily, on his horse Carnival, a black beside Binty's grey. Men can speak more easily with women than with other men, he saw, because the rivalry of males causes suppression greater than men's fear of women, something well behind him now. The soft grass tussocks were caressed by a quiet movement of air. 'Hard to believe,' he said, 'that the big fires came through here.' She nodded, remembering, then she said, 'What's your answer, father?'

If he was to retain the respect of his daughter he had, he felt, to find an answer worth her thinking about. He dug deeply, preparing, while

their horses, Carnival and Binty, carried them to the edge of the plain, the vantage point, where they would peer down, looking for stray beasts. ‘I suppose I’ve got two answers,’ he said, ‘and I’m not sure how well they go together, but here’s what I think, if you want to hear.’

‘Tell me.’

‘The first answer, for me, would be about handing on, and pride. The pride comes from making something good, whether it’s a cattle station, a house, your family life, wealth, knowledge, or a set of values. And the next part, following that, is all about making sure that the things you’ve done best don’t die out with you, but are handed on. You can’t fully respect someone whose children are failures, because if they are then the parents have failed too, somewhere along the line.’

‘And the other answer?’

The line of mountains, blue against the pale sky, dipped and swung, like music, singing the shapes and contrasts of the earth.

‘The other answer, to me, is how often you can have a moment - they don’t come all that often - when you think you can see everything, and everything’s connected. Moments when you feel your vision’s complete. You can’t make them come, those moments, but you can know how precious they are when they arrive.’

She wanted to tell him about the statements of the cloud that came out of the valley on the other side of the plains, but felt the knowledge was ... not that it was too precious, but that it wasn’t hers to share.

1950

On New Year’s eve they gathered for the second time at Hilda and Alec’s house - the ageing Thomas and Belle, their four living children, and the three wives: Audrey, Hilda, Gwen. Six grand children, two to each of the boys. It was warm enough not to have a fire, but Thomas insisted

because it would give him something to attend to. To poke, put wood on, stir. There would be a kettle to be topped up, emptied to make tea. Alec did what his father wanted. They talked about the houses the other boys were about to build, within calling distance of the first two, but separated by belts of trees. The builders were expected to arrive in two days time, but Alec was sceptical. 'I'll believe it when I see them.' When the clock said it was midnight they got up and sang. 'Everybody makes a wish!' Belle called to her family.

The young mothers explained to their children what this meant, and how they were not allowed to say their wish aloud, or it wouldn't be granted. 'A pretty good principle, if you think about it,' Thomas said. 'Say nothing to anybody, and you've got a chance of getting what you want. Tell others, and someone'll do you in, or grab it before you do!' He laughed sourly; his wife responded. 'Nobody ever said the Pattersons let a chance go begging!' It occurred to the three young wives that she'd gone down the same road they were travelling, and might have much to tell, if she could be got to open up instead of putting biblical precepts in front of them. Then a silence fell on the room while each thought of a wish. Those who were quick watched the others trying to decide, wishing they could read their minds. Claire felt suddenly stiff and cold. She wanted a change. She was sick of the way she was. The cloud had told her she'd have children, but nobody had come to have them with her, she felt her responsibilities to her parents and their cattle-raising were unrewarding, always putting her where she had to do something without letting her feel the impulse of wanting to do it. She wanted to be wanted. She wanted, she saw, even to want. She wanted to stop being dried out. She wanted to be uplifted by her feelings, not borne down by things she had to carry. She closed her eyes. The grandchildren - her nieces and nephews - had made their secret requests of a presumably receptive heaven, and were chattering again. Their mothers noticed first, then her brothers, and finally her parents, that she was engrossed. At length she opened her eyes. 'That was a pretty big ask, I reckon!' her brother Scott said, grinning at his sister's expense. Hilda said to him, bending down,

as she spoke, to take something held up by a child, ‘She mightn’t have been asking for some thing, she might have been asking for changes in people. Maybe she thinks some people should be different, perhaps? But we’re not allowed to ask, remember?’ Claire was grateful for the support, though it hadn’t achieved its mark: she had wished for her life to end if it didn’t change in the coming year.

When they woke in the morning, cloud had settled on the two houses, and the sites, pegged out and partly cleared, where the next two homes would stand. By mid-morning the cloud had lifted, but there was no sign of the builders. ‘Sleeping off their celebrations,’ Alec said to his wife, who told him, in a moment when the children were outside, that she was concerned about his sister. He gave her a penetrating glance. ‘Tell me what you know.’

Hilda said, ‘I don’t know anything, but there’s something coming.’

‘Coming? What do you mean?’

‘She’s clinging on to what she’s got, and she’s rejecting it at the same time.’

The Pattersons didn’t talk like this. ‘She’s not rejecting anything that I can see.’

Hilda said, ‘It’s what we can’t see that I’m bothered about.’

‘Get her over with you today. Tell her you need some help with the children. Talk to her while she’s here.’ He felt his job was done, but, later in the morning, helping his brothers grub out stumps that stood in the way of the houses waiting to be built, he felt troubled, and, after a time, convinced that his wife was right. Claire hadn’t done any of her spontaneous things - dashing to the door if she thought someone might be approaching; singing snatches of oratorio; she hadn’t said, ‘Bless you for that’, or ‘The only way I’d ever let that happen ...’ or ‘It’s a pure, radiant mystery to me’. A certain guilt half-presented itself. Here he was, helping his brothers build, and it had never occurred to him that his sister might be wanting something; it had taken Hilda to sense it. Why was it women’s business to feel? If you couldn’t sense things, then

you were limited to what you saw, but then again, if you didn't have it in your mind to look for something, the chances were that it would avoid your eye. We live, he decided, inside our habits, and the worst of them, the most binding, and restricting, are the habits we keep hidden from ourselves. He got a crowbar under the stump he was working on, and levered hard. Half of it came away, while the remainder sat defiantly in the hole he'd dug, for all the world like a broken tooth. 'Bastard!' Alec Patterson shouted, causing his brothers to look at him.

'You okay Alec?'

He knew, even before he spoke, that words would mask his feelings. 'Fine. It's this.' He was looking at the stump he'd half dislodged. 'I had it, but it broke.' His brother Hugh said cautiously, 'If that was the biggest problem we had, we'd be sitting pretty.' He added, making sure the conversation touched only on things outside themselves, 'If those builders'd turn up we could get things moving.' The men resumed their work, trapped in whatever kept them silent.

A week later the builders arrived, two men in the cabin, one sitting on the tray. 'Sorry for the delay, Mr Patterson,' said the man whose name was on the door of his truck - T. Pugsley, building contractor, Crewe - 'but we had a job to finish and there was a hold-up with materials. Holiday season, people forget some of us have jobs to get on with.' Disarmed to some extent by Pugsley putting himself among the workers, not the delay-makers, Thomas gestured towards some trees. 'Head over there. I'll show you where we're building, and where you can camp.' He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke; the man on the back must have lit up as they arrived on his land.

Pugsley and the man beside him were shown a cleared patch beyond Alec's house, and then another site, further around a timbered slope. 'You'd best camp near the first place, I think. That way, you can get yourselves water from Alec's tank.' Pugsley drove his truck to the spot he'd been given. Thomas moved to help them unload. He saw the man on the back stub his cigarette on the edge of the truck's tray before he

flicked it away: Thomas was going to comment on this care when he saw, for the first time, this third man's face. It was Jacko, very much a man now, harder, sterner, face still unlined but set with determination, tenacity, that hadn't been there in earlier years. 'Howareya Tom?' this new Jacko said. 'Been a while, eh?'

Thomas Patterson stared at him. There was something wrong with this arrival, and the way it had been made. 'Been a long time. Turned yourself into a builder?'

'More opportunities than I used to get.' He paused, insultingly, Thomas felt, before adding, 'Yeah.'

'Got yourself a tent?'

'My word.'

'Anywhere around here,' Thomas said, and watched them unload, tossing their tents where they were going to erect them. Jacko, he saw, put his tent at the opposite end of the site from Pugsley and his front seat companion. He commented on this. Jacko said, 'I like space to myself. I got used to it when I was up here, all those years ago.' Thomas wondered what the man's experiences of war had been, and how they'd changed him. He was certainly different, and the new Jacko filled him with dislike. At lunchtime Belle and Claire saw that something was troubling him, and waited for him to speak. Eating a slice of cake with his tea at the end of the meal, he announced, 'Bit of a surprise this morning.' The women waited, watching. 'Pugsley's brought a fellow to work with him that we already know.' Then he let out the word, and what it represented, that was troubling him.

'Jacko. Came up sitting on the back of the truck, smoking, didn't speak to me, didn't show his face, until I went to help them unload. He's different. Not the fellow we used to know.' They felt he had a little more to say. 'Might be best to ignore him. Treat him like a stranger until he changes his tune. That might be the way to sort him out.' They felt the shutters of his mind coming down, and his preparedness for trouble, expressed in a silence that failed to conceal his anger and distrust.

Claire was first to know why he'd come because she felt a stirring of interest. Inexperienced as she was, she knew that interest was a step on the path to desire, and beyond that lay a fulfilment which was all around her in nieces and nephews, brought into the world by acts kept away from sight, or even discussion. The builders' meals were prepared by Hilda, with Gwen or Audrey helping, and eaten in the kitchen at Alec's house. There was no need, beyond curiosity, for Claire to go near, but she found herself waking in the nights, and straining to catch any sound of movement: she felt there was someone not far away, watching, only to realise, in the clear light of morning, that she didn't know whether she had apprehended someone lurking, or merely feared that he was there. As the days - nights - went by, she could not conceal from herself that an inner part of her did not fear the silent man's approach, but wished it. Her room had an outside door. She could, if she wished, slip into the night to meet the figure she feared, and wished, was there. If she went to him, could she have passion by night and normalcy for the day? Her reading told her that people had contrived to do this. If she did, would it mean leaving her family? She would certainly be letting it down, but how could she leave it without disappointing them? Her brothers, she saw, had added women to the family, turning themselves into husbands - sexual men - by the law of custom and common practice. Why could she not do the same? Did someone have to give her away?

If she could be given, could she not be taken?

If she could be given, could she not make the gift herself, by a bold, if secret decision?

What would be the price to pay if she did?

What would be the meaning of the action, when the time came, years hence, to judge whether she'd done well or unwisely?

She felt ignorant, tempted, but to what she wasn't sure, and her mother noticed. 'You've been strange these last few days. Something's going through your mind you don't want anyone to know about.'

Claire felt she was diverting her mother when she said, 'I've been thinking, and wondering. About how people form families. How long

was it between the time you first met father and the time you decided to be married? I don't think you've ever told us that.' Belle saw at once where the trouble lay, and told her husband as they lay in bed that might.

'The very thing I feared.'

Belle said, 'Tell Pugsley to leave him in Portree next time they go down, and never bring him back.'

'He'd say he couldn't sack a man without giving him a reason, and if I told him our reason, Pugsley'd laugh. I think he'd like to cause trouble, so he could have the pleasure of looking on and enjoying.'

Belle was filled with contempt. 'Enjoyment!'

'Some people don't mind watching others brought low.'

They lay in their bed, feeling surrounded by a night that troubled them, the same night that Claire was watching from her window, waiting for a movement. Then she heard the sound of feet; reaching for the handle of her door, ready to face whatever was offered, she realised that the sound was made by shuffling slippers, and she wriggled quickly into bed. The door creaked, opening a little.

'It's your mother, Claire. I woke up wanting to know if you were all right.'

'I'm fine mother. There's nothing for you to worry about.' Though she tried to make her voice sound drowsy, she gave herself away. 'All right my dear, just needed to be sure. I'll let you go back to sleep.' Belle shuffled along the house. Claire lay in the dark, defiant, troubled. She was being watched. Her parents were aware. It was going to take a skilful deception to get past without them knowing, or it could be done in an act of boldness and defiance from which she could never return.

Belle said to Thomas, beside him in the dark. 'She was wide awake. I'll wager every penny that's been minted that she'd been looking out the window, thinking of him.'

Thomas sighed. The passions of women could be used, but never understood. 'I'd do anything for her. But I also feel betrayed. I want to send her away somewhere, where there's no temptation.'

‘Temptation’s inside us. It can’t be walked away from.’

‘What do you want us to do?’

‘Wait a while. See how things develop.’

‘We’ve got to stop things developing.’

Belle said, ‘Once there’s a force loose inside people, you can’t stop it. You have to find the moment when it can be diverted, and send it down another channel. You have to be watching like a hawk, and praying you won’t miss the only chance you’re going to get.’

‘You think we’ll only get one chance?’

‘If we’re lucky. If not, it’s too dark to contemplate.’

Jacko had to wait. He could feel her fear, and temptation, in the air. She was never there when the builders ate. She never watched them working. He decided that to satisfy her curiosity she must visit one of the houses they were building when the three of them were at the other. They moved between sites according to what had to be done and what materials were available. When Pugsley and his mate went south for supplies, Jacko wanted to stop behind, but went, rather than make his waiting game noticeable. Sometimes he left something - a hammer, a bag of nails - at one site when they switched to the other, to give him a reason to go back, in case she might be there. But she kept away. He sensed that she knew what his moves would be, and was keeping clear. It was frustrating, but it meant his game was being played.

A day came when he was retrieving a saw from the house they weren’t working on - his excuse for going back - when he saw her near the fence at one side of Alec’s: she was coming! He’d been right. He turned and bent, so she couldn’t see his face, but it failed. When he looked again, she was inside the fence, going to Alec’s house. She’d be with Hilda, talking as if nothing had happened.

But Hilda noticed her agitation. ‘Have you had a fight with your mother?’

‘Nothing like that.’ The agitation was present in her denial.

'What is it? Claire? You're so tense. You're strung-up like a wire that's been strained.' Hilda felt she should know, and needed to know, if she was to help.

Claire had to say something, and said too much. 'I think I need to get away. For a while. Take a break of some sort. Maybe go down to the city and lose myself for a time.'

'Lose yourself? I wonder what you mean?' Hilda, who had cried on Claire's shoulder when she was troubled, before the arrival of her children had left her no choice but to change, sensed a crisis in Claire's capacity to continue as she'd been. Claire Patterson was longing for a transformation that couldn't happen among her family, her people, in one of her special places. Hilda was about to say that perhaps, indeed, she should give herself a break, a holiday away, when Claire went further. 'He's trying to put himself right away from me, and make me come to him. He's trying to tantalise me, and I'm being tantalised.' Then she realised what she'd said. 'Don't you dare repeat that to anybody! Don't pass it on. This is my problem, it's for me to solve!' She saw that Hilda was undecided. She searched in her mind, and remembered. 'You had your doubts. You wished you weren't married. I kept that secret for you. You have to do the same for me! Hilda!' Her voice had a shriek in it, though it was secretively quiet. 'Promise? Promise me?'

Hilda remembered the confession she'd made. She owed Claire what she was being asked for, but was it wise to give it? 'Are you sure it's wise to bottle this up? Tell your father to order them off the place. Someone else'll finish the houses.' She took Claire by the hand. 'Have you had the feeling that you're going to crack? You say you're feeling pressure? Can you stand it? Or is it getting too much?'

Claire went rigid. 'I'm in control of myself. I think. But the conflict, you see, is that a part of me doesn't want control. Part of me wants to run wild, to embrace - sorry, but this is the word - abandon.' Her eyes blazed, switching to every point of Hilda's face. 'I can't stay as I am forever, Hilda. You know that. We can't. It's against our nature. We have to go through our change. You've done it, even though you weren't

happy when it was coming over you, but you've been through it, and you're out the other side. You're better, aren't you? You wouldn't deny me that?"

Hilda felt the power of Claire's perception, and the danger. "You think you can find a way out of this?"

"I'll find a way out of it, because nobody can live in it for very long, and I'm in it, whether I want to be or not. And that's the thing. In a strange way I do want to be in this situation. I've been avoiding it for too long. Whatever happens, Hilda, I'm not going to be wasted."

When Claire had gone back to the old house, Hilda realised that no name had been mentioned, and none was needed. Putting her mind around the situation, it was clear whose presence was undermining. She decided to watch him, and see if she could think of a move to make before Claire made a foolish one of her own.

Two nights later, Claire woke. She felt she'd been woken, not by the turmoil within her, but by a sound outside. She listened. She heard a cracking sound, and sat up. It could have been a horse treading on fallen wood, but she felt not. Shortly after, she heard the sound again. She felt it was being made to attract her attention. It was the man who desired her, and whom - there was no disguising it with lies - she desired. Her body was ready. More important, the storm of mind was swirling. He was calling. He was telling her that night was the time to come to him; that he'd be waiting. She listened. There were no more sounds. Later, catching the creaking of a branch, a sound so different from the ones she'd heard, she knew he'd been there, signalling, reaching into her mind with nothing more than the breaking of a stick. She could hardly be more exposed. Then she heard her mother's voice. "There was something moving around. I could hear it." And her father's. "I can't see anything Belle. I think you imagined it." Her mother denied it. Their voices went inside, at their end of the house. Claire wanted to open her door, the pathway to the abandon she desired, but forced herself to stay in the bed which was large enough for a lover, if he could be brought to

where she was. Yearning ran through her, the wish to hold and be held, to grip the force she longed to experience. Something in her self-control slipped and she knew she was preparing to leave behind the ties of her family, its pioneering story, and the delicate threads of love and association entailed. She would do it in the morning. She would wait till the morning's dishes had been washed and put away. She would saddle Buff, replacement for the ageing Binty, and she would ride past the men at work. She'd hardly look at him. She'd say 'Ready?' as imperiously as her condition allowed, and if he didn't follow there and then, she'd ride out of the mountains alone!

She sobbed. She was powerful in her fantasy, but weak, unresisting in her yearnings. She'd been too well studied by the man who desired her. He knew her through and through. He'd called, with his crackling sticks, and she was obedient. He'd given her notice of what she had to do. Next time he called, she was to open the door and become part of the night with him. Desire would flood between them, and when morning came, everything would be changed by what had happened ...

... in the night. Her desires belonged to it, because they swam in the waters of imagination, which could be tamed by the prosaic demands of day, but could swirl unchecked in the starlit dark. Tomorrow night, she promised. Call, and I will come.

She had breakfast - one last time, in her overheated mind - with her parents. She washed up, put things away. She glanced into her room, not exactly saying goodbye to it so much as to the person who'd slept there, and she saddled Buff. Nearing the fence at Alec's house, she veered left; she wasn't ready yet to look on the man she was going to join. That belonged to the night. She wanted to see the plains in case she never saw them again. She rode Buff along the track to the dividing range, and the long incline to the inland where she'd never been: where her soul hadn't learned to belong.

She rode, quietly enough, letting Buff walk when he wanted to, through belts of trees, over the snowgrass plains. Cattle followed her

at one point, hoping for some dispensation that she didn't offer. She looked fondly on them, saddened a little when they stopped. Her experienced eyes read the birds' movements, and the drift of clouds. The dark valleys and the linear, curving cut-off between earth and sky moved her as never before. Am I, she asked herself, so full of this demanding force that I'd give all I love, up here, to satisfy its demands? She knew her answer was foolish, and she knew it was certain. She was going to do what had to be done.

She rode until she reached the edge of the plains. The track became no more than the tops of ridges taking her to the Brass Monkey and Mount Solitude. For no more reason than that the day was too long for her to be at home, and to be out of her routine offered as much heart-ease as she was likely to get, she moved on slowly, taking every chance to stare into the valleys, which grew steeper as she moved north. 'Don't worry, Buff,' she said, 'I know what I'm doing.' It occurred to her that she might be riding him for the last time, and this cut into her: the loyalty of animals was even more precious, when you were troubled, than humans' conditional love.

Love. She wondered if she'd ever find it. She had no illusion that what she wanted to do with the man who'd broken sticks to claim her had much to do with love, though some people had the good fortune to connect the two. No, there would be no love in it, urgent as it would be.

She was coming to a bare saddle on the range when she saw smoke, and then a man, squatting near the fire, with a billy, and his horse and pack horse tethered to a tree. Hearing her, he stood up, looking, from beneath the brim of his hat, to see who was approaching.

She rode close to him and dismounted. He nodded gravely. 'Good morning.' She clutched her reins, nodded, but said nothing. 'I'm Clive Ransome,' he said. 'From Weldon, or pretty close to it. On my way to Crewe. I'm hoping to buy some stock. I thought I'd come the direct way. Never done it before. It's quite a journey.' He stopped, feeling he'd said enough to put this person at ease. She remained tense, he saw. 'I'm making tea. You're welcome to join me, if you'd care to.' If he'd been a

stockman, he'd have said, 'Ifya like!' She nodded, meaning she would. He looked at her horse, her gear. 'I think you must be a Patterson?' She nodded again, and then something in her broke.

'Claire.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you. Everyone in the north-east's heard of your family. I believe I've heard your name mentioned, once or twice.'

She said, 'I've got a friend in Arawilla.'

He said, because names and networks were how people placed themselves, 'Arawilla. Who's that?'

'Nancy Strong. She used to be Nancy Wilde.' He laughed. 'She used to be wild, and when she married, she became strong! That's what's supposed to happen, but I haven't been through that sea-change yet. My turn'll come, I suppose.' He turned his attention to the billy. She saw there was only one cup on the ground. 'You have your tea first, Mr Ransome. I'll go after you.' He grinned. 'Rules are made to be obeyed. Ladies first.' He poured, she took the cup because he held it out. She kept her eyes down as she sipped.

'Good?'

She nodded again.

'You can't beat the open air for drinking. Just about anything.' She said, 'You seem at home for someone who's never been here before.'

'I feel as if I have. I've always wanted to come through here, and now I've run into you. I've got someone to stop me getting lost.' He was obviously a good bushman, he was only being gallant. But she did know her way, and he was asking her to lead. She said, and it was the first time her voice had sounded natural for days, 'I'll take you home. You can have something to eat at our place, then we'll tell you how to go on. It's easy enough, but there are landmarks you have to watch for.'

'I'll accept that very willingly,' he said.

Belle was amazed when her daughter returned with a stranger. At the sight of two people moving easily towards her, chatting in the indolent way of experienced riders, she felt pride surging. What she saw, a fine

young woman and a man equally comfortable on horseback, was what she'd always wanted. Then, when the inferior, provocative tempter on the building site entered her thoughts, she knew that the moment she'd identified to her husband was with them. She had to be adroit without letting her intentions be obvious.

She stepped through the gate to meet them.

She asked them to come inside.

She asked Mr Ransome about his family, and where their properties were.

'I'm the only one on the land. The others are auctioneers. And I've got two sisters, but they're in the city. Janet's teaching, and Marion's in charge of the knitwear department at Myers.' His regard for them was in his voice. 'And how often do you get to see each other?' Belle was feeling her way.

'We try to get together at Christmas. Once a year's as much as we can manage, unfortunately.'

'Families should stick together as strongly as they can. That's my belief. We don't go through the trouble and effort of raising children just to see it all fall apart.' Claire felt the remark was in some way a frame that allowed her to be inspected. She remembered the picture she'd brought home from school, years before. She hadn't seen it in ages. It would be in one of Belle's drawers, stored until her mother thought it right to display. If her plan for that evening eventuated, and the facts of her connection became known, the portrait would be brought out to release the grief and shame of her mother. She thought of the inward-looking, sweetly confident schoolgirl whose likeness, mounted on card, had come home with her when her days in the city with the other girls, being shaped in their values and virtues, had ended. She said, to her mother's surprise, and cutting across their guest from the north: 'Mother, what became of that photo that I brought home from school? You know the one. I'm in uniform. I haven't seen it for years.'

'You mightn't have seen it my dear, but I've been taking good care of it.' Belle left the kitchen and returned with the picture. It was handed to

Claire, who felt in some way admonished by the sure-minded girl looking at her. She handed it to Clive Ransome. ‘This is me in 1938. They took pictures of all the girls who were leaving that year.’

He looked at her, looked at the photo for a long time, then studied her face. ‘You haven’t lost a thing,’ he said. ‘You’ve gained.’ Something in her twitched, and tears formed in the corners of her eyes. ‘Thank you.’ The words were little more than sobs. Belle said, ‘There, I’m glad we’ve brought that out. We’ll let it sit up here for a while,’ and she put it on top of the dresser, looking down in its considered, introspective way. From time to time, during the preparation of their meal, each of them glanced at it, smiling at the others’ recognition of the object of their thoughts. Thomas saw it at once when he entered the kitchen. ‘You’ve had that put away for years, Belle. What caused you to bring it out today?’ Belle said, ‘Claire asked where it was, but I think really it’s there because we’ve got Mr Ransome with us. He’s going down to Crewe to buy some stock.’ She wanted to get Thomas aside to whisper in his ear, but no such opportunity could be created, so she had to keep going. Her voice full of imperious confidence, she issued a command which he was not to reject: ‘I was going to say to Mr Ransome, when you came in, that if he buys some animals in Crewe, he’s to bring them back through here, and he’ll be free, of course, to use our yards and hut at Mount Macalister. You’ll have to ride down as far as that with Mr Ransome, Claire, and show him how to find them. There’s a key to the hut, Mr Ransome. Claire will show you where we keep it.’ Their visitor was delighted, sensing, as he did, that few, if any, received such an offer. ‘That’s extremely good of you,’ he said, then realised that in his excitement he’d spoken before Thomas Patterson, who was, after all, the ruler of this place. He looked at the older man. Thomas was astute enough to catch what his wife was up to. ‘An excellent idea. Yes, of course. If you’re bringing stock back this way, use the yards and hut. Claire will show you where everything is. And we’ll be pleased to give you a hand getting them through the ranges beyond the plains. There’s some dif-

ficult country, as you'd have found this morning.' He beamed. The moment had been seized: what would happen next?

Claire and Clive Ransome had no sooner ridden away than Belle said to her husband, 'I was over with Hilda this morning, and I couldn't hear any noises. What's happened to our builders?' Thomas told her that they'd finished the two frames, but the roofing iron hadn't arrived. 'They've stopped. Just doing a few odd jobs.' He was unhappy, but apparently accepting. 'Is that so?' his wife said. 'In that case, I've got a letter to write!' With no further explanation, she went inside.

Minutes later, she was outside again. Her husband was in the smithy. 'I want you with me, Thomas. One of Mr Pugsley's men will have to post this for me.' He glanced at it. It was addressed to her brother, and there were stamps on it sufficient for a parcel. It was on these that he dabbed a finger. 'Where'd you get these?' Most of the stamps were two monarchs out of date, and there was even a stamp issued by the state of New South Wales. She looked upon him, stern, pleased with herself, and floating, as he well knew, on an ocean of laughter. 'I needed them, so I went searching. There's drawers in our room, Thomas, that neither you nor I have cleaned out in years!' She made it into a condemnation of laziness. Puzzled, but amused, he left the smithy with her.

Pugsley and his men were standing by a fire of off-cuts, smoking. Belle gave them no room to manoeuvre. 'Someone's let us down, Mr Pugsley. Our roofing iron hasn't come.' He'd promised himself a couple of idle days, shooting, perhaps, somewhere in the ranges. 'Shouldn't be long, Mrs Patterson. Lotta shortages at the moment. Can't avoid hold-ups, no matter how well you plan things.' Belle over-rode his answer. 'Don't imagine that we're going to feed idle men. You get yourselves down to Crewe and find out where our roofing is. And don't come back till you're ready to go on with the job.'

He didn't like it, but was wary of taking on an angry woman whose husband was beside her. 'I was hoping, Mrs Patterson, that the truck'd arrive today. Maybe tomorrow. I don't expect it'll be very long.' He

expected her to soften - it was what women did - but she knew his tactic.

'On the road this minute. We never built this property with idle hands. Idleness is as wicked as things that put men in jail. Off you get, about our business. Our business, you'll notice. People who want to get paid have to remember who they're working for. Jacko, come here!'

The youngest of the workers, who'd called himself Jack, post-war, got up slowly from beside the fire, but moved no closer. Belle flourished the envelope. 'I've written to my brother in the city. He's older than I am, he won't be on this earth a great deal longer. It's nobody's business but his and mine, but since I want you to do something for me, I'll explain. He doesn't realise it, but his will won't stand up. I'll say no more than that. There'll be a challenge. I've told him what he's got to do to fix it. And I want him to get it as soon as the heavens make it possible. You worked for us for years ago, so I know I can rely on you. I want you to take this letter, Jacko, and post it yourself, and tell me, when you get back, the time of day you handed it in. Don't go dropping it in a box. I want a receipt, so I can be sure.' She flourished it. 'Here it is!'

He didn't move. 'I was thinking of staying on, Mrs P, while the boys' - he nodded his head - 'went down to Crewe. I'm enjoying it up here. It's good to be back, after some of the places I've been in, the last few years.'

'You can come back after you've done what I ask. Otherwise, we'll have to say goodbye to you today!'

Pugsley wanted to intervene, but sensed a division between his interests and Jack's. 'You want to give us marching orders, Mrs Patterson? Are you trying to tell us there's something wrong with these houses? Your boys are happy enough with what we've done.'

Belle was ready. 'You'll notice I haven't said a word about the houses. If my sons are satisfied, and their wives, then I'm satisfied. I don't want idle hands around the place, and, more than that, I've a great need to get this in the mail. Are you going to do it for me, Jacko, or do I have to saddle a horse and ride to Portree myself, and put it in the hands of

the mailman because nobody I asked would do me the favour of carrying it? Is that what we've come to? Is it?

Jack, fuming, but trapped, stepped forward, snatching the letter from her hand. 'I'll see it's posted. I'll get you a receipt.'

Triumphantly she told him, 'It's good of you. I'll always be grateful.' He knew she thought she had him beaten, and wondered if he had any more moves to make.

Pugsley had only been driving for a few minutes when he saw two riders ahead, one of them on a horse he thought he recognised. Reaching an arm out the window, he slapped the door a few times, and pointed forward. Jack, sitting in the tray with his back to the cabin, and smoking as they moved along, twisted onto his knees to look. She was with a man, and they had a well-laden packhorse. What was going on? His teeth gritted and his face went cold. As the truck got closer he saw her glance over her shoulder, then say something to her companion, who looked at them, then moved forward again. 'That's Claire Patterson,' Pugsley said to the man beside him, 'or I'm a Dutchman. Who the hell has she got hold of?' Neither of them knew. Pugsley leaned out his window to roar over his shoulder, 'Whaddya make of this Jack? Ya got any announcement?' He didn't expect an answer.

Claire and Clive Ransome kept their distance when the truck pulled up. Pugsley, looking at them, saw that they didn't want to speak to him, and it made him angry. 'Ya getting riding lessons, Miss Claire?' She said, 'I don't think I need them. Do you?'

It was the insolence, the inferral of his unimportance, that riled him. 'We can all learn a bit from someone with experience. That right Jack?' But Jack had his back pressed against the cabin, and his eyes on the horizon. He was buggered if he'd acknowledge her if she'd got someone else. And where the hell had this fella come from? He'd turned up out of the blue and wrecked what he'd had going nicely. The trap had been within a few hours of closing, and she'd got away. Worse, he and Pugsley had been kicked off the place. Pugsley'd have to go back with the iron,

but he, Jack, would be moving on. The fucking Pattersons had got on top of him, how he didn't know: the one thing he was sure of was that he wouldn't be letting them crow over him. He thumped the cabin with the palm of his hand. 'Get moving!' he told his driver. 'Seeya,' Pugsley said to Claire and Clive, and drew away, leaving them with the road, a puff or two of dust, and an uncontaminated future to work out for themselves. 'If they're your builders,' Clive said, 'I reckon you might be better off without them.'

Claire felt as if a stranglehold, mysteriously in command of her only hours before, had somehow, in a way she couldn't have described, been released. Her life was, in some equally mysterious way, her own. Then she remembered what the cloud had told her. 'You have to divide to be whole. Resist nothing, in order to be free. Let go in order to hold. You can do nothing by yourself.' She looked at her companion, wondering what forces had brought him at the moment when she was vulnerably alone. He looked into her eyes, wondering what was holding back an answer. 'Much better,' she said. 'Much better off without them.' How long would Clive be away, once she left him at Mount Macalister? How long till he was back, and she was guiding him through the ranges till they reached the highest watershed, where the earth fell away on either side, where the ranges stepped down, one behind another, growing paler at each occurrence until the last was soft as sky? There, in that vision, she'd always felt complete. Now, released from the tyranny Jacko had exerted on her, she saw she'd been taught a lesson. It would be better not to be alone again, nor need she, she saw, while her companion felt as she sensed he did.

In the time of Thomas and Belle, skeletons were well hidden in cupboards. Claire said nothing of her lust for the workman. Six months after she met Clive, they married. The ceremony took place in Crewe, the honeymoon at Mount Merrick - there were even a few snowgums to be found, on the walks that took up hours of each day - and then they travelled to Clive's property outside Weldon. He had an elderly couple

who kept house for him, and managed things while he was away. They greeted their new mistress with respect. Their responsibility for Mr Ransome had been taken from their shoulders. Claire felt, as she was taken around by the Brownings, Clive's keepers, as he called them, that they were educating her to be his wife, and that in handing over their endless scraps of knowledge, their understandings of things that needed attention, they were relinquishing his need for them. She thought of her own parents, a little older than the Brownings, still managing two homes and two properties, and the migrations between them. She said to her husband, by the fire one night, 'Clive, have you thought about this? I've got three properties to think about. Three special places that are parts of my heart.' She didn't need to explain. He'd been waiting for the moment.

'People used to ask me when I was going to get married. I used to tell them I was too selfish to share. One day someone laughed at me, and when I thought about it, I came to the conclusion that I didn't mind sharing at all, but I didn't want to lose. I didn't see why I had to give up anything. Then I thought, why am I worried about losing? Why can't it be a gain, for both sides? That's what I wanted to know. And I looked around, and I could see that for lots of couples - most, probably - there were gains in getting married, but there were losses too. And I decided I wouldn't marry if I thought there was going to be a loss involved. At first, I was only thinking of a loss for me - freedom, all that sort of thing - but later on I could see that when there was a loss, it was usually the wife who paid. She gave up her name to join her husband's family ...'

'That doesn't worry me,' Claire said. 'I know who I am.'

'... so what I want for us is that we add to each other. You should feel you've got more, and I should feel I've got more, because we're married. That's how I feel.' He waited for her.

'Then I'll have three homes,' she said, 'and so will you. One in the mountains, and one on either side.' She looked into the fire, but he felt she was swearing him to the allegiance of their lifetime. 'You must come with me when I demand it, and I must do the same for you. The rest of

the time, you're free to do all the things you have to, here, and I'm free to look after my parents, because they're starting to need someone, it's not too obvious yet, but it's starting, that dependency ...' She paused. 'Is that how you see it?'

'Before I answer, come and sit beside me.'

They brought the sofa closer to the fire, then sat hand in hand. She looked at him. He knew it was for him to speak, but he had to say what she wanted to hear.

'We'll often be apart, days, even weeks at a time, but we'll be joined. We'll learn to hear each other's voices, calling, and then we'll learn to hear each other's thoughts, and the mountains will be no barrier, because each of us knows our way through them. They hold no terrors. Is that how you want our marriage to be?'

Claire pressed against him.

1954

Claire noticed the signals of pregnancy much earlier the second time. She wanted Clive to know, but something checked her. In bed one night he rubbed where the child was forming. 'You've been very quiet lately. Is there something you've been wanting to tell me?' She said, 'You're very observant, darling. I'm glad we've grown close like that. Our second baby's started ...' He was excited, but heard a hesitation in the way she spoke: 'And? Is there something else?'

'There is, and I can't quite grasp it.'

'What sort of thing? Is it something in your body? You need to see a doctor?'

'No, it's a realisation. We're going to be different. It's a turning point, but I can't see why. It should be obvious, but I can't seem to say it.'

‘You’re not worried, then?’

‘No. I feel fine. I’ll enjoy carrying the child, and then of course I’ll get big, and tired, and I’ll just want to have it, so I can slim down again.’ She stopped.

‘What is it? Can you see, this time?’

She said limply, ‘Maybe I won’t grow slim again. Plenty of women get tubby when they have more than one.’

‘Rubbish. You’ll be fine. Is that all you’re worried about?’

‘You see, I can’t explain ... Yes I can. I know what it is. After I had Keith, I thought I was still the same person. Same old me, and he was extra. His arrival added to us - well, we always wanted it that way, didn’t we? - but this time we’re both going to change, especially me.’ She stopped, uncertain of what else there was to say.

He tried to grasp her thought. ‘There’ll be so much more to do. You can have help. Mrs Browning’s not much use with kids these days. We look after her more than she looks after us, I reckon.’ He was amused at this twist of fate because he’d been pleased at acquiring the Brownings to do the things he didn’t want to be bothered with - cooking, cleaning, shopping: everything that wasn’t a man’s central business! The fact that he could laugh about it was a measure of Claire’s effect on him. He was a married man, and he had a child!

She rubbed herself, her fingertips contacting his. She sensed that he was willing to be led, but didn’t see why they had to move. ‘Women’s intuition,’ he said. ‘You’ve sensed something. But darling we can’t do anything about it if you can’t say it.’ It was a complaint, and, she felt, a resumption of normality by her husband. If she couldn’t tell him what was changing, there’d be no need to change anything. ‘Would there?’ was what he’d say when the moment came, as perhaps it had.

She thought. ‘Last time I was at Cairngorm with my mother and father ...’ she began. ‘April this year,’ he said, making sense of it, if he could, for himself.

‘... I realised I was watching them, compensating for anything they couldn’t do, or had forgotten. They’re getting old, like the Brownings.

When you're with people all the time, you hardly notice. But when you haven't been with them for a while, the changes are obvious. My parents had grown old. It happens slowly. It starts on the day we're born. Proud parents say our baby's growing up, and we feel ever so good about it. We take photos to look back on.' He could tell that she was smiling in the dark. 'But what's happening is that the baby's growing older. While it's still developing, it's all right to call it growing up, but then they reach maturity, which is where you and I are, and we try, if we're lucky, to stay there a long time, but eventually, decline sets in. We take the first steps towards going out, as once we came in. This baby's moving us, darling. When I had Keith, I was still a bright young thing that happened to have a child. That's what I told myself even though I had him much later than my friends, or my brothers' wives had theirs. I was a late starter, Clive, and so were you. That means ... I'm sorry I'm going on so long about this, but if I don't say it, I don't understand it, and that means it hasn't happened properly. Not fully, not yet, if you see what I mean.'

She felt he was trying: his fingers were still there, inert.

'What does that mean? It means we both had a drawn out beginning, and now things are rushing for a while. We're in the middle of our lives. The very centre, and a week after this one's born, you and I will be different. Women can't stop it happening. Some men try, but if they succeed, it makes them mean and foolish. They've refused to see something they need to see as much as women do. Isn't that strange?' She paused. He took it over.

'We're parents, now, before everything else. Is that what you mean? We've given up being protected, and now we have to take our turn at protecting. Is that it? And, much as we may try to avoid noticing, we're on the march to the day when we'll have to be protected, in our turn, by those we've had in our protection. Did I say it right?'

She was glad that his words could be heard by no ears except her own. He was too vulnerable, too pride-less, in what he'd said. She turned to lie on her side, facing him. 'Hold me darling. We understand each other. I want you to love me now.'

1955

Thomas Patterson rarely allowed himself to sit between sunrise and sunset. Claire was surprised when Keith, her first, told her, 'Granpa's under the tree.' Something was wrong. She found her father sitting on the ground, one hand pressing restlessly against his breast-bone, the other propping up his forehead. 'Father?' she called, and it seemed to her that her cry had echoes that went as far as the edges of their mountain run, and further again, into the infinity that kills all efforts to question and so to understand. 'You're not well!' He mumbled something about being all right. She, knowing that a corner had been turned, told her boy, 'Get daddy. Tell him to be quick.' The boy ran inside. Claire knelt beside her father, closer to him than she'd been since the day of her wedding. 'Are you feeling any pain, daddy?' He didn't reply. 'Is it hurting?' He shook his head, but a moment later he leaned back a little, resting against the huge snowgum that had grown for years outside his fence. 'Good job this is here,' he said with an attempt at whimsy. 'I mightn't be much good without it.' She felt it was an admission of weakness: no, a realisation that his end was approaching and was, to his eyes if to no others', already in view. She looked around, feeling foolish. What was there to see?

Clive, her husband, was coming with their boy. Seeing him study the man she was holding, she sensed that Clive's appraisal was different, in some way she couldn't describe, from her own. He was inspecting, studying, as he came to where they were. 'We'll get you inside, Thomas,' he said. 'We'll put you on your bed so you can lie down a while. How do you feel about walking? Can you manage?' Thomas nodded, but when he tried to get up, nothing happened. 'Not feeling too good,' was

all he could say. ‘The boys,’ Clive said. ‘Alec and Scott and Hugh. Better get them to carry him in.’ He meant his wife to do this, but she bristled. He could feel the mistake before he’d realised what he’d done wrong. ‘Sorry Claire. Stay with your dad. I’ll get’em. You’d better come with me, Keith.’ He strode towards the nearest of the three later homes. Claire said to her father, ‘Clive’ll get the boys, daddy. They’ll carry you in.’ She felt that a fate she’d never considered had taken over her voice, and was infusing her well-intentioned words with an even simpler, though dreadful, message. ‘You’ll feel better when you’ve had a lie down.’ Her voice shook. ‘You don’t lie down in the daytime, do you daddy? Sorry about that. Just for a little while till you’re strong again. It’s only sensible, you know that.’ Thomas made no reply. He felt, this old man in her arms, as if he were preoccupied by something he alone could see, or sense in the offing. He was looking down. She rubbed his hands, and twined her fingers about his neck - the collar, it occurred to her, that he hated to wear when he was working. ‘We’ll have you back on the job soon, daddy. We need you, to make us strong.’ She knew, as she said it, that she was talking about the weakness, the failing, that was spreading through his body, and hers. ‘We wouldn’t be able to go on without you,’ she said, and again she knew as she spoke, that the truth was the opposite of the words she was using. What was in conflict, here: what hopes, what desperate desires for the impossible, what realisations of what had to come?

Thomas was laid on his bed, boots off, belt loosened. Belle sat beside him, occasionally moving, when he was sleeping, to her other watch-point, a creaking chair beside the stove. She stoked the firebox as if it, at least, could respond to her wishes, then took herself back to the room she shared with her husband in the years of her children, now grown up, married, house and property owners, yet always, somehow, hers. She was sullen, and quiet. As her sons and their wives came to the house, she said nothing, leaving it to Claire to lead them to where Thomas was lying, unconscious or asleep, she wasn’t sure. They could only view him

when she, Belle, was out of the room. ‘Leave me with him,’ she told Hilda when she and Alec were at the door, as if the offence committed was the woman’s only. Hilda and Alec withdrew, sitting in the lounge room by the fire Claire had told Clive to light. ‘People will be coming and going all day, they’ll want somewhere to sit.’

As the afternoon wore on, she went to her brothers. ‘If he dies,’ she told them, separately, ‘he’ll have to be laid out. Mother will want to do that. She’ll feel it’s hers to do, whatever we may think. Then we’ll have to get him down to Ben Avon. He should have one last night in the house before we take him on to Crewe. We have to have them ready for us, down in Crewe, so someone will have to send a message ahead. And we’ll need to put the news out to all the people that know him. That’s hundreds, he’s so well known. There’s lots of people that will be upset if he goes without them knowing.’

She knew that in taking control of events, in managing, she was formalising her own likely and forthcoming emotions: her father had had great dignity, and so must she in her impending grief. When she’d made the arrangements which it was hoped would not be required, she asked Clive to bring Keith and Tania to the spot where Keith had found his granpa, beneath the giant tree. ‘Sit with me. We need to be together.’

Clive had been the last to look in on the old man, but said nothing. He was waiting for his wife’s direction. She was holding her children to her, but part of her, reassured by them, had freed itself to search for what had to be done. Then, glancing at him to indicate the status of what she wanted to say, she began. ‘We know what we have to do here. We have to look after him. And at the other end, in Crewe, we let the minister and the undertaker manage things. By then, events are beyond our control. We have to fit in with what’s done. It’s the in-between stage that we have to think about. Getting him off the plains and down to Ben Avon, where we can put him in a room with candles. That’s when his spirit leaves on its last journey. I’m sorry it has to be this way. I wouldn’t mind if there was no service, and we buried him up here. I know he’d like that, but mother wouldn’t. She’d insist on a formal burial as a mem-

ber of the church. So that's how it has to be. We've no choice, even to do what's most fitting. It's how we live our lives, isn't it ...'

Clive saw that she had found a plane of thought where she was at home, able to say what came streaming from her; it was the feature of his wife that he admired most, though it had almost nothing to do with any wishes he might have to express. She went on. 'He'll be buried on the lowland. We'll be taking him down. We have to show him each of his calling points, the places that have been special to him, where things have happened in those years of travelling up and down. Reciprocation, that's the word I've been searching for. It's what the life of a well-made man is full of. We have to pause in silence, or laughter, at all his places, and then be quiet, to let the bush reciprocate, which means letting breezes blow through the leaves, and move the clouds ... they're always on journeys we can't understand, that makes them like my ...'

She stopped.

Clive looked at her. Keith was troubled. Tania looked at a bird flitting above her head. Clive said, 'Your father?', prompting. Without leaving the special, exclusive dimension where she'd been, Claire said, 'He's going now. It'll only be a minute. Watch, darlings, wait a little moment.' She went quiet. Clive waited, putting a hand on Keith's arm to reassure him, if that were possible when it was his uplifted mother who held him. The bird came closer, then flitted away. A horse neighed, somewhere through the trees. Claire stiffened, alert to something not visible to the eye, then she said, her throat dry, but easing, now that the wait was over, 'He's gone. A moment ago, he took his leave. He circled, then he went up, and disappeared.' Her eyes caught her husband's. 'Did you hear me, darling? He's not with us any more, and we're all that's left, trying to fill his place.'

They sat beneath the tree, until Claire was ready to go inside.

Belle laid him out. The Pattersons went in to pay last respects, one family at a time, Belle sitting at the side of the bed. Claire took her husband and children in last, nodding to her mother, lifting Tania, whispering

to her to say goodbye to granpa. The child said, ‘Goo’bye granpa,’ as requested. Keith looked at his sister, troubled by the words. He’d been told they wouldn’t see granpa again, but here they were seeing him, asleep, though more stiffly than his mother and father were when he crawled onto their bed and woke them. Heaviness held him; this was an occasion which, for some reason, would never come again. His mother, touching his shoulder, said, ‘It’s up to us, now. We have to carry everything on. And be here for granma.’ Belle’s eyes remained on her husband, his eyelids imperfectly closed, as if he was peering at the world he’d left, inspecting it in his sardonic, practical way.

‘Scott and Hugh and Alec are getting everything organised, Mrs Patterson,’ Clive said. ‘They’ll be with you as soon as they’ve got it all worked out. Who’s riding, who’ll be in the second car. Getting supplies at the other end. Getting the children to their homes, all those things.’ Belle, nodded, accepting that such things must be thought about, but still numbed, searching herself to find how much, if anything, was left. ‘The end of his life isn’t the end of everything,’ she said to Clive and her daughter, ‘but there’s those that can make a fresh start and those that can’t. It’s a matter of how big the loss is, against the amount of energy, which is really hope, that you’ve got left.’

Claire wanted to dispute this. ‘If we have hope, it’s always that things will be better. What’s wrong with saying, things have been fine, I’m not asking for change, I want things to go on as they’ve been?’ Her mother’s eyes told her that that was exactly what she was asking the heavens to yield her, and they’d refused.

‘Yes,’ Claire said. ‘Sorry, mother. I’ll go and help get things organised.’ Her mother returned her observation to the man on the bed.

Outside, Alec had brought the first car to the gate, and moved the back seat so the body could be stretched along it. ‘I’ll drive. Mother will sit beside me. There’s room in the boot for a few things we can’t pack on the horses. Hugh will drive his car. Hilda can go with him. When they get to my place, at Portree, she can get the fire going, get the house ready for whoever’s staying. From there, we’ll organise getting

supplies to Ben Avon, make contact with the undertaker, find out when he can come up for the body. An awful lot's got to happen. I'm worried about the children and the long ride. Hugh's going to have do some shuttling, picking up the younger ones, once he gets Hilda settled in at home. Oh well, all in a day's work!' The emphasis he gave this remark demonstrated the opposite, Claire noticed, wondering if the crisis had unveiled a family characteristic.

The cars were to leave that afternoon, but it had been decided that Scott, Audrey, Gwen and the children would begin their long ride the following morning. Clive found a moment to say to his wife, 'You haven't said what you're going to do?' She had a way of coming up with the unexpected. She said, 'Keith wants to follow his grandfather. He can go down with him. It's something he'll remember all his life. He can sit on my mother's knee, or beside her, the seats are wide enough. It'll be good for her to have a little person to talk to, about the places along the way that he doesn't know yet. You, darling, I think you should ride with Scott, and Audrey and Gwen. They'll have their hands full, getting the children down, because some of them are better riders than others, and you could help them with that.'

It seemed she'd finished; he said to his wife, 'And you, darling? Where do you fit in the scheme of things?' She smiled faintly, in a way that always disarmed him. 'Leave Tania with me. I'm going to stay here two more nights, then I'll ride down to Ben Avon, bringing up the rear. Mother will be first, with father, and I'll be last. You can call that spirit, and memories. Which is which I don't think I know, but we have to get them both off the plains, respectfully, so that he can come back. No. Sorry, father. So that he can always be here.'

He waited. 'Go on, darling.' She said, from deep within her, 'In a place like this, there's money and there's fences, there's branding irons and bags of salt, cattle that breed well and those that don't, but in the end everything comes down to those two things, don't you think? Spirit and memories?' He nodded. 'If you say so.' She felt it was more certain than that, but perhaps he was right. 'Father's taken knowledge with him.

He's taken a lot more, like his love for us, his energy ... but it's what he carried in his mind, and his soul, that's precious. It's been built up by years of living, and it's a storehouse of incredible richness, so much that you can hardly believe it, it's like a fairy tale of caves filled with diamonds ... and suddenly, as in those tales, it's gone. There's only a body that can't say a word of what it used to know. Did the knowledge go out of the world when he did? Surely not? Surely it's still here, in the walls of the house, that have heard everything that's been said since it was built. That's why I'm staying on, darling, to hear whatever's in the air, and take it down to the family as it gathers for the funeral. I don't think we'll ever be together again, the whole lot of us, with all the children. It's so much bother. I know Scott and Hugh think it would be simpler if they just came up once in a while, had a look around, and left their families on the lowland. Perhaps that's the way we'll do things from now on. But not you and I, darling! Three houses, remember what we promised? All we need is a wind to connect us! Remember, darling, I think you do? If you ever forgot, I think I'd want to join my father.' She was looking over his shoulder at the sky. Her mysticism irritated him, but he suppressed the feeling, deciding that too much had to be done, and organised, in the next few days for an outbreak of dissent. 'As you say. Make sure you've got a raincoat for yourself, and Tania too. There can be storms in summer like any other season. I don't want you getting drenched.' She flicked her hand imperiously, like her mother. She wouldn't be getting drenched.

The men carried the body of Thomas to the car. Belle had covered his face with a pillow slip. Alec slid behind the wheel. Belle took her seat beside him, and Keith got on her knee. Alec said to Hugh, 'Give me a few minutes start. You don't want to be swallowing my dust.' The first car went, taking Thomas from his mountain home, and then the second. The gate was closed behind them, all too definitively, it felt to the remaining Pattersons. The following morning horses were saddled, lunches made up, and things loaded onto pack-horses. The Pattersons

were leaving early. Tania clung to her mother as the party rode away, waving because that was what her mother was doing, and her daddy was one of those who were going. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow night,’ he’d said to his wife and daughter as he’d kissed them goodbye. Claire felt the emptiness, the void they’d left, as a relief. Women mightn’t have the active importance of men, but they carried family memory. In the strange allocation of human functions to bodily parts, they were allowed to be the back of the mind and most of the heart of a living body of people, connected by the things ruled over by men but innerly defined and quietly held against forgetfulness by what women knew.

Claire wanted to lose as little as possible, and, if possible, to apprehend a little more of what her father had been in the long life which had ended. It was she, though nobody else had remarked on it, who had closed the rear door of the car he’d driven for as long as the family had owned it, thus formalising his departure from his home, his property, his vocation as a cattleman, and his life. He was underway, now, heading for what Claire felt sure would be the family’s first break in their descent, somewhere among the alpine ash trees on Mount Macalister. ‘I’ll tell you where I think they’ll stop on the way down,’ Claire said to Tania, ‘and then tomorrow, when we ride down, we’ll stop at the same places and see if we can feel them there.’

The next morning Claire saddled her own horse and loaded a pack animal, which she attached by a rope to her saddle. She wanted both arms free to hold Tania in front of her. She put Tania on the back of a cart, high enough to be able to reach her easily, mounted, then swept her daughter to a spot on her saddle between her legs. ‘Away we go, darling. We’re following granpa down.’

They rode, on a warm day with swirling, changeable clouds not far above their heads, Tania looking up, then studying the trees, the birds, the hairs on Buff’s black mane. The little girl made murmuring noises, making Claire wonder if she, in her generation, might be the first trained singer in the family. She thought of the Handel she’d sung when school-days, still in front of Tania, were in her immediate past, and of the day

when, with fire about to engulf them, she'd decided there was no beneficent power looking after them. Free people are the top of creation's tree, she said to herself: that's what I am, and so I will remain! Pride flowed through her fingertips to the child she loved, so dependent, so ready to grow and go free. She thought of Keith, her son, anxious to please his granma, his father, so curious to know what it was that was happening around him. As they passed a little clearing, she had a feeling that the cortege might have stopped there. 'Tracks are getting cold,' she told herself. 'I almost missed that one.'

It was the site of a former hotel. The people who'd owned it had at one stage held the Pattersons' runs, but somehow there'd been a transfer to the people who'd sold to her family. Nobody claimed knowledge of these events: Claire presumed that the parties involved, anxious to be seen as the type of people for whom everything was 'above board', had excised certain memories from whatever had transpired. If there were no stories but family stories you could be certain of censorship, or at least a certain historical re-creation, in the name of decency, respectability, propriety. Communities needed the flags of these virtues to fly above them, at the same time as they did whatever had to be done to prosper. Success was gained through struggle, not necessarily clean, and then diverted itself, at a certain stage of prosperity, to an appropriate reconstruction of what was remembered to have happened.

'Memory,' Claire said to her daughter, with her on the powerful horse. 'We control it, it lives its life through us. When we die, it dies with us, unless we've handed it on. That's where you come in, my love. You're too young to remember this ride in years to come, but long after you've forgotten I'll be remembering it, and telling you about it, so what I remember, or make of it, will be handed on to you to tell your children when they come. That, my darling, is the river of memory, running over rocks, going underground, coming back to the surface when people think it's lost. We're granpa's memory now, and he lives on in whatever we say about him. It's a big responsibility, and it's ours.'

Later in the morning, thunder rumbled and the clouds overhead grew dark. Claire stopped, pulled two hats and a waterproof coat from the bags on the pack-horse. She put her arms in the coat, then drew it around her, enveloping Tania, who was at first anxious, and then laughed, as the buttons were done up. ‘I’ve got you back in my tummy again,’ Claire said. ‘I’ll leave these two buttons undone so you can poke your head out and watch the storm. Push through, darling, I want to put your hat on.’ Tania tried to get her arms out. ‘No, leave your arms inside the coat. Just your head. There!’ The hat was on. ‘Now I put my hat on’ - Claire did so - ‘and we’re ready for the rain, whenever it comes.’

A minute later the rain was pouring down, two little eyes were studying the trees from beneath the dripping brim of a hat, and Claire, mother, and memory, was letting Buff guide herself on the track which the family, though they had to share it with whoever passed through the ranges, felt was theirs. The events of their lives had strung themselves along it, the skein which, unwound, was their partly-acknowledged, partly-concealed, account of family life.

She felt Clive was strange when he came back from the funeral, the men an hour or two later than the women because they’d gone to a hotel. He was restless in bed, and didn’t touch her though she wanted him. The next morning he kept out of her way. Something had happened. It was more, she knew, than her father’s death. As soon as he saw that she would want to stay at Ben Avon to be with Belle in her time of adjustment, he found reason to take himself over the ranges. ‘Of course,’ she told him, in the front garden of the halfway house, as he insisted on calling it, ‘there’s not a great deal to hold you here, and a lot to do at Weldon. But something’s troubling you. If we’re going to be apart, you should tell me, so I can think about it too. What is it, Clive?’

He both wanted to burst out with it, and to keep it hidden. ‘Something happened after the funeral,’ he said. ‘We all went back to the Albion.’ Knowing this, she waited. ‘I came in after the others, and I felt like having one on my own before I talked to anybody. I was at the

bar and I heard these men talking. I didn't like the look of them much. They were talking about your father.' He looked at her. She waited.

'I worked out after a bit that they must have built Hugh and Scott's houses. From the way they were talking. They laughed about your father dying. They actually laughed. And one of them said, "He wasn't the real strength of the Pattersons. The old lady's the keeper of the castle." That's what he said. "Keeper of the castle." I was listening now because I thought they knew a thing or two about your family.'

'Yours,' she interrupted.

'Well, that's it,' he said. 'Mine, you say. But is it?' He menaced her with a pause in his narrative. She waited, drawing strength for whatever defence was needed, or perhaps an attack, if he revealed a failing.

'One of them said, "Remember what happened with the roofing iron? The old lady got rid of Jacko quick bloody smart." And they sniggered in a dirty way. You know what I mean.'

She knew, and her face set firmly. 'What else did they say?'

'That's what you'll have to tell me. I turned to get a better look, and this fellow with a smirk on his face had his mouth open to start telling something he thought was a nice little tale ... you know what I mean ...'

'Get on with it. What did he say?'

'He didn't. One of them saw I was listening, and he nudged the fellow who was talking, and he shut up. He didn't know me from a bar of soap, but one of them did, and he stopped him telling the story I wanted to hear. I've got an idea you know what he would have said, if they hadn't noticed me, so you tell me. What was he going to say about you Pattersons? There was a story there for him to tell and you know what it was, I'm ready to bet my bottom dollar.'

A shaft of light broke between two clouds, lighting the top of The Hurdle. Claire let her eyes move across its shape. 'Come on,' her husband said. 'Never mind the birds. Say what you've got to say.'

She looked directly into his eyes. 'You've nothing to fear from the birds. Or the mountains you know I love. They're the backbone of all

the integrity I've got, and you get the benefit of that, every day of my life.' With the arrogance he half-admired, but knew that other people hated, she added, 'Do you not?'

'You're getting like your mother,' he said. 'All barriers and protection. You know what I'm asking you, and you know what that fellow was talking about, and I'm asking you to tell me. Are you going to do what I ask? Or bloody well not?' He was rageing, but determined.

She said, 'Of course I am. I've nothing to fear but foolishness.' She told him about Jacko, her temptation, and her decision, if that was what it was, to find him in the night and let her body's experience be given to her by lust. 'A lust so strong it conquered me. And then I found you, boiling water on a fire. I rode with you. I took you home ...'

'And your mother told you to show me the yards at Mount Macalister!' It was an accusation.

'She knew something was wrong, and I'm pretty certain she knew what it was, though she's never said a word about it from that day to this.'

'You people! Your whole family's the same. You leave silences everywhere. Every silence either hides a secret, or a trap for those who don't know why things have gone silent. I didn't understand your family when I married you ...'

She might have added that she hadn't known his family either, and how could there be marriage without risk? But he was going on.

'... and now I know the way you operate. There's messages and signals all over the place. Things you won't go near. The family know where these things are, and they avoid them by never mentioning them. It's only outsiders who trip over them, and when they do, your family don't say sorry, we should have warned you, here's what you needed to know ... no, they're not like that at all. They think you're a fool for exposing the thing that needed to be hidden. What an amazing way to live!'

'And?' It was almost a shout, challenging him at his furthest point.

‘And Keith and Tania are ...’ tears were creeping into his rage ‘... going to be the same, if you can make them like you are!’

‘And if they don’t become like the Pattersons, they’ll become like the Ransomes, is that the idea? Is that the salvation you think they should be offered? Not to be like my family but like yours?’

Proud as she was, she couldn’t face him down. ‘That wouldn’t be such a bad idea!’

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. ‘I’m discovering what you really are. I’m sure you feel the same about me. I think you’re stupidly jealous. You think I think I’m superior. You feel you were cheated, tricked, by my family!’ His eyes showed agreement with each of her propositions.

‘Where do we go from here, Claire Patterson?’ He wanted to show contempt by refusing her the name she’d taken on their marriage, but the insult, the denial, made her cold. ‘That is a very good question. We shouldn’t try to answer it today. We’re too angry with each other, and something tells me that when we look back on this quarrel my father’s funeral will seem an important cause. I think you feel released from bondage now the head of the clan’s not around. You want to get yourself out of my grip. No, it’s not quite that. You could stand having a man who was superior to you, but now the family’s headed by a woman, you’re not going to let it happen any longer. You want out. I think it’s only fair if I give you the chance you want.’

Turning nasty, he said, ‘You mightn’t be giving it, I might be taking it!’

She said, ‘You’re trying to make me as angry as you are. I’m not playing, sorry Clive. No go. Tomorrow, go back to Weldon. Cross the mountains. Tell yourself it might be the last time you’ll do it, and see how you feel. I’ll stay here. I’ve got to get mother settled, help her adjust to the way things are going to be. The children had better stay with me for the time being ...’

‘Don’t think you can get rid of me and hang onto them. They need me as much as they need you.’

'I'll bring them to you as soon as I can. This isn't their home, it's their granma's home, and it's not the bleak, windswept place you think it is, but let that go. The Brownings can't help you much with the children, you'll have to get another couple to help look after them ...'

The making of arrangements was ready to become another ground for quarrel. He said, 'Stop it. I'll go tomorrow. We both need cool heads. I don't have one now. My world's gone topsy-turvy. I need to be in my own space, not a Patterson place, to work out what I want!'

It was the best they were going to get on a day when the hidden had found its way to the surface. 'Tomorrow morning, then.' He went inside. It struck her that the sun on the opposite side of the valley from The Hurdle was ending a day when her father had been buried and her husband had indicated that he might be leaving. That the two events were connected, she had told him she had no doubt, but was there a link, hidden inside her, that she hadn't uncovered? She didn't know.

1956

Three weeks passed, including a sad Christmas when Claire had her mother's company, day and night, and the members of her family who were passing Ben Avon, but never the children of her flesh. 'You don't sing like you used to,' her mother grumbled. 'When are you going to leave me and get off to those wee ones?' Claire didn't know. She wanted to be called, and this meant a message from her husband that he'd been foolish, petulant, shallow in his working out of what he'd been told.

She thought that if he had any quality of judgment - and that was what made humans worthwhile - he'd have seen that the way she'd told him what had happened with the workman had been frank, embarrassed, but untroubled. She hadn't asked him if his path to their wedding had seen any indiscretions. Why not? Because she hadn't wanted to know.

She assumed that everybody who'd arrived at the state of being grown up must have learned from mistakes. If he couldn't see this then he hadn't reached that point. How to get him to where he should be?

The first step came on a morning, early in the new year, when her mother, watching the clouds above the ranges, called to her, 'We'll saddle the horses tomorrow! I want to go back. Thomas is at rest in Crewe. I want to find him where he's still alive!' Claire smiled. Belle could be a strength, again, as well as a burden. Tomorrow morning!

They ate, that night, with Audrey and her children in the house opposite Ben Avon. Scott was on the plains. 'I don't want we women to be lowland bodies,' Belle pronounced, 'too busy with our little ones to have any vision of who we are!' Audrey told her, 'We get tied down, though,' indicating her children. 'How come you're so free, Claire? You must have Clive pretty well trained?'

It was a question cast in untruth. If there was trouble - and Audrey knew there was - it could only be referred to in the terms normality imposed. Normality was assumed not to include trouble between wives and husbands, though the Pattersons had lived by separation. Keeping an eye on the horizon, so necessary for survival in the unforgiving mountains, could also mean not acknowledging truth at one's feet. Honesty, in a word, was like a range-finding device, able to be focussed here, or there, perhaps not at all.

'I'm still training him,' Claire said, and realised, from something as simple as a movement of her mother's shoulders, that she'd admitted herself to the company of women for the protection it offered, and occasional, surreptitious support. In difficulty, one could not stand alone.

'As far as I can see, it takes a lifetime,' Audrey said, making Claire wonder what sort of man Scott must be to live with; she'd not thought of her brother in that way before.

'How far along the way are you?'

Audrey said, 'No nearer, no further. It's a lifelong process. Picking up the messes of grumpy, overgrown boys. Am I right, Belle?'

Belle hated to be put on a spot. ‘We make messes of our own. Usually it’s by being too honest. By taking our menfolk to have more brains than they have.’ It was aimed, Claire knew, straight at her. Angered, she saw that she had to constrain herself: she had to ride with the old woman the next day. Or did she? Why didn’t she ride separately, setting off that night? The moon was filling the sky with light; she could find the way. Let her mother manage in the morning!

It was impossible. Her mother was a doubtful ally, but she couldn’t be abandoned. They had to suffer each other, making each other share the hurts that maimed them. It could hardly be a happy journey, the next day’s ride to the plains.

They barely spoke. Ben Avon was locked, the pack horses loaded. They reached Portree in silence. Hilda gave them tea, and fruit and cake to take with them. They rode through the town, and began to climb. Belle left the track and followed the ridge their cattle knew well. Instinct underlay, Claire saw, most of what her family had depended on, and now that must include herself. Could she stop herself being cruel to Clive, could she give him what she thought was wisdom? Was his wisdom, the need he had for something that could make them reconcilable, the thing she wanted to give him, or another thing? Perhaps peace, if it came to them, would not be the outcome of emotional bargaining, but simply the growth of something in the space they’d agreed to share again. What would unite them would not be an idea, but a need they both admitted: was that all her mind could produce?

The long rise ended. They made their way, climbing slowly, to the hut at Mount Macalister. They lit a fire, and, habit ruling them, Claire took the billy to the little fall not far away. She gave it to her mother to hang above the blaze. Belle said, ‘Thomas always sat where you’re sitting. He hated not to be able to keep an eye on things. Don’t you think you’re maybe crowding Clive too much? You’re too strong!’ Claire was used to her mother’s oblique rushes at unspoken, unmentionable things. ‘He heard some men talking in a bar in Crewe. They didn’t say much, but he asked me about the time those men were building the last two

houses on the plains.' Belle raised a brow. 'I told him about a foolish desire I had.' She paused; her mother said nothing. 'I told him as honestly as I could, expecting him to take it in his stride. Instead, he's gone all funny about it. He's gone back to Weldon to try and work it out, but I know he'll never do it on his own. I have to guide him through it. Make him accept me again. Have you got any ideas?'

Her mother stared at the fire. 'Men feel reduced. They have to be big, in their own minds at least. That's why it's dangerous to tell them things because they think that if they didn't think of it themselves, then they've been lessened. If a man's like that, you have to keep feeding him things so he thinks he's big. It's either that, or ...' Claire was waiting '... find a way to make them grow up. The best way would be through the children, somehow. That'd be up to you to find, but that's the way I'd be going. I can't tell you any more than that.'

They drank their tea, nibbled Hilda's cake, and resumed their ride. It was dark when they reached the house, lit the lamps, unpacked, made a fire in the lounge, put sheets on the beds they were going to use and said goodnight to each other. Claire stood by the fire for a minute after her mother's door had closed. From the wall above her a photo of Belle stared at the room - a glance full of apprehension and strength as affecting as she must have been on the day the picture was taken, shortly after her wedding, more than fifty years before. The old lady was still riding and still had something to say. Strength was flowing both ways between the two women. On another wall, Claire saw a photo taken at her own wedding, not so long ago. She went to it with a candle, trying to read the strain on her husband's face. It was all he could do, she remembered, to get through the day. He hated to be organised, arranged; he wanted to manage everything for himself. That too, she saw, was a piece of advice as strong as her mother's. She went to her room - their room - blew out the candle and climbed into bed. She lay on her back, remembering the sound of cracking sticks in the night, and the warmth of a husband, and she saw that the wish to be proudly alone and to be warmly embraced would be parts of her as long as she lived.

She stayed two days at Cairngorm, then, on the third morning, she loaded the pack horse again. Her mother came out, and her brothers arrived as she was mounting. She swung into the saddle, and looked down on them. Alec said, loudly as if it were a declaration of policy, ‘Any troubles down there, Claire, any difficulties, just let us know.’ He was implying a visit of the enforcers! She said, ‘I’ll be all right. It’s enough to know that I’ve got you.’ She looked on them fondly, equestrienne among foot soldiers, then stirred her horse, the motion implying the journey, and the journey its purpose. The three men and their mother felt powerless as they followed her with their eyes, moving through the belt of snowgums towards the track.

Later in the morning she paused at the point where she’d met Clive. She’d felt far more troubled that morning than she did today: that, surely, was the measure of what marriage and two children had done for her, and for him too, when he came to see it. Something she would have found hard to identify moved through her, forgiving, softening, and, although she couldn’t quite grasp it, preparing her to move to a new position in her relationship with Clive. ‘I’ve etherealised,’ she said to herself. ‘A dimension has opened up for me to move in, and Clive doesn’t know it’s there. That’s why he’s sorry for himself, and feels cheated. He doesn’t know about this other plane, affecting ours, where things manoeuvre to have influence on humans who are silly enough to think their brains can tell them all they need to know.’

She wondered how she could possibly make him aware of this dimension, and then, even if only in private, with her, nobody else suspecting, to admit that it was there, giving him restrictions and possibilities that nobody else could see. Our marriage has a future, she decided, better than our past: I’ve only to make him know. It wouldn’t be easy, but if everything had to be risked, then she would do it. She rode quietly, trotting, walking, to the highest point of the road, the watershed, then she turned Buff down to the third, most recently acquired, of her homes, where her children were, wondering why their mother wasn’t with them and when she would be, completing the circle of their lives.

They were with the Brownings, she found, when she arrived; Clive was away. ‘Heard about some good horses, over near Tatunga,’ the elderly people told her. ‘Said he’d only be a couple of days. We’re expecting him back tonight.’ Claire held her children, sat them on her knees, talking: ‘What have you been doing? Tell me everything that’s happened!’ They questioned her sorrowfully. ‘When are you going away again, mummy? Take me with you if you are!’ She said to Keith, whose anxieties were more focussed than Tania’s, ‘I’m not leaving you again. I’m not going anywhere without you. Even if granma gets sick, and I have to look after her, I’m taking you with me!’ Keith was so pleased that Tania grew anxious, fearing exclusion from some contract made in words she didn’t understand. Claire rubbed her nose into the little girl’s cheek. ‘You’re mine! You’re coming with me wherever I go. And if daddy wants to be with you, he has to come too!’ In the excitement of reuniting, of saying what she felt about being apart, she’d said it all in the hearing of the Brownings, who, if the household were to form two camps, would have to be on Clive’s side. She thought. No, she decided, there was no explanation to make; she’d meant it, that was how things were.

It was lunchtime the following day when Clive arrived, leading half a dozen young horses, with the biggest, the one the others would follow, on a rope running from his hand. The children heard him first, then Claire, and they went to the front verandah as he came along the driveway, the Brownings watching from behind the flywire door. The children wanted to rush to the yards where he’d water the animals, but Claire restrained them. ‘Here is where we’ll meet him. He’ll only be a couple of minutes, and then he’ll be with us. Give him a big hug when he comes. Say “Welcome home, daddy”.’ Keith tried the words. Claire said, ‘Stay where you are now,’ as she gathered a chair from further down the verandah and placed it at the top of the steps. She stood behind it, hands on its upper corners, and when they heard him whistling as he came near the house, she sat in it, ready to receive. Keith moved to one side of her, pressing his hand nervously on the left arm of this chair, and

Tania pushed against her mother's right shoulder. The Brownings, too, were watching his approach: his trial.

They were in position as he came up the path, studying them, and his situation, as he came. Thoughts came into his mind: that he might ignore the trio at the front and call on Mrs Browning for something to drink; that he might embrace the children, but not their mother; that he might enter into a battle of eyes with his wife, trying to force her to rise from her seat and come to him; or - his unconscious decision - that any of these things would be a losing move and, having challenged and lost he could never challenge again. He smiled, shrewdly, but with humour, and his wife saw that she had won the first skirmish of the long encounter. 'I'm here to welcome you,' she said. 'That's something of a departure in itself.'

He laughed. 'And I wasn't here to welcome you, was I? But the children were, I see. Nobody could fail to see that.' They were joined, that much he had conceded: how it would affect them, and how they would shape it in the years to come, remained to be seen.

In the months that followed it was Keith, her son, who kept turning Claire's attention to her people in the south. 'What's granma doing? Is she on her own? Can she drive the car or does she have to ride everywhere? When are we going to see her? Can we ask her to stay with us?' Claire told him, 'I don't think granma would want to come over here. She'd feel she didn't belong in this part of the world. Granma would expect that if we wanted to see her we'd go to her. She's been like that for a very long time.' Keith felt they should visit her, but he was told that his father was too busy at the moment: they might, if he was lucky, see Granma at Christmas, or shortly after. 'When daddy's ready.'

The boy thought she meant his father would have to say he wanted to go into the mountains, but for Claire the sentence needed to be completed with '... to let me go, whether he wants to come or not.'

She set about making herself one of the Ransomes. Clive's brothers Robert and Fred travelled far and wide, showing properties to buyers,

selling stock, moving them to wherever there was feed. They were successful, narrow men who drove about the countryside without questioning its ownership or use, except in terms of profit, and, eventually, the creation of comfortable homesteads where men like themselves could relax with families regarded as being a credit to them. If you could help them to these goals, they knew you: if not, there was no need to acknowledge your existence. In fact, a town would be better off without you because questioning was subversive when goals were easy to state. Their way of placing Claire was to recognise her background, to assume she'd be loyal to it, and to attribute the difficulties they experienced in knowing what was going through her mind to her years away at school: 'learning all sorts of useless things', the brothers told each other, not bothering to prevent their wives from hearing. Claire was an object lesson in what a woman ought not to be: too keen to speak when she should be listening, to manage when she should be waiting for direction. They felt Clive had made a mistake, that he would keep his children, if he had any brains at all, on their side of the mountains, where commonsense would prevail, and that his preparedness to let his wife travel to the south, though it was no way to make a proper marriage, did at least give him periods without her. They could never work out what her influence was, but it wasn't a good one, and they had no intention of letting their wives become visible in the way Claire regarded as normal. Normal! The woman wasn't controlled. They thought less of Clive for letting her get away with it.

Clive sensed all this: it troubled him that when he was with her, the things she did seemed entirely expected, and that it was only when he was away from her, in another sphere of thinking, that she seemed to be against his expectations of what was right.

Normal.

She wasn't what everybody in his district would call normal, and it was plain she never would be. It wasn't that she did things that were wrong, because she didn't; it was, though, and this was more unsettling, that she gave nobody reassurance: people said of her, when they'd been

with Claire, and were back with others they trusted, that she made them uncertain of what she was thinking, no matter how nice she tried to be. Something in her challenged them, and they could see that she didn't intend it, and that made things worse because if she didn't intend it, then the problem was built in, and wasn't behaviour she could change or at least control.

As the months passed, Claire felt all this in the social web around her, but determined to wait for an opportunity, if one ever came, to turn this tide of opinion. She yearned for the mountains, and the life of the family that had shaped her, but she kept her eyes on Clive, on Keith and Tania, their house and property, their town, their neighbors and connections, yet somehow it was only tolerable, this husband-centred life, if she could be out of it as well.

Clive said to her, one afternoon as they sat outside the home they'd extended twice in their married years, 'It's been hot today. I think we're in for a warm summer.' It was his indirect way of referring to the coolness of the high country: she looked at him, waiting. 'I know you miss the mountains,' he said. 'Can you tell me what it is you miss?' He looked at her, expecting, though he didn't realise it, the sort of cliché his brothers used as the coinage of their thought. She said, answering him on that plane the others found disturbing, 'What I miss most is easily said, but harder to explain.'

Well-intentioned, with the tolerance of those who are, however unjustly, quite certain of themselves, he said, 'I'd like to hear it. I think I'll understand.' He put down his glass of pineapple juice.

'On our family's run' - she pointed to the south - 'there's a place called Five Mile Plain. It's not far from my mother's house.' He butted in. 'It'll be your house, if she's made her will the way she should. Your brothers have got houses of their own.' She acknowledged what he said. 'Yes, I'd like it to be mine. It's a part of the property nobody else is going to use, anyway. Property means a lot to me, but there's more than that.'

He felt she was talking in the way his brothers and their circles couldn't understand, and, as ever, he was both troubled and admiring. He wanted her to be different, and he didn't. If only he could be admitted to what it was she drew on for her vision. He waited, then he prompted. 'More than that?'

'Five Mile Plain is very important to me. I think you've sensed that. You've ridden there with me, but I've never said much about it.' She told him then of her experiences with the cloud that swelled from the deep valley of the Portree: how she'd experienced the cloud of knowledge when she was only six; how it had returned, over the years, catching her, sometimes, and at other times coming, or not coming, when she sought it out. 'It seems to speak to me, but perhaps I'm only hearing my own thoughts as if the cloud is speaking them. Whichever way it is, I know that what I'm hearing, whether it's from inside my head or outside, is as true, as certain, as anything can be. And now that I'm talking about it with you, I'm not certain - forgive me for this, but I have to say it - I'm not certain whether I want you to experience it with me, or not. You see, it's always been mine on my own. I've never talked about it with mother, nor did I talk about it with father while he was alive, though I know he knew I had a special connection with that part of the run. And I have to say, though I'd be much happier if I could keep it hidden, and never even think about it, that I feel a long way from those moments of vision when I'm down here, in the inland. There's nothing wrong with being here. In many ways it's more comfortable and certainly it's wealthier than back up there. But I miss my visions. My moments with the cloud and the voice of certainty.'

She stopped. She was putting him to an unexpected test. He said, 'You amaze me. I don't think I understand a word you've said, but I'm not entirely stupid. I can see that you mustn't be cut off from that cloud. You must be able to go there whenever you need to. If I'm honest I have to say that I'm amazed to find myself married to someone who hears a voice in cloud, but if that's what gives you a centre you can trust, then I suppose, even though I can't understand what it gives you, I have to trust

it as you do. Go into the mountains whenever you like, Claire, and when you come back, promise me, please, that you'll try to explain whatever it is that's happened. I might come to understand it eventually, and at least it'll mean we're talking to each other, not heading off in different directions, with me feeling resentment because there's something going on that I can't know about. Maybe it's not in me to grasp that sort of thing, but I can try. If you'll try to make me understand, I'll try for you. How's that? Do we have an understanding?'

She couldn't have asked for more. This acceptance of difference, this attempt to understand their non-understanding, was more moving, and gave a more certain promise of loyalty, than the foolish passions of love. 'You've become very precious to me,' she said, tears filling her eyes. 'Let's get the children,' he said, 'and sit with them while they eat.'

1960

She often found herself, as she grew older, thinking about sexual desire. The young girl in the photo, which her mother still kept by her bed at Cairngorm, had been throbbing with it, yet hadn't known what filled her: it had been a force unexplained and impossible to predict - a future which no one could foresee. The friends she brought home from school, all those years ago, had married, but Jennifer had been first: perhaps this meant she'd been first to understand what their lives were going to be about. She, Claire, had arrived last of the group, last of her family, at the condition - maturity, it was generally called - of being a sexual creature with two faces, one of them showing only in the dark, in bed, while the other, daylight, face was restrained, un-frank, apparently without the desire to consume and be consumed that was at the heart of sexual congress.

She thought of it a lot, but avoided talking about it, though she knew that the other wives in her husband's district passed each other secrets they were unwilling to share with her because they didn't believe she could be as subterranean as they had learned to be. She thought they were slaves, with the mentality that kept them so, and they knew her mind. Sometimes, at Cairngorm, she wanted to speak about it with her mother, but the old lady brushed her aside in the mornings when they were 'busy', and changed, in the course of the day, to the alternative defence of feeling 'tired'. Claire became accustomed to seeing her mother moving off to bed with a lamp, carried in a trembling hand, and bidding her goodnight, which was a sentence of silence until the morning, when, again, they would be 'busy'. Was her mother, then, to die without intimate exchange?

What distinction, if there was one, was there between the intimacy she sought with her mother, and the exchanges she shared with her husband, and, occasionally, desired with some other man she'd met, or merely looked on? Sexuality, like hope, could attach itself over impossible distances and leap where the normalities of social life prevented one from going. People called this fantasy, but each journey of the mind was a real one; that is, it did take place even if the next layer of reality never matched it. Desire could take one to any possible or impossible partner, limited only by the imagination's power. She thought this marvellous, yet people feared it, as she'd once done.

She wondered if she'd ever find someone who could talk about it with her.

In her social world, she saw, there could only ever be the one.

She told her husband about the answers she gave her children when they asked where babies came from, and how young women 'no different from anybody else' became mothers. She told him about Keith's earnest filing away of knowledge; she said she felt he had a store of scraps which he added to, but when she asked him what he'd like to know he could never find big questions to ask, only details. 'He's trying to build a big picture with jigsaw pieces, you know what I mean? He won't say "Tell

me everything I need to know”, and sit back and wait. I feel he’s prowling around, trying to find a missing piece to put into the picture he’s forming, but he won’t let me get near the picture to see if it’s right. You know, Clive? You know what Keith’s like?’

Clive knew because he was the same sort of person. Clive knew that Claire knew this, and was probing him in some way, asking him a question he didn’t want to formulate for himself. ‘He wants to feel easy about himself,’ her husband said, on another of the warm days when they sat outside, sipping pineapple juice, before they went inside for dinner. She said to Clive, ‘Everybody wants to feel easy about themselves. I certainly do ...’ He laughed. ‘You! I’ve never known anyone who was more sure of herself. We’ve talked about this before. It’s something some people have difficulty with. You’re lucky! You don’t have the difficulties a lot of people have.’ He smiled, but she was not to be diverted.

‘The fact is, we have inside us this tremendous force that lets us have children. It’s the force that keeps life going, yet we’re scared of it, because we don’t know what it’s going to do with us. It drives people into the arms of impossible people, sometimes. It can be brutal, like all the rapes when soldiers are out of control in foreign countries. And yes, we have to control it, because if we don’t it’ll rip our lives apart.’ He could see that she was, as he would say, ‘getting wound up’. Coughing, meaning he wanted to interrupt, he caused her to stop. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that it’s something that’s best left unexplored. People who get too curious can get in out of their depth, if you see what I mean.’ He was trying to look stern, and knowledgeable, but was merely embarrassed. His wife said, ‘I respect that Clive. I have to, because you’re saying it. But I’d really like to go further into it with you. I can’t talk to my mother any more. She goes to bed. I know she reads in there for hours, sometimes, but she’s got a closed door between her and me. And I don’t want you and I to do that to each other. You understand me, Clive?’

He did, though it troubled him. The most sensible way to live, as he saw it, was to decide how much space you needed for your life, to organise everything in that space, to put a fence around it, and then,

quietly and without commotion, to remove everything that troubled you or made you puzzled or afraid, and put it on the other side of that circumscribing fence. What else was a sensible person to do? Ask questions, endlessly, about things that held no answers? He couldn't see the point, though he knew he'd be unsettled by his wife's inquiries for as long as she pursued them, and that would be to the end. He'd married a difficulty, really, and was honest enough to admit that while he tried to keep his own soul quiet he did a lot of surreptitious exploration through the dialogues he had with his wife, after, of course, she'd done the preliminary, on-ground exploring. He admired her, and she made him cautious; what made the marriage possible, he partially saw, was that she could manoeuvre between his granting and denial of permission to pursue whatever it was she sought. He found himself wishing, occasionally, riding on his own, that one time when they were together on her family's mountain runs, she would take him to the edge of Five Mile Plain so he could undergo the test of his life: it was something he would not like to die without having faced.

Claire said to her son, 'School for you next year, darling. What are Tania and I going to do when you're away in Weldon?' The boy said, 'You'll ride around with daddy and I won't be able to come with you because my teachers won't let me.' He'd learned to be sorry for himself, she saw: it was an indulgence for which he drew validation from his father, who allowed himself the same latitude. Tania always hated Keith when he was in this mood, though she couldn't yet recognise it for what it was when her father displayed it: that fell to Claire. Disciplined, and stern with herself, her husband thought, she exerted energies and foresight to prevent what she called 'sick-sorry-self' occurring. He'd always complained that the Pattersons buried things they didn't want to think about; she felt that the Ransomes enjoyed having problems in the open so they could go public with their woes, as she put it. As the time for Keith's schooling approached, Clive built a shelter at the gate of their property; Keith would ride there, lock his bike, and wait for the bus, or

the cooperating parent who would drive him into town. ‘You know lots and lots of words,’ his mother said to him. ‘Soon you’ll be reading books you bring home from school.’ He was taken in, he met the teachers, he had a school bag bought for him: there were only two months and his life as a pupil would begin.

One morning when they were talking over breakfast Keith asked what time he’d have to leave to get to school, and his parents realised they hadn’t defined that factor in the equation. Clive said, ‘Let’s find out now! We’ll have a race to the front gate. We’ll all ride our bikes, and you can ride your trike, Tania, and we’ll see how long it takes, and ...’

His son broke in, ‘We’ll see who’s going to be fastest! I bags a good start! You, daddy, have to wait here at the house until I wave my school bag to let you start! Mummy, you too.’ He paused. Claire said, ‘Well, if I have to give you a start, how much start are you going to let Tania have?’ The boy hadn’t expected this question. He tried to back away by saying that Tania could start at the same time as he did. She said that wasn’t fair; he had a bike and she only had a trike, and the wheels were littler and her legs were shorter ...

Clive settled it. ‘I reckon that tree that’s fallen over, the one with the birds nest in the bit that’s still standing up, you know the one ... I reckon that’s about halfway. You set off first, Tania, and when you’re nearly there, Keith can start off, and when you get to that bit of rope on the fence, Keith, you know where I mean, you give a wave and your mother can start ...’

‘And how much start do I have to give you?’ Claire demanded. ‘Your bike’s a racing machine by comparison with my old thing. You have to wait until I get to the tree that’s fallen over, that’ll be my start!’ Clive protested. ‘You’re one of the fastest women on a bike that I’ve ever seen. I’ve got no hope if I have to give you a start like that!’ They started to argue but the children wanted the matter settled, and the four of them took their bikes and trike to the long drive leading to the main road, on the edge of their view, where the argument over handicaps broke out again. ‘I’m off!’ Tania called, and pedalled as fast as she could, while

Keith hopped on and off the machine his parents had bought him a few weeks before. He realised before his parents that Tania had no intention of signalling when she neared the fallen tree, and set off early. His parents laughed at him pushing the pedals with his little legs as though a lifetime's fame depended on him winning, and a competitive spirit joined them, and separated them too, as they watched his progress until Claire leapt on, the question of her handicap still unresolved. Clive gave her what he later claimed was a minute before he pushed off, pursuing with rapacious speed.

Tania, looking over her shoulder, and still believing there was such a thing as victory, pedalled till her legs grew tired, and then, in a muddy patch where the shade of a tree had prevented some rain from drying out, she slewed off the middle of the track. Tugging her trike out of the mud, she saw Keith closing in, passing her just as she got on again. A moment later Claire, her mother, drew alongside, urging her to go after her brother, and then her father, competitive and keen, swept past his wife and daughter, catching Keith and passing him twenty metres from the gate, where he swerved and clasped the post with one hand, waving with the other at his family. ‘You started before you should have,’ Keith complained to his father. ‘No I didn’t,’ Clive said. ‘I gave you a good start and I had to ride really hard to catch you. I’m puffed, you listen!’ And he was breathing hard, though Claire and Tania, who were only dawdling by now, with the race won, had their breath back by the time they got to the gate. Keith consoled himself. ‘That’s the first time I’ve ridden the whole way to the gate really quickly. When I’ve been doing it for a year, we’ll have that race again, and we’ll see who comes off best!’

Proud of the competitive ability he felt sure was going to improve, he looked with some contempt on his mother and sister, who, having come last in the race, as he put it, had the cheek to declare that it had only been a bit of fun and it didn’t really matter who’d won. He knew who’d won - his father - and he knew who’d beat him one day, when he was older, and bigger, and more experienced. Him!

1963

It occurred to Claire, on the day she took Tania to school for the first time, that Bob and Fred, her brothers in law, were, in a disguised way, absorbed in themselves. They had little reciprocity with their wives. Their children were expected to 'get results'. They were active in local affairs because things had to be shaped to suit them. They studied anyone who came into their lives, knowing that to please someone was to 'get them on-side', the beginning of another's usefulness. They were generous to charities as a way of buying esteem. They did nothing, she saw, that could be said to stem from love of anyone but themselves. How had Clive become different?

She asked her husband to talk about his parents, his home, his growing up. He talked freely, but she couldn't see a way to the heart of the mystery: why were men who were so self-centred so popular, so highly regarded?

She decided that Bob and Fred - those common names - had somehow bluffed their communities into thinking they were the right-minded generous people they pretended to be. Then, made sullen by her contempt for them, she felt she had to ask herself where and how she was different. This meant identifying every scrap of selfishness in her own personality, and separating it, strand by strand, from other attributes. The place to begin was with her children.

Keith and Tania had drawn on her and Clive for the personalities they were forming, but they were separate, each having brought characteristics into the world for which there was no parallel in their parents: she and he were truly their guardians, a more responsible attitude, she believed, than the egotism implied by reproduction. This led her

to thinking about people's ways of seeing their children in relation to themselves. 'My' son and 'my' daughter: what strange, ego-centred ways of speaking! Why not 'a' son and 'a' daughter? This question hovered in her head for days. She decided, after Tania had been at school a couple of weeks, that she could, after all, think of her children as 'mine', but only if the word did not imply ownership on her behalf. What she did possess was not the person, but the responsibility for the person, a responsibility which had, carefully and with well-judged training, to be handed across to the developing person, the child on the way to being a woman or a man.

Those who couldn't make that distinction, she decided, still with Bob and Fred in mind, hadn't grown up themselves, and therefore could only hinder the growing up of young people put by nature in their care.

She decided to study the children of Bob and Fred in terms of how much harm their fathers' egotism had done them. She knew them well enough but knew also that much is brought into focus by the framing of a question that concentrates on a part of the whole. What was her question, then?

This formulation took days, simple as it sounded; she tried to refrain from thinking about it except in the hours the children were at school. Eventually she decided she wanted to know in what ways Tim - Fred's son - and Annette - Bob's girl - imitated ... replicated ... reproduced ... repeated ... their parents' ways without knowing it; she wanted also to know how far they were original, uninfluenced or unshaped by the parents; and she wanted to know if they had any view of what their parents were like if seen from a direction that wasn't a child's.

What sort of experiment do I think I'm setting up, she asked herself. It's impossible, it's inhumane to ask: and yet she wanted to know.

Tim, Fred's son, came to her home late one afternoon, looking for Clive. He'd been told by his father that Clive was thinking about buying a new car, and, cars being in the male field of influence, he had the idea of buying the one that Clive was trading in. Claire received him at the

door, and led him into the kitchen of the house she controlled now that the Brownings had passed on without being replaced. She told Tim, who looked as his father must have looked at the same age, that Clive was helping a neighbor with some fencing, and wouldn't be back for an hour or two. Did he want to leave a message? The young man was too excited to overlook his aunt's presence as his father would have done. Tactfully he let it be known that he'd like to inspect the car that he hoped might become his. Claire told the children she was going to the shed, found Clive's keys, and took Tim to the car. 'I s'pose I should ask, first of all, if Uncle Clive is thinking of getting a new one?' he said.

'He's thinking about it.' She considered him. 'You know what men are like with cars.'

He smiled. 'We think they're more important than wives.' She looked at him. He added, 'They're a lot easier to handle because we can trade them in whenever we like.' She was on edge by now. 'And who do you think would get the traded-in wives?' He chuckled. 'Better men than the ones who got rid of them.' Something else was waiting, then it came out, surprising himself. 'You wouldn't think we could be so silly!' Claire handed him the keys. 'I think you've just earned yourself a drive. Just a moment, I'll get the children. You bring the car to the front of the house. We'll come for a little drive while you see if it's what you want.'

He did it. She put Keith and Tania in the back. 'Tim's taking us for a drive. He's thinking of making an offer to your father for this car if he decides to get a new one. You have to decide if he's a good enough driver to get it. Okay. Off we go.' He turned to look at the children. 'I hope you give me a good report when your dad gets home!' He let out the clutch and the car moved smoothly down the track to the road, a fraction faster than Clive or Claire would have driven it. When they got back to the house, Keith reported, 'If daddy's going to sell the car I hope he sells it to you. You won't turn it into a wreck, I can tell.' Tania's verdict was, 'Very good driving. You're better than your father. He frightens me.' Claire looked at her in surprise, causing her to say, 'Only a bit, but he does, mummy. He's very fast.' Tim said of his father, 'Yes, he does

drive fast, but then he's driving all the time. It's something he doesn't think about. It's time that's keeping him from the next thing he has to do. Not much style, my dad, but he gets things done.'

Clive, of course, had to be told all this when he came, and he guessed what his wife had been up to. 'It was really Fred you were studying, wasn't it?' He laughed. 'Poor bloody Fred. He sat an exam without even knowing it! Question! Did he pass? Or fail? Or does he have to sit a ... what do they call it? A supplementary exam, is that the word, you know what I mean.' He was in great spirits; the thought of someone appraising one of his brothers unknown to the examinee was very pleasing. 'What's your answer darling?'

She said, 'His son didn't fail, so I suppose that means he passed. Don't you think?' Clive added, not bothering to wait until the children were in their rooms, 'Who's next to come under the microscope? Don't tell me, let me guess. One of Bob's. Now, which one? I think you've got your eye on ... Annette: am I right? Annette, eh? Am I right?'

He knew when he saw the flicker of a smile in her eyes. 'I feel I ought to warn her, but don't worry, I wouldn't do a thing like that. It'd spoil your fun ...'

'And yours!'

His happiness filled the moment. 'I wouldn't miss this for quids. When're you going to take a look at her?' Suddenly he thought he was being incautious. Raising a finger in the air he said to his children, 'Not a word about this to anyone, you two! Not a word. Your mother and I are having a bit of a game, and it won't hurt anybody, but we wouldn't like anyone else to know. You hear me? Not a word!'

The children weren't sure what was going on, or why it had to be secret, but knew what they had to say. 'Yes daddy. Not a word.'

Claire ran into Annette in the newsagency in Weldon. It was Saturday afternoon, and the town was emptying. Tennis was getting underway at the courts behind the Anglican church, and aspiring footballers were

doing their first training of the year. Annette, Claire could tell, was at a loose end. ‘What’re you doing these days?’

‘Nothing much.’

There was an immoveable glumness in her answer, as if her soul had been formed from glue, and had set, too hard, too young.

‘How’s your mother’s garden?’

‘All right I suppose.’

She wondered if anything ever set this girl’s mind on fire, or was she prey to rancour and sullen, jealous hostilities? ‘What are you reading?’

‘*A Passage to India*. We have to read it for school.’

‘You like it?’

‘I love it.’

Annette didn’t enlarge. Claire said, ‘Tell me about it. I’ve never read it.’ Annette looked cautious, as if she might give away things that needed to be kept hidden. ‘This stuffy young English woman goes to India. Falls in love with it, really. She’s taken to see some famous caves. She goes into them with this Indian man ...’

‘Is that dangerous?’

‘Very dangerous. We’re not really told what happens in the cave. I don’t think much happened at all, but a hell of a lot happened in the young woman’s head. In her imagination.’

‘That’s us all over.’ Claire thought it was certainly true of Annette; was it also true of her? How were men’s imaginations different, and, if you asked them, could they tell? She thought not.

‘The Indian man’s accused of ... rape, I suppose. We’d say he gave her a bit of a hard time. Except, maybe he didn’t. Maybe she gave him the hard time. You’re not told. So really, the main thing in the book, the thing it all hinges on, isn’t described.’

‘So you have to use your imagination, and that makes you an actor in the story yourself?’

‘Exactly. That’s why it gets me. He shows you, the writer shows you all the silly things that go on as a result of something that you’re not sure really happened. There’s a big court case. The British put the

Indian man up on trial. Doctor Aziz. In the end, he gets off. Most of the English stay in India, making nuisances of themselves, you suspect, but the young woman goes back to England, and you have to work out whether she's any the wiser for all the fuss she caused.' Annette's eyes looked into Claire's for understanding.

'I wonder where you'll travel when you've finished school?'

'I dunno, but I have to get out of here.'

'There's plenty of worse places.'

Annette's eyes drifted over the trivia in the newsagent's, things she'd seen too often. 'I'm sure there are,' she said, 'but I want to have a choice. You know?'

Claire, Annette saw, was sympathetic.

'If I stay here, my whole life will be organised for me. I'll never have to make any decisions, except whether I'm going to have three kids or four. And maybe what I'll call them, if somebody hasn't decided for me. I have to get away, Auntie Claire. Our teachers talk a bit - not much - about university, but if I mention it at home, dad wonders why a girl would go there because he thinks it's for lawyers and doctors, and it's right out of mum's world altogether.'

'Travel?'

'Who with? Where? They've got me all tied up. I feel if I stay here much longer I'll even stop dreaming of getting away. They get you so trapped that you're like a bird that's forgotten how to fly!'

This time, when her eyes rested on Claire's eyes, both of them knew how strong her appeal was: Claire had to support her. 'I went away to school when I was younger than you,' Claire said. 'In fact I came back at about the age you are now.'

'But you'd been away. You had a choice.'

'Not much. But what I did was freely chosen.'

'I wonder. A thing seems natural, you think it's inevitable. If it's inevitable, it's probably because you had no choice, you just accepted what was in front of you. I don't see people around here getting too many choices. Everybody watches you. They say they're trying to help

you. Help! They're making sure nobody escapes. They're making sure everybody thinks their prison is a comfortable home. You want to know how it should look? Read these magazines!' She flourished a pudgy hand with contempt. Claire realised how much she admired this girl, and how little she could do for her when she, Claire, was part of the restriction like everything else. She knew that when she told Clive about this meeting he would go quiet, and withdraw. Too hard. No option but to accept, what else did anyone do? For that matter, what was so wrong with what the girl was complaining about?

Claire said, 'I'm not sure I can offer you very much. But. Next time I'm going up to my mother's house in the mountains, perhaps you could come with me. It'd certainly give you some new horizons. How does that sound?'

She felt that Annette was attracted to the idea, but saw dangers too. Annette said, 'If you're serious, Auntie Claire, get Uncle Clive to mention it to my dad first. He's the key. If he doesn't want me to go, I won't be allowed. If he thinks it's okay, mum won't block it. But ...'

Claire waited.

'... what it really needs is for dad to think there's something in it for him. It'll be a breeze if you can make it look like that.'

Claire said, ending their interchange: 'I can see I need to think about this.'

Later that year, when the snow had melted, Annette accompanied Claire, Keith and Tania as they drove to Belle's house at Ben Avon. They travelled in a huge half-circle, avoiding the mountains, and entering them from the south. 'You'll see them all the way from my mother's to Cairngorm,' Claire told her companion. 'And when you get there, you'll think there's no end to them!' Clive was to bring the horses up the way he'd come the time he and Claire had met; Annette liked the story - as much of it as she was told - of the two young people meeting in the mountains, and marrying soon after, a union of those who lived on either side of the ranges. 'I'm longing to see it all,' she said. 'My exams

are behind me, I've applied for uni, I don't know how I'll go, and if I don't get a scholarship mum and dad won't back me, but I'm in there with a chance.' Her glance at Clare was an offering of herself: how did Claire see her chances? Was there anything special, or useful, even, in her for the making of a life? If she couldn't get away, was she doomed? If events forced her to stay in Weldon she'd have to forget the disrespectful, even treacherous, thoughts she'd been having. She could have no peace without acceptance, and it wouldn't come easily. 'These weeks with you, Auntie Claire, are going to be the start of something great, or it's going to be like the candle before it got snuffed out. You know?' Claire said, 'We'll have to see if we can read the future then.'

'I don't think I want to know unless I can be guaranteed it's going to be good.'

They reached Ben Avon just on dark. The fires Belle had burning in the kitchen and the lounge somehow emphasized the emptiness of the house. Claire was surprised when her mother gave Annette the room that had been hers: was she reading her mind in some way? Claire and her children had the room that used to be Scott's, overlooking the road, and looking across at the modest cottage where Scott lived now, with Audrey and their children. 'How are they, mother?'

'They're fine. They'll have seen you arriving. They'll call over later, just for a minute before the children go to bed.'

Her mother, Claire saw, was both fragile and persistent; it was as if the ageing process had gone into relapse before its final assault. Her household habits had been pared down to the finest economy. A table was set and their meal prepared with no apparent effort; Claire knew that this efficiency could only be achieved by a mind that thought of little else. You had to choose what was central, let everything else go, and maintain those central activities, backed, as you were at Belle's age, by a lifetime's experience hardened into habit. Belle hated anything to be done out of her accustomed order, and preferred, therefore, to act without assistance. The helper would only be a bother because she - or even Keith, who loved to be with his grandmother - would do things in

a worrying, improvisatory way that detracted from the certainty that was the reason for doing anything. Or everything. A butterknife, Claire saw, was for her mother as big an affirmation as the Lord's Prayer, or, for that matter, a day's drive to Cairngorm, surrounded by higher mountains than The Hurdle. 'It's good to be home, mother,' she said, and Tania and Keith were surprised at what was, to them, a displacement of their lives. This wasn't home, it was granma's! They said so, loudly, to the evident, and somewhat malicious, amusement of Belle. 'Your little ones don't think the way you do,' she said. 'I was brought up here,' Claire told her two. 'Before I made a home for you and your father, this was my home, and, as you see, it still feels that way for me. It's not something I can undo.'

Claire drove her mother from Ben Avon up to Cairngorm, feeling that this journey made many times in the past would live on in all their minds. It might be her mother's last ascension; it was Annette's first, and most memorable. For Keith and Tania, too, earlier trips were being subsumed, their mother felt, into this experience as the mountain entry they would always remember: it was therefore of new importance for her. 'I'll point out all the landmarks,' she told her children before they left, and she did, though it was Belle who asked her to stop at the top of the long climb out of Portree. 'Right here,' she told her daughter and the generation after, 'was where we stopped when we were bringing Thomas down to be buried. This was the last stop in the mountains, because the next thing, we'd be dropping down. We'd be putting the high country behind us, something he would never have wanted to do. We were doing it for him, so we were taking a decision he wouldn't have wanted us to make. That meant he was truly dead. All we were bringing with us, once we left this point, was a memory and a body.' She stopped, but had something held inside her. Claire said, 'And what did you do, mother, here?'

She said, 'I got out of the car ... Keith was on my knees, do you remember, Keith?' The boy was uncertain; Belle went on. 'The first

thing my eye fell on was a red leaf, with the sunlight catching it. I told myself, that'll do for a message. People think they get messages. They don't, they're just being sentimental, but we can't help it because we need messages. I promised myself that day that whenever I saw sunlight on a red leaf, I'd think of Thomas, and I do. Well, I'm sure I forget quite often, but that's what you're like when you're old.' She added, 'Like me.'

Keith said, 'There's one there!' He pointed. His grandmother looked about uncertainly, then saw what he was pointing at. 'That's your granpa keeping an eye on us,' she said, 'making sure we're not up to no good. He was always strict in his virtue. There's nobody like him today.' Claire restarted the engine, not wanting to let her mother awe the young people any further. *A Passage to India!* They were entering the mind of an old lady, widowed, devoted, used to ruling people via their imaginations and their uncertainties, two areas where she was not uncomfortable. They drove on, they arrived, lit fires, made beds, toured the garden with Belle issuing instructions about weeding, later in the day, or digging beds for new flowers. 'A garden that isn't being re-created is being allowed to die!' she announced. 'When I'm gone, Claire, I'll expect you to keep this garden growing, and changing as it needs to. Mind you set that responsibility firmly in your head!'

Late the following day, Clive arrived with their horses, and the day after, the family, except for Belle, who stayed at home, rode into the snowgums, Annette close to Claire, hanging on her every word. Claire said to her husband, 'Where do you want to go, Clive?'

He answered, 'Five Mile Plain,' and she knew he wanted to face his challenge.

They rode. At the edge of the valley the Portree had cut over thousands of years, they paused to look down. Annette sensed an undercurrent when Clive said, disappointment in his voice, 'Nothing doing today.' Claire laughed. 'Some things won't be bidden. It's just as well! You think about it. If we could make things happen because we want them to, the world'd be such a muddle! There'd be people who want rain and

others who want fair weather so they can play golf! There'd be droughts brought on by people who're pessimists, and half a mile away there'd be floods because other people wanted rain. It's just as well we can't control things. We're not to be trusted. We're too full of contradictions!' Clive and Annette could tell that she was happy with this pronouncement. Annette, wanting to draw her further, said, 'Could you tell us what you mean, Auntie Claire?'

Claire said, looking over the mountains which were the only suitable home for her restless soul, 'Clive wanted the cold cloud that comes swirling out of there to come today. He's curious. And I wanted it too, I have to say, for him, for you - it'd be a big experience for you - and for me. It's a special event for me, every time. But today, it's not to be. That tells me something. When the cloud comes, I feel I gain knowledge. Sometimes I think it's redirecting me. That means that it comes when I need it. Do I need it today? I think I do, but it thinks differently. It's wiser than me, so I have to wait until it's ready. That's healthy for me. It's a reminder that I don't know much about my life at all.' She switched her attention to her husband. 'Don't be gloomy, Clive. It'll come one day when you least expect it. You'll have about half a minute to work out how to get to where you can find your way home. Either that, or stay in the cloud, lost, unless you can hear it speaking.'

He studied her, troubled by the indifference, or carelessness, in the way she spoke of him. 'You don't get lost, do you. How come you can find your way?'

His wife pointed at the ground. 'Ask yourself how you know where you are. I can tell you your answer. You look at the sky, the ranges, the belts of trees. Things that are level with your eye, or higher. Well and good. But what about when you can't see them? You need to know what the earth's like, under your feet. Here!' She pointed again. 'Right there! What's it doing, how does the land lie, beneath your feet, where, most of us, most of the time, aren't looking? That's its message, really, now that I think about it.'

Clive was out of his depth, and given no test by which to redeem his view of himself; Annette thought her aunt was speaking in tongues, and Claire's children, though responding to the power in her voice, her vision, had no idea what she was saying. The party rode on, following the rim of the high, sky-blessed pasture to their left, or western side, and to their right the dark valley explored by miners long ago, and evacuated when the gold disappointed them, a valley with scraps of mining equipment here and there, bottles, bits of wire rusting to dissolution, a horse shoe or twenty, and trees and bushes to the number of stars in the night sky.

1964

Clive stayed longer than his wife expected. He rode around her cattle, and did jobs on the house. He patrolled the fences, making repairs where beasts had pushed through. He set traps for dingos, which involved riding into valleys, keeping an eye out for tracks. Belle said it was good to have a man around the house again, and she'd feel lonely when he'd gone, even if Claire and the children stayed on. Claire wondered what was pushing him to take this deeper interest in the high country; it hadn't escaped her notice that his trapping was on the Five Mile Plain side of the runs, not the western, O'Reilly's Plain flank. It dawned on her that he was trying to work out when the cloud would lift, and why it did so. She was wondering whether to put this to him, or whether it would for some reason be unwise, when he asked her, one night, what the name of the river, and the town it flowed through, further down, derived from. 'It sounds like a corrupt form of poetry,' he said, 'but I can't believe that's why they chose the name.' Claire told him, 'It's supposed to be named after a town in Scotland, but I've never checked the map.' Something in him was satisfied. 'We've got an atlas at home.

We'll have a look.' She felt the question had been raised to divert her from what he was thinking about; she listened closely over the next few days to his talk of the weather patterns, and the movements of wind and cloud. A day never passed without him riding on Five Mile Plain. One morning, as they looked from the edge, she decided to prise him open. 'What's your theory? Tell me what you've concluded.'

He smiled, as if she'd surpassed all previous bests. 'I had an idea you knew what I've been doing.' She said, 'It took me a while. You covered pretty well.' From one horse's back to another, he said to his wife, 'It's not a bad test of being properly married. You can't have secrets.' They laughed, happy for the moment to be together. Clive looked at the valley where she'd led her friends from school, years before.

'Cloud,' he said, 'is moisture-laden air. If cloud comes out of a valley, it has to be because that sort of air has got trapped down there, with a layer of different air on top, and later, the pressure of the layer on top has to weaken, so that the moist air in the valley has the higher pressure. That's when it would rise.' He looked at her, but she said nothing. 'So, if I'm right, you'd need two weather systems, pretty well straight after each other. One to get the moist air trapped, and one to release it. Does it swell onto the plains here, where we are, or all along this side?'

'All along. But it often starts here, because this is a little lower, if you notice.' He nodded. 'What I can't work out yet is what the second weather system has to be like, and which direction it must come from. It must be a sudden change, because from what you tell me, the cloud swirls up quickly. Now, next question. Does it only happen in the day? Or do you think the same thing happens in the night?'

She said, 'I've never asked myself that. If it's foggy around the house when I get up, I've always assumed that cloud has settled during the night, not that it's come out of the valley. But you see that's what I've assumed, I've never known how you'd check.'

They looked at each other, sharing what had always been hers. How he would respond when the cloud was swirling around him was still to be known.

Days passed, the Milky Way turned over in the cloudless nights; Clive said to his wife, ‘It’s time I took myself home. You want to stay on?’ She did. She packed the children’s things, and saw them seated in their father’s truck, with their horses in cabins on the tray. ‘Good job there’s only four of us,’ Tania said. ‘We couldn’t fit any more horses.’ Her father said, ‘You’d have to ride. That’s how we’d solve that problem.’ The girl was indignant. ‘You’d have to ride! Mum could drive, couldn’t you mum?’ Claire thought she could drive the truck if she had to. ‘There y’are daddy,’ the girl said. ‘Mum could drive us, see!’ Clive was going to tell her not to get cheeky, but he saw a sadness in his wife’s eyes. He looked at her, questioning.

‘I’m feeling divided,’ she said. ‘Most of the time, I’m all right about being here while you’re down there, but today it’s getting to me. I know it’s only going to be a couple of weeks, but I’m really feeling it today.’

Her children said she should come with them, leaving granma on her own. ‘She’s used to it, mum. She’s on her own at Ben Avon.’

Claire shook her head. ‘It’s something else that’s holding me. It doesn’t feel right to be going today, so I won’t. But I’m going to miss you. I really am.’

A moment later the truck was moving along the track to the dividing range, and the long descent to the third of her homes, the one that was basic to her children. It was the separation from what their lives were going to become that was hurting. She stood, peering through the snowgums for a minute, then, rather than go to her mother she saddled Buff and rode to Wallaby Spur, where she and her brothers had taken her friends from school. She’d written to them after Tania had been born, she’d had a note from Nancy and cards from Jennifer and Emma, and since then, silence. A part of her, she felt, was always alone. She turned at a signpost, and began what became the long descent to Jane’s Gate. She only wanted to go a little way, hoping for reassurance, but there was none. The grandeur held hostility, she felt, that morning. She rode close to the edge and looked down on the valley cut by the Portree and its tributaries. It was darker than usual because the sky was filled

with fast-moving clouds, heavy with rain. She thought fondly of her children and her husband, secure in their cabin, pressing into the storm obscuring the point where their track reached the divide. ‘They’ll be all right,’ she said to Buff, then got off, tied the reins to a tree, and moved to the edge. All, she felt, was depth or darkness. Lightning flashed, far away, and thunder, at the slower speed of sound, rolled across the valley. Again Claire felt isolated to the point of being meaningless. ‘There’s nothing,’ she said. ‘No god looking after us. Only our own charity to warm the world, our cruelties to fill it with horror. Up here I can see it. Down there’ - she was thinking of Weldon, and perhaps Ben Avon - ‘you can tell me anything and I’ll think at least it could be true. But here’ - the thunder rumbled again, underscoring a flash she hadn’t noticed - ‘there’s nothing but this vastness, and hardly a soul to penetrate it with warmth. My eyes, my consciousness, are not the only intelligence, because there’s birds and animals, and maybe even trees, but I rule over all that’s before me. I won’t always rule, because I’ll be dead one day, but I’m lucky, I’ve got children to go on when I’m like my mother and prefer to stay inside so I don’t have to look at these limits, which are, in a way, reminders of my end.’ That, she decided, was what gave the scene its grandeur: that was what grandeur was, in fact - an absolute indifference to human need. The ranges had no sense of being owned, or ruled, therefore they weren’t. If fire swept through them, they waited a few weeks, then put out growth. If storms crashed through, or lightning, they lived on, waiting, and when the sunlight came back, they knew that was impermanent too.

Claire got up, untied Buff, and rode to Cairngorm, the second, and highest, of her homes. Belle asked where she’d been. ‘I felt lonely when they left. The funny thing is that I wanted to be more lonely still. I rode down Wallaby Spur because I knew I’d be alone there, and I was. Oh mother, birds swirled out of the trees when the storm was coming. They do have nests, but they’re not protected. There’s no other creatures that make homes like we do, have you ever thought of that? Rooms and furniture, walls and ceilings, and a fire. No other creatures

can make this little safe world for themselves, so they have to swirl in the air, unprotected. I saw these birds soaring into the valley when the thunder rumbled, and I knew they couldn't protect themselves the way we do. They have to swim in the whole world, with all its cruelty and indifference to the fate of any one creature ...'

Belle said, 'Are you wet? Let me feel you. I don't want you catching your death of cold.' She put her arms around her daughter. Claire said, 'It's ages since you put your arms around me mother. It's nice. But it's not cold out there, just blowy, and I didn't get wet. There was rain about, but not where I was.'

Her mother said, 'Well, you'd do well to give thanks. If you've been spared, there's plenty that haven't. Where do you think your family would be?' She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. Claire calculated. 'They'd be getting near Letchville by now. Not far from home.'

Belle said, 'You've got yourself a good husband, Claire. He lets you go your own way.'

'I know that. I let him go his way too.'

'Yes,' the old woman said, 'but he hasn't got such a distance to go as you. He means well, and he's a fine man, but he hasn't got your imagination. We suffer if we've got imagination, but it's what makes us rulers under God!'

Claire wanted to argue about God, but it was no use. For her mother, God existed, and if she wanted to think so, then He did. As for her, the void was filled, not with supernatural guidance, but with thunder in spaces vaster than the mind could control. Only imagination could fill those spaces, and it did, giving her moments of exhilaration after which, trembling and wanting to lie down in the warmth of her mother's house - which would be hers - she was afraid. If, like birds flying to meet the storm, you let yourself be swept up by exhilaration, there would always be a fear beneath your ecstasy that you'd have to face, one day, one moment, before you could soar again, but you did want to soar, no matter what it cost, because the flying, the exhilaration, was worth everything you had to pay to get it. She knew why people gambled, or

took risks: they held in themselves a streak, a strand, of the thing that drove her to the edge of ecstasy. Had it gone on to her children? She wasn't sure. It mightn't come clear until they were adolescents, and by then she might be fearful, an indoors woman, finished with flying, waiting for the end.

1967

Keith was proud when he worked out how to ring his granma across the ranges. He knew where the phone was at Ben Avon and he thought of it ringing, black, imperious, where she would be alone, unless she had some of his cousins staying with her as, he knew, they liked to do, because she told them stories of a world that had vanished, but where the places had the names they knew: Portree, Crewe, and the rest. He told Tania and she wanted to join him. Together they rang, and spoke to Belle, who was admiring of them for managing something she couldn't have done at the same age. 'Keep it a secret' were her last words, but they had to tell their mother, who was slow to realise what they were talking about. She thought they'd imagined it, but they reassured her that they had in fact achieved it. When they were outside again, playing, Claire rang her mother.

'I thought they were making it up. As far as I knew, you were still at Cairngorm.'

'I was, until the night before last. Then I got back here.'

'Which of the boys brought you back?'

Her mother's voice came back strongly, 'I don't need to be driven. I rode all the way.'

'By yourself?'

'Of course I was by myself. Why do you sound surprised?'

Claire thought of the track, some of it not easy, and the fragility of her mother. ‘You shouldn’t put yourself to a test like that. Goodness me!’ The old lady snapped back, ‘I enjoyed myself. Billy’s a good horse. We’re used to each other. It was getting cold up there. The boys wanted to leave the cattle another three weeks, and I didn’t want to stay that long. I made up my mind, and I did it!’

Claire saw that making up her mind was the crucial step. The ride was the outcome of what had happened in her mother’s head. Belle was going on: ‘I thought of Thomas, and how proud he’d have been if he could have seen me. I had a bite to eat in Portree with Hilda, and when I got here I had a cup of tea with Audrey. Hilda must have rung her, because she had a fire lit here in my house and she’d left a note to say she was expecting me. So I went over. And I don’t mind admitting I slept well that night, even though I’ve been a little subdued since then.’

Claire wondered if her mother would get over it, and if she really wanted to. ‘You should have told one of the boys to drive you. They might have grumbled, but they’d have done it. They have to ...’ She wanted to say ‘look after you’, but knew it would displease her mother. She stopped, but Belle gleaned her meaning. ‘I don’t need anybody to do things for me that I can do myself. I don’t want people thinking I’m helpless!’

Claire, who’d been waiting for weeks since her last period had come, and was wondering if she’d entered the phase of life that followed, saw that when people asserted that they didn’t want something to happen, they feared that it would, and in protesting about it, in trying to show that it wasn’t to be feared, they showed their fear. We pick our opponents, she thought, and they are always a part, a reflection, of ourselves. ‘Well, I’m very glad you did it safely’, she began, but her mother broke in. ‘Of course I did it safely! How many times have I ridden that track, over the years. I did it with your father before you were born!’

‘I think that’s why I’m a little worried about you still doing it,’ Claire began, but again her mother broke in. ‘Don’t go on about that. I didn’t send you away to school all those years, which cost a pretty penny, I can

tell you, to have you lecturing me about things I shouldn't do! What I want to know is, when are you coming over to see me? I want to make sure all my affairs are in order. Someone should read my will. I don't trust that silly Mr Bailey in Crewe. He's all promises. "Yes Mrs Patterson, clause seven takes care of that." And I look at clause seven, and I can't understand it. I tell him to read it to me, and he reads it so badly I still can't work out what it means. And I need to show you where things are in the house. There's nothing wrong with Audrey and Hilda, but I want one of my own flesh to go through my will, and house, so that I know that everything's in order. When can you come?"

She's getting ready to die, Claire thought. 'I can't answer until I have a talk with Clive. He's in Tatunga ...'

'What's he doing there?'

'... helping his brother organise the sale of a property ...'

'Is he being paid for his work?'

'No, it's something he's doing because his brother needs him.'

'I've never liked Clive's brothers. They ask and they never give.' It was Claire's estimation too. 'Well, he feels he wants to.'

'Talk to him when he gets back. And get yourself over as soon as you can. I need to be sure that everything's as I want it.'

After she'd put the phone down, Claire went for a walk. The inland was so far from her mother, Ben Avon so far from her children. Clive would say, logically, that her mother should have a copy of the will posted to her daughter, and her suggestions could be posted back to her mother and the solicitor, and Audrey or Hilda could go through the house with Belle, being shown where everything - not that there was so very much - was kept; it would be ever so logical, but it would miss the point. Belle had made her last great ride, a trip that was only possible at her age because she no longer cared what effect it had, and that was because it was reunion with her husband of so many years that she'd wanted, and, having rejoined him in spirit she didn't mind when the flesh followed. If she was going to drive, Claire saw, and she was, she couldn't risk getting caught in the snow; it would have to be the long way around, a day in

the car. She wanted Clive to be back as quickly as he could, so she could tell him what she had to do, and draw on him for strength; not so much her body as her will was weakening as the loss of her mother's support impressed itself on her mind. Belle, having decided that she wanted to go, had, in some sense, already gone.

1968

Belle's funeral was held in Portree twelve months later. The cattle had been brought down a little earlier; Alec Patterson commented that they had, for once, done what their mother would have wanted. 'That ride. Silly woman! She took a risk she should never have taken, but she got away with it. Mother could always pull a bit of luck out of the air.' Sternly as he looked on his extended family, it was not lost on them that he was proud of her, and that the ride had been her last great claim. It gave her a place on the legendary plane the family liked to think it inhabited. Her photo was staring from the wall of her house, now Claire's, and Claire would never take it down. Belle the young woman, forever frightened and forever determined not to show fear, had taken her persona, created with so much force, into a world where it would never change. Conversation, family lore, could only polish it, neither adding nor subtracting. Belle was, in a way, perfected.

The Pattersons stood outside the tiny church in Portree, in no hurry to take the burial its next and final step. The minister from Crewe, calm in cassock and surplice, looked upon them gravely. He'd left his home shortly after sunrise for the service in the mountain town, and he'd follow the hearse back to the lowland so Belle could lie with Thomas. The family had half-apologised for this arrangement, saying that Belle herself had wanted it that way. 'We were used to these simple little statements which were, really, the firmest of orders, made when you weren't expect-

ing them. Mother's mind used to burrow underground, and you didn't know where she would pop up, or what she'd say, because you didn't know what she'd been thinking about.'

Scott was there with Audrey, Hugh and Gwen, Alec and Hilda, and the children their generation had produced. Andrew, the first of Belle's children, was buried in Crewe, so that those of the family who died later were made to join him. Claire, youngest of the five, stood with Clive, and Keith, the end of his secondary schooling in sight, and Tania, a shapely young woman not quite as mature, as calm and considered, as her mother was in the photo Claire would rediscover when she went through her mother's drawers. 'The hearse,' the Reverend Munster was saying, 'will travel at a modest speed, so the rest of us should have no trouble keeping up. The driver of the hearse has told me that he'll stop just before the bridge over the Glenaird, until we've all arrived, and then we can move into Crewe with our lights on, in procession, for the interment.' The men of the Pattersons accepted this, nodding; they liked time and space to move about them in an unhurried way so that their thoughts about an important occasion could move in their minds like a wheeling flock of birds, settling, at last, in the most natural un-composed, un-arranged way. They would talk freely, in their cars, about the wide world, with only the point where the road passed Ben Avon and Scott's house, facing it, as a stricture reminding them of the purpose of the day.

Two or three people standing in front of the Portree hotel were the town's only acknowledgment of Belle at the end of her eighty six years; the cars were past in moments, the town settled back, and the old woman was taken to her appointment with her firstborn, and the father of her children. Her sons and daughter followed, in the cars that never seemed natural to Belle, whose time had come to its end.

Keith and Tania had to get back to school, so they went with their father to the north-east, while Claire travelled with Scott and Audrey to Ben Avon, which, she knew, because she, alone of the family, had seen her

mother's will, was hers. Something of Belle's terse way of speaking had slipped through Mr Bailey's legalisms: 'My sons having been provided for in their lifetime by my late husband, I bequeath to Claire Lillian Ransome, née Patterson ...' Claire had smiled at this almost wilful insistence by her mother that her marriage, and adoption of her husband's name, was no more than an overlay, easily swept away if opportunity arose, though she, Belle, had made herself powerful by being the most Patterson of them all. To conquer you must join, appropriating all they own, putting their name on it as you do! Keith and Tania, though, were Ransomes, because those were their formative memories, and Belle Patterson, much as they held her in awe, inhabited a separate place and time. I married so late, and lived with my parents so long, Claire saw, that I became the keeper, the trove of memories, which to my children belong on this side of the mountains. My life is the bridge from my mother to them.

When Scott's car reached his house, Audrey said to Claire, 'You'll want a few minutes to yourself. We'll go in and get things sorted out, you come over when you're ready.' Claire was grateful; it was time alone she was being given. She walked up the drive, steeper now she was older. She stepped onto the verandah and a board creaked. She turned the handle and pushed the front door, half expecting spirits to rush out, but there was silence and the smell of a house inhabited by the same family for seventy years. Claire was unwilling to go in. Leaving the door open, she walked around to a shed her father had built when Claire was so small she couldn't remember what, if anything, had been there before. There were birds' nests, bags, tools, harnesses and machinery, boxes of chemicals, and pieces of wire that her father had declared might be useful one day. One day! What would she, new ruler, do with the wire? Throw it in a tip? Bury it in the earth? Or leave it lying where it was, in the way of farmers, until nobody knew who put it there, and then, after the property had been sold, some other people, with fresh purposes, could throw it away without feeling they were disturbing family ghosts?

Claire knew that she would leave the wire where it was.

She looked at the back and northern sides of the house that was now hers. It needed painting, and the spouting had rusted. Her mother had told her that the engine that produced electricity needed to be replaced. She didn't bother looking at it; the electricity grid would pass the door in a few years: she'd use kerosene lamps until then. She'd always hated the noise of the generator, because light should be silent, not the product of a sound that broke the peace.

She pushed open the back door. Her mother's teapot was on the kitchen table. She picked it up, and felt, from the weight, that there was still tea in it. Of how many thousands was this the last? She started to walk down the passage to the room that had been hers, but the teapot drew her back. Belle's cup had been washed and put away: it was sitting in its accustomed place, a willow pattern blue and white. The teapot was wrapped in its knitted cover, trying to keep it warm, though, like Belle herself, heat had gone out of it days before. Claire, in an urgent accession of a feeling she couldn't have named, and certainly couldn't control, pulled the cover off the teapot and rushed through the back door. Almost running, she got well away from the house, into long grass - another job to be tackled if anybody, ever again, wanted the house under control - took the lid in one hand and tossed the pot so its dregs were flung into the grass. Claire jerked the pot violently to ensure that it was rid of leaves, then she went back, and turned on a tap beside the steps, partially filling the pot so it could be emptied, definitively, one last time.

Relieved, purged, though she couldn't have said why, she took the teapot to where it had been standing, replaced the cover, and pulled her mother's chair out from the table in the way she'd seen Belle do countless times. Then, leaving the kitchen, and closing the front door from the outside, as she'd opened it a few minutes before, she turned her back on Ben Avon and crossed the road to Scott and Audrey's, where, naturally, it seemed to them, though it was almost horrifying to Claire, a sort of invocation of the dead, she was offered a cup of tea. 'Freshly made,' Audrey said, meaning to cheer her up, 'and ready to pour!'

In the morning, Claire said to Audrey, as they washed the breakfast dishes, ‘I didn’t sleep as well as I should have. I kept thinking I ought to be in the other house. I’ll sleep over there tonight, though it won’t be easy. I’ve got this feeling that if I don’t do it now, I never will.’ Audrey put a plate in the rack to dry, but Claire picked it up at once. Audrey said, ‘Too many ghosts in the old place?’

Claire thought, a tea towel in her hand. ‘I suppose ghosts is as good a name as any. Too many associations. It’s so much to take on, a big old house like that!’ Audrey said that Belle had let the house run down in her later years. ‘She did, but you can fix a house by spending money. It’s the personal gap, though. You’d know this. When a house has been filled with a family’s life, how can you fill it up again? You can’t. All you can do is maintain it, and I’m not sure I want to.’

A few minutes later Audrey watched Claire crossing the road and walking up the drive. She saw her sister in law step onto the verandah where there was a creaking board, and open the front door. When Claire disappeared, Audrey moved inside her house, a heaviness in her heart for Claire.

Belle had simplified housekeeping by shutting the doors of rooms no longer used. Claire opened them, one after the other, and raised the windows, forced by the proximity to notice the condition of the curtains, some of which she remembered from her childhood. The fabrics, never of good quality, had aged. She wanted to rip them down, but restrained herself; her energy was needed for something else, a decision, perhaps. When every door and window was open, she went outside, looking at the house from the clothes line her father had placed to catch breezes moving across the saddle, then turned her back on it and walked up the slope, conscious that, years before, she’d dashed over this same terrain that her ageing, and her mood, had made more difficult. She climbed until she came to a rock. She’d sat on it as a child: she sat on it again. Her eyes moved over the ranges and the cleared country. It was hers, now: was she accepting?

This question translated itself in her mind to another: was she happy to be who she was?

She said aloud, with the long valley and a blackened stump to hear her, ‘There’s no escaping unless I sell the place, and move across to Clive. I’d be wiping myself out, and becoming someone else.’

So that was her answer: could she accept it, or was dislike of herself to be a companion in years to come?

She looked on the house, its doors and windows open, pleading. She wanted it to shed its memories, releasing her as it did so. There was no hope of that. Its memories were hers, and would remain until she followed her mother, then new people could give it life, or tear it down. Feeling protective, she stood, and made her way down the slope until she was again at the clothes line. There was a tall post at either end, with a cross-arm. If you wanted to put things on the line, or take them off, you used a pole with a hook to pull down the side you wanted, while the other swung high in the air. She’d always found this funny, for some reason, and had carried the pole for her mother, laughing when Belle brought the sheets and shirts down to her basket. Claire looked around; where was the pole?

She went into a shed, she searched through the detritus of years until she saw what she was looking for. Why had Belle put the pole in the shed?

She had no answer. It was there.

She picked it up and took it to the line. It was heavier than she remembered, and the cross-arms of the line were stiff, but she managed to get the hook on a wire and bring it to the height of her shoulder. It made her chuckle. She’d always wanted some system in the way her mother hung things on the line - smallest to biggest, or things of the same colour together - but Belle had always, with brutal lack of system, hung things in the same order as she picked them out of the basket. ‘All my childhood,’ Claire said, speaking aloud again, ‘she never once did it the way I thought she should!'

It hit her in that moment that she'd accepted. She could hang things any way she liked. The house and its responsibilities were hers. She looked at it. She felt it was gasping with relief at being allowed to go on, in the same hands, or their continuity, as before. It was hers, she'd sleep in it that night, and she'd bring it back to life. Where would she start?

In the days that followed, Claire took charge of the house, burning, sweeping, dusting ledges. She took note of jobs to be done - leaks, painting, boards to be replaced. At the same time she became aware of a change in her brother Scott, and Audrey. They were reviewing their opinion of her, she could tell. It was only when she was on the long journey to the north east, and her children, that she realised it had been summed up in her brother's response to her scornful denunciation of something he'd said: 'You're getting like your mother!'

Scott had laughed triumphantly, and Audrey had leaped up from the table to gather plates, but that, she realised, had been the thread joining their unusual reactions. Watching from across the road, Audrey would have seen the continuation, perhaps even the rebirth, of Belle in the vigorous, impatient figure putting the old house in order. There was a huge pine tree not far from the back of the house; Belle had slapped its trunk, through the years, with rugs and mats to beat out dust. The bark of the tree had a grey band from the dust. 'Entered its soul,' Claire used to laugh, as a schoolgirl, but when it was her turn to purge the house, ready for renewal, where else did she beat the rugs and mats? She'd calculated how many head of cattle the place could run and budgeted an amount to be spent on the house each year until it was as good as the day it was built - or better! Scott and Audrey had seen this with amusement and even, she sensed, some malice: their sister had the job of being Belle in the next generation, which meant they were free to go the way of their own choice, not their mother's. They'd lived, Claire saw, beside Belle for too long to like her any longer. This meant that if she was to be the next Belle, they would, with superficial courtesy, hate her.

She'd gained too little at too great cost.

Tania and Keith, when she got back to them, were so loving, so considerate, that she sensed that Clive, having taken some reading of her psyche after the loss of her mother, had instructed his children to give their mother an extra warmth. Which he gave too, yet she noticed that his physical affection, when they lay in bed by night, was not the demand for satisfaction she was used to, but a tenderness which came from concern, from attentiveness to her needs which, loving as it was, came from a man whose perception of her had changed.

So, she saw, she'd changed. An old woman had died, and she'd been moved into the vacant place: this meant the place was necessary to them, so she had no choice, except in how she went about it. Coming back, after being away from her family, she saw how like Clive her Keith had become; when he was nice to her, Claire saw, it was an extension of his respect for his grandmother, mixed in with what he knew of his mother, and wanted to give. She'd changed for her son; this must have been happening over a long time, but she hadn't noticed. Tania, too, was, unusually for a girl at her school, studying mathematics as well as history and French; to Claire's pride, she was a high achiever, but this meant that it was only with boys and girls in her classes that she had conversation offering insights. We support her, Claire saw, she's grateful, but she's finding a way of her own. In years to come, when she's got achievements behind her, I'll be the dowdy, admiring figure in the background that everyone's polite to: 'You must be so proud, Mrs Ransome!'

And Clive?

They'd made a pact, years ago, of togetherness in separation, and he'd compensated with carefully adjusted changes to his habits. There were things he referred to her, and things he didn't; why some things were this, or that, she couldn't have said. His decency, his unfailing courtesy, meant there were layers of his being, rarely brought into play, which she hadn't affected. To remain a Patterson - and she was more than ever one now - she'd had in some measure to prevent herself being more than three-quarters married. When she embraced Clive, in the paddocks, in the shed, the garden, in front of the fire at night, she knew

he knew that she'd realised, at last, what they'd made together: what, in a word, they'd done to each other. One night, when she'd embraced him by the fire and asked him to turn off the light 'so we can be together in the light from the flames', he said quietly, 'I'll make a cup of tea for us now,' and she felt something in her heart give way. He came back to a darkened room and his wife sobbing into her hands, and he knew that there was some chance of rescuing the years to come, but only by allowing that the years behind had been informed by decency, and need, rather than passion. He put her cup in front of her, and sipped from his, sitting a little apart, but concentrating on the feelings emanating from his wife: still his wife, of that there could be no doubt. He'd lived truly by her, and that, he knew, was part of the reason why she was crying.

'It's best for you to cry,' he said. 'It gives us a chance to go on.'

Keith announced, as his schooling's end approached, that he'd work on the land: 'Dad, or Uncle Robert or Uncle Fred, can get me started. I don't mind working interstate to get experience. It's probably best if I'm away for a while. You won't be embarrassed by my mistakes,' he said cheerfully, amusing himself at his parents' expense; hers, mainly, Claire thought. He was starting out. It was a wonderful time, and a time of sadness, a time when their rearing of him, their training, would be put to the test. She feared that if he went away there might be a midnight phone call to say that he'd crashed a car, or malicious whispers finding their way to his parents about drunkenness, or the pregnancy of some ill-suited girl. The proprieties of her girlhood had largely disappeared, swept away by influences she'd never really considered. She looked at her husband, waiting for him to respond. Clive's reaction was unlike her own.

'What sort of experience, that's the question. You want something that's as far from what you already know as you can get. That way, you won't be making comparisons with what we do here. Another thing: you want to pick the sort of people you're going to work with. They might be lowly people, or wealthy, but you need to be curious. If they're lowly,

how do they survive? If they're rich, how did they make their money, and what did it do to them? You need a reason to be with them. It mightn't be a reason you can say much about, but there has to be a real curiosity, so you can grow in what you're doing.'

Claire reacted quickly to his advice. 'Aren't you telling him to find someone else to model himself on, not like us? What sort of advice is that? Haven't we tried to form our children to be the right and proper sort of people we want them to be?'

When Clive replied, it was almost a body blow. 'I could hear your mother speaking, when you said that.' Claire felt her cheeks grow tight. He went on. 'What we give our children is a foundation. A good foundation if we're good parents. What they put on the foundation is up to them. That means they have to bring new ideas in, or else they become a second-hand version of us. Who wants their kids to be like that? Not me. It's too unadventurous. I think parents want to be proud of their children, not look at them and think, "He doesn't amount to much." Well, that involves a bit of risk. They can't succeed unless there's a chance they might fail, can they? I think,' he said, turning now so that he looked on his son and not his wife, 'that he should think of a few alternatives, he should tell us what they are, we should give him our comments, and then he should make up his mind himself. That how you see it Keith?'

The boy smiled; his father said, 'I'll bet he's got a few ideas already, which we're going to hear about in good time.' Keith burst out laughing. 'Good one dad!' A minute later the men - for so Claire had to think of them - were driving away in the utility, and Claire was brooding. The young man's decision had been taken out of her hands; was she only the guide for Tania, or had that young and watchful woman chosen a path to maturity that would involve minimal influence from parents? Whenever, in Tania's development, Claire had thought she should be pointed in a certain direction, she'd found, once she applied herself to guidance, that she was too late: Tania had foreseen the fork in the path, and chosen, already, the way she was going to go.

That makes me no more than a support, Claire realised, and really that's all I've ever been. She looked down the road where the utility had gone. Young men leave home, she thought; they need to be in the big, free, open air: it was the choice, it suddenly occurred to her, that she, a woman, had made for herself, and yet, paradoxically, she was, as a result, responsible now for no less than three homes, two of which were empty, while the third was a nest containing young only a little longer. Birds are always flying away, she thought, making homes only when they need to. My needs are almost exhausted: am I on the way to emptiness, or will something big and mysterious fill me? She thought of the cloud that had swallowed her when she was six. It seemed to her that what she'd heard in the cloud was a deeper speech than humans could voice, and that to be able to hear it was to be different, but, beyond that, to be vulnerable to something you couldn't begin to describe. The dust of the vanished utility was settling, now, on the road; the men had gone wherever they were going, Tania was at a friend's, eyes blazing, no doubt, at every new thought, and it was she, Claire, whose life was needing to be filled.

1970

A letter came from Longreach. Keith had been working on a cattle station, but was moving on. 'I'm still undecided. I could head up to the Gulf, or I could follow the channel country down to South Australia. Or there's always someone going through to the Alice. The distances are so big, nobody wants to tie you down. They accept you if you stay, they let you go if that's what you want. It suits me at this time of life. I don't know which way I want to go, but I know I want to move on. I've been here a year, it's been great, but it's time to roll over the horizon and have a look!'

Claire read it twice, then put it on Tania's bed for when she got home from school. She was in her final year, studying hard to get the marks she'd need for university. Claire found her daughter awesomely informed. She took for granted opinions that Thomas and Belle Patterson would have banished her for holding, yet had no sense of being radical: 'I read, I look up things I don't know about, and I draw conclusions. I don't tell people around here what I'm thinking, because they'd be afraid. I can see fear in their eyes that you might have ideas in your head, so when they're talking about tennis ...' she laughed '... they're actually inspecting you to see if your mind holds bad thoughts. I don't let them see mine. I talk tennis too!'

Claire recognised in her daughter something that had never had a chance in herself, and couldn't restrain her, because she wasn't sure how that hard-minded Claire had been prevented from arriving. When she tried to trace the strand of her being that had never developed, she could find it only in the years before her schooling in the city; something in the Methodist training had subdued the toughness of a fully active mind. Service and a certain soft gentility had been held up to the girls as desirable, and somehow she'd lost the habit that had come out in her daughter.

She was glad that Tania's development and her parents' lives hadn't overlapped; she'd have been forced to take sides, either, unthinkably, against her daughter, or against herself. Clive was easier with Tania than she was. He described the qualities that troubled Claire in simple ways like 'being independent', 'having her head screwed on', or 'she's going to go a long way', and nothing about her troubled him because she was so strong-minded that she would never expose her family to disgrace: Claire would sometimes say to Clive, 'Is disgrace the only thing you fear?' and he would say, 'Yes. If I get sick, or have an accident, I'll bear it, though I'll hate it, because I'll know I didn't cause it to happen; it happened to me. But if I was disgraced, it'd be because I'd done something stupid, and the fault would be mine. Anything wrong with that?'

She had to concede there wasn't.

Later in the day she noticed herself glancing into Tania's room as she moved down the passage, each time letting her eyes fall on Keith's letter. What she was really thinking about, she realised, just before Tania arrived on the bicycle she rode from where the bus dropped her, was what Tania would say when she wrote to her brother in ...

He wouldn't be in Longreach; they'd have to wait for his next letter to know where to write. Tania would be thinking what to say, and when he read the letter Tania wrote, it would be more relevant, more pointed, than the thoughts she or Clive could offer. So the capacity to identify important events moved down to the young, while the passing generation were less able, with every year, to say anything that mattered, except, in the formal confines of a will to say 'It's yours' to the children they'd brought into the world.

The sight of the letter, as the afternoon wore on, gave her a pang in the heart; she was relieved when she saw Tania in the distance because when the young woman read the letter in the privacy of her room, the thought processes of creating a reply would be underway, and the movement of the age groups would have shifted an imperceptible stage.

Tania was exhilarated when she came in; she'd been riding as fast as she could. Claire fussed over a drink, but Tania said, 'Milo mum. I'll get it. No need for you to bother.' Her mother looked so disappointed that she added, 'I'm not helpless!' The asperity in her voice was, Claire felt, a permanent factor in their situation. She was about to say, weakly, 'Anything interesting today?' when Tania burst out: 'I told you about Wonky.' This was the students' name for their maths teacher. 'He drifted off in class today, first period after lunch.'

'He went to sleep?'

'No, not that sort of drifting off. He started whistling. And beating time in the air with a little brush he carries. I've told you about his brush. Nobody knows why he's got it.'

'Does he paint?'

'Not as far as anybody knows. He started conducting with it. We all nudged each other and watched him. It must have been a minute or two before he opened his eyes. When he did, we all started clapping, and Sam, you know Sam, he called out, "Play it again sir! Great stuff!" Wonky didn't even look embarrassed, he just said, "Anybody need any help?" Sam got a bit cheeky, he said, "I'm not too sure where I am sir. Can you tell me?" We all laughed. Then Wonky says, "How come you don't know? Did you leave the room for a while?" We just about wet ourselves.'

'Does he often do this?'

'Wonky? Not really, but, yes, he does drift off now and then.'

'And you like him for it? Or not?'

Tania thought. 'Yeah. We like him better because we can laugh at him, and he doesn't mind. It sort of lets us know he must laugh at us, and I guess we need that. We have to take ourselves seriously, otherwise where are we going to end up? So we have to laugh at ourselves, and the way we do it is laugh at everything we can. Wonky's a prime target. He's so quaint.'

Claire thought about this. Did young people advance by finding the weaker members of the generation before them, and ease themselves past, laughing as they did? If you took yourself seriously, as she did, were you insisting on standing in their path? She rather thought you were. She said, 'Didn't you tell me he's over fifty?'

'Forty-nine. He told us yesterday. We all thought he was older.'

'How did he come to tell you his age?'

'It was the answer to a problem. Forty nine. None of us could do it, so he worked it out on the board. When he got to the bottom line, and it was forty-nine, he said, "Nobody got it? I'm surprised. You keep me under observation most of the time. It's my age." So of course there were lots of jokes, and I could see Mr Remington looking over his shoulder as he went past. Mr Remington's suspicious of Wonky. He knows he gets good results, but he can't see how anybody so ...'

The word, both knew, would matter, because it would reveal.

'... puerile, actually, could be so effective.' Tania waited for her mother's inevitable question.

'You really think he's puerile?'

'No. Yes. He's supposed to be teaching us, so he should be keeping us under, bottled up, he should be making us scared to fail. And he whistles music with his eyes shut. He leaves it to us, and we laugh at him. We probably love him, at the same time as we wish he'd push us harder.' She thought. 'He's a problem, really.'

'It sounds to me as if he's got the same problems as you have. The students in his classes.'

Tania said, 'Spot on mum! It's like watching a cartoon that's based on yourself. It's hard to go to his classes sometimes, because you know everybody's going to crack up, and the reason is, we want to crack up, and the reason for that is ...'

Claire waited, then finished it for her: 'It's hard, it's painful, in fact, for you to take yourselves seriously, because if you do, you let the possibility of success and failure, real, long term, lifelong success or failure, break into your lives. Isn't that it?'

Tania pulled the cupboard open, grabbed the Milo, then took a milk carton from the fridge. 'If you say so, mum. Let's get off it, can we? Anything happen for you today?' She spoke as if there was fat chance of her mother having had an event.

'There was a nice letter from Keith. It's on your bed. He's going to leave Longreach pretty soon, but he's not sure which way he'll go.'

'Great. I'll read it.' Tania rushed to her room, closing the door.

1975

Tania's graduation drew them together. Keith flew back from Geraldton where he'd been working with a mining company. 'How do I look?' he

said, referring to a suit he'd bought that afternoon. 'I crossed the country in my working clothes because that was all I had!' He hugged his sister. 'Ya proud of me? Let me hear it, loud and strong!' Tania pinched him on the inner thigh. 'If you're like the boys I know all you want to do is get it off!' Clive coughed. 'Okay dad, I know where we are. I just had to let my kid brother know how things stood!' They had arms around each other. Claire looked around the lounge. 'We can't go in till everyone's here. It's not a roll up later sort of place.' Keith appraised his mother. 'What sort of places have you been taking her, dad, while I've been away?' Clive smiled wistfully. 'Only the places you think you know too well, I suppose.'

Keith caught the sadness, the awareness of time lost and parenting having an end, in his father's voice. 'Okay, an announcement. Before the rest get here. I've left Western Mining. I'm back. I'm working for you now, mum and dad. I've seen all I need to see, and I'm coming home.' It was so weighty he began to joke. 'Tania's going to set up one of her friends to marry me, and I'll be right! Eh?' Tania pretended to scoff. 'You'll have to spend a lot of time on your knees if you want someone to marry you. How much have you got saved up?' Keith, not answering, looked pleased with himself; Claire remembered a letter that said he tried to live four weeks on one week's pay, and bank the rest. Then Tania said, looking at the entrance, 'Here they are! Together, which means they met beforehand when I told them to meet me here!' A group of ten or a dozen friends of Tania approached, subdued only slightly by the presence of parents and a brother they hadn't met. 'Okay,' Tania said, before introducing them, 'where have you been and how long have you been there?' A blond, engaging boy said to her, 'In the Imperial, just across the road. We thought that's where you were going to meet us!' It was such a lie the young people burst into laughter, making Clive and Claire conscious of their age. 'Okay you hoons,' Tania said. 'Introductions! This is my mother, and father, and brother.' Claire and Clive felt pride in her voice, a wish that they should present themselves as well as she was going to present them to her friends, who did, beneath the laughter,

want to have fine people on a layer above them. ‘Claire Ransome, née Patterson, and don’t you forget it.’ Claire’s eyes ran across the eyes examining her. ‘Clive Ransome, my dad.’ She smiled, and Claire saw how successful Clive’s quiet, trusting way of being a father had been. ‘My brother Keith, who, this time last night, was in Western Australia, digging up oil, or mineral sands, or something, and is now - he’s just announced it - coming back to be a man on the land!’ Keith clasped his hands and waved them like a winning sportsman above his head; Tania’s friends could feel his openness, and the trust of a man who had no dis-honour in his nature. One of them said, looking at the thirties-stately lounge, like something from an ocean liner, ‘This is a fabulous place to celebrate your graduation Tania! Where’d you get the idea?’ Tania said, ‘I’ll tell you when we get into the dining room,’ and began to move, but Clive coughed, in his serious, signalling way, and produced a camera. ‘I think we’d better record this!’ He began to signal Tania’s friends to crowd around, then Tania burst out, ‘You’re not taking this dad! You’re not leaving yourself out! You get everyone lined up while I get one of these people’ - she indicated the hotel staff - ‘to press the button.’ In a flash she was across the room. ‘Very organised, my sister,’ Keith said. ‘Always was. Comes from you, mother, doesn’t it?’

The young people were looking at her. ‘No more than from your father’s side.’ Keith grinned. ‘Come on, mum. When someone gives you a compliment, take it with both hands. Show it off!’ He was overflowing with happiness. ‘We don’t get’em all that often!’

By now Tania was on the way back with the woman, a decade older than herself, who managed the lounge. ‘Okay everybody, this is Willa. Yes, you heard it, Willa! She’s going to take the picture for us, thanks very much Willa, it’s good of you. Now! Dad. Where you are. Mum, beside him. Touching, don’t press yourself against him. Keith, next to mum. Space next to dad for me. Everyone else ...’

Claire said, ‘That’s wrong, darling. You should be in the middle. It’s your night. It was you who graduated, not your father and I.’

Tania looked at her mother with the piercing eyes she'd always had. 'Two points mum. First one is, we're going to take two pictures. Two. One with me and Keith in the middle, one with you and dad. Okay? Second point, if you think about it, you and dad graduated today as much as I did. Keith knows what I'm talking about. So!' She shuffled her friends into place, taller boys behind, the others crowding on the left and right. 'Okay Willa,' she said, handing over the camera, 'go for it!' She tossed her head twice, letting the long hair settle, before she stood beside her father. Willa glanced at the camera so briefly the group saw that she'd done many times, for others, what she was doing for them. The camera was raised to her eye, pointing. Claire remembered, suddenly, and for the first time in years, the photo she'd brought home to her parents, thirty-seven years before, on the day when she'd returned from school in this same city. It was in a drawer beside her bed at Cairngorm; she'd have to study it when she was there next, and this celebration, this transition passed through, this gathering dispersed. In the waiting, the pause, she wondered what sort of woman Willa was, then there was a flash, and the stranger's voice was saying, 'I'll take another before we rearrange the group. Okay everyone, smiling now. Once again, before we move you.. Not bad, more smiles from you girls there. There!' She was nodding, two of Tania's friends were caused to giggle. 'Lovely, that's it. Okay!' Click, flash, and it was done. Tania took over. 'Everyone else, stay where you are. Okay Keith, you and I in the middle. Mum and dad, move over. Sorry. I forgot to say please!' She said it so girlishly the young people burst into laughter, Keith roared, and even Clive and Claire, on the brink of tears, had to smile at what was happening as they lived through these brief, precious moments when one new life - or two - took up front position.

1980

Claire had never been interested in gardening, and Keith, whenever he was with his mother at Ben Avon, was on his horse the moment he'd eaten. Claire rode with him, leaving the house empty until they got back, when, for the most part, they got the combustion stove roaring, ate quickly, and were out again. At night, though, reading quietly, Claire was aware that the garden had been dying for years. Occasionally she stepped outside, standing at a spot on the verandah where a pine tree, already huge when she was a child, blocked the light from Scott and Audrey's place. Audrey dabbled with flowers and vegetables, but had little idea of how to use a garden to give a house its setting. Claire knew she lacked the dimension entirely. At night, if she stood on the verandah, it was the stars in the sky that claimed her, turning as the night wore on. Lying in her bed, even with Keith in the next room, she felt she was a survivor from another age. If she came without him, Audrey told her not to sit in the house on her own but to share the evening with her and her brother; their children, too, had grown up and left. Claire always went back to Ben Avon early, saying she wanted to get around her stock at first light: they knew it was her way of being on her own. They were lonely, too used to each other to have anything to say, and wanted the voice of an outsider, but Claire had no wish to give; it was the dying of herself, the absence of new impulse, that held a fascination for her. If she looked at her house, standing in the garden at night, she saw one light in the darkness. Occasionally she toiled up the slope to the rock where she'd sat, years before, after the death of her mother. She liked the detachment she felt, on the rock: it was as if her soul had removed itself from her body, which was lying, bound by sleep, in the bedroom

below. When I go down, she told herself, soul and body can unite; while I'm here, I'm out of body, with no ability to influence events. Sitting on the rock, she was aware of the sounds and movements of animals above and below her, of possums, horses, wallabies drinking at her dam, and, in her imagination at least, of insects, spiders, lizards, tiny things making no sound as they went about their business. Life! Death! She had four hundred cattle whose breathing would cease and blood would spurt when she decided to sell. They too moved about at night, or got down on the grass to take their weight off their legs. They struggled to get up when she rode past in the morning. When she got back to the north-east, Clive would ask, 'How were things over there?', and she'd tell him, faithful to the detail, but what he was asking, and she could never share, was what it was like to be in the old house on her own.

It was a question that distressed her and one that drew her back, again and again, to the house she'd had renovated, and the garden which, she knew - she could feel it, even at a distance - was dying with the same, quiet inevitability that was moving her.

When the snow had melted and the days were warming, Keith drove his mother to Ben Avon. Audrey saw them arriving, and crossed the road with a bundle of mail. 'Most of it's not very interesting,' she said, 'but you've got a letter from Thailand. Who do you know in Thailand?' The intrusive question would have been justified, if anybody had thought to arraign her, by Audrey saying it was part of a family's support for each other: to be able to support, they had to know! Claire told her sister in law, 'It'll be from Tania. She's running a training program. But why did she address it here?'

Audrey invited them to her house. It was a routine, born of loneliness, that Claire had never been able to break. She said, 'I'll get a fire going in the stove, then I'll come over. You go now, if you like, son.' Keith and Audrey walked between the rows of pines, starting to break up from age. Claire watched them walking away, got the fire started, then slit the envelope. Why had Tania written to her here?

Looking at the letter, she felt as if Tania had read her mind.

Mum,

When you get this you'll have Keith and maybe dad with you. Tomorrow you'll get all the stock in the bottom paddock, ready for the road. The day after you'll open the gate before the sun comes over The Hurdle, and the big migration will be underway. How many years has it been happening now? I've forgotten. Was granpa the first, or did it start before him, when he was a little tiddler? I want you to take photos this year, mum, and send them to me, all you can get. I don't care if there's a few silly ones, I want every one you take. I can't be with you this year but I want to feel part of it still. I'm in the tropics, and it's hard to get used to. Really I suppose it's the pollution that gets to me more than the humidity, but whatever, it takes a lot of adjustment. And I am adjusting, but I keep thinking of you and dad and Keith, back home, and it gives me a bit of a wrench. I'm running courses in statistical method for an insurance company. They're nice people, though their methods won't stand much examination. I guess that's why I'm here. They show me things, I'm making lots of friends, and they ask what it's like where I live.

That stops me every time. I want to take them from Ben Avon to Cairngorm, but if I so much as say the names they look at me as if I'm strange. (Have you got the slow combustion burning, mum? Go on, put some wood on! I want to hear you swishing out the teapot before you make a fresh pot, mum! Mum, you hear me! Go and do it now!)

Claire rose from the table, obeying her daughter. She took the teapot to the sink and rinsed it, before dropping two spoons of leaves in the bottom, then she lifted the lid of the kettle to see how close it was to boiling. She knew Audrey would be doing the same thing on the other side of the road, but this ... tryst ... with her daughter was too important to leave: she put the lid back and returned to the letter.

I would have said I knew every bend in the road between the two houses, but now I'm away, I don't. I've got the general impression, but I forget the details. Please photograph all the signs along the way so I can get them in order in my mind. (I know, I know, but I'm a statistician these days mum!) Also the views, the trees, the horses, the dogs, the cattle trudging along. And take note

carefully of when you think they realise where they're going. I always thought that when we let them out of the yards at Mount Macalister they - not all of them, but the brighter ones, the ones that should be in my stats class - knew where they were going. They remembered.

It's funny to think of animals having memory, but we do, so why shouldn't they? I've been exercising my memory really hard the last few days, trying to bring back the cold, the smell of the trees when you get into snowgum or ash country, the particular, distant, hazy blue of the ranges when you get a glimpse through the trees. I'm really yearning for it. I've been like this for days, though I don't tell a soul, especially the Thai people. Everything they show me makes me think of something they've never seen and never will, unless maybe I take one or two of them with me, with us, on that big trip one time. I hope it goes well, mum, this year, and for years to come. Don't you ever stop! Keith'll help! Dad'll help! Next year I'll take leave at the right time and I'll help. But it's up to you to keep us going, and I know you're doing it today. Kettle's boiling mum, enjoy your tea!

Claire put the letter down and lifted the lid of the kettle. ‘You’re a little too soon, darling, so I’ll have a word to Audrey first. But I’ll have you with me.’ She felt renewed as she crossed the road.

There was only faint light behind The Hurdle when Claire and Keith got on their horses. As they rode to the bottom paddock, he said, ‘Are you sad, mum, when you leave Ben Avon?’ She nodded, but it was too early to bring feelings into consideration: there was work to be done.

They opened the bottom gate, and got the mob onto the road, moving them quietly; horses, cattle and humans had a long day in front of them. Two hours into their trip, the cattle stopped to examine three riders coming in the opposite direction. Alec had said he’d send Tim and Bob out from Portree to help, but the third rider turned out to be Janet, the second of Alec’s three. ‘I’m staying with mum and dad,’ she told Claire when they’d greeted each other, ‘and I couldn’t resist a bit of droving!’ Claire felt as if the unexpected female was Tania in another form, and Janet brought support. ‘Mum’s got heaps of stuff prepared.

She says when we get near Portree, a couple of us at a time have to go in for lunch, then send the others when they get back.' Claire told her that she was hoping Clive would reach them about the time they got the mob to the town: 'He's driving through from the other side. I've got a horse for him in the paddock behind your mum and dad's.'

In abbreviated messages they conveyed to each other their intentions for the day. The cattle plodded, sensing that their journey was to be an extended one, with a long climb before they would be allowed to rest. The riders acquired some of the qualities of their horses, speedy, patient, responsive, pacing themselves to the task, and of the cattle themselves - gripped by the inevitable. The morning passed, then they breasted a rise to see, at last, the valley where Portree lay, confined by ranges in ever-receding lines. They rode down, pushing the mob before them, to find Alec and Hilda on their verandah, smoke writhing from a chimney, and a newly arrived husband saddling his horse. 'Tie him up again, Clive,' Alec commanded. 'You can share the first sitting with your wife!'

As the day wore on the cattle were pushed through the settlement, then into the mountains. By mid afternoon the riders were letting the mob drink where water poured from a spring on the side of Mount Macalister. 'They're getting a bit weary,' Clive pronounced. 'We're making good time. We won't have to push'em. But don't let'em slow down either. They have to feel the pressure's there to respond to.' The others heard, accepting. Clive said to his wife, 'Do you want to ride ahead to the hut? Take the pack animals and get their stuff off them. Get a fire going.' Claire resisted, then she caught the eye of Janet, still with them; Tim and Bob had gone back to Portree once the mob was at the top of the Long Cutting. 'You want to come Janet?' Janet agreed; the two women pushed their way past the cattle, leaving them with Claire's husband and son. 'See you at the yards. In an hour or two,' Clive called. Claire cracked her whip by way of answer. Keith cracked his whip fiercely, best of his generation, and laughed. 'Have the kettle on, mum!' His acceptance, his pride in her, were touching, but it was Tania who'd been with her all day, from her first movements in a darkened house until now, in a forest

of tall, refined trees, flourishing in air that was colder than the foothills. Claire remembered lines from the letter she had in the pocket of her blouse; had Tania, in Bangkok, been thinking of her today? Moving with them, tracing on her mind's map where they'd be at each hour from light to darkness? Claire felt she had, and hoped that the journey in the mind had been its own reward, because it would be days before she'd be able to write back, and even then she'd not be able to extract from the day its poetry, its re-enactment of what had been done, season following season, by her family down the years.

1981

It was the thickest cloud she'd ever seen rising from the valley. Keith was scared. It was moving slowly but with certainty. 'Quick!' he told his mother. 'We've got to get out of here!' She said, 'If you're not comfortable, ride on home, but I'll stay. I find it rather thrilling, to tell you the truth.'

'You won't be able to see a thing when that gets here. Don't be stupid, mother. Shake a leg!'

But she was fascinated by it, feeling it must have a stronger message than usual to tell her, because it was so majestic, with an air of having chosen that day.

'Your father used to worry about me,' she told her son. 'My parents wouldn't let it get anywhere near them, but I became used to it at a very early age. Six, in fact. I don't get lost. I find my way home. I'll do it again today. But if you're not comfortable, that's all right. Ride home. I'll only be half an hour behind.'

Keith was almost as troubled by the remoteness of her voice as he was by the moving cloud. 'Mother I can't leave you here. You won't have the faintest idea where you are. It'll be around us in a minute!'

The cloud had lifted to be level with the plateau. Keith sensed that it would rise a little more, then surge sideways. He looked anxiously to the belt of trees where the track - hardly more than a few droppings and hoof marks - would show them the way. 'Go, son,' Claire said. 'It's making you anxious. I welcome it. I've been experiencing this all my life. If that troubles you, I'm sorry. But it's important to me. Ride home now. Stoke up the fire. I won't be far behind.'

He said, fidgeting in his saddle, 'Why are you doing this? It's so silly! Can't you see it like any sensible person would see it?'

His mother said, 'No! That's exactly what it's about. I'm not sensible when it comes to this. I need to know! I hear what's going to happen when the cloud's around me. All right? It's my voice, my vision, call it what you like. It matters to me. Without it I'm ...' she wanted to say she was nothing, but that wasn't true, and was too harsh for the young man whose practical sense she was rejecting '... not worth very much. Go, darling. I'll be with you soon. I can see it's upsetting you, but I want to be in it, so go. Please go! No, don't stay with me!' She saw the conflict in him, and tried to settle it, against herself, was it, or did she really want to be alone?

She did.

Desperately troubled, he touched his mother's hand, telling her, by the gesture, that he didn't expect to see her again and that he was doing a shameful thing - but he was riding across the plain to the belt of trees where the track led back to the yards, the houses, the gardens, the fires, stoves, beds, chairs, photos of the family, the station's account books, the diaries of family members, and - this was what he was most afraid of losing, after his life - the memories of the Pattersons who'd entered this region and made it their own. Claire watched him riding, dignified even in his panic, then, seeing him reach the trees where the track was clear, she turned to face the cloud swelling from the valley.

It had never been so dense. It was sitting at the edge of the valley, exactly at her level. It was swirling with internal energy, static in its position for the moment, yet she could tell, looking at the instability of the

mass, that air currents and pressure systems were in a fierce but narrow disequilibrium about where, or whether, it would move.

Something gave, and it flushed across Five Mile Plain: in hardly more than a moment it had swirled around Claire Ransome, née Patterson, and the latest of her horses, named, this one, Bounty, and Claire couldn't see the ground at her horse's feet. Then he did a treacherous thing. Scared, he sidled backwards, and twisted, as if to find a way to confront this monster. He'd turned them around.

How far? Claire jumped off, clinging to the reins, then, solidly on the grassy earth, she replayed in her mind the horse's movements, first forward, then in reverse. She dug a line in the ground with her riding boot, then chided the horse. 'Silly to be scared, Bount! It does nobody any good. For a moment you took my direction from me. You haven't got a nose like a dog for smelling tracks. You depend on me. You mustn't throw me out. Now calm down, calm down, Bounty. Let's see what it's got to say to us.'

It was thicker than she'd seen it. It swirled till she could hardly see her feet. Bounty, she could tell, was terrified. He wanted to stumble through the cloud in panic, lost until it moved away, somewhere in the following day, perhaps, but Claire was keeping her feet steadily on the mark she'd gouged. When the cloud had spoken she'd want to move, and had to have a bearing.

She waited. Bounty calmed a little, his will yielding to hers. The cloud thinned; she saw, first, the mark at her feet, then, for a second, quickly vanished, some rocks to her left. They were where they should have been. That much was safe. What word?

'There's always an end', came a voice. 'It will be like this.' Claire lowered her head, looking at the mark on the ground, which appeared and disappeared as the cloud thickened or abated. 'You must be ready for the void', it said. 'Your children have replaced you.' Claire felt fear in her. Had it come to take her? Warn? Or merely to frighten, so that when it came in earnest she was ready?

'To make you ready', the voice told her. 'Look after your husband. He must come when you come.' The voice grew distant in the last word. Claire knew the message had ended. She stood in the swirling cloud, tears streaming from her eyes. She hadn't been called this time, but she'd been warned that the next call would be for her - and her husband: she'd often wondered if one would outlast the other, and she'd been told. She looked about with eyes that couldn't penetrate, amazed that something so alien could be so frank, so attuned. 'My husband,' she said to the cloud. 'My son. My girl.' The cloud was indifferent, and cold. Claire's waterproof coat was glistening with moisture. Did Moses come down from his mountain saturated, she wondered, and the silliness of the thought made her facial muscles perform the gesture of a smile of relief. 'It didn't say how many years I've got,' she told Bounty. 'I have to make the most of them.'

Keith left the high country a week later because his father needed him. Watching him ride away, Claire felt that something had changed. It was partly his awkwardness over the cloud, and partly, she felt, a change inside him. He was detaching himself from her and possibly from Clive. It was a development she supported because she felt it was the beginning of a wish to marry; there was a readiness about him to outgrow what they'd made him, and enter his transition with a woman from outside. When she herself was back in the north, she asked her husband what he thought about it in, of course, their best time for talking - bed at night.

Clive rolled on his side.

'There's something going on. You're right. When he got home I had the feeling he'd left the high country for good. And a couple of days later I got the feeling that I'd been relegated too. Nothing unpleasant, he was nice enough, but he'd made a decision of some sort.'

'I don't think we make those decisions. I think they creep up on us and by the time we realise them, they've already happened.'

Clive thought. 'That could be.'

'Go on. You felt he was leaving you.'

'I did. A funny thing happened one afternoon. I was in the house, here, at a time when I'm normally never inside, and the phone rang. It was a teacher from the school. The one he and Tania went to. This woman sounded ...'

A tremble entered his voice. Claire supplied, 'Pretty sexy?'

'Very. But hang on. She didn't ask for Clive, she asked for Leslie. I said there was no Leslie here, nobody but me. I asked her what made her think that Leslie, whoever she might be, was at our place. Well, she closed up at that. Said she was sorry, must have been given wrong information, that sort of thing. I told her Keith was in the mountains with his mother, trying to see if she knew what I meant.' He paused. 'And did she?'

'Oh yes. "On the high plains," she said. "When will he be down?" I told her my best guess, then she said she'd pass it on to the people who'd given her the wrong idea of what he was up to, and she hung up. Never even said her name.'

'Did you tell Keith?'

'Yes. No fuss about it. He said he didn't know why anybody would think Leslie would be here. He thought he'd met Leslie at a party in town, but he didn't really know anything about her. He wrapped it up by saying he'd try to find out what was going on. End of story. He hasn't said a word about it since.'

She thought. 'He'll marry Leslie, or the one that rang. He's ready. He's grown out of us. It's funny, Clive, he's going to do the opposite of me.'

Clive said, 'What do you mean?'

'When I married, I wanted to stay a Patterson. You've been good to me about that. I know what it's cost you.'

'We're still together.' He said it with both love and patience in his voice.

'I know what it's cost you. Keith's stayed with us, though, longer than was good for him. Now he's ready to be gone. In fact, somewhere in himself he's gone already. He won't come back. I don't know what

he's going to become, but you and I are going to be running the properties on our own from now on. Hiring people. We've been two families under the one umbrella, now we're going to be three. Or four, depending on what Tania does.'

Clive rolled on his back. 'Where does it end?' Some anxiety about his daughter was troubling him. Claire said, 'It doesn't end. That's the point. We end. They put us in a box and get rid of us, but it doesn't end. It goes on, and on ...'

He said to the ceiling, 'You think we're just an episode in an endless serial? *The Days of Our Lives*. You remember *Blue Hills*?'

She laughed wistfully. 'I've lived my life in them, and where's it got me? Tania makes more money than I've ever had, or my brothers. We've told ourselves a story, and we've convinced ourselves. Meanwhile the world gets on with its business, leaving us behind. It's not sad, it's not foolish, it's just what we decided to be.'

He took her hand. 'It was a good choice. Trouble is we only get one.'

Tania could tell that something was changing. From Sydney airport she rang her brother. 'What's going on?'

'How do you mean?'

'There's stuff in mum's letters. Static. Things left out. I can tell who the cause is. So what's going on?'

He tried to head her off. 'When will you be home?'

'About an hour and a half. Robert's picking me up.' She knew what he was trying to do. 'Don't change the subject. What's going on?'

He saw that it would be smarter to use her than try to fend her away. 'I'm involved,' he said. 'Okay to use that word? With two people at once. Which means I'm confused. And also means I'm having a great time. I'm hardly ever home, except when dad insists. They're called Leslie and Helga. Helga's Swedish. She teaches maths at the high school. You'd probably understand what she thinks about. I'm only the ...'

She felt scorn for his embarrassment. ‘Call yourself the man in her life.’

‘That’s certainly it! And Leslie, she teaches there too. It’s funny, going to the same place where we went to school, only I’m going there for ... because ...’

‘Are they living in that flat across the road from the science block?’ He said they were. ‘How do you manage that? Both in the same place?’

‘Well, it’s sort of shifts ... if one’s out, or away for the weekend ...’

‘You can’t keep that going very long. Have you made a choice?’ His silence told her he hadn’t. ‘You want to keep having both of them? They’d know, or if they don’t, they pretty soon will. They’ll gang up on you, Keith. You’ll lose both of them. Maybe that’s what you want?’

‘I think it is. Have them both, lose them both. Have a good time, even if it’s not for long.’

‘I hope you realise I have to be on their side, not yours.’

This made him stronger. ‘You say that, but you can’t carry it out. We’re tied together. You can’t get rid of me any more than I can get rid of you.’

‘What do mum and dad say about it?’

‘They don’t know about it.’

‘I’ll bet they do. They mightn’t know the details, but they’d be onto the general situation. Dad’ll be asking around.’

For a moment both of them tried to see it as it would appear to those who’d brought them into the world. Then she said, ‘Hang on.’ There was a pause. ‘They’re calling my flight to board. Ring me at my place tonight. Don’t do it from home, and don’t do it from the girls’ flat. Find somewhere else. Now. Before we stop, here’s a question to think about. How long do you give yourself before you know you’ll want to settle down. You don’t want to settle now, you want to have the biggest fling you can. Anyone can see that. But how long till you ... how much is enough, that’s what I want to ask. Tell me your answer tonight. Seeya!’ Her voice was gone. He put the phone down, alone in his parents’

house. Looking through the window, he could see their car, coming back from Weldon, groceries in the back, the stockings his mother had said she needed, stuff dad had bought at the hardware. Parents couldn't undo their bonding. It happened, somehow, joining people who'd been individuals, separate, sexual and free.

Between the bondage of being in one family and the bondage of starting another there was this brief aperture for people like him. The newsmakers, the fashionably photographed, pursued, and written about people could have lovers without end, until they realised that fame and glamour bonded them more cruelly than any but the harshest family law. Freedom, he asked: do I want it?

Yes, he wanted it almost as much as he lived for the moments with Helga and Leslie.

Tania's question: how long did he want? When would he be ready to select a path, a partner, and remain? His parents' car was crossing the cattle grid, and would stop beside the house. His indecision made him think of his mother's cloud, the cloud of knowing, she called it: he wondered why anybody could call confusion anything but unknowing. That was the state of people whose fate was being settled. He went out to carry things in from the car.

Keith and his father were fencing. They reached a low-lying patch where the ground was soft. They'd need to protect the fence with strands of barbed wire. Keith drove into town to get it. He loaded the rolls of wire and went to the bank. Coming out as he arrived was Helga, the Swedish maths teacher. 'When you've got your money, come round to the flat. No. I'll wait with you. You can drive me round.' Keith flushed; he should be on his way back. 'What's wrong?'

'I haven't got long. Working day for me. How come you're up the street at this time of day?'

'We're having a curriculum day, but most of the people who teach my subject have gone to a conference. So I'm a free agent.' That, he saw, was an invitation.

'Quick cuppa then. I really have to get back.'

She was amused at the conflict in him, and annoyed. A victory was to be sought. 'Always a cuppa! The great Australian substitute.'

'What's it a substitute for?'

She felt she had him. 'You tell me.' He was uncertain. 'Bank first, then my place. In we go.'

He felt awkward about going inside with her except at pubs and parties. Bank people knew him from his family, an identity he wanted separate. She watched his transaction. Putting his money in his pocket, he was rushing her, she felt, and walked to his vehicle more slowly than he wanted to walk. He started the engine; they drove.

'Drive around the back. Put the car under the tree.'

He was used to this. It meant that it couldn't be seen from the school. He was surprised when she filled the jug. 'I truly don't have much time, Helga.' She ignored him touching her. 'You have all the time there is.'

'And it's never enough.'

She granted him some interest. 'Then we have to scale down what we want to do. It's either that, or we rush about, night and day, trying to fit in more things.' He knew she was teasing him, trying to interrupt his day; he knew that the more he rushed things, the slower, more indolent, she'd become. It was a game at which she was skilled. It would be easier for him to play the game if he were genuine, committed, in love, but he was none of those things, just a man hungry for sex, exploring, trying to find from lustful experience what this central force did to people's lives while they used it for gratification. As if she could read his mind, she said, 'You could always have a breakdown. Engine trouble. Or did you run out of petrol, I forget?' She was laughing at him, and he couldn't escape, much as he wanted to. The sexual force had him: he'd met her on a day when she was free. She wanted him to spend it with her. He was so tense that he knew that something in him was close to breaking. She knew it too, and was curious, testing to see what would happen. He was, though he couldn't have said it, being used as he wanted to

use her. It was a contest for which he had no description, only instinct. Something told him he had to relax; that his tension, though it filled him with energy, destabilised his defences.

In a flash he saw what he had to do. He stretched, wishing he could yawn. He'd sit her out. Bugger the fence. It could wait another day. Dad could walk home. Being a Ransome could go on hold; he'd get back to it. He thought briefly of Tania; if she could see the pair of them, in Helga's kitchen, with her bed in the room opening off, whose side would she take? Helga's body was on offer, tempting, waiting for him to make a pleasing approach, not a grudging one. He remembered what she'd said, last time he'd been with her. 'Have you thought any more about seeing the parts of the country you haven't seen yet?' She nodded, waiting. 'When would you go? What time of year, I mean?'

'The end of the year's coming up. They say they want me back, but I don't know if I want to stay on. It's a big world, and this is only one little place.' She lifted a hand airily.

He wanted to sound decisive, but casual too. A big idea at a bargain price. 'I'll come with you. There's a lot of Australia that I've seen, and I could show you. And there's a lot more that'd be as new to me as it is to you.' He felt pleased with himself. She said, 'Wouldn't you rather go with Leslie?'

She had him pinned. He knew he was being examined by a relentless mind; strangely, she felt more vulnerable to him through the question. 'She's not an outback, open spaces sort of person.'

'What sort of person do you think she is?'

He was staggered to be asked, but knew no way of dealing with a question but to take it head on. 'She's an inward sort of person, very private. But sure of herself, because she knows how much she's got to give. No! Sorry! Wrong! She knows how rich she is, in an inner sort of way. That means she works on you in a certain way. She's saying to you - she's saying to me - this is yours if you'll share with me.' He looked steadily at her, not fully aware of the challenge he'd laid down. Helga said, 'We can have that tea later.' She turned off the jug. 'I'm learning

about you.' She put her hand on his shoulder. 'You must tell me more of your thoughts about people. They're very interesting. You shouldn't keep your ideas to yourself. Sharing is a good principle.' He was on his feet, following her to the adjoining room, and the love they both needed to get, and to keep secure for themselves, and to bargain for, relentlessly, selfishly, until one of them made the other certain.

His father was furious when he got back. 'I've been sitting under that bloody tree for the last two hours wondering where the hell you'd got to! How the hell can I run a property if you clear off on me when I'm working. Work ...' He sensed that his son wasn't accepting the rebuke.

'I've been with one of my girlfriends, dad. It's pretty tense. She wants me to travel around Australia with her next year, and I might be going to do it. And I might not. I might be travelling around the mind of another girlfriend instead! And I might be a bloody fool, and finish up with neither! And I don't know what's going to happen. So that's where I am at the moment, so if you think that a couple of chains of fence mean all that much to me, would you have another think?'

1921

For Belle, it was her easiest birth. 'When they told me it was a girl, I knew that explained it.' Thomas, humble father, was allowed to pick up their fifth child, and, though they hadn't then decided, their last. Belle's babies had entered the world over a span of twenty years, and she felt that this one, whom she had determined to call Claire, would end that phase of her life. She'd done enough creating; she'd maintain, from now on, advise, minister, train. Help, direct. Guide, monitor. Mother. The burden of fertility had been put down even as she entered Crewe hospital; something told her that this was her last. Though she couldn't

have said it, it was a resistance, a strike, on the part of her imagination. She couldn't think of herself going through it all again, therefore she couldn't do it. Thomas said, 'Claire', reverently, ignorantly. This was their first and only girl, and therefore a fitting end to a line of males. 'We've turned the corner, love,' he said to his wife, who knew what he meant. 'She'll take us in a new direction,' Belle said, with calm, pleasure and an ignorant benevolence in her voice. Thomas held the baby a little longer, kissed her, then handed her back.

1981

Keith's mother could tell when he'd been with Leslie; he was pensive, detached, yet also thoughtful and considerate. She brings out his inner quality, Claire saw, yet this puzzles him because he's not used to it. If she gets him, he'll go through a time of not knowing who he is.

Claire wanted Leslie to win out over Helga, and her son.

She was wise enough to say nothing that he could recognise as pressure on the scales. He could tell from her reticence that she had a position, but wasn't expressing it, and he didn't ask because he feared what he might be told. Whatever his mother had to say would sway him because he was evenly poised. Helga was leaving. Helga was travelling. She hadn't asked him to go with her, but he could; she'd left the opening there, and the challenge. There were maps in her flat, brochures; he knew he could give her a better experience of his vast country than the commercial operators, and he knew that she was leaving these things as a question, perhaps a request. What would he do?

Leslie was hardly ever in the flat she shared with Helga. Mostly she stayed with another teacher, Louise, and Louise's husband Ross, a phys. ed. teacher who thought Leslie should tell Keith Ransome to piss off,

because he was using her. Leslie, though, was keeping her energy to herself; ‘Waiting hurts,’ she told Louise, ‘but not as much as competing.’

Louise, who’d had a glamorous courtship with Ross, a glamorous wedding and honeymoon, and now enjoyed leadership of the younger set of professionals in the district, found Leslie a fascinating object of study. She was hardly noticeable in the house. She ate little, made no noise, yet had a presence that was hard to locate. Louise wanted to know what she was waiting for. ‘He’s used to getting his way. If you want him, you have to take control. So what are you going to do?’

‘Wait.’

Louise was aghast. ‘For what? What’s got to happen? He’s not going to fall on his knees, I can tell you that!’

Leslie was sure of her position. ‘There’s two things that have to happen. They’ll either happen or they won’t. It’ll take place inside him, and he’ll do them. Or he won’t. I have to wait and see.’

Louise thought this was pathetic. ‘You’re letting Helga make all the running. He’d love to take her round the country. Come on, Leslie, you know they’d look good, and it matters to both of them. Confident spunk. Dashing blonde. That’s what they are, and what they want to be. You’re a sort of shadow in his life. He’d love to get rid of you, but he doesn’t know how to do it - and he’d love to keep you, sure, but he can’t find a reason to do it. You’ve stopped sleeping with him, haven’t you?’

Leslie nodded. ‘Pretty well. For the moment.’

‘I think it’s over, Leslie. All that’s left is pain. I’d be moving on if I were you.’

‘I am moving on. He knows where. He’ll come to me, I think, but I can’t be sure. Nor can he. Interesting times, though sad for me. I’m too sure of myself. I don’t like to be kept waiting. If he doesn’t act soon, he’ll find I’ve stopped waiting. I’m not all that strong on patience. It hasn’t run out yet, but there’s a limit, and it can’t be far away.’

1922

Sitting in her high chair, baby Claire made a murmuring noise which Belle was quick to seize on. ‘She’s saying mum, Thomas. Oh, my little one, you’ve got your mummy wrapped around your finger!’ She bent to kiss the child’s brow. Her sons, seventeen, thirteen and ten, feeling her affection in some way working against them, laughed when their father commented, ‘She’s saying Um, um, um. She’s not too sure what she ought to be saying, so she’s having a bet each way.’ He grinned at his boys, but the male ascendancy had been vanquished in Belle’s mind. She straightened. ‘She’s addressing me, not you. She knows who you turn to if you want anything done in this world. A woman gets things done while men only dither. And boys are no better,’ she added, catching a smirk on Alexander’s face. ‘By the age of ten they’ve already got the marks of the man they’re going to be, and don’t you ever forget I said that, Alexander Patterson. When you’ve got children of your own, you remember it, and take a look in that brain of yours. You’ll perceive then, if you cannot now, that I saw, when you could not, what you were to become!'

Thomas put an arm around his wife. ‘We’re only teasing, love. The balance has been altered, with Claire in the house. The boys know that as well as I do. We just had to have a joke about it.’

Belle was not easily soothed. ‘I know about jokes! Jokes are the way people say things they seriously believe. There’s no such thing as a joke. There’s things you can say with a straight face, and things that are meant so deeply that the only way you can say them is to laugh while you’re doing it. I know what jokes are! But maybe you don’t, Thomas Patterson, and you boys, all taking after your father. If you want to know what a joke means, ask yourself who’s getting laughed at. That’s the

person who's meant to be hurt! A joke is like a robbery. When it's over, some have got more, and some have got less. That's what you need to learn, you men; there's women who're clever enough to see through what you're up to, and we can stand up for ourselves! Mark my words!

Thomas reached for his hat. ‘They’re well marked, my love. Speaking of which, we’ve got cattle to attend to. Get those horses saddled, Scott. Hugh. You coming, Alex, or staying here?’

Alex looked at his father, then his mother. The power balance left him undecided. His mother said to him softly, still holding Claire’s fingers, ‘Go with your father, lad. Don’t be upset because I was snapping at him. We women have to defend ourselves. It doesn’t mean we’re not in it with you. When you come back I want you to tell me everything you see. It won’t be long before Claire can sit up on the horse with your father, and maybe with you, if you’re a careful rider. That’ll be the day! Get along, Alex. Your mother doesn’t need you inside, and your father wants you with him. It needs four of you to do what I could do on my own!’ She was smiling at her own venom, Thomas was saying to his youngest, as he kissed her, that he’d see her later in the morning, and the Pattersons, whether staying inside or fanning across the ranges, were together in their pride.

1981

She thought long and hard before putting the idea to her son. She had misgivings about intruding on his domain. On the other hand, he needed an intervention, or so she thought when she saw him sit down to meals, mind elsewhere, lifting his eyes occasionally to look at his parents with little idea, most of the time, what they were talking about. Work was a relief and he threw himself into it, rushing about the country, moving stock, shifting bags of fertiliser as if they were parcels from

the supermarket. He played tennis in the town, avoiding introspection because it meant decision, and he didn't want to be forced to calculate the gain and loss of settling on one of the women who'd disturbed his life. Claire found an opportunity to speak when Keith came into his room to find her making his bed.

'I'll do it mum. I shouldn't have left it like that. I was in a rush.'

'You're always in a rush these days.'

'Busy, busy, busy.' He laughed.

Claire said, 'I've got an idea.' He looked at her. 'Next week I'm going to Ben Avon. I want to look at my stock. Young Donald gets around them fairly often, but I need to see them for myself before we take them up on the plains. Do you think you'll be able to help me with that, this year?'

He sensed that a ring, a cordon, was being drawn around him, but well out, so it didn't look like a trap. 'I expect so. We've always been able to fit it in with what we're doing on this side.'

'Then I'll come back across the plains, to make sure we've got everything we need in the house.'

This was routine. He said, simply, 'Right,' and waited.

She said, 'I wonder if you'd like to bring one of your friends with you, this year. They're probably too busy at the time we're moving the stock, to come on that trip, but later, perhaps? There's an awful lot you could show someone, up there.' She waited, but there was no visible reaction. 'What do you think of that?'

He said, 'It's something they'd never get to see, otherwise.'

She used the same pronoun as her son. 'They'd be getting a look at the very heart of what you are, at least on that side, because it's what you and Tania - and she's never here, now - will inherit from me. From my side of the family.'

He saw it then, unsure whether it was a trap, or an opportunity. It was, he saw, a way of making up his mind. He couldn't take one to the mountains and go off with the other. His mother had provided him with a testing stone for his confused desires. Which one did he want to take

back into the mountains where his mother had come from, as opposed to the plains and vast spaces where he'd been saying he might go with Helga? He saw in a flash that if he offered it to Helga, it would seem a lesser exploration than the roaming of Australia's spaces she'd been planning with her brochures and maps. Why would it seem less?

Because it would seem, to Helga, to be a withdrawal, not an enrichment. His mother had, with a clear knowledge of what she was doing, reversed the balance to favour Leslie, whom he'd seen infrequently the last two weeks. Suddenly she was back in the conflict he'd almost resolved in the other direction. He flushed, his spirit sagging. 'What is it?'

'You've made me feel terrible mother. Again. Not you, me. When I say again, that is.' Claire said, 'I know it's agony for you, but you have to face a simple fact. Nobody can have everything. We have to make choices. We have to earn a living in one way, not twenty or thirty. We have to have one place where we live ...'

Keith scoffed. 'Says you! With three houses!' He felt he'd got on top when she'd had him where she wanted him. He laughed with a savage edge, as if mankind's foolishness was apparent at last. Claire unfurled a sheet, then moved to the top of the bed to press it into place. 'For goodness sake, mother,' he said angrily, 'I'll fix the bed. You don't have to do that.'

She wanted to say that it was exactly what he needed her to do, but restrained herself. She picked up the pillow from a chair and tossed it on the bed. 'Finish it then. Who cares who makes the bed? The bed just wants to be made, that's all. Anyone will do, so long as they make it, is that what you think? For that matter, so long as they sleep in it. Anyone? Or there has to be a choice?'

She'd played her highest card. Forcing a decision on him, she added, 'I think it'd be beautiful for you to bring a friend up there this season. As long as you like. Any time you like, or that suited your friend. I'll fit in with anything you decide, and I'm sure your father would say the same.' She left the bedroom and, to his amazement, a moment later

she'd started the engine of his car and was driving towards the town. He had a feeling of being cheated, robbed, but blessed with a decision that was a lot easier to make - and had to be made if he was to get the spiritual inheritance his mother was holding for him. Which of them - Helga or Leslie - would understand it best? He knew the answer, and it settled him because he had things to do, and then he saw why his mother had taken the car. He couldn't rush in to them. He'd have to sit back and think his way through what he was going to do. That wouldn't be easy, but it'd be easier than stewing in his mess. He wanted to laugh again, but only a sob came out, and he realised - a flash of perception cut into his mind - that he would never again, in all his life, laugh the savage, angry laughter that had come from him a few moments before. The crisis was over, and he had to get on with what came next.

1923

The boys stood around her. She was walking and talking, and knew her own importance. 'C - C - C - Claire! Give us a k - k - k - kiss!' This was Scott, the eldest. The little girl said, 'C - c - c - cuddle,' laughing. Scott's brothers laughed too. 'She's c - c - c - clever!' They laughed some more. Their mother came out of the living room to see them in her garden. 'Don't tease her, you boys. Get off and see what your father wants you to do. Go on, he's in the yards, somewhere.' She expected Claire to run to her, but the little girl didn't move. To the boys Belle said, 'Off you get. And ask your father to bring back the saw. He took it over there yesterday, and I need some wood cut for the stove. That'll be a job for one of you!'

The boys dawdled off, despite the stern gaze of their mother. 'They'd let their father do all the work,' she said to her daughter. 'They haven't begun to realise that everything depends on them as much as him. Or

us.' Claire was looking up at her mother; Belle, who was quite short, realised that she was huge to the child. She bent down. 'We do depend on you, little darling. I wonder what it is. You've added something to the Pattersons. They're not the same since I had you.' She realised that she was, effectively, talking to herself, since the child couldn't answer. Her marriage, too, had changed. Womanhood had brought itself level with manhood, though the numbers were uneven, but her gender had struck back, making them allow things that weren't natural to enter their field of thinking. 'Do you want me to hold you?'

Claire shook her head.

'Carry you?'

'Piggyback!'

Belle knelt, turning; Claire jumped on, knowing that safeguarding arms would clutch her, and her maternal horse rose from the ground, puffing as she got her legs straight, and moved inside, pausing, at the door, to let Claire grasp the knob and close it behind them.

1982

Claire was tense. She'd made bread, and had a pot of soup at the side of the stove. She had carrots and onions from her garden to throw in, and Hilda, who'd come up with Alec the day before, had brought sweet corn and beans. The sky was a cloudless blue. Leslie's arrival would be an initiation, and it had to go well. She'd been thinking of them all morning, winding up the divide to the point where they'd head south, drops on either side. Their horses would be peering out of the trailer behind their four wheel drive, and their clothes, and the extras they'd decided to bring, would be on the seat behind them. The excursion was so precious in the mind of Claire that it made the warmth, or scale, of her welcome somewhat onerous; she wished there was something easy she could do

to receive them in a way that didn't make them feel heavy: over-wanted. She wanted to be able to read them a poem when they came, though what the poem should be, she couldn't say. She'd even dug out a book of verse she'd studied in her years away at school, but they seemed dated, now, and juvenile from the association. Sitting on her bed, the book on her knee, she asked herself how much she'd altered with the years, and how much was the same. Of her brothers, Alec might have had an answer; Hugh and Scott didn't think about such things. 'Always been the same to me,' they'd say, pretending to themselves that ageing wasn't happening, or was, at least, being resisted.

This struck her as silly. She expected to live another five years, possibly ten - but possibly not. She had need, therefore, to make peace, because one should leave this life untroubled. The arrival of Keith and Leslie was important because it would mean that the transition in her son's life was successfully underway. If he was too much a Ransome to make Leslie a half- or quarter-Patterson, then he might at least show her how to appreciate what she was joining. The real burden, though, Claire knew, lay with her. Hers were the hands that must pass on. Suddenly she heard a sound, and a moment later the dogs were barking. She rushed outside, and there, on the point of leaving the main road for the Pattersons' track, was her son's vehicle; the passenger door swung open and a lithe, slim figure under a broad-brimmed hat was jumping out and fiddling with the wire and hook that held the gate. Distantly Claire caught Keith's voice, telling his friend - the euphemism wouldn't do - his lover, the woman who would walk down the years with him: his wife, in the months to come, when they settled on a date - how to undo the thing.

Leslie worked it out, the gate swung on its hinges, the vehicle rolled through. Leslie disappeared as she closed the gate, then said something to her driver. Keith drove across the house paddock, swung the vehicle in a wide circle, and brought it to a standstill beside his mother. She put a hand up to clasp the hand he was offering her, and together, close, without tension, full of completeness and satisfaction, they watched

Leslie striding through the well-browsed grass in the trousers she would ride in. Halfway between the gate and the admiring watchers, she bent to pick a flower, then straightened. ‘She’ll be twirling it between two fingers,’ Keith said to his mother. ‘She always does. It’s the simplest thing, and it’s so beautiful I can’t believe my luck.’ Claire squeezed his hand, then let it go.

Leslie came near. The dogs barked. Claire and her son restrained themselves from commanding the dogs to be quiet because they wouldn’t, and because a raised voice would have been in conflict with what was happening in their hearts. Leslie came to the vehicle she’d got out of a minute before, and put her arms around her second mother. ‘I wanted to walk the last little bit,’ she said, ‘to see how it felt.’ Still hugging her, Claire said, ‘And how did it feel?’

‘Very final, very beginning, and very complete.’ Leslie laughed. ‘Even at this stage. How’s that?’ Suddenly she looked shy, as if she’d declared herself too early. ‘That’s beautiful,’ Claire told the younger woman, and her son. ‘It’s a moment none of us will forget!’

1927

On an unsettled day Thomas took his daughter with him as he moved around his cattle. Belle had said to him, ‘I don’t want her coming home dripping wet and a serious cold starting up, Thomas!’ and he’d retorted, ‘You think I can’t see when some rain’s approaching? She can get under my coat.’ Now, at the edge of a plain, with a drop into darkness before him, he gave the little girl his feeling of certainty amid all the risk of being isolated. ‘They say there’s nothing to fear but fear itself. I say banish it. Always be sure of what you’re doing. Know how you mean to do it, but be ready to make a change if you have to. Respond to what you see in front of you, that’d be my first lesson in survival.’ It occurred

to him that he was speaking to express himself rather than to teach her; reining in the horse, he pointed. ‘Tell me what you see.’

Claire said to her father, whose hands, holding the reins, were in front of her, ‘Bobby ...’ this was the horse ‘... thinks he’s all right.’

‘Good girl. You’ve started in the right place.’

‘The trees are near the edge. You can always find the edge.’

‘Good. How do we get home?’

This made her think. ‘You have to know which way to go.’

‘How do you know which is the right way?’

‘You have to know what you did, coming out, then do the opposite, going home.’

‘Do you have to go home the same way as you came out?’

‘No.’ She thought. Her father waited, curious to hear what she’d say. He’d felt already that his daughter’s way of knowing where she was differed in some way from his. He trusted her instincts because she was good at getting from place to place when she was near the house. Now, at the edge of his domain, he was keen to teach, and anxious to learn. ‘If we wanted to go home a different way, how would we do it?’

‘Why would we want to go home a different way?’

He thought about that too. People get lost because they’re not noticing things that could guide them. The front of the brain is busy with something else, so they’re leaving themselves unguarded. They’re beyond their point of certain return, but they don’t know it. ‘Suppose we couldn’t find the cattle, so we rode along here for half an hour.’

She thought. ‘That’d be like riding along the edge of a clock, wouldn’t it?’

This made him pause. ‘What’s in the middle of the clock, where the hour hand and the minute hand hang from?’

‘That’s our house. Mummy. The boys.’

‘So, to go back? To get home again?’

‘You ride in to where the hands are.’ She pointed. He noticed that her arm was moving. ‘Point now. No, point where the house is. You’re making your arm move, but the house isn’t moving!’

She was undisturbed. ‘You said we were riding for half an hour. That’s moving around the clock, remember? So the house isn’t where it was when you started riding.’ She moved her left arm in a decisive swing.

‘Very good, darling. You’ve got the right idea. Now I have to teach you to recognise things when most people would say they look the same.’

She said to her father, ‘What’s down there?’

‘The Donaldson. You know that.’

‘How would I know it if I was right at the bottom, looking at the water?’

‘You wouldn’t, unless there was something you knew down there, like a hut, or maybe a blaze you’d chopped out of a tree.’

‘Like at Jane’s Gate?’

‘That’s it!’

‘How do people get lost, daddy?’ He looked over the ranges and valleys, trackless for the most part, and said, ‘Because they don’t know what they’re doing. They don’t know what to look for. They’re lost, most of them, about a minute after they start off.’ She didn’t know what he meant. ‘If they’re walking along, or riding a horse, and they’re getting along without anything stopping them, they think they’re doing well. But unless they’re reading everything with their eyes, and remembering what they’ll need to remember so they can find their way back, they’re losing themselves. If you go into something and you don’t know the way back, you’re losing yourself every step of the way. Sounds silly, but it’s true.’

He was pleased that he’d been able to teach this to his daughter, but he had a feeling that her absorption of it was so individualised that he, should she have been able to tell him how she was receiving this lesson, would have been learning too. ‘I like to talk about how you find your way in the bush,’ he said. ‘It’s very important for people like us, up here. But when I’m telling you things, you tell me what you think too, would you? I might learn something from you.’

Solemnly she said, ‘I’ll always do that daddy. I promise.’

1982

Three days after Keith and Leslie's arrival, Claire's husband went back to the north east. Claire, responsible for the visitor, hoped she didn't seem like a crusty Belle to the lovely, introverted girl. A week after Clive's departure, she saw Leslie close one of the garden's gates and set off into the snowgums, carrying a folding chair and a broad, flat bag. Filled with curiosity, she forced herself inside, and, when she could stay inside no longer, she saddled Bounty and rode him in another direction. It was a beautiful morning, but her feeling of being on a cloud, of being high, related, she knew, to more than the sunlight; it had to do with what Leslie was about. She's an art teacher, Claire thought; she's gone off painting!

To her embarrassment, an anxiety entered her about how she looked, to Leslie. The young woman had a fine complexion and a head of glistening hair, black as Asia, but light in its waves of movement. She had a way of sitting very still, composed, Claire had always thought, and now the word had another connotation: a picture had to be composed.

It had first to be found, and that meant taking a discerning eye to the world Claire had called her own since childhood; she remembered, happily, many rides about the plains with her father, who found her, she realised early, an appreciative listener.

And learner. Under an exterior of strength and determination - no illusion, these - he possessed that quality a later generation had come to call soul. He knew she had it, he knew that his wife didn't, and his sons were somewhere in between, not able to trust their souls, as he did, and put their judgment behind it when in doubt. In training his daughter, then, he was training himself in what nobody had taught him. Leslie, Claire thought, is discovering what father discovered in me and therefore

in himself. The ranges gained a new dimension. She rode, quietly, to O'Reilly's Plain, a place much loved by her father. She could feel his spirit as she moved, knowing where she'd meet him. On the edge of the Donaldson's valley, looking down, she remembered a day when he'd gone after cattle with his boys, leaving his daughter and wife to go home, and Claire to return with salt, to keep the animals from roaming too far. She reached the edge, and dismounted, tying Bounty to a log. She walked down to the rocky point where Thomas Patterson had surveyed the valley for his cattle, and remembered her father's expression when he saw them: satisfaction, firmness, clarity about what had to be done. Then she sat, dangling her legs, because she wanted to ask herself the same question. What had she to do, and what did it have to do with Leslie, the lover of her son?

She thought, and then it came. If Leslie can capture the mystery of this exalted place, then I'll know I have to do something. Enthusing won't be enough. I have to give her something ...

What? Recognition, gratitude? She knew she was groping, and wondered how long it would take till it was clear. She stood. She thought. There's always a deeper truth in the simplest things. I'm standing where my father stood. There's a drop in front of me, a slope behind, and my horse to take me home. If I wanted to end my life I could take a step forward, and plunge into the arms of gravity, but I don't: I've something to do. I'm going to accept Leslie in a way that gives her something I must lose. She shook her head, unable to clarify what she was half-seeing and half-understanding.

She untied Bounty and rode home, taking a new route, after twenty minutes ride on the western edge of the plain. She waved an arm towards the house, remembering her father's first lesson in bushcraft. He always felt contempt for those who didn't know where they were, because his technique was good, his observation sharp.

He would have been happy, and a little disconcerted, too, to have a painter on his land. Claire hoped Lesley would be finished when she got home.

She wasn't. The house was empty. Claire built up the fire in the stove, and made the inevitable tea. The doomsday drink, she told herself. They could be polishing the trumpet for its final blast, and the Pattersons would be making tea. She laughed, and was feeling oddly self-conscious when she saw Leslie coming out of the trees. She had the broad hat on, and her dark hair waving beneath. She went to the end room, where she and Keith were sleeping, and came to the kitchen a minute later, hat off, hair brushed. Claire offered her a cup, and picked up the teapot..

'Just been made. Are you ready for one?'

Leslie nodded. 'Have you been out riding?'

Claire nodded. 'How can you tell?'

'It's something in your body, and in your eyes. The eyes, mostly, that's where it's strongest.'

This pleased the older woman. 'I'm glad it has an effect you can see. I love this country, you know. I'm bred right into it, I think.'

Leslie accepted this without comment. 'I went out painting.'

'I saw you go out. I think that's what made me go for a ride.'

The young woman was respectful, but every bit an equal when she said, 'Tell me what you did, Mrs Ransome.'

The first part was easy. 'Call me Claire. I may be Keith's mother, but I can relate to you directly if you wish it.' Leslie's lifted eyes gave an answer. Claire told her of the ride that morning, and the many rides, going back to the beginning of her life, to the spot her father favoured. 'That,' she said, 'was on the side of the property I call his.'

'Is there a side you call yours?'

Claire told her about the cloud that swelled from the valley onto Five Mile Plain, and how its presence had been a character, a bonding thread, in her life. Lesley listened closely.

'I'll go there one day, if you show me. Now I have to show you something. I did a painting today, not very far away.'

She went to her room, coming back with the flat bag, from which she drew an A3 notebook. 'There's a few things wrong with it,' she said.

'My technique's not worked out for what I'll have to do up here. But at least it's a start.' She opened the notebook.

Her picture showed the end of a fallen tree, and a clump of grass obscuring broken roots. The grass was partly dry, and partly green. In the corners and on the edges of the picture there were four or five small birds, either half out of the picture, as if escaping, or looking out, as if ready to fly away. Claire asked why they were so uncertain about being included.

Leslie paused. 'I've been thinking about that. They're not too certain about how they feel about being where they are. The tree's dead, and so is some of the grass. They can fly away, or they can stay, and share the same fate. Go through the same process, I think I mean. Will they do it, or not? Hop off somewhere else, or stick it out where they are? That's what they're thinking about, if birds can think. We don't know if birds can think, do we? Or animals. We say we do, but who knows what we do when we think? Perhaps thinking is just a sophisticated set of reactions to stimuli, like pulling your hand away from something hot. We don't know. In fact, we don't know very much at all. If you take your thinking to the edge of what your mind can think about, and that's the only worthwhile place, it seems to me, then there isn't any certainty at all. I suppose I like that edge, just like you were telling me about your father.'

She stopped. The picture lay before them. Claire felt as if her mind had been read so intensely that she wanted to share whatever this young woman didn't already know. She stiffened, growing serious. Leslie, she knew, was aware, and waiting.

'If you and my son Keith, Leslie ... if you decide to marry, then I will be a very happy mother, because I'll have you around me a lot of the time, and that is something that would be very precious to me.' She looked into the younger woman's eyes, which reminded her, in their candour and purity of expectation of the eyes in her own photo from many years before, the girl on the verge of leaving school, and she saw also in the younger woman some of the shrewd and wary nature of her

daughter. She added, ‘We all have to give, to hand on, to hand over possession of what we know, and own, but we don’t like to do it unless we know that the person who’s receiving our gift, our transmission, is a fit and suitable person ... oh dear, that’s the way my mother would have said it, and I’d rather not sound like her at a moment like this ...’

Leslie said, ‘Any gift from you ...’ she couldn’t say Mrs Ransome and she wasn’t quite ready for Claire, in this moment of intimacy which was also formal, because it was a presentation and receival, ‘... will stay with me all my life ...’ Claire waited. Her life: far away, and far flung, or intimately bound with hers? She felt she knew. ‘... and I think I’ll roam up here as long as I live too.’

1983

Half an hour after she got to Ben Avon, the phone rang. It was Tania.
‘Dad told me where you were.’

‘Your timing was good. I’ve only just arrived.’

‘Lit the stove yet, mum?’

Claire was being teased. ‘Just about to. I’m sorry I can’t send you out to the woodheap.’

‘I’m sorry too, mum.’

Each of them felt the distance between them, and the closeness.
‘How’re the cattle?’

‘I haven’t really looked at them yet. From the road they seem okay.’

‘How’s the house? A bit empty when you first got in?’

Claire looked about her, suddenly heavy. ‘Yes it needs someone in it. I’m not here often enough. Young Donald was talking of getting married a year ago, but he got cold feet, I think; anyhow, nothing came of it, but at the time I was thinking of renting it to him. Pity.’

'Young Donald! How old is he now?'

Claire had to think. 'Thirty five. Or six. Why?'

'You got married at thirty five.' Claire waited for the comment, but there was none. Her daughter had left it as a bare fact. What did she want? 'How's Robert?'

The tougher side of Tania stirred. 'Going nowhere. He doesn't realise how close to the edge he is.' Her mother warned, 'If you're feeling like that you need to talk to him. Warn him, I think I should say.'

'He knows. He can feel my eyes on his back, that man.'

Claire laughed awkwardly. 'Darling!'

'What mum?'

'You sound like you're going to ... stick a knife in him!'

'I feel like it sometimes. Other times I'd rather jab him with an electric prod. Cruel, aren't I? It's my rural upbringing coming out. All that watching the things we do to cattle.'

Was she serious, out of control, or savagely playful? 'What did Robert say when you talked to him?'

'Let's forget him, mum. I rang because I wanted to know how you were. It can be a bit lonely when you get somewhere you haven't been in a while, and there's nobody ...' her voice weakened '... to make you a cup of tea.' She added, 'Speaking of which, you ought to go and light that fire in the stove. Get the house alive again!' She chatted with a forced vivacity for a minute longer, then hung up. Claire didn't light the stove. She felt disconcerted. It was as if she'd been caught at her weakest moment by someone who had miseries she did and didn't want to share. Robert, or other problems with work, with Tania's identity? Why did her daughter only show there was something causing her pain, but not reveal what it was and what she thought she might do about it?

She went outside. Smoke was floating from Scott and Audrey's chimney. As if giving up on her own house, she crossed the road and knocked. Audrey had seen her coming, and the door opened in a flash.

'Good to see you Claire. Been a while.'

Claire had a feeling that she'd made a mistake in coming over. Audrey sensed at once this mood of regret, or displeasure, in her sister, as they called each other now.

'What sort of a trip did you have?'

As Claire told her, the two of them appraised each other: Scott's wife, and the last of the Pattersons. They were rivals, Audrey irritated by the fact that the older, better house facing hers was empty, its garden a ruin, while its owner had somewhere else to go. Audrey had appropriated the Patterson family pride, which she voiced, and manipulated, in ways that never occurred to Scott, the simplest of Claire's three brothers.

'Where's Scott today?'

Audrey told her he was in Crewe, getting prices on timber for a shed he was going to build. They talked about the need for the shed, prices for stock, weather, the movements of their children, then Audrey said, 'Don't you think it's time we had a family get together?' Claire said, as she felt she had to, that it might be a good idea. Audrey was listening carefully for the amount of enthusiasm in her voice.

'You don't sound very keen on the idea.'

It was a trap, and Claire saw it straight away. She was expected to rouse a false enthusiasm to this idea, commit herself to it, do a lot of organising, and then, at a certain point in the arrangements find herself relying on Audrey, the helper, the lower ranking supporter, who would manufacture a situation in which she, Claire, would have to hand the reunion, and the credit for it, to Audrey, the outsider who, aspiring to her crown as main spokesperson for the family, needed, visibly and cunningly, to take a step which placed her higher. She, Claire, would be deposed. Audrey would be central to the Patterson descendants, and she would be relegated to the Ransomes on the other side of the ranges. Claire thought about her response, then said, as if it hadn't a drop of venom in it, 'Where would we have it?'

'Perhaps in Crewe. Perhaps in Portree. One or the other, I suppose. We'd have all the facilities we needed if we hired a place in Crewe.'

Claire hit back. 'We could have it across the road! At Ben Avon! It's always been one of the family's centres! If not the centre! We could

manage the catering for ourselves. We'd do some of the cooking over there ...' she waved grandly '... and whatever else was needed, we could do it here, in your kitchen!' She smiled brightly on Audrey, who was furious at the relegation this implied. Before she could gather herself to reply, Claire added, 'It would need a fair amount of cooperation, but we'd manage that quite easily, I think, don't you?'

They finished their tea in a sternly fought end-game, then Claire said she had to get to work in the house she hadn't visited for so long. With a pretence of amiability, Audrey led her to the gate overlooking the road, and they parted, Claire walking up the drive to her empty house without so much as turning to give a wave. I'll pay for this, she knew, and the price, or its first instalment, was exacted when the phone rang, as if to greet her, and she picked it up to find Tania's voice coming shrilly from the earpiece: 'I've just told Robert he's got to go. He's no good for me. He wants too much and he gives too little! It's draining me! It's making me feel old when I shouldn't! He's taking from me the very things I need to enjoy. He started going on about the things he'd done for me and I told him he'd done fuckin nothing!' Claire stiffened at the word. Her hand, holding the phone, was trembling. She knew her daughter would burst into tears when the outpouring ended, and it happened as she knew it would. To her sobbing daughter she said, 'Do you want me to come to where you are? I could drive down this evening.' Tania's sobbing broke off. 'No. Don't drive down. I don't want you to do that. I just want to know you're there!'

Mothers must have houses. When Tania had calmed a little, and promised to ring back in the early evening, Claire let the atmosphere of Ben Avon, which she'd been resisting, enter her system. Something of Belle came with it, sturdy, stubbornly aggressive, denying the flood of tenderness that wanted to embrace every sorrow-filled body in the universe, passionate without an analytic mind, furious that her best remedies healed neither broken bones nor hearts. 'Ah, mother!' Claire called in the empty house. 'Leave me in peace, can't you!"

She'd heard her parents speak of it, and now, before her eyes, the valley was lifting - or so it seemed. The mass of white cloud which had been its floor was swirling as it rose. Fascinated, she slipped off her pony and walked nearer the edge, leading her mount by the reins. She felt a shiver run through him before she noticed it herself; the air was colder. The scale of what was happening was matched by its speed. It was as if a great struggle to hold the cloud had been lost, and now, like the impoverished, the crushed, the poor of the world, it was breaking out.

Looking at it, she assumed that the cloud would continue its rise, straight into heaven, but it was spreading; trees that she could have identified individually, halfway down the spur that branched off Five Mile Plain, were being swallowed. It was heading her way. She swung around. It was a long way back to the trees where the track ran onto the plain, and the cloud was coming too fast; she couldn't escape. As it came near, a faceless identity-devourer, the chill seized her; she'd heard about arctic explorers found frozen in the snow, and wondered what this thing was going to do to her. She wanted to call, but there was nobody to hear, only her pony, and he was more frightened than she was. Something told her to crouch down, to wait and see.

She squatted on her haunches, clinging to the reins. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the trees where the track was, then she faced front to see if anything was coming with it. She knew it was silly to expect something, but when a mystery revealed itself, anything might be possible. What are you? she said. What are you going to do to me?

Surround you, was the answer. Swirling white advanced, hesitation foreign to its nature, then it swallowed her in its chilly body. Claire shuddered violently. It had taken her over. It was inescapable. A duality

existed in her mind. The way out was to walk to the trees, and the track; she could have done it with her eyes closed. The cloud had gripped her mind, though. It felt as if it was inside her as well as around. She felt it had come to speak to her, that it would have a voice. She felt - though it wasn't until years later that she would be able to articulate this - that it had chosen its moment to capture her. Either it had seen her coming, and had rushed to take her in its grip, or she'd known it wanted her, and had ridden out to meet it.

What was happening was no accident; of that she was certain.

It teased her for a minute, thinning and lifting, so she could see a little again; there were rocks, grass, and even a few trees at the beginning of the spur. Then it thickened, and she could hear it breathing in her brain, not ready, yet, to speak, but preparing. The readiness, she sensed, had to be in her. It would speak if she was listening. It would speak only if it knew she could hear.

'I'm ready,' she told the cloud.

It swirled more thickly. She could hardly see her pony's tail. He was shivering, stamping his front feet occasionally, scared to pull away from her grip. 'Shoosh,' she told her horse. 'I want to hear what it says.'

The voice, when it came, was like what she imagined the waves of the sea would be like if they could talk - and who, now, would say they couldn't? It didn't speak in words, it made her mind look both ways, this and that, as if telling her she must make a choice. 'I'll do what you say,' she said.

It was asking her to choose between short and long, and it was saying that this was not one but many choices: short meant wild, headstrong, risk-taking, adventurous, and ready to die. Before it said any more she gave it the answer: 'Long. Fairly long. That's what I choose.'

Then it put another continuum before her, power at one end, clarity of intention at the other. She watched, introspectively, as the alternatives revealed themselves: with power were aligned anger, violence, duplicity, subtlety, lies, brutality, wealth, despair, and a host of others she couldn't

recognise, but wanted to keep away from. She looked to the other end of what was offered.

At this second pole were delicacy, thoughtfulness, reciprocity, and the twin certainties of having little to possess and much in the definition of feeling; she inclined her head. The cloud, knowing, granted her a little respite; for a moment she could see the trees at the beginning of the spur, then it swallowed them again, and she knew she had another choice to make.

What would it be? And would it be the last, or would they stretch out, these alternatives, like torture until she had something forced out of her? Powerless, she waited.

The cloud made her look to the right this time, and put into her a demand she was too young to grasp. It was something about how to balance what she would do. What she would be. It was making her think in the abstract, this time, not letting her choose a place along a line. It wanted her to speak, and she didn't know what to say, because she didn't know what it was asking.

'I'm only six,' she said. 'You have to tell me.'

The cloud swirled silently. She felt it was angry with her, but this time it was up to the cloud to make a choice, not her; she couldn't help it if she didn't understand. Then it put a series of pictures in her mind. There was a woman in each picture, and she fancied that it was her grown-up self that she was seeing. Each time the figure came to her it changed. It was singing, for instance, and it closed its mouth, then it put its hands to its ears and its face grew dark with strain. Claire shook her head. The figure sang again, radiating music. Claire nodded; that was what she wanted to be! Choice after choice was put in her mind, and she chose. Sometimes the cloud tried to trick her, or was it to test her, by putting the form she wanted to choose last instead of first, and sometimes the choice was not a clear good versus bad, but a contest of alternatives, between a Claire that got her way because she was strong and a Claire that listened before she made up her mind. Claire felt the cloud was trying to trick her, and didn't like it.

'I've already answered that!' she said.

The cloud rushed about her, thicker than before. Her pony was terrified, but fear flew from her body; Claire knew she'd caught the cloud up to tricks and had made it admit it should be honest: was that the ultimate test, the question all the other questions had been leading to? She felt it had been. She stood up.

'I'm waiting,' she told the cloud. 'Is there anything else?'

There was only silence in her mind. The visitation was over. She turned, carefully, keeping her orientation in mind, and walked to the hidden trees, and the track, leading her pony because she was surer of her direction with her feet on the ground. She could feel the animal's relief when they were on the track, so she mounted and rode it home. Her mother was at one of the garden gates, staring into the cloud that had settled on the house, fearful that her youngest was lost. Belle's boys - three of them, because Andrew was long dead - were on the verandah, looking at a grim-faced Thomas Patterson, who was unwilling to get himself and his boys lost on the plain, and equally certain that he couldn't leave his daughter without help. Her parents, Claire knew, had been stricken through their love for her, believing her lost when she was enlightened. 'No need to worry,' she called. 'There wasn't anything wrong. I knew where I was, and I knew how to get home.' It entered her mind to say, 'I knew it wanted to tell me things,' but kept that locked in herself. Belle called, 'You little wretch! What were you doing out on your own with the cloud coming down? Your father and I have been beside ourselves!'

'It didn't come down,' Claire told them. 'It came up. Out of the valley.' She pointed. She started to say, 'I've heard you and daddy talking about it,' but saw her father take an impetuous step forward, as if contradicting her mother gave him the reason he needed to smack her: then he heard what she'd said. 'It came out of the valley?'

She said it had.

'How did you find your way home?'

'It was easy. I was never lost.' They were amazed, and, young as she was, she knew she'd said something she'd need to think about. Hadn't

she been lost in her mind? In the choices she'd been asked to make? In the alternatives posed in her brain? Then she saw, and the miracle of what had happened became apparent to her, that the choices she thought she'd made had been imprinted in her at birth. She was always going to be what she'd told the cloud she was choosing. Clever cloud for giving her the chance to know.

They were still looking at her. Thomas and Belle Patterson would never have said that a child of theirs was transfigured, but they saw the strangeness about her. 'Come inside girl,' Belle commanded. 'You must be sopping wet.' Claire looked at herself. She'd been made wet by the cloud, and hadn't noticed. 'Get yourself a towel,' her mother said. 'Go to your room and take off every last thing. Put a rug around you to keep warm. I'll have to get you new things.' Belle was fussing about clothes because she couldn't reach the dimension of her child that had changed. She didn't know what had happened, and it made her furious; the child, she saw, as did Thomas, was relieved, not at having escaped the cloud, but for having had the chance to be in it.

1985

Clive came into the kitchen with folded sheets of paper. 'Guess what I came across?'

She smiled. 'I'm not playing. You'll have to tell me.'

He came to her side of the table and put the sheets in front of her. The top one read Last Will & Testament of Clive Bryant Ransome. 'Good heavens! How old is this?'

'I'm not too sure. I was only a young fellow. Dad said I should make a will, so I did.' She found the date: 1949. 'Before you were married. We hadn't met each other. Where did you find it?'

They talked about the will he'd made when he was young, laughing at memories it brought back, then: 'I have to make another. You too. Leaving everything to each other, and then to the kids.'

'Kids.' Her wistful eyes were far away. 'Hardly kids any more.'

'We could say the same about ourselves. That's why we have to get in to see Campbell and Black.' Even the name of the legal firm was frightening to Claire. 'Black. What a name for a man who's going to read out your will!'

'He doesn't have to read it out. I think that's just something they do in films, to make it more dramatic. Someone argues, they all start abusing each other, that sort of thing.'

Still frightened, she said, 'Keith and Tania won't quarrel. They get on well.' She thought. 'Keith would expect to get all your land up here. What about Tania?'

'We could ask them.'

'I suppose we should. But we have to come up with our ideas first, so that when we talk to the children they feel that we know what we're doing, and it's right.'

'What about my country up here for Keith, and Ben Avon and your share of the high country for Tania? We'd get them valued, or take a guess ourselves, and then throw in some money to even it up, whichever way it goes. How does that sound?'

Her eyes were staring, unfocussed, on a cupboard door. 'Darling? How does that sound?' Claire said quietly, 'How long is it since Tania was on a horse. She's into calculators and computers, these days. Maths and money, I tell her. She laughs at me. When I say maths and money she says to me, "Beef and bulls' balls!" And laughs a bit more.' Clive could see his wife was going to cry. 'I never wanted to grow old.' She started to whisper, 'I never thought I would', then broke off, murmuring, 'No, that's not true'. Looking at the table, she said quietly to her husband, 'I never wanted to do this, but if it's got to be done, let's do it today.'

He sat beside her on a kitchen chair. Her head was down. He put his hand under her chin and lifted, then turned her so she was looking into his eyes. ‘Nobody lasts forever. We’ll be together as long as we last. We’ve been a good partnership, and we’re going on a while yet.’

It was not so much love she offered as lack of defence, or boundary. ‘A while, yes. A limited while. “Just a minute!” my mother used to say, when she wanted to put me off. “Can’t you see I’m busy?” And I’d think, she doesn’t look any busier than usual, but I knew that whatever it was that was so important to me, it had to go on hold. My mother’s favorite trick. Don’t say no, make them wait!’ She sat back, laughing, tears streaming down her face. ‘Oh what’s it all for, Clive? What does it matter if we’re here or not? You or I might never have existed and it wouldn’t make a scrap of difference!’ She started fumbling for a hanky, couldn’t find one, so snatched a tea towel to wipe her tears. His eyes moistened too, then he pinched the corner of the tea towel between two fingers, and said, ‘Well, if you’re right, there’s nothing to restrain us! We can be two silly buggers having the time of our lives!’ He rubbed her back with his hand, then he put his arms around his wife. She accepted him, without giving anything in return, except a glance. ‘The time of our lives ... yes, the time of our lives. Time runs out though Clive, haven’t you noticed? It runs out one day. Some day, one day, it’s all the same. The day comes when there isn’t any more. You had your bowl full, and you’ve emptied it.’ She said sadly, ‘Every day I think I’m getting more like my mother, and I am, and when it all ends, I will be. Clive. Clive. You’ve made all the difference I’ve ever allowed anyone to make for me.’

‘That, my love, is called being married. How many years now?’

‘Don’t ask. Let’s just be grateful.’

1933

Her mother was sitting on the verandah when Claire got home from the Portree school, and she was looking at a booklet with a photo of an old building, and a fountain in front of it, shaded by a large and un-Australian tree. ‘Welcome home, my girl,’ Belle said. ‘You can tell me later what you learned today, but in the meantime, look at this. This is where you’ll be going to school next year.’ She passed the booklet to her daughter and went inside.

Claire sat on her mother’s seat, aware that currents that would sweep her up were moving, in places she didn’t know about. She looked at what she’d been given. It was called a prospectus, a word nobody in her world used, and it was about a school for girls. Or that was the word Claire would have used, but she saw that for this school the term was ladies, because that was what girls became under its influence.

I’m to change, Claire saw, and wondered how much of what she was, and had, in her home looking at *The Hurdle*, would have to be given up. How much of her would survive the change? Why was her mother doing this? Had daddy been told? She ran inside.

Her mother was making scones as if nothing could ever change. ‘Where is this school? Why do I have to go there? How do they make girls into ladies? I don’t know any ladies, I only know women!’ It was an accusation that didn’t disturb the righteousness, the concentration, of her mother, arms in flour, mixing the butter in.

‘Mother?’

‘Yes, my girl?’ Her aloofness was a rebuke, and intended.

Shamed into respect, Claire said, ‘Please tell me what’s going to happen.’

'You're in the highest grade in Portree. Mr Blair's been a good teacher, but you've run your race in there. We've got to send you away. Your brothers went to Crewe, as you know, but we're going to do more for you, your father and I. We're sending you to the most famous girls' school in the country. You'll be a boarder. You'll be away from home for a whole term at a time. Fourteen weeks, it says in there. You'll be living with lots of other girls, the same age as yourself, a bit older, a bit younger. There'll be teachers and others to look after you. When the school has a holiday, you'll come home. You'll still be a Patterson, they might improve you but they'll never take that away from you. What more d'you want to know?'

'I'm scared.'

'There's nothing to be scared of. It'll be a big change, but you'll make lots of friends. Maybe they'll want you to go and stay at their homes. Maybe you'll want them to come and stay here. If they stay with us in summer we can take them to Cairngorm and show them our property up there. A lot of those girls will never have left the city; they won't know what it's like. That's an advantage you'll have over them!'

Claire couldn't see the advantage; it felt as if it might be the opposite, because she didn't know what it would be like to live in a city that the other girls knew and she didn't. 'When do I have to go?'

'In a couple of weeks, when your father's not so busy, you and I will go to Crewe and catch the train. Your father wants to come too, but I don't think he'll be able to get away. We'll stay with your Aunt Milly and we'll pay a visit to the school. It's just around the corner, you'll be able to visit her at weekends, when they let you. We'll ask. They'll show us around. They'll show you where you'll sleep. And eat, and wash. They'll tell us what you'll study. When you get back here, you'll know all about it, and you'll make yourself ready. It's going to be a big change, but it has to be. You can't go on living here and not knowing what the rest of the world's like. You need to be educated. That means a lot of learning, more than your father and I ever got. Then, one day, when the time comes ...'

Claire saw that her mother was weakening, and didn't really want this change to occur: so why did it have to be?

'... one day, my girl, you'll come back to us a refined, educated, young woman, and your father and I will be proud of what we've done for you!'

It sounded like a statement of public policy, a deceit which, to have its effect, had to deceive the deceiver as well. Claire knew her mother. A statement, once made, had to be defended. No surrender was ever made. Adjustments were minimal, and grudging. She was to be like the other girls - ladies - in the prospectus. 'What's this word mean, mother?'

Belle was brightened by a question she found easy. 'It means looking forward.' The grim smile she directed at her daughter was an order to do what the word implied, and like it!

1986

Keith, his mother and Leslie were standing near the four wheel drive that would take the couple back to Weldon. Leslie was apologising for leaving Claire on her own, knowing that the old woman welcomed it as much as it hurt her, but fearing that she might injure herself, perhaps having a fall from her horse when there was nobody near. 'When did you say you expect Tania to arrive?'

'The day after tomorrow', she said, 'but I don't expect them till late at night. Robert finds it hard to get away early, though goodness knows he puts in an enormous amount of overtime, weekends and so on.'

Leslie reflected on this combination. 'It's strange that they're still together. I don't know how often they've split up, or threatened to.'

Claire said, 'I don't think there's anything in life that's a greater mystery than why people are attracted in the first place, and why, given that, some stick together and some don't.'

Keith teased her. 'You and dad have got the right arrangement! You've each got a space of your own. It makes it very clear who's boss!' He didn't seem to think that what he said had any application to himself, but Leslie did. 'Rather than get into that, I think we should get ourselves on the road.' Knowing that he'd do what she said without questioning, she embraced his mother. 'See you in - what is it - three weeks?' Claire said, 'Three weeks,' her lips in Leslie's hair, their arms twined about each other. Seeing them, Keith felt lucky to be a part of such a bond. He put his arms around them both. 'Bye bye mother dear'; Claire kissed her son. 'Don't you people worry about me. I won't do anything silly. I'll work in the garden and get the house ready for Tania. It's years since she's been up here.'

A minute later Claire was trembling from the pain of losing them, and Keith and Leslie, silent and glum, were heading towards the slopes looking over the inland. Leslie said to her husband, 'I know she's all right but I don't like to leave her.'

He said, 'I don't like it either, but what's the alternative? Either she doesn't stay there, or if she does she has one of us to keep watch? Well, we'd say to keep her company, but she'd know what we meant. No, if you've been doing something all your life, you have to keep on doing it, otherwise your life's ended. That's the way I see it.'

Leslie looked at the plains, and the surrounding mountains, feeling that the drawings in her folder were in some way stolen from the place Claire had inherited, rather than tributes to it. Claire was authentic, had never wished to be anywhere else, while she ...

She said to Keith, 'It's silly, I suppose, but I don't actually feel married yet. Why do you think that is?'

He said, driving in the patient way of his father, 'Some women don't feel married till they've had children. Living with their husband isn't the main part of what marriage means, for them.'

'Is it like that for you?'

Keith said, 'No. When you accepted me, I felt married then. The actual ceremony only confirmed what had happened inside me. The moment you said yes, the change was underway. I think I was luckier than a lot of men. A lot of men don't want to admit they're changing when they marry. Silly dopes!'

Some tenderness revealed itself in her half-smile, but he felt she was changing the subject when she said, a minute later, 'Drive slowly, please Keith. I love these trees leaning over the road.'

In her house, seeing them off the plains in her mind, Claire thought of the stretches of road and mountains, the belts of trees and the steep drops falling under Leslie's eyes as she and her husband left the plains. Then she compared the love she felt for Leslie with the love she had for her son. For Keith, she had a bonded tie, inescapable, tight. He irritated her as much as he pleased her, because, she realised, much of him derived from her, and, though she was peaceful in a generalised way, now that she was older, there were still aspects of herself she was unwilling to come to terms with. Leslie, on the other hand, was a bonus, an addition to what she'd expected when she came home after being away at school. 'I never thought, then, about being old,' she said to the kitchen. 'Whoever would have dreamed, in those days of a crowded family, that the house would be empty except for me?'

Trying to get away from herself, she went for a walk, through the snowgums to the edge of the plain, but no further. She knew she'd feel lonely if she went into the open on her own. Walking back, she was pleased to see the house, smoke coming from its chimneys. It's only me in another form, she thought, but it's a good companion; then a disquieting idea crossed her mind. If she could feel a welcome from the house, would it feel a loss when she was dead?

1936

When the girls got back for the new year, Miss Fitchett ('Fidget' to the girls) called them to the common room, to welcome them, she said, and to set a tone for the year to follow. They bowed their heads while she prayed, then they listened as she reminded them of the difficulties facing them in the year ahead. The first, for new girls, was to find out their responsibilities and duties in this, their new home, albeit one that was, for many of them, far from home. 'I particularly want to welcome,' Miss Fitchett said, 'Mildred Martin. Would you raise your hand please Mildred?' A solid girl, plain of face, but possessing considerable strength, the others felt, raised her right hand, as if attesting to something of importance. 'Mildred,' Miss Fitchett went on, 'is going to be one of us this year. She's from Victoria River Downs. Some of you - but not many, I imagine - would know that Victoria River Downs is a cattle station in the Northern Territory, it covers eleven thousand square miles, and it is the biggest station property in the world!'

Miss Fitchett paused, letting that sink in!

'In a short time - I mean a week or two from now - I'm going to ask Mildred to tell us about life on Victoria River Downs. I'm sure we'll find it fascinating. But we'll let her get used to the way we do things before we ask her to tell us about the world she's come from.' She paused. 'All of you, like Mildred, have left a home which has great meaning and value for you, to come to this school. And, drawn out as many of the days here are sure to seem, they are in fact all too short, as a number of the girls who left at the end of last year said to me as they were leaving. One of them wished she could have her time over again, giving her the chance to make better use of her opportunities. Unfortunately, we don't get a second chance with the days of our lives.'

Miss Fitchett looked on her boarders, one or two of whom were already fidgeting, as they liked to call it, just loudly enough for her to hear. ‘Those of you who were here last year will have read your copies of *The Clarion* ...’ she lifted the school magazine ‘... while those who are new will have to wait for the year to run its course before you get your first copy. This is what the principal said in his editorial last year.’ With ridiculous solemnity, she uttered three lines of verse:

For us the trumpets blow,
For us the heroes gather at the gate,
And through the dusk their faces shine like stars.

‘The principal went on,’ Miss Fitchett said, ‘with these words. “A great deal has been said and written about being young - much of it revolting in its sentimentality. About youth there is a glamour - the glamour of new life unfolding ...”’

When her homily had ended, Miss Fitchett said she would leave the girls to themselves for the next hour and a half, when it would be bed time, but on her way out of the room she brought Mildred Martin to meet Claire Patterson and Jennifer Harris, two girls who came from what were, in their state, big properties. ‘I’m sure they’ll have a lot in common with you, and will be able to show you the ropes.’

Claire and Jennifer winced, as most of the girls did when Miss Fitchett used an expression she felt was vulgar but appropriate. When the house mistress had left them, Jennifer said, ‘Why’re you here?’

Mildred said, ‘There’s no schools mum and dad would consider in Darwin, so they looked further afield. What about you?’

Claire said, ‘Much the same thing really. This place has a reputation ...’

Jennifer said tartly, ‘Which may or may not be justified!’ Mildred and Claire looked at her; it was surely too early in the year to be asking questions?

Jennifer added, ‘Fidget gives us an awful lot of sermons. They’re full of ideals we’re supposed to follow. Sorry, emulate is the word!’ Claire wanted to defend their shared experience. ‘We do have lots of interest-

ing visitors who give talks, though. It's not all prayers and buttermilk!' Mildred broke across this. 'Are we the only ones who come off cattle stations?' The others nodded, waiting. 'Where do the rest of the girls come from?'

Claire and Jennifer told her about the others in the room, flicking their eyes sideways to indicate whom they meant. Claire said to Mildred, 'There must be places on your property that you've never seen, if it's as big as that!'

'There are. Most of the time, dad lets the stockmen put the cattle out, because he says they know the place better than any white man. They're not all from the same tribe, though, so there's things you have to watch, like who's allowed to go to certain places and who isn't. Dad's really good at that. I get muddled. Sometimes if I get the parts of the property wrong, one of the stockmen will say, "Okay miss, I tell Tommy," and he gets me the right man, and I know they're running the place as much as we are, but visitors don't realise that. They think it's the way it's put in the newspapers.'

She looked at them, these other station girls, and realised that it was only with girls who understood her pride because they had it themselves that she could be as open as this. Daringly, or was it haughtily, she said, 'Are any of these girls rich?'

Jennifer said, 'No. Believe me. Not rich. Not even wanting to be, most of them.' Weary scorn was in her voice. Claire said, 'There's some pretty nice people here, though.' Jennifer, by not affirming what she heard, denied it. Mildred was aware of this undertow, but lacked the social skill to divert it. It was Claire who did what Mildred and Jennifer could not. 'We'll introduce you around. You'll want to meet everybody. They'll be curious about you. Now. You don't want to get sick of talking about where you've come from, so don't answer any questions, just say, "I'll deal with that in the talk I'm going to give." So long as you do, they won't think you're snobbish.' She noticed that she'd amused Jennifer, for whom staying on top was central, which meant for Claire that Jennifer saw her as useful; there was also that the rivalry between

them was, in its way, a form of collusion: for Jennifer, nobody else even presented themselves as rivals.

1987

Clive watched his wife come in from the garden. Something was troubling her. She sat in a chair and gripped the arm.

'What is it?'

Her attention was inside herself, and she didn't answer. For a moment her eyes turned to him and he knew that if he'd ever seen an appeal for help, it was in her glance. 'I'll ring Doctor Robards.' She shook her head. 'I'll be all right. I had a bit of a turn. I bent down to pull out a weed, and I straightened up too quickly.'

'Blood swirling around in your head.'

'It made my eyes go blurred. But I can see again. I'll be all right.' She was still gripping the chair as if it were her life.

'I'll make some tea.'

She shook her head. 'Whisky.' He was amazed. She wanted to add, 'I might as well go out with a bang', but it would hurt him, and it was Clive she needed to think about, not her own needs, which, obviously to her, if not to him, were spent.

He said, 'Perhaps in a little while, when you're feeling a bit more like yourself.' She laughed, a quaintly old-fashioned musical laugh, a stagey, conventional laugh of someone pretending to be amused when they are in an opposite state. 'I'm feeling like myself,' she said. 'I've never done anything else.' She knew it wasn't true, because it made her think of the distracted nights and days, before she met Clive, when she lusted after Jack, their former worker who was building houses for her brothers' families. What would have happened if she'd been Jack's lover? If she'd had his child? It was no longer a dramatic alternative, merely

a might-have-been, a curiosity, like a long forgotten toy or garment you might find at the back of a cupboard, unopened for years. Her house in the mountains was like that now; she'd been squirreling things away to make it feel secure, and soon it would be emptied, or at least cleaned up by her children and their partners: Keith and Leslie, Tania and Robert, the new owners.

No. She remembered. Her will gave everything to Clive, and in the event of him predeceasing her, the estate was divided. Tania got Cairngorm. She'd been told. She knew. In a sense, then, it was already hers. Claire spoke. 'I only have to make way for her.'

'What was that, darling? Did you say make way? Who were you thinking of?' But his wife's mind had turned into itself again. Clive said, 'Do you want to lie down, darling. Just for a few minutes till you're feeling better?' She shook her head. 'I'm better if I sit up. In fact, I think I'd be more normal if I was walking. I'm going back into the garden. I'll walk a little bit, and then I'll sit under the willow.' She added, 'On the seat you gave me last Christmas.' He felt she'd said it to please him, perhaps to appease him, and sensed that she was weakening. 'I'll come with you.'

'No, my love, I'd like to be by myself for a few minutes. You make that cup of tea and bring it out.'

They'd developed rules, so many of them, in their years together, expressed in courtesies which controlled them. 'Certainly, my love. Enjoy your walk. I'll bring your tea when it's ready.'

To Keith and Tania, their father said, 'I'm sure she knew she was going to die.' Their eyes, their auras, asked him to go on. 'She made a space for herself. We've done it for each other any number of times. Now we'll never do it again!' He was aghast, but managed to carry on. 'She would have said it was unseemly to die, so she did it on her own. If she'd wanted support, she'd have had me there, but she didn't. She wanted to be alone. It's ...' his eyes turned to the clouds '... the best way to go, I think!'

Tania grabbed her father's wrist, but he barely noticed, his mind filled by the realisation that he'd almost certainly said I think for the last time. He had nowhere in any crevice of his being any wish to go on without his wife. His last links were with his son and daughter, and those links were vanishing as the seconds passed. Keith, Tania. They were like names you read in a newspaper from a city you'll never visit again. The land would continue, in their hands, under their names. Keith, Tania. They had partners who were ... somewhere out of sight. He said, 'I think I'd like to lie down now.' He thought of adding 'for a while', but that would be deceiving them. It was his hope that the while would last till eternity declared itself at an end. He smiled at this conceit, a trait that had resurfaced as he and his wife had grown old. 'We're getting quite childish,' Claire had said to him, in this very garden, only three weeks before. 'Regressing, I think is the word. And I believe, Clive, that you encourage it in me so that you can be as childish as you feel like being. It's very naughty of us, but I suppose it doesn't matter now.'

That was what she'd said. Now? Three weeks ago. Three eternities. He saw Keith and Tania looking with concern at him, then remembered he'd said something about lying down. 'I can manage,' he said. 'I need a little sleep. Look in on me in half an hour. I'll be feeling like a talk, then.'

He knew he was trying to deceive them. It was their mother he wanted to speak with, but first he had to find her. She'd gone ahead. He went inside, his son and daughter tactfully behind. When he closed the bedroom door he thought he was being malicious, then it occurred to him that it was exactly what his wife would have done, and he felt justified. In the clear. It was clear, at this very end, everything. Duties, favours, loves and losses were all very clear, and somewhere far beyond insignificance. He lay on the side of the bed that had always been his wife's, and closed his eyes.

1937

Halfway through the last term the girls were told the photographer was coming the following week. He would take the boarders as a group, and studies of those who were leaving. Miss Fitchett urged any girls who were even thinking of leaving to have their portraits taken, because, she said, ‘Once he’s gone, you can’t bring him back. You’ll be sorry all your life if you decide, later, that you’re not coming back, but you haven’t got one of those photos to remember by.’

The boarders took this as another example of Fidget’s sentimentality, but an indiscretion from the young man who brought the proofs to be displayed at the school gave them a new perspective: as a way of keeping in with the school and getting the work, the studio let the housemistress - Fidget - keep the proofs. She wanted them, the girls decided, for her collection! What sort of person would want a photo of every girl that had been through the place? It made them uncomfortable. They’d been looked after by someone with ‘a loose spring’, as they called it, in her mind. Two girls who’d been on the verge of ordering said they wouldn’t buy a picture. Proofs began to disappear from the board where they were on display. Fidget met resistance when she made inquiries. One of the girls told another teacher what the discontent was about, and this teacher told the principal, Mr Gullett. He called his housemistress to his study where she assured him that the story circulating among the girls was untrue. She invited him to search her room for the photos she was alleged to collect. ‘There’d be hundreds, if I’d been doing this all the years I’ve been running the boarding house for you!’

Mr Gullett accepted her word. He waited until the boarders were doing evening study, then he told them that certain rumours had been spread by girls whose names were unknown to him, and, he said, he had

no wish to know who these girls were because what they had been telling others - who had then spread it further, to the great detriment of the school - was unfounded. He went back to the origin of the tale: a young man who had been working as a messenger for the photographers. What this young man had told one or two of the girls was not the fact they had supposed it to be; it was merely an idle speculation. Miss Fitchett had no vested interest in the orders for the photos. Miss Fitchett had no photographs of the girls who'd been boarders in her time as housemistress, except for pictures that appeared, as a matter of course, in *The Clarion*. He invited them, therefore, to reconsider the photos and their desire to have them. 'In years to come,' he said, 'this business that I've been talking about tonight will be a mere mistake, something silly that came about as a misunderstanding. The photos, however, will be yours forever, capturing you as you were on the morning they were taken. They will be a record you will be able to share with your families when you get home for Christmas, and then the larger, wider families you will have when you marry, as I hope you will. Please think of them as they will be to you in years to come, rather than as they have been described in recent days. One more thing,' he added importantly. 'I have spoken with the photographic studio and have arranged - without giving my reason for making the request - that you will have an extra two days to make up your minds. The photos will be on the wall until Tuesday next week. Any girl who has taken down a proof from the wall - and it would be a matter of a moment, only, to check whose pictures remain, and whose have been taken away - should put them back at once.'

He stepped from the dais and left the room, leaving Fidget - Miss Fitchett - to deal with any questions.

There were none, but later, when the dormitory lights were off, Jennifer said to Claire, the two of them turning in their beds to whisper, 'Fidget could have hidden her pictures somewhere. If she asked Mr Gullett to search her room, that's a sure sign the pictures aren't there any more. She wouldn't want him searching if that's where they are!'

Claire said, ‘Maybe she didn’t have them. It might be a story somebody made up. I don’t see how we can be sure.’

Jennifer had a darker view. ‘If you’re not sure, it’s better to err on the darker side. You’re more likely to be right!’

1987

When the service was over the Pattersons wandered around the cemetery, pointing out the graves of people they’d known, explaining relationships and the transference of identities into marriages. The minister said goodbye to Keith and Tania, and drove away. The elderly men who’d been Claire’s brothers spoke to their descendants. Gloom and inevitability carried the scene. Leslie, Keith’s wife, had never had a head for family detail, and was looking uncomfortable amid the granite and marble, the crosses and solemn last words. Tania, restless and unhappy, joined her.

‘You know whose grave this is?’

Leslie had no idea. ‘Andrew Bignell Patterson’ had been cut into the stone. ‘Was he someone special?’

‘He’s special to us, unfortunately. I think I mean unfortunately. Perhaps it simply doesn’t matter.’

Leslie wondered what she meant. ‘Why?’

‘That grave,’ Tania said, ‘is a magnet to the family.’

There was nobody near it, except themselves. ‘What power does it have?’

‘A lot. That person ...’ she glanced at the bulky, sombre grave ‘... was my mother’s brother. He died before my mother was born.’ Leslie looked at the dates: 1903 - 1920. ‘Your mother was born in 1921?’

‘Right. Andrew Bignell Patterson was born in Crewe hospital, so when he died, his mother - my grandmother - decided to bury him in

Crewe. She could have buried him in Portree, but she made a different decision. Here in Crewe.' They looked about. 'Then, when my grandfather died, his wife had him buried beside the son they'd lost.' Tania pointed to the grave beside them. 'When Belle - that's my grandmother - died she was buried here, with her husband and her first child.'

Leslie looked at the dates. 'Almost half a century! It gets to you, doesn't it.'

'So when mum thought her time might be approaching, she made it clear that she was to be buried here. Hence today. And dad decided that though he'd never lived on this side of the mountains, he'd be buried with his wife.' She pointed at the open, double grave. 'Mum's brothers are still reasonably healthy, but they'll all be buried here, unless they get cranky and rebellious.' She smiled. 'Which is quite likely, come to think of it.'

Leslie's mind jumped ahead. 'You and Keith. That'll be a decision you'll have to make. Oh! I see what you mean ...'

She was standing, she realised, where she would be buried, unless her husband decided to break the chain, or she, if she outlived him, chose to be buried apart.

'We're in a chain of circumstances, aren't we? I'd never given it a thought.' She looked at Tania. 'What are you going to do?'

'Mum would have said we don't need to make decisions, we can let events take their course.'

'That means ... ending up where we are.'

'I suppose it does.'

They took each other's hands, and then, the shared idea pulling them more strongly, they clung to each other in amazement as much as grief. An hour later, Keith, Tania, Leslie and Robert were on the road to Portree, and a late lunch at Scott and Audrey's, opposite Ben Avon. Audrey greeted them when their car swung into her drive, asked them about the funeral, and urged them to go inside. Tania said to her aunt, 'If you don't mind, I'd like a minute to look at the other house, first.' Since Ben Avon would now be Tania's, Audrey conceded.

‘We’ll be inside when you get back, just come right in and join us.’

Her brother, his wife, and the man she lived with, Robert, went into the modest house while she walked up the slope to the family seat which was hers, now, by virtue of her mother’s and her father’s wills.

‘Mine.’ She didn’t feel it, though she knew it well enough. The house, despite the money spent by her mother, was again looking neglected, though holding out a promise of renewability, if anyone wanted to make an effort, but the garden was dead, except for some broken pines, lacking even a wind to bring them to life. She went around the house, telling herself she’d enter on the way back; she wanted to climb the slope first, to a point where she could look down the valley that belonged to her, now, as, she realised, did the herds of cattle she would see from her vantage point.

She walked up the slope, puffing a little by the time she reached the rock where, she knew, her mother had liked to sit. The Hurdle seemed closer than she remembered. Looking to her right, she saw another car pulling into the space in front of Scott and Audrey’s. People got out. She thought, from the way they moved, that it was Alec and Hilda, and two of their sons: where were the rest of their families? Then another car swung into view, and stopped beside the car Keith had been driving. Cars, cars, and people getting out of them. Tania wanted to make herself look away, but felt a fascination with the people forming groups as they straggled towards the house where they would chat as a substitute for mourning until, neither purged nor broken, they felt it was time to drive somewhere else.

Where? That was the question that pressed her. Where was the site of feeling? Only a spirit-abandoned body lay in the earth at Crewe. Her mother, if she was anywhere, was here in the house of her childhood, or at Cairngorm, the family’s other place. She said the word aloud: Cairngorm, a name as stony, as rounded, as the mountain plains were undulant. Where was her mother? Her mind flitted to the house across the road. Unwillingly, resenting herself, she wondered if Robert, who didn’t have the social skills or the human breadth she expected from the

sort of man she could marry, was managing to talk to, and be civil with, the Pattersons. She supposed they could carry him if he was awkward, and he would be: it was his tenderness that made her stick with him, and he could only show it in flashes with people he didn't know. Leslie and Keith could look after him till she got there, but ...

... she wasn't ready yet. She wanted a vision, a visitation, a certainty. Her mother had had something that hadn't been passed on. She, Tania, owned the house, the long, green valley in front of where she was sitting, on a stone her mother used as a seat, and she, Tania, owned another house too, in the mountains, where they'd be staying that night, not that they needed to, but so that the house and its spirits knew that someone was there, waiting for contact when they were ready.

Tania began to shiver. She felt an immanence. Something was coming close to her. She felt the back of her neck prickling. She put her hands on the cold rock, and they were sweating. They were pressing where her mother's hands had pressed in the sixty six years of life she'd been granted.

Then Tania felt that the spirit, the presence, was receding. Was gone. She felt an overwhelming, bitter sorrow. Flooding through her, washing over her, was her feeling of loss. Only The Hurdle called, and the mountains, ever higher, ever further, beyond. 'Mum!' Tania called. 'Where are you mum? Where have you gone? Come back to me, mum! I want you! I need you! I'm not adequate. I can't do things! I'm never going to be half what you were! Mum ...' She sobbed, blocking out the echos of her voice. From far down the valley came back only the sound of a beast mooing, and Tania knew she was alone at last.

1937

The last assembly was over, and girls were milling around, sustaining the year a little longer, if they could, while others were emptying lockers, putting things in bags, and heading for the gate. Teachers moved through the throng, saying goodbye, or wishing a good holiday to girls who were returning. One quartet stood a little way from the hall, nervous with each other, yet unable to pull apart; they would be staying at a home near the school that night, then three of them would catch trains to their country homes, and later, in what would still have been their holiday if they hadn't left their days of schooling behind, they would gather again, three of them catching a train to be met by the fourth, and her parents, who would take them into the mountains where this fourth girl lived.

Something held them from doing things the other girls were doing: unwillingness to let go, a wish to deny that a phase of their lives had ended? In his final address, Mr Gullett had likened the business of leaving the school to facing a second birth, into maturity, this time, with attendant responsibilities. He spoke of our first birth, by which we enter the world, as a moment of gift to life, when a soul, a spirit, left the fields of heaven to bring what it had by way of gifts to the human struggle. Within that world, he said, there was a time of training, of development, before each of us must make a commitment to a path of our own: that path, with all that it might bring, was in front of the girls leaving that day. Those returning, he said, knew what they would come back to. He allowed himself a joke or two at this point. Those leaving, he had gone on, could not be sure what they were facing. He mentioned the evil brewing in certain nations that might bring about another war.

He prayed, before he brought his address to an end, and a parting hymn was sung, for peace in their time.

Jennifer, Emma, Nancy and Claire each had a wish to appraise what they'd gained in their time at the school, a wish to leave it as quickly as possible, and a compulsion to linger, like a ghost unwilling to admit its departure from the flesh. Young women, it had been made clear to them that bringing children into the world was their special role, and it encumbered them, a burden they wanted to be freed from, yet knew was inescapable. Their flight in freedom would be a short one. Emma said to her friends, 'Time to go! Here's dad now, with the car!' She waved, catching her father's eye, then directed him with further waves to turn the car so that it was pointing to the doorway of the boarding house. A minute later the girls were bringing their suitcases to the car which stood, boot and doors open, ready to receive. Laughing, the girls piled into it everything they owned; Emma told her father they'd walk to the house, so long as he did them the favour of driving the luggage. He smiled, closed doors, made an inquiry or two, told them he'd see them in a minute, and drove away, telling his daughter, 'Your mother's got morning tea on the table. Don't be long!'

The girls assured him they wouldn't be long, but they walked slowly, once they were in the street. 'Do you realise,' Jennifer said, 'the two or three minutes it's going to take us to get to your place, Emma, might be the only time we ever own in our whole blessed lives?'

Claire stopped walking. The others stopped. They were standing by a brick fence, with a banksia rose trailing from some wires it had been given to climb. 'We're all free now,' she said. 'We can forget Fidget's rules. So long as the war holds off,' she said doubtfully. Jennifer said, 'I'm afraid!' She stood stock still. Emma was taken aback at the way things were moving. 'Why Jenny? What can you possibly be afraid of?'

Jennifer, from the wealthiest family, by far, of the girls in her year, looked down the quiet, thoroughly respectable, and therefore constrained, street. 'There's so much force,' she said, 'all ready to get loose.'

We can't be sure of anything, really. That's why we have to hold hard to what we've got.'

Nancy thought this was an admission of weakness. 'If you're only holding on to things, you're going backwards, don't you know that? To succeed, you have to be going forward. If you're not forever claiming something new, and trying to achieve it, you're losing. It's just like things that aren't being used, they're dying, or rotting. Going bad.' She thought a moment, then added, 'You have to keep pushing on. That's what I'm going to do.'

Emma urged her friends. 'Half an hour ago, while Mr Gullett was riffling through his papers, you said to me, Jennifer, "What sort of cake's your mother been making?" So can anyone tell me why we're standing in the street, trying to guess what our futures are going to be like?'

Jennifer took up the challenge. 'Because that's exactly what it's natural for us to be doing. This is the moment of our decisions. It's only a short walk to the cake, but it's a long walk to ... somewhere else ... don't you see what I mean?' Claire thought she did. 'Every moment,' she said, 'is full of decisions. It's as if we're standing near a tap, or a light switch. We could turn them on, or we could leave them alone. If we go one way, that's how things turn out. If we do the other, everything's different forever after.' She looked at her friends. None of them knew what was in the others' heads. They'd been close for ever so long, they'd be together that night, and then, after their homeward journeys, they'd be together again in January, for their initiation into mountain life, courtesy of Claire. 'Are we going to stand here all day, yabbering?' Emma said, 'or can we, maybe, just get on with whatever's going to happen?'