

RUNNING THE RACE



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Chester Eagle



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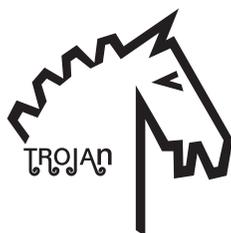
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RUNNING THE RACE

a novel of sorts

Chester Eagle



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The Start

There'd have been a hundred boys and girls gathered on the flat beneath the school, and someone was dragging a stand into position for Dick Hart. He, tall, genial, Catholic, and fit enough to run himself, stood ready, a starting pistol in his hand. 'Is it loaded, Arnie?' he said to a burly man; 'I don't want to make a fool of myself!' They laughed. Dick climbed up on the stand, a judging stand for a race like the hundred yard dash, but turned the other way. He blew a light blast on a whistle, then called, affably enough, 'Good morning everybody. Welcome to the round-the-town run! I know everybody calls it a race, but it isn't. The only prize is for finishing and we're hoping everyone will manage that. Try not to drop out. If you get puffed, sit down and have a rest. But make sure you get back on your feet, because we'll be waiting for you! The run,' he told the gathering, 'ends at the canteen, and the Mothers Club is at work right now getting ready for you. Now. You've been told where to run, if you're in any doubt, keep an eye out for the flags and markers, don't go too fast too early and get yourselves knocked up, it's not a race, it's a run. Treat it as a stroll if you like. It's okay to walk for a while!'

He beamed. He meant them to enjoy themselves. He raised his pistol.

'Are you ready? Ready to run around the town, a distance of four and a quarter miles. Ready? Go!'

He fired the pistol and the young people set off, better athletes scrambling to get near the lead as they crossed the park, jogged onto the side road, past the ancient tannery, across the highway where two policemen were holding back traffic, and along the edge of the

town. Putting the starting gun in his pocket, Dick said to a group of teachers who'd watched the start, 'Cup of tea, ladies and gentlemen. The mothers have kindly invited us to take tea with them as soon as the youngsters are out of sight. It should be ready now.' Still genial, patrician in his role, he urged the teachers up the slope to the school where the mothers, he thought, were getting ready to pour.

Near The Finish

The function was at the Studley Park boathouse, in a modest room with table set for sixteen. Tom Ambrose, the organiser, was at the door, welcoming. On the table behind him was a list, with names ticked as people arrived - and paid. When Carl Nelson arrived, he shook hands with Tom, then gave him a fifty dollar note. 'This would have fed a family for a fortnight, when we were boys.' They laughed. There'd been an earlier lunch, a year before, when they'd agreed, in a laughing sort of way, not to talk about strokes, pacemakers, operations, funerals, or 'anything else that shows us being overwhelmed'. So it was a gathering full of friendship and continued existence. They were oddly, almost unusually happy, as if simply to see each other was an achievement. 'What are you doing these days?' Anything was worth mentioning, because they were curious to know. Acquiring years is easy. One has merely to avoid death to grow old. Getting up becomes that little bit harder. Understanding comes more slowly. The boathouse party assembled, nobody late. The ticks on Tom's list were completed, four couples, eight men on their own. Gary Stewart said to Tom, 'We're not very representative! Women are outlasting men these days by years, yet they're under-represented here.' His wife, Annette, said, to as many of the gathering as were in earshot, 'That's because once women lose their partners, they only go out with other women.' Darkly she added, 'If they go out at all.'

Tom, cheerful as a boy, said to those around him, 'I've finally been able to get a list of names. Until now, I've been working off old photos, and half the time people can't remember the people next to them.' Amusement rose inside him. 'I have to say that half the

time people have no idea of who the person was. No idea at all!' He chuckled. 'So it's been a hit and miss process. We've done well to get sixteen. But this coming year, I'll be working on addresses. We might need a bigger room, next year!'

This amused the party; a bigger room for a declining group? Carl said, 'Perhaps we could get a stock of shop window dummies to represent those absent. If you're not feeling well enough to attend, you donate a few dollars and a dummy sits in your seat. If you wanted to, you could record a message about what you'd done the previous year.' This, coming from Carl, was taken as amiably eccentric and the conversation shifted to the approaching bushfire season. Could helicopters do any more than slow the rush of flames? Would people have to give up the idea, attractive to their age group, of retirement in the bush? Clemens DeVille, owner of a palatial home at Mount Macedon, said, 'It's asking a lot, isn't it, to persuade people who've retired to a country property to go back to the city. Denise and I are breeding horses, and it's a lot of work, but it's easier than bringing up children, as you would all know. Horses don't try to be the same as we are!' He smiled. 'I remember saying to Denise, when we had four little ones under the age of ten, I've got this awful feeling that the boys are like me and the girls are like you, so I'll never be able to understand the boys any better than I can understand myself, and I'll never be able to understand the girls better than I can understand you, my love, and I have a feeling that to manage me you make sure I don't know too much about you!'

Someone said, 'And what did she say to that? Can you remember?'

Clemens looked into the years. 'I think she just gave me one of those enticing smiles, so charming, so impenetrable, at least to someone as limited as I am, and went to another room. Or that's how I remember it.' Others took up his theme. It was harder to remember, as you grew older. Or it was easier. The distant past was available, at the limit of one's grasp; it was only the recent past, or things said a

minute ago, that couldn't be recalled. People talked of memory lapses, and things coming to them in the middle of the night. Of leaving notepads around the house, so that things didn't get forgotten. Then Tom picked up a knife and tapped a glass. 'Ladies and gentlemen, it's one o'clock so please be seated and have a look at the menu. They'll be taking orders pretty soon.'

Another sort of order settled on the room. When standing up, one can deliver bon mots to an audience, but when seated, one is responsible for the feelings of those seated nearby. They had all known each other in childhood, and few of them had seen each other in the intervening decades. Decades! What had they done with their lives? What had the years done to them? The questions were too big to be capable of being answered, but goodwill was in the air. The gathering was unusual in that everyone wanted to know about everyone else. Why had this one not married? What had happened to the earlier partners of that one? How loose, how upright, how promiscuous, how steadfast, had they been? Those that had religion in their childhood had been taught to expect a judgement of god, but god was no part of their reunion. The judgement, as kindly as could be imagined, lay in their being together. Each knew that the others would recognise any false defences. But why would anyone use them? They'd stayed the distance. Others had fallen by the wayside, some of them years before, but those assembled at the boathouse had succeeded in the simplest possible way – by turning up. Carl turned to the woman on his right. 'Anita, did you ever get to Norway?'

She said, with a quickness he remembered, 'I did. With my second husband.'

'How long were you married the first time?'

Her answer was not so much sad, as accepting. 'Fifteen years. When we make a mistake, it can take a long time to admit we were wrong, and longer to find a way out of the situation.'

Carl considered. It was true enough. Did it call up anything in him that he needed to tell her? He couldn't think of anything. But Anita was going on. 'By the time I got there I'd outgrown my obsession. It was just another place. I found myself walking around and wondering, why did I want to come here when I was sixteen? And I didn't know. I looked at the cities, and forests, and fjords, and so on, and I realised I was questioning them – why did I want to come here? If you think about it, that's a way of asking something outside yourself to explain you to yourself, and that's impossible. How can Norway tell you why you'd wanted to come to Norway, years before?'

The waiter came, Anita discussed the menu with her husband, sitting on the other side, then someone on the opposite side of the table claimed her attention, and Carl was on his own. In lively, vibrant company, with people he wanted to talk to, he felt on his own, and it disturbed him. He had only to voice a few pleasantries and he'd be spoken to, but he felt solitary. How long had this been his condition, and was it permanent? He turned to the man on his other side, Ely Jenkins. 'You came off a farm, Ely, I think; did you become a farmer?' Ely had horny looking hands, as if he had, but he said, 'Only a few years, then I got out. Just in time, I'd say, before the rot set in. I shouldn't say the rot. It's a good life but you've got to commit to it completely, and it was starting to kill me. In here.' He tapped his brow. 'I thought, I've got about six months before I die. Out!'

'So what did you do?'

'I put the place on the market, and I went to my brother. He had a factory in the city, making bicycles, of all things. You'd have to go to China today if you wanted to make bicycles ... and why would you, for God's sake? Anyhow, I told my brother I wanted a job. I'd sweep the factory, I'd stick labels on boxes, I didn't care what I did so long as I had a few quid in my pocket and I wasn't farming!'

'Quid!'

Ely smiled. 'A word from another time. When was it? 1966, that was when we changed to decimal. At the time, I thought there'd be

chaos, but it only took a couple of days, then we were all using dollars and cents as if we'd been doing it all our lives. I remember thinking at the time, we don't need to be afraid of change.'

A waitress broke in to get their orders. She made a note, and moved on. Ely re-started the conversation. 'Any regrets, Carl? About being in your seventies? If you look back, that is?' Carl felt Ely was asking himself, and wondered if he might, perhaps, answer his own question, but no, he was waiting. Carl said, 'Life's a bit of a cheating process, I feel. If – *if* – we could start out at twenty, or sixteen if you're an early starter, with the knowledge and experience inside us that we have now, how much easier it'd all be. How much further we'd get!' He was ready to go on but Ely broke in. 'But we do have all that experience there in front of us. Books! God, I'm amazed, now, at how much I'd read by the time I was twenty. And what good did it do me? I had my parents, and my grandparents – they were living with us for a few years till they passed on – but I did my best to avoid them because I didn't want to be bored. Weren't you like that? Or did you listen to your parents? Were you an obedient sort of boy?'

Carl put the question to himself. He had been an obedient boy. 'I was. I think I was a *good* boy. Why? Because if you did what you'd been told not to do, it got you into trouble ...' he could see that Ely wanted to break in '... and causing trouble meant that people were after you, surrounding you, when what you really wanted was your freedom, so it was better to keep out of trouble because if people thought you weren't likely to cause trouble they didn't bother watching you all the time ...'

'Clever!' cried Ely. 'Clever! You had your eye on the horizon instead of on the traps being set at your feet. It's the only way to escape a trap, isn't it? Step right over it! It's best if you never even know it's there!'

Tom was tapping on his glass with a knife again. 'Sorry to break in, ladies and gentlemen. They'll be serving up in a moment. I thought I'd take this opportunity to circulate a couple of lists. The

first one is everyone here with the addresses where you're living now. If you expect to be somewhere else by the time I'm organising our next get-together, could you give me some indication of when you're likely to be moving, or how I can contact you, so we don't miss out? And the other list is of some mystery people who seem to have dropped right off the radar. Try as I might, I cannot get any hint as to where they are these days. If you can help at all, just put your name next to their names and I'll contact you in the next few weeks. Thank you. Enjoy your lunch.' As he finished, two young people came in wheeling a trolley, and began serving.

Slipping Out Sideways

Sam grabbed Neil by the elbow. 'Steady down a bit. When we get to the road, stand behind the coppers, as if we're scared. Then cross the road, then duck under the bridge.'

His plan worked. 'Down to the old wharf,' he said. 'There's a boat!'

A minute later they were on the river, with Sam watching while Neil wielded a paddle. 'Don't bust ya gut,' Sam said. 'Let the river do the work.' It carried them down a few hundred yards before Neil said, 'Whatta we gunna do?'

'We're not gunna run that crazy fuckin race. We're slippin' out sideways. Unobserved!' He pointed to a bluff a long way downstream. 'Eagle Point, here we come!' Neil was amazed. 'Gettin' there's the easy bit. What about gettin' back?'

No trouble to Sam. 'We shove the boat under a bush and hitch a ride. We hide down the river till we hear the other kids gettin' back, then we come out. We wuz with them all along!' He smiled. It might be called cheating, but it was easier than running, the way Dick Hart told you to do.

Neil wasn't sure. 'You know whose boat this is?'

'No idea.'

'If it's someone important, we'll get into trouble.'

'Pig's arse!'

Neil looked downstream. 'You reckon we can get there and back in the time they're all running?'

'For sure!'

Confidence betrays us, often enough. What Sam meant to do was grab the double-ended paddle and ply it in the water, but Neil hung on when Sam snatched, and it fell in the water, the boat turned ninety degrees, and the stream took the paddle away.

'Fuckin''ell!

'We're up Shit Creek now!'

Sam tried to reassert control. 'No problem. We get over to the bank and hitch a ride.' But a weakness in Neil was exposing itself. 'We're not gunna get out of this as easy as you think.' Sam fought back. 'What's gunna stop us?' Getting no reply, he shouted again, 'We're not in anythin' we can't get out of. Just do what I say!' He could see that his partner was close to tears. 'First thing! Pull over to the bank. No! Other side, we're gunna hitch a ride back to town. If you're too fuckin' weak to walk!'

As the run wore on, groupings formed. Young people stopped to walk, or sit, and developed plans. Some were keen to get back, as intended, but others felt a need to assert themselves. Keith found Wilma willing to investigate the space between two fallen beech trees, part of a clump that had got away from someone's garden, but when they squeezed their way between the roots of the trees they found that others had had the same idea. 'Ello, 'ello, 'ello, who's this sneaking off, you naughty people!' Magda and Lou, two of the larger, more developed people of their year, with the arrivals noticed, their pants unbuttoned. Lou, a bossy, assertive boy, said to the arrivals, 'Pants off here, that's the rule.'

Keith: 'What're ya gonna do?'

Lou said boldly, 'Whadda ya think we're gonna do? Think we're gettin' our pants off to have a shit?' But Wilma was looking through the beech trees at some houses not very far above them. 'People could be watching, up there.' Lou was ready with his answer. 'Just down here, through these trees, there's a shed. We'll go there.'

A moment later the youngsters were at the shed, but Lou felt resistance when he pushed the battered door. 'Someone's there!'

A voice came through the rusty walls: 'Who is it? Whadda you want?'

Magda whispered, but loudly, 'Oho! Caught them in the act!' Then she added. 'Let's in. We won't be tellin' anyone.'

'Better fuckin' not!'

The door, such as it was, was opened, and the four young people squeezed into the tiny space. A man and a woman, naked, their clothes on the ground, were holding each other. The youngsters' eyes were drawn to the man's erection. 'We were just getting ready,' he said. 'Ya wanta see it done?' They could hardly say no, since they had left the run for some exploration themselves. Accepting their silence, the man pushed himself into the woman who seemed in no way surprised by the movements convulsing her body. Flesh slapped against flesh in a way disconcerting to the watchers; when the couple had done, and the man said, 'Who's next? Anybody starting to get any ideas?', Magda found herself swallowing, and could only say, 'I feel a bit strange about it,' and Wilma said, 'No. Not right now. Sorry Keith.' Keith too, though bulging, had a feeling that to imitate the older people would be wrong. 'We're supposed to be on that run,' he said. 'Maybe we'd better get back?'

Getting back

Wendy and Erica had cheated; they hadn't crossed the Wy Yung bridge and gone back to school by the long way, they'd jogged up the slope into the street that overlooked the river. It was shorter and easier running. It hadn't occurred to them that they might be seen approaching the canteen, the finish line, from the wrong direction. They were too involved with each other to have thought about it. As they passed the oldest building in River Street, Wendy said, 'That place gives me the creeps.' Erica took up what she'd said. 'Mum always says, if the walls of that house could speak ...' They ran on.

Wendy: 'What?'

Erica: 'Eh?'

Wendy: 'What would they say?'

Erica: 'What would who say?'

Wendy: 'The walls, dopey!'

Erica, after padding a few more steps, 'They'd ask if you really wanted to know, and if you did, they'd threaten to tell you.'

Wendy (persisting): 'Tell you what?'

Erica (mysteriously): 'Things that have happened there, down the years.'

Wendy: 'Like what?'

Erica (not telling her, yet not exactly dodging): 'Let's just say, you'd wouldn't want to go there at night, not on your own.'

They ran on. They were seventh and eighth to get to the canteen, yet it was, to their surprise, and the frustration of the earlier arrivals, who were thirsty and ready for something delicious to eat as well as the plaudits of admiring mothers, closed. The shutters were down, the door was locked, and it seemed as if it had been years since anyone had opened the place. There was no sign of Mr Hart, either; no teachers, parents, nobody. It was too early for the buses that drove students home to the nearby towns, but today there wasn't even an early bus or two, parked in the shade, waiting for the kids who would fill them with noisy chatter. No buses, nobody except the first few back from the run, slumped on a bench, disappointed.

Wendy said to Erica, 'Where's everybody?'

'How would I know?'

Kids are good at disowning responsibility, but Wally Richards got up from the bench near the canteen and started banging on the door. 'Open up!' he called. 'We're hungry!' Nothing happened, so he banged again. Then, to the surprise of the youngsters who'd been on the run, the door opened. A woman, presumably a mother, was there, and none too pleased to see them. 'Yes?'

Wally tried to continue his boldness, but didn't have much conviction. 'We're back from the run. What've you got for us?'

'What run?'

It wasn't what they'd expected. 'The run around the town. Mr Hart told us to come here when we got back, and here we are.'

'I can see that,' the lady said. 'And what might you be wanting?'

Wally felt he had right on his side, but he hadn't been brought up to be rude. 'We ran right around the town. We're tired. We were told there'd be drinks and something to eat ...'

The lady disappeared, then came back with a bowl and a packet of biscuits, open at the top. As if the children were noisy dogs, and no more, she poured the last of the biscuits into the bowl and offered it to Wally. 'That'll keep you going till you get home. It'll have to. I'm not supposed to be here. I looked in to attend to something I mightn't have time for tomorrow.' She shut the door again and they were as they had been before, if you ignored the milk arrowroots. Wally banged the door again, but it didn't open. 'This is all we get,' said Wendy. 'Looks like it,' said Erica. Wally was more deeply affected. 'This isn't what we were told was going to happen.' He tried to draw himself up. 'I expected more than this!' His angry glance fell on a skinny girl and a timid boy whose names he demanded to know. They confessed to being Liz and Denis, names which for Wally had no clout at all. How come these two little weeds had got back so early? 'Ya take a short cut through the town, didya?' They denied this, but when everyone but Wally was grabbing for the biscuits, it was hard not to see him as ridiculous. He wanted more, nobody was going to give it, and there was nothing he could do. The bowl was passed swiftly from hand to hand. 'It's all we're gonna get.'

Wally was sullen that night, even after dinner. 'Come on, son,' his mother said. 'Whatever's got into you?'

'I can't say,' the boy said. 'I feel really let down.'

‘You’ve told us that,’ his mother said. ‘I promised you. I’ll ring the school tomorrow and ask them what happened. It sounds to me like someone thought they’d got something all arranged, but they didn’t bother to tell whoever they should have told. Somebody made a mistake. They probably put it down in their diary for the wrong day. Sillier things have happened.’ Wally grumbled some more, but his mother was adamant. ‘I don’t want to hear about it. Let’s find out what happened. At the moment, we just don’t know. Not another word till we find out.’

So Wally went to bed disturbed in a way he couldn’t deal with, but unable to say anything for fear of his mother who’d closed the matter – she felt.

There was a rumour that Dick Hart had been taken to hospital shortly after starting the run, but the school told anyone who cared to listen that he was attending a conference in Melbourne and would be back the following week – as he was. In the staffroom, where most were only casually interested in the run, which had never been their idea, the whole thing was no more than a function of the town’s capacity for what the more academic were inclined to call folklore, that being the town’s way of coming up with complex, muddled reactions to things which seemed simple to teachers. The matter of the run simply died when the school became aware that a Form 1 girl called Magda, a cheeky, too-advanced-for-her-own-good girl, had become pregnant. Her parents were accused of not keeping an eye on their daughter, but it then came out that her deeds had been done in a shed made of scraps down by the river, at which point it might be said that people ran for cover because most of the townspeople had, in some form or other in their minds, little retreats to which they resorted for practices likely to be condemned. Town life, village life, is a peculiar construct, with virtues and the vices they construct by counter-definition living side by side. Town life, village life, is built on the unavoidable fact that people know more about each other than it

is good to know. Another item to circle the town was that Dick Hart had been asked to take up an administrative position in Melbourne, but, despite his suitability for the job, had declined. Holding a small beer in hand at the Commercial, he told his colleagues it would have been a diversion from his planned career; it didn't lead anywhere, though it would have given him recognition, but his idea was to become a principal while still relatively young and then transform his school into a model for the state. His colleagues were impressed. A model? That would be an interesting point of study, if it ever came about.

Magda's parents, whom we mustn't forget, asked their doctor what could be done about their daughter's condition, and he told them that, locally, nothing could be done, but if they contacted a man whose name he mentioned – in Melbourne – something might be arranged, at a price. The matter was arranged, and the price was paid. Magda disappeared for a couple of weeks, then returned, somehow different. Told not to talk about her operation, she kept her mouth closed, placing her apart from her classmates. She couldn't grow through the experience, so it was an undefinable but palpable happening which everybody knew about but nobody talked about, except that of course they whispered, snickered, passed significant glances back and forth, somehow darkening what might have been natural and turning it into a happening in that veiled, dubious world that shadows this one – or am I simply describing the thinking of people who live in the shade of conscience?

Magda stayed on at the school, but Lou, who'd fathered the aborted child, moved, early the following year, to South Australia with his parents, his father having found work on a boat at Port Lincoln, fishing. Lou was strongly built and likely to follow his dad, one of those who are never really young because their place in the adult world is obvious. Those who knew him knew there'd be other girls, other pregnancies, and then, before too long, a family he'd love in a neglectful sort of way before he found himself with sons and

daughters just like he'd been himself. Some cycles are too easy to follow, and therefore never get broken. Why? Because there's no way out. They close on themselves too easily. Lou himself knew he was predictable, and didn't care. If the racehorses he'd follow before too many years passed were half as consistent as he was, he'd be a rich man!

The School Forgot

The school forgot. Dick Hart was busy organising exams, another of his jobs. December advanced, teachers took classes on picnics. Numbers dwindled. Farm children brought notes to say they were needed at home. Nobody cared. Arnie Longmire said to Dick Hart, 'You know Dick, the rot started with that run!' Dick grinned. 'What rot?' What rot, indeed? The world's normal condition was chaos. In the English department they pored over a dictionary. *Ka-os*, a Greek word, meaning ... well, chaos, what else could you say? A shambles? A mess that there was Buckley's chance of cleansing? Carl Nelson delivered himself of a speech on the matter at morning tea. 'We're in the grip of an ancient problem! When I was a boy ...' those in the room knew they'd be listening for some time '... I was asked to define a *spiral!*' He looked, significantly as he thought, at his colleagues. 'I defined a spiral, and as I did so, I couldn't keep my fingers still!' He twirled his index finger, showing what a spiral was. 'The lady who asked me what a spiral was laughed when I did this.' He repeated the movement. 'She said, people can't stop themselves. You ask someone what a spiral is, and they twirl their fingers, the way you did. I'd fallen into the trap!'

Someone started to talk about spirals, but someone else broke in: 'So what are you trying to tell us, Carl? What've spirals got to do with it? Eh? Can you explain that?'

Carl believed in himself. 'I can. The most powerful force in the world is metaphor, have you ever thought of that? People will argue about whether god exists or not, they'll wage wars and kill each other as to the nature of the god who does or doesn't exist, but they ignore

the extraordinary power of something they use all the time, without even thinking. The power of metaphor. It's too clever to rule the world, it rules our minds instead ...'

Nobody knew what he was talking about. They respected him because whenever they walked past his classes, everything was running smoothly – stuff on the board, people listening, boys and girls clapping each other when they read what they'd written, yes, it was a room where good things must be happening because the kids knew best and chaos – *kaos* – in the classroom was the surest evaluation of a teacher, yet, when you brought Carl Nelson out of the order he created in his classes, and you actually listened to him, what did he have to say?

'... in the days when this school was first set up, people used to talk about the British *lion*. There never were any lions in Britain, except maybe in a cage, at a circus!' Nelson thought about what he'd said. 'That's appropriate. A circus is a metaphor too. Do you notice how we'll say that someone's household, or maybe his business, is a *circus*? We mean that it's an organization, better considered as a *disorganisation*, which is actually a combination of the most wildly disparate forces you could possibly bring together, and it's pretending to be a well-run show. Which you're asked to *pay* to watch!'

He couldn't stop himself laughing and a number of others laughed too. Voice: 'You talking about the Liberal Party?' (There'd been ructions in the federal parliament that week.) Second voice: 'What about the Labor Party split? Revisit the nineteen fifties, mate.' And so on. Carl got himself going again. 'Metaphors are tricky things to use, yet people use them unthinkingly all the time.' Knowing that most in the room had never thought of the matter, and being a teacher, he set out to explain. 'A metaphor is a way of borrowing the attributes of one thing to define the attributes of another.' The room began to weary of him. 'People in the British empire used to think ... used to *like* to think that the empire, or some part thereof, possessed the attributes of a lion. That is, no matter how dopey or

drowsy it might look, or actually be, it was dangerous when roused, and it was *feared*. So it always got its way. That was what they liked to think. And we were silly enough out here to believe them. Why else did our soldiers rush off ...'

His colleagues had heard him on this before and had no intention of suffering a repeat. Attention turned away, cups were sipped, people began to gather things for their classes, and so on, when the door opened and the principal came in. 'Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm sorry to break in. I've just been told that the parents of Magda Nelson ... Form 1G, some of you will know her ... are coming to see me this afternoon. Would all those who teach her, or know her well enough to make some contribution, please join me in my office at twelve o'clock? I won't keep you long. I just need to be brought up to date on her progress, attitudes and so on, since her return after a recent absence of two weeks. Thank you. My apologies once again for breaking in.'

And he was gone.

Conversation with the Albrights had hardly begun when the principal realised that Magda had little hope. The girl's parents were riddled with shame. Failures themselves, they were passing on their fate to their daughter. 'We never wanted her to be this sort of girl,' Mrs Nelson said, causing the principal to wonder how they failed to see that they'd made her what she was. 'When the doctor told us she was pregnant ...' Mr Nelson said, leaving his sentence incomplete except for a head-shaking display of incomprehension. 'She's had every chance!' the mother added, filling in, then added, 'We were expecting you to expel her, but you were too kind to do that. We're very grateful.' The girl's father nodded in his self-lacerating way. Attempts to lift them, or even to change their focus, were unsuccessful. The principal told them that such things occurred, though they were kept as quiet as possible, and that getting young people on the right road was more important than punishment.

In a moment he regretted using the word. The Nelsons wanted him to know that their daughter was having her 'privileges' reduced as far as possible. The worse she became, the stricter they were going to be. They were *determined* ... The principal did his best to curb them, then gave up. 'Mr and Mrs Nelson, before you go, there's something I want to say.' He'd emphasized the word 'go' so strongly that they knew they were being ordered out. 'Parents come here every week and tell me how much they're willing to do – to *spend* – in order to bring success to their sons and daughters. Success isn't bought. It's created. And believe me, as a professional educator, I can tell you that it's both easy, and hard. Young people need to feel good about themselves. I have people in here all the time who tell me they're going to buy their child a desk lamp. Or give them a separate room. They'll restrict their children's liberties, or they'll offer them rewards. None of it's any good. These threats and promises are useless. Or next thing to it. The only thing that guarantees success ...' He stopped. 'Sorry, *almost* guarantees success, is making young people feel good about themselves. If they aren't happy with themselves, if they haven't got confidence in themselves, they've been set up to fail.' He waved away the pleading, the refusal of what he was saying, that he knew the Albrights wanted to express. Cursing the Nelsons in a part of his mind he tried never to show parents, he went on: 'It doesn't much matter whether students are lazy, or brilliant, careless or careful, methodical or slapdash, it doesn't much matter whether their parents are rich or poor, this side of the tracks or that, what matters is that young people must like being who they are!'

A minute later he was saying goodbye, knowing they were disappointed. Parents, he thought: they think they're coming in to discuss their problem but 'discuss' means handing it over to us. They've spent thirteen or fourteen years handing their failings to their kids and then, having done so, they ask us to find a solution. Who was Magda going to marry, and when, or would she be able to find a way through the maze, all by herself? He stood in the passage as

the Nelsons walked away, thinking of the rooms surrounding him where teachers taught their students, and most of the effort useless unless his simple demand was met. 'Hopeless,' he said to himself, or thought he had, because one of his teachers came out of a room beside him with a pile of exercise books in his arms and looked inquiringly at his superior, wondering if he'd been addressed. 'Not you, Mr Wright,' said the principal. 'Talking to myself. Occupational hazard.' His face looked bleak. Mr Wright smiled in a pale sort of way, days behind with his marking and not wishing to have to explain himself to his boss.

Clive Wright spent much of his life afraid of being caught out. He was also defiant, when it didn't show. Passionate people perplexed him. He'd taken the job because he thought teaching would be easy, he'd brought his family to a town near some lakes, and he'd bought a boat. The boat was certainly a success but the job was defeating him. People were so passionate! Parents expected miracles of their children, his colleagues were doctrinaire, everything mattered too much. Why couldn't people just do a job, then go home and forget about it? Martha, his wife, was always telling him about invitations to join this or that: Martha, who'd never been a member of anything! Why did people want to join things? He could see some sense in being a member of a boat club, you got rights to tie up in safe places, and there was a lot of expertise you got access to over a drink, but membership as a way of life? It wasn't him. At the school where he worked he did his best to avoid his boss because he knew he wasn't like the other teachers, who were passionate ideologues, in Clive's eyes. Finally he decided that he must protect himself with an all-absorbing interest, or leave. Which was it to be?

If he'd been in a city he'd have talked about it with someone, but it occurred to him, one morning, as he stood in the street with a newspaper under his arm, that everyone around him was a local, and he was an outsider. Even the poorest of them, the despised and the

drunken misfits, belonged in some way, and he didn't. So that's it, he said. You have to surrender yourself. They mightn't want you, they mightn't think much of you, but they wanted to see submission. You had to kow-tow to their regional ideal in some way, or they'd drive you out, unwanted. He felt interested, challenged, for the first time since he'd arrived. What was he going to do?

If you can't beat them you have to join them, he thought. But I'll do it on my terms. He talked to Martha, she didn't have many ideas, he went quiet for days until it occurred to him. He'd form a society of former students of the school where he worked, and he'd trace them to see what had become of their lives. Successes, honours ... and the usual failures – he'd make the town own up to itself. It existed by shutting out what it didn't want to know, and he'd make it aware of those things. If the town was defeating him by not letting him live the way he wanted then he'd defeat it by not letting it tell itself what it wanted to about the way it lived. He felt good. He'd wrestled the town onto terms that suited him, and there wasn't a soul who knew what he'd done.

Not yet!

He brooded over the idea for weeks. He had a feeling that much of what he wanted to create was already in existence, and all he had to do was recognise its parts when he saw them. Then he'd put the thing together, and start.

He devised his rhetoric. Everyone in the region was proud of it and they didn't want to move away, but often they had to. Once they got qualifications their jobs took them to the city, even overseas. Once moved away, few of them came back. Well, he'd open up the lines of communication so that those who were still here were in touch with those who'd left. They'd invite them back to give talks, they'd be asked to lay out the paths they'd taken to reach whatever they'd achieved. Half of them, he knew, had fallen on hard times once they'd gone away, but the town could be relied on to discover that only slowly, not all of a sudden. Nobody would suspect him of

trying to rub their noses in failure because he wouldn't do it. He'd let them do it for themselves. He spoke to the principal, the mothers' club, to members of the council: his ideas were well received. He asked the principal's permission, and got it, to organise the opening of a new building nearing completion, to which he'd ask some distinguished former students to address the gathering. After that he'd launch his In Touch Society. Enthusiasm is a better thing to have flowing through one's veins than frustration; Clive Wright even got his marking somewhere close to schedule. He stopped dodging the boss in the passage. They don't know what I'm unleashing, he told himself, but they'll learn.

But what a mixture!

Simple Sam, as the papers called him, was Clive's first discovery. He was often mentioned in gossip about gangland murders, though he'd never been charged with anything. 'First person questioned,' he used to boast, 'and last person charged!' He had a baby face, and a way of swinging his arms as he walked so as to claim the widest footpaths as his. He smiled for cameras and chatted with anybody idle. 'Never hurt a fly in me life,' he claimed. 'Find it hard to kill a mozzey when I'm walkin in the bush!' Not that anyone had ever seen him in the bush; he was too urban for that. Someone told Clive that SS, as they called Sam, was an old boy of the school where he was working, Clive checked the records, and he was. Clive wondered what use he could make of this, and the very next day he encountered the man himself, standing on the step of the Railway Hotel. 'Sam!' he called in surprise at having the infamous personality delivered. Sam, who hadn't been drinking, was in jovial mood. 'Simple by name and simple by nature. Only one rule,' he said, raising a finger, 'Don't call me Simple Simon. Gotta get me name right!' Clive explained that he was trying to get in touch with ex-students of the school, and had been wondering how to make contact with Sam. Why? Because, Clive extemporised, it was the variety of people's experiences that he wanted to make

townsfolk realise. 'As a teacher, I find myself expected to deliver all sorts of good things to the youngsters, but none of us ever know what becomes of the people we teach. Off they go into the void to become an unknown quantity. I've heard so much about you and now our paths have crossed!'

Sam was a show-off who liked to be flattered. 'I'm only in town for a day or two, but I'll do anything I can,' he said, affability itself. 'I've got contacts, mate. Anything you want done, you let me know and we can arrange it.' To which he added two more words with such sententious confidence that he might have invented them: 'No worries!'

Clive wasn't sure where to fit Sam into his scheme of things. After all, as the school had thousands of ex-students, he'd need to be in touch with some of those nearer the top of the social scale than Simple Sam. People would want achievers to look up to. Clive turned over his lists of names. Our oldest living Old Boy, our oldest living Old Girl; how equivocal he felt about those terms. In an odd sort of way men were proud of reverting, in old age, to the state of their childhood, but the same couldn't be said of women. They weren't girls, as they grew older. Girlhood, whatever it meant to a woman, was a state they lost. If you called a bunch of older women 'girls', you were inviting them – *forcing* them, perhaps – into a falsity. Girls they were not. When did women stop being girls? Clive realised he didn't know. His wife had never discussed it with him, they'd never discussed it with their two daughters and their son. 'It's vital,' Clive realised, 'and I have no idea. What sort of education did I have, and what am I handing on?' The next morning he watched from a first floor window as the school pulled things from lockers and started the chaotic movements which ended up, a few minutes later, with everybody at a desk, or a bench in a laboratory. Or in sporting attire on parkland across the highway, doing exercises labelled 'Phys. Ed.' Fizz Ed! The mysterious thing was that everyone seemed to see sense in what they were doing yet

they hadn't the faintest idea where anything would lead or what its effects would be. 'They're all Simple Sams,' Clive told himself, 'and nobody's got a clue!'

Then Sam was charged with murder. The town knew in minutes. It had happened in Shepparton, far away, and it involved a Mafia killing of an orchardist whose fruit was being picked by Cambodian refugees instead of Italians or Greeks approved by the gang. Sam had been seen in Shepparton in the days before the shooting, a place where he was unknown. He had no legitimate reason for being there. He'd been drinking in bars with 'undesirables', presumably finding the lie of the land before despatching the man whose life had become *de trop*. The orchardist's family were pictured in newspapers, daughters weeping voluminously, his son with a darkened brow that made it clear that the sins of one generation were going to be repeated in the next. No improvement for the humans of our planet! Mrs Calabrese's face was as much a mask as the scarf that covered half her face. She was going to carry on till the girls married and brought men into the business, or till her own little boy grew up. 'We're not gonna get wiped out, you take it from me,' she said, and these words resonated wherever the press could spread them. Mrs Calabrese had spoke! In Shepparton, nobody knew who Sam was; he was a foreigner, or as good as, but in his home town he was regretted. Clive Wright's colleagues wanted to know if Clive had a file on Sam. He had scores of files at this stage, just as he was to develop hundreds in the years that followed his acceptance in the town. The school's new building, once opened, was presented by the newspaper people with a photo of Dick Hart firing the pistol that started the run around the town – the run that never ended, in one version of the tale. 'What did happen that day?' people asked, or told new teachers to ask when they got to their appointed school, and the normal answer, given with ready confidence, was, 'It depends who you talk to!'

The answer covered all types and all seasons: 'It depends who you ask!' Clive enjoyed this nonsense. It seemed, to him, that his ever-expanding files of who'd done what once they left the school and, most of them, the town, could contain within themselves, as it were, a sub-set of files about stories of the run that had never ended, or never even begun, according to some. A puzzling business: Clive put off worrying, even thinking, about the blessed race – run – until he had time to think about it. Every year that went past there were more people talking about the run – but fewer and fewer who'd actually been involved. It was an event that diminished as it grew, if one can make such a silly statement, as, of course, one can!

The town knew ...

The town knew, in a way, that it led an existence separable from the lives of its inhabitants. This is a bold claim and not provable. The town is an organism without a heart ... Without a mind? That's another question. It's perhaps simplest to say that the town's mind is in residence, though only temporarily, above the mouth of whoever is speaking at any one time. This means, obviously, that the town has many minds, because there are many speakers. True! The town has many minds so if you want to know what the town thinks, you choose a voice for yourself, and that becomes the one. This is not as hard to accept as it sounds. We are used to the Church speaking, whether fallibly or otherwise, no mean claim; politicians are known to put their own views in the mouths of the People, and Chief Executive Officers pronounce, at times, and often enough, on behalf of that abstraction known as the Company. Other pronouncements are made by other people on behalf of Destiny, Fate, God's Will, or even, more recently, The Environment. We don't all, or always, speak for ourselves, do we?

So the town led a life that somehow compounded the lives of all who lived in it, or near it – all who participated, we might say. If, sitting in a bar, you leaned forward to get closer to a story being passed

around, you could decently claim, if the thought entered your head, that, for the moment at least, you were the town. The town, then, is not only a collection of buildings sitting on surveyed blocks, it is unlike such famous abstractions as god because god is outside us, beyond us, and the town is inside us. It's our reaction to whatever we hear because we know that a piece of news will cause reactions, and that we will hear about them, deeming them, in all probability, expected. We know our town after a while. We know what it will do or won't, we have a fair idea of how it will react ... and we get surprises, too.

Take Sam. He got off the charge of murder, though everyone in his home town was sure he was guilty as charged. Guilty ... but the cops couldn't quite prove it. Those who'd known him all his life could see that the experience of murder and subsequent trial had changed him. He'd tried for years to keep his inner self invisible except in stories he circulated, and then, suddenly, every news camera and crime reporter claimed to know all about him. He couldn't even blow his nose in private. There were things in the trial that reduced him to tears, and his tears were national news. They had a camera at his shoulder as he entered and left the building. Barristers were paid king's ransoms to prate about his motives, his relationships with the deceased and the dead man's family. Sam was haunted by the faces of the dead man's children, each of them in one way or another reminding him of ...

... the man. Sam, who had been busy wasting his life, suddenly realised that in taking a life – he *was* guilty, as charged – he had realised the value of a life. I said he was changed, and changed he was. He wanted not only to live, but to serve. He wanted to do simple, humble things that brought gratitude to faces he'd barely known, and worthwhile, acknowledgeable tears to his eyes, blind to so many realities for so long. 'Where was I when they handed out common-sense?' he shouted in his prison in the hours before his release.

The warders let him out, he got a ride on a truck to his home town, and it accepted him. A job was found at a hotel, serving occasional beers, sweeping the yard, helping the women with the washing when they were short-handed, something he would never have deigned to do, once, but now accepted gratefully. Lucky was a man who was allowed to bring in the sheets, and as to pressing them, the only person in town who had a better job was Mrs Delaney at the dry cleaners who used a press and steam iron to make clothes look better than new.

So the town existed, it was an entity ever so slightly increased in stature because it had taken back the outcast who, let's be honest, had turned his back on it, and now the town held in its clenched, or rolled-up, palm, a jewel of sorts, though common enough, a man who'd found in himself all the obverse sides of a life of crime. Sam was simply, if only slightly, redeemed. He was the same old rogue who'd been known, meaning seen through, for years, and he was still among us – the townsfolk, the town's people, good and great, bad and small – whether we wanted him or not. He was life, really, or a part thereof, and he'd been sanctified by a process nobody understood but everyone had taken part in. That was why people had towns, really, so that they possessed, always available, something bigger than themselves.

Martha gets love, gets religion

Clive's list of names grew longer. Many of these people became known to him. Some dropped in to see him when they returned to their old town. Clive was always on the lookout for projects to involve them in. Martha was passively helpful in this, neither enthusiastic nor knowledgeable, certainly not imaginative, but useful. She welcomed the visitors and talked to them if Clive wasn't in the house. This was no more than wifely behaviour until Clive noticed a change. She announced one day that the kitchen needed painting and before Clive or the children had had time to get their minds around the idea,

Martha was up a ladder, painting. Martha was obsessive. Brushes had to be cleaned! Pots of paint sat on newspapers so they wouldn't mark the floor. Awkward parts of the ceiling were made attainable by trestles and platforms, which Martha moved with skill. The kitchen had hardly settled back to normal before Martha declared that the house was filthy, the word oozing moral condemnation. Clive knew something was happening, but what? Martha began to clean the house, one step at a time. The undersides of tables. Cupboards which hadn't been emptied in years. Taps were polished till they shone, an electrician was brought in to check every switch, then sent to the ceiling to investigate the wires. Clive was quiet by now, watchful: what was wrong? The house wasn't filthy and never had been. Something in Martha's mind was offending her. What? He noticed – and when he did, he kicked himself that he hadn't observed it earlier – that her body temperature seemed warmer, even hot when she was excited. She was in love. Love! He could hardly remember what it had been like; they'd started a family, the natural process, so quickly, with so little consideration or discussion that it was almost as if love hadn't happened, though it had, briefly, and in a well-skirted (avoided) way. In love?

With whom?

Clive watched, and it took him days. At first he thought it might be Gracie Nelson, one of the mothers running the canteen, slight, skinny, too young to have a teenager, you'd have said, except that she was imaginative and had a never-quite-captured air which made her attractive to men. To women too? Martha?

No, Clive decided, after days of observation, it wasn't Gracie, it was his colleague Carl Nelson, a man of poetry and words, as imaginative as Gracie but more knowledgeable, with more resources, if he did have the painful habit of making speeches. Clive began to look at his colleagues in the staff room when discussions were underway, gauging the qualities of their minds; they were, after all, responsible for educating the town, and what they had to say when they were

together suggested that they weren't really up to the task ... but who else was? Is Carl Nelson in love with my wife, Clive asked himself, and decided he wasn't. So how, then, had Martha got herself into the state she was in? For that matter, what was she going to do when she'd scoured the walls of their dwelling? He didn't have to wait long to find out; Martha got religion. She'd always been respectful of her parents' Methodism, but overnight it became a passion. Her body developed needs, most of them negative ones, that were compelling. Though she stayed faithful to the bed she shared with Clive, there could have been a sword between them for all the intimacy the bed provided. He felt she was preparing herself for an ultimate sacrifice, that being an experience to be shared with the unacknowledged lover. Clive tested her one day by quoting something Carl had said at work, something irreligious, which had caught Clive's attention. Martha seized on the words as if only her hands, her mind, were cold enough to handle them. 'Tell that man his soul needs cleansing, and I mean to do it for him.' Clive looked at his wife, a total stranger, almost, to him now. They'd never given each other ways to think about their bodily demands, and now, here she was using her lust as a demonstration of her righteousness. 'How will you do that?' Clive asked his wife. 'I'll take him to church with me,' she said, 'Sunday after Sunday. I'll pray for him. I'll direct God's attention to him. Let's see him keep God out of his soul when God decides to take possession!'

Clive considered these two forces thrown together in his sight – a woman's lust and the great unknown that people called God. God and the vast inrush of desire that made a woman into a mother. One was unstoppable, so how could you hold back both? 'Get a hold of yourself, darling,' Clive said to his wife. 'Carl doesn't go to church. You're not responsible for what he does. He is. Carl's responsible,' he repeated. 'You're not. God wants willing converts, he doesn't want victims. You want to make Carl a prisoner in some war of faith,

but he doesn't want it, and neither do I, Martha – Martha! – neither do I!

Clive had never spoken to his wife like this in their years of marriage. Martha had never been spoken to like this in the whole of her life. She'd been a good girl, she'd been a good wife and mother, she sensed that Clive was accusing her, with passionate if unstated conviction, that she was going wrong. 'God,' she said with shrillness, madness, in her voice, 'wants the soul of every unbeliever to realise that He's there, ready to receive the souls of the lost!' Clive knew that he had to rescue his wife; he had to drag her back to the shores of sanity before the wave of her madness took her to sea and drowned her. 'I'm going to drive you to church tonight,' he said. 'Then I'm going to sit in the car while you go in and pray. You say to God, God, I want you to decide. If you want me to wrestle with Carl's soul, you make him walk past the church when I go out to my husband. If you want me to leave Carl to work things out in his own way, keep him away. Make up your mind, God, because I'm going to walk out that door in five minutes time and what I see as I leave your church will make up my mind for me!'

Clive drove her to the church, she went in and prayed, and she came out. Carl was nowhere to be seen. Clive knew – had known all along – that he was playing squash with a club in another town, and always did on Sunday nights, but Martha was unaware of this engagement. When she came out, there was no Carl, but a gaping hole in her, and a vacant seat in the car she shared with Clive. She got in, her husband drove her home, and they never talked about the 'affair' again.

Keeping things under wraps

Faith was a matter of institutions, as the town saw it. Individuals had faith, of course, but that didn't matter. The only faiths that counted were those that had backing. Spokespeople, buildings. Bits of paper, noticeboards, bullshit made official in some way. You could ask an

official of a faith for its views on this and that – divorce, abortion, the moral questions of the day – and there'd be an answer. It would of course be unsatisfactory, because it wasn't drawn to suit the questioner, it was the standard from which anyone in trouble could start their bargaining. Virtue was mostly a matter of reputation, and that meant it relied on what people thought, and the buggers were capable of thinking absolutely anything – anything at all! Carl Nelson knew this better than most. He'd been having regular meetings with a smart young woman – beautiful but unhappy, you know the cliché, at the very time that he became distantly aware that there was something strange in the way he was viewed by Martha Wright, his colleague's wife. He was so concerned to keep the affair secret that he had no attention left over for Martha, a woman he'd never thought about. A few whispers and some gentle hints having made him aware of the Martha problem, it seemed to him that Martha's madness was a good distraction. He could tactfully pose as the honorable gentleman he wasn't as a cover for what he was keeping quiet. Under wraps, people used to say, and when Carl was with Joanna MacMurray, his lover, they made jokes about getting between the wraps, meaning, of course, sheets, a place they liked to be. Joanna was talkative in bed: 'It's not that I don't like my husband,' she'd say, 'because I do, it's just that I've got so much more to give than he knows about. That's why I come to you.' Carl liked to hear this, but in his more thoughtful moments he realised that she might be saying the same to other lovers about him. 'Carl's nice to me so I go to bed with him but he doesn't understand me,' she might be saying, and with truth. 'That's why I come to you.' Who might she be saying that to? Any number of men, all at once, or serially, as she searched through what the men of her town could give?

Carl, who, as we've already learned, was a vocal analyst of the way the town did things, realised after a few encounters with Joanna, that she was innately subversive, and that, in that respect, she was similar to the men of the town who granted recognition to the town's

faiths while withholding any but superficial commitment to them. She obeyed the form – you could see her driving through the town with her husband, and two children in the back of the car – and she could slip away for her lover(s) as opportunity presented. If the town upheld respectability while leaving room for darkness, you only had need for two faces, a dark side and a light, the presentable and the hidden, and you were perfectly adapted. ‘Joanna,’ Carl said to her one night, when they were putting their clothes back on, and getting ready for those sips of wine which promised more lovemaking in the future and summated the pleasures they’d enjoyed, ‘Joanna ...’

His lover, pleased to hear the formless form of his query, said boldly, ‘Yes?’

Carl, with all the weakness of a man who doesn’t understand women, said, ‘Do I mean anything to you?’

She laughed. ‘You’re a man. You set the rules. You even set the ways that cheating can happen, to give yourselves a way around the rules. What you can’t do, because this is what women are better at, though you only half-know this, being a man, is that all the expertise of playing the game – playing the game, you notice? – is with us. Women. You need us more than we need you, though very few of you know it.’ She smiled happily. ‘Do you want to see me next week? I can see you on Tuesday, if you want.’ It dawned on him that she was so confident that she could show her cards to him in the certainty that he’d gain no advantage from seeing them, no advantage at all.

‘Next Tuesday? That’ll be good. It’ll be great to be with you. Again.’

The following Tuesday Joanna came to his house. Normally he picked her up so that nobody would be able to say that they’d seen her car in front of his house, but they were becoming bolder as the weeks wore on and they remained undiscovered. When she walked into his living room he was on his knees in front of a shelf, rearranging books. Stacks of them were on the floor, in piles around him.

She stopped a few paces short and he knew she was watching to see what he'd do. He had to welcome her. He stood, kissed her, then led her to a couch, several steps away. 'As you see, I'm rearranging things,' he said. 'Long overdue. It's taking me much longer than I thought. I thought I'd have it done before you arrived.' Again, he was aware of Joanna's amusement; she hardly cared what he'd been doing. Whatever he was to himself, it was far from what he meant to her. She said, easily enough, 'We should start doing more things together.' This, as they both knew, would mean making their affair public. Letting everyone know. Becoming, in the parlance of years yet to come, 'an item'. Of gossip, or something solid in itself? Could these two things be considered as one? 'If we were in a big city,' he said, 'we could do it. But here ...'

She seemed not to care. She smiled, mostly to herself. 'Do you smoke? I've never asked.' He shook his head. 'You have one if you want.' She shook her head. 'Non-smokers don't like kissing smokers. I'll wait till after.' Desire began to make itself felt in both of them. Wanting to build some other bridge between them, of understanding, he said, 'I suppose that there's one thing that can be said for being married; there's a lot less waiting than you and I have to go through.' She took the thought inside her, and he realised he had no idea what she was thinking. They were still at the stage of satisfying desire, not of giving and taking to and from each other. 'I wonder how long we'll be lovers,' he said, taking her arm with his hand. She responded by turning her body towards him in a way that he knew meant acceptance of him. Undressing and going to bed wouldn't be far behind. And yet, part of him was still curious, mostly about her curiosity. She saw him in ways she'd not articulated, so her use of him wasn't open to him. It nagged at him. He thought he was using her and she, he knew, was using him. Perhaps it didn't matter if both were getting what they wanted. It was all very mysterious, the moment you turned desire into thought. 'Too much thinking,' he said, and leaned close to kiss her. She kissed him richly, but still with

consideration, absorbing him. She was knowing him as she took him in. He liked this. If it pleased her, it also pleased him, giving, or being taken.

Which?

'Men think they possess women,' he murmured. 'I think that's where we're wrong.' She stood, using her fingers to draw him after her. It was the way she took him to his own bed, every time. Following, he kept talking. 'We don't look at the fact that we're being possessed too. It's something we don't seem to understand.' She kissed him again in the doorway of his bedroom. 'We're going to do it one of these days with the lights on. Not tonight. Don't be alarmed. It's just that I like the idea of doing it in the open. Anything but in the dark.' Almost trembling, he said, 'You're so different that it frightens me. The dark is a necessary part of a man's mind. It must be different for you, and I don't understand how that can be.' She was near a chair, putting her clothes on it, slipping out of things as if they'd been hiding her and she wanted them out of the way. Then she waited while he did the same, and he noticed how quietly she stood, how ready she was, and accepting, though she was both still and silent. 'You've got a different way of being,' he said, and he felt her fingers running down his shoulders to his hips. 'It's truly strange. We're such mysteries to each other.' They lay on his bed together, then she drew up the bedding to cover them. 'Lie beside me till we're warm.' She always did this and the moments of waiting to be warm were the hardest, for him, though he could tell they presented no problem for her. 'I always feel that it's me that's on display,' he said, 'and I don't know why I should feel that. You're in my house, everything around us, including the terms of your visit, is as I arrange it, but somehow I always feel that we do what we do on your terms, not mine. I get my way every time, yet in some mysterious way, I don't. You don't trick me – I don't think you trick me – but in some way you slip past me while I lie here, unawares. In you, loving you, but unawares. Is that how you feel things? Between us?'

She slid an arm under him and drew him towards her. 'Get your answers from what we do, and not what I say. I don't want to say anything much. We can talk in the living room, we can talk in the street, but I didn't come in here to talk.'

The lovers had an unusual non-meeting. Joanna was driving down the town's main street when she saw a car she recognised pulled over. She slowed a little, though not so much as to cause comment from her children, in the back seat with friends, on their way to a party. It was Carl, and he was putting a letter in a letter box. It wasn't one of their times, he wouldn't be thinking about her. Who was he writing to? She knew he wrote lots of letters but he never read any replies to her, though she'd have listened if he did. It had always seemed to Joanna that if you wanted the best from people, they had to be happy first, so you must let them reach that state. Many people, as she well knew, and this included her husband, Trevor, actually preferred to be unhappy, though admitting such a thing was impossible. Impossible, but true; they didn't want to be happy. Feeling wretched in some way confirmed them. Failure and misery lay at the end of every path signposted 'Happiness'. It wasn't there at all. Or so the miserable believed. Which were the miserable? You couldn't find out by asking, you had to let them declare themselves. Hence her maddening patience. So Joanna was driving her children to a birthday party and she saw Carl at a letter box, not thinking about her. She didn't toot, and she had no impulse to stop, not with the children on board.

Carl looked up and recognised the car. It was the main street, it was the middle of the day, nothing could be made of the moment. He was powerless. He didn't know who else might be in the car. He smiled. She saw this and lifted a finger from the wheel, acknowledging. She loved him for having done nothing. Most men were no good at this. They thought themselves disabled unless they could act. Silly! Joanna smiled on her lover as she drove past. She'd leave a note at his house when she got a chance, some tender words. How strange,

and how revealing, she thought, that it was only when he couldn't do a thing that he'd given himself to her, as he had by smiling. She delivered the children, hers and her neighbours', to the party they were attending, and in a moment she was part of the party too, carrying a basket of cakes around the house, and then the back lawn, inviting the shy to nibble. She was asking the hostess how often she had her piano re-tuned and how much it cost, she was talking clothes, the cost of new ones and the friends whose hand-me-downs her children wore, she was talking arrangements for Christmas, though it was weeks away, and she managed to keep a part of her mind open to what she was searching for, and what was that?

What, indeed, was that?

She wanted to be used up, and that was far from being the same as *used*. If you were used, you were probably being misused, but if you were being used *up*, every part of you was engaged in satisfying yourself and another person at – oh wonders! – one and the same time. There was nothing wrong with being selfish if your selfishness overlapped with someone else's, so no nasty energy leaked out of whatever you were doing to poison those around you. She saw nothing wrong with having lovers. She'd had a number and she'd have more, but who and why hardly mattered. What signified, in Joanna's mind, was the rightness of feeling when she was with a lover, and that wasn't easy to gauge, because lovers wanted tokens, words of abandon, and things of that sort, when they should be looking for the edges of what was going on to see if any bits of either party had been left out of the reckoning in some way. For a moment she stood, shoulder to the wall of the house of the party, children swirling about the garden, she stood, basket in hand, thinking of the town, the area, as described by the man who became her husband. Full of exciting things to do and see, he'd told her, and he'd open every door so she could have anything the district offered. It had been the right rhetoric, but delivering it was beyond him, so she'd had to take things into her own hands. She had. She knew she was seen as restless. She

was. What was wrong with that? It was her condition, the state of her being. People condemned unhappiness in others to disguise their own. She wasn't falling into that trap! Then she saw a woman she didn't know, crossing the lawn to be beside her; she must be a mother too, mothers talked, snatching words and insights whenever they got a fleeting chance. 'You're Joanna, aren't you?', said the other. 'Julie Cardross,' introducing herself. 'I know I've seen you around ...'

'Just so long as nobody pointed me out to you,' Joanna said. 'That's the kiss of death around here!' She laughed. Julie felt drawn in. The laugh contained a truth that should be held in reserve, unspoken. She, too, had a feeling that people saw things in her that she didn't know about herself. It was a way of rendering you helpless, unable to take care of yourself because you didn't know what angle you were being seen from. People could be seeing things that weren't there, indeed, from what she'd heard when people gossiped, as they never stopped doing, whole personalities could be created and affixed to people's backs when they weren't looking, which would stay there, unremoved, un-dealt with, for years. 'Ever feel helpless?' Julie said to the stranger, or semi-stranger she'd accosted.

'Most of the time,' Joanna told her, and she felt that an even bigger laugh than usual needed to be restrained, because this was a children's occasion and that was a very big test of a mother's respectability. 'Most of the time, but when I do, I go quiet. I retreat inside myself, and you know what? I always feel okay. You know what I know? There's nothing wrong inside of me. Any problems, they're all out there.' She didn't even bother to point.

Carl thought a lot about Joanna; she made no assertions, claimed next to nothing, but managed to undermine his thinking, his ways of doing things, at almost every point. Did she undermine her husband? He must know about her other men, so she must have a way of giving him assurances about himself; how else could they continue to live together? His name was Trevor MacMurray, he had a fleet of

buses taking tourists around, and children from outlying towns to the central school. It was generally agreed that Rotary had made a mistake in choosing Mick Calvert as their tourism representative; Mick was losing it, while Trevor was of a generation coming through. People liked that expression, 'coming through'; it mixed appraisal with approval in a way that suited the town. All the judgements that counted were made by men about the doings of other men, yet ...

... Carl sensed, from his intimacy with Joanna, that the appraisals and approvals of women were what finally mattered, in a town that belonged to men. How could this be so?

It was because men were vulnerable, and most vulnerable through their women. The town's leading men fell into two categories; those who admitted partnership with their wives, and those who ruled their women, or affected to. Of these categories, the second, too, was vulnerable, because a wife had only to raise her eyebrows at some pronouncement, some dictum, from He Who Should Be Obeyed, and it was clear to those observing that He wasn't. Joanna called on Carl on a Tuesday when he'd only just got home. 'I know I'm early. A woman called Julie Cardross – you don't know her, I don't think – offered to mind the kids for an hour or two. To *free me up*, she said.' Joanna considered her lover. 'She didn't know I was coming here!'

Carl hadn't been expecting her so early, and he had a moment of pique before he softened. 'What would you like to do first?'

She spread her arms. 'I'm sweaty. I'd like to have a shower.' Carl went to get her a towel, and in the moment this took him, she undressed in the passage, dropping her clothes on the floor. When he approached with the towel she had her back to him, sniffing the soaps on the little stand in the shower recess. 'Oh, people give me soap,' he said, 'and I have to go through the motions of using it, but they never buy me the sort I really like.' He picked up one of the tablets of soap, and she took it from him quickly. 'Can I use this one too?' He said, 'Why not, it's my favorite ...' and then he realised she was

studying his response. 'I wouldn't keep it for myself if you wanted it,' he said to her, surprised. 'You're free ...'

He stopped, because she was still studying him, trying to find out what he meant.

'Free, you say?'

He had to improvise, because he didn't know what he was being asked. 'Free to come, free to go. Free to use this soap or that. Free to shower, free to stay dressed, if that's how you feel. You see, I don't think people know what's going on between them if one controls the other. What I mean is that if I force something out of somebody, I didn't really get it. All I got was their obedience, because I compelled it. Nothing's got any value unless it's got an impulse behind it, a real, living thing.' He felt nervous of her, standing in his bathroom, naked, the shower not turned on. 'I'll use your favorite,' she said. 'Getting in with me?'

He apologised. He'd put away the things he'd brought home. He'd let her have her shower in peace. He wasn't sure what he was refusing and what he was accepting, some later use of her feelings, her person, perhaps? He never knew, with Joanne, and he never knew himself when he was with her; he was different, and he couldn't see what his base was. She ran the shower as he stood there, and she got under, smiling brilliantly at him, tossing her head of thick curls back, moving to get the water running onto her neck, bending to run the soap from her left thigh all the way to her feet, then the other side. He wanted to tell her to keep enjoying herself, but, since she was going to, why say it? Then he wanted to turn the light on because the bathroom was on the shaded side of the house, but again, why? She didn't care, light or dark: she didn't care. She wasn't divided into light and dark, as he was, she had a spontaneity he'd never had, she'd had children and it hadn't quietened her down. 'Don't just stand there,' she said. 'Are you getting in?'

He slipped away. 'No. I'll leave you to it. Enjoy. I've got stuff to put away.' He did his little jobs, then he sat, and he watched as she

came into the passage where she'd dropped her clothes, and dried herself with the towel, then put her clothes back on. Still doing up buttons, she settled on the couch. 'Freshens you up,' she said. 'It'd be good if everything was as easy as that.' She even added, 'Thanks for the towel.'

He felt he should say something in reply: 'Thanks for your loving, thanks for lifting me out of myself,' but the only way to give her thanks was to give her something she wanted, and that, he decided, was an entirely new life. 'The fact is,' he said, and she bent forward a little, as if to catch any implications set free by his words, 'I feel, when I'm with you, that I'm a slave to things I don't even understand. I know you'd say, don't *claim* freedom, just take it. Seize it by the wings and fly with it! That's what you'd say, I'm sure, and you know, I don't think I could even recognise my freedom if I saw it.' It seemed a momentous thing to say; he waited to hear what she thought of what he'd said.

She was running a hand through her hair, mostly still dry, but wet here and there. 'They say prisoners dream of being outside, but if you can't even imagine what freedom would be like, you're really imprisoned, aren't you?'

Studying each other, and considering what had been said, each knew that they would be in bed in a minute or two, and a few more times in the weeks to come, until the burst of energy that had brought them to each other was exhausted, but each knew, also, that the inner life of their relationship, their belief that they could *do something* to and with each other, had died in the minutes while she was having her shower alone. Alone, and yet she'd invited him to join her; alone, and yet they could have been together.

Joanna on her own

The affair ran its course, they parted fondly, yet finished, as they knew. What is it that dies, causing an affair to end? Curiosity? Lust? An interest in taking possession? What is it that dies, and what is it

that determines what happens next? In the last weeks of the relationship Carl met Julie Cardross, at Joanna's suggestion, and sensed his way forward, while Joanna went back into herself, but only for a few weeks before she started her next relationship, the one that brought her marriage to an end. She called on Carl to tell him she wouldn't be seeing him again, and she mentioned Roddy, a man in the same industry as her husband. He too drove buses. 'Bit close to home, isn't it?' was Carl's comment, and Joanna said, with disdain for her husband in her voice, and a note of triumph too, 'I'm underway, this time. Any objections from my man, I'm taking myself off.'

Carl's last words to her, almost: 'You're ready to take yourself away?'

She was. She took up with bus driver Roddy, she did nothing to hide it because she was being provocative, this time, and Trevor, her husband, knew it. He swore she'd lose her children, thinking he was playing the trump card, but he wasn't. She'd produced children as part of being married, and she wasn't going to be married any more. She shifted to the city, and teamed up with her brother's friends, most of them in acting or film-making. She hung around, she got odd jobs, she could drive, she was thorough and she remembered things, so she got work with a film crew and surprised herself by being good at it. The director relied on her and she didn't let him down. She didn't have an affair with him, either, because affairs belonged with marriage and she'd released herself from marriage. Marriage was fine if it was what you wanted, but ...

Another film job took her to the Gold Coast, and another to the centre. She liked the aboriginal people, she stayed in Alice Springs when the filming finished, and worked in a shop, selling art to tourists, most of whom amused her when they didn't give her the shits. The tan she'd brought from the south grew darker, and she had her curls cut back. Her body grew leaner and she gave herself to men less often. She only left the centre because the director of her first film wanted her for something he was starting, a complex script

which he wanted to film using a minimum of locations, and this was where Joanna came in; she was to make sure that the locales weren't recognisably the same as shown in earlier scenes; it needed an eye for detail and the ability to analyse what people would remember of what they'd seen. She did this so easily that she got a name in the industry and was passed on to a theatre company director who was looking for someone with the same qualities.

Meanwhile, she lived, mostly, with her brother and his partner; when they had dinner parties they sometimes added a spare male to the guests for Joanna but she showed them what she thought of this either by going to bed early, or outlasting everybody till the following dawn. 'Joanna's too good for us!' they said of her, and she knew she'd won that round. Occasionally she had her children to stay with her in Melbourne, and they were envious, if a little puzzled, of the freedom she'd attained. Dad ... his buses ... his loads of tourists with their endlessly-repeated questions ... the kids could see no sense in that, but neither could they locate exactly what it was that was making their mother happy. When their father asked them about her they told him, 'She seems to be doing what's right for her, even if we don't know what it is.'

When the film industry went into a slump, and theatre work was hard to find, she got a job as buyer for a chain of shops. She travelled, she learned to scour the horizon for shopping trends, known as fashions, cycling around according to the needs and whims, always whims, of those who produced things. She gave work to tiny little industries in Thailand and other places in the countries to the north, she saw that middle men were front men and learned to look behind. 'Look further back!' became her motto; there was always someone out of sight, controlling. Years later, a decade and a half after she left Trevor and his buses behind, she ran into Carl, in the streets of Carlton one afternoon, the pair of them looking into the same book-shop window, side by side, unaware ...

'You're married, I can tell,' she said. 'You've got that look about you.'

He wasn't surprised. 'I am married, I've got two kids, the same as you once did. Have you had any more?'

'No! I'm finished with that!'

'So what are you working on, at this stage of your life?'

The question amused her. It was a long time since she'd been asked. 'Today. And sometimes I give a thought to tomorrow. Beyond ...' She shook her head. 'No can see. And you?'

Carl was pleased to be out of the town where they'd lived. He gave her his address, mentioned his wife's name, said they'd be pleased to see her any time she liked to drop in, but she said, 'If you visit married people, you've got to play by married rules. I've left that behind. Forever, Carl, believe you me.' He saw that this was true. 'I have a feeling you've really found yourself, at last.' She wouldn't even give him this. 'I was never in any doubt about myself, but I was silly enough, in the years when you knew me, to try to please other people, including you. I thought I could only make other people happy by doing whatever it was they wanted me to do. Bullshit! We have to make ourselves happy first, otherwise we can't do much for anybody else. Simple rule, but true, you can take it from me.'

He felt there was a lot of weight in her statement and for a moment he loved her with the understanding he'd never had, in the days when they were seeing each other. 'I'll give you a card,' he said, 'just in case you ever think I can be of any use.' She took it, she put it in her bag, he knew it would get grubbier as the months wore on, until the bag suffered a clean-out, and then he'd go in a bin, somewhere, not quite forgotten, but ...

... the past was the past and the future had still to be made. The chain of shops was taken over, she was downgraded, but managed to get herself picked up by the opposition, doing much the same thing, and again she was travelling the world, checking predictions of the future against the things being turned out experimentally in design

studios, fascinated by the interaction of peasant goods and high-tech industry. It's all one world, she saw, and high and low taste are only two sides of the same coin, used worldwide. She told her brother she'd buy herself a house and move out of his place when she'd made her second million, and her brother laughed. 'You're never here anyhow, what's an empty room? Besides, if you didn't live with us, the kids wouldn't get all the exotics you bring back for them. I don't think you give your own kids half the stuff you give ours. Japanese kimonos ...'

She was sorry that she hadn't been much of a mother to her children, but she got through to them, when and as she could, the things she was doing and the things her thinking was concerned with, and they knew that if they ever needed her she'd give them tickets to wherever she was at the moment, and she'd be a big sister to them when they arrived. 'Take care of yourselves!' she'd say whenever she had to part from them a further time. They'd tell her they missed her, they'd tell her about Trevor's second wife and how she was good to them, but somehow it wasn't the same ... and Joanna would say, 'I wasn't cut out to be a stay-at-home mother, I tried it for a few years, it simply wasn't me.' She would hold them tightly, then loosely, then say, 'I love you both, I know you don't see me much, but I'm never apart from you ...' this, of course, was what distracted them '... because we're part of each other. The world's too big a place for people to live in little boxes.' This, they knew, was her charge against their father, who lived in little – actually rather large – boxes which he drove around, and then in the boxes of his financial systems, and the boxes of the town where he lived, with its Rotary Club selecting members to represent each part of the community's life. 'Do you want us to live with you, mum, when we start university?' This was the question that mattered. 'No,' Joanna told her son and daughter, 'I don't. Near me, yes; with me, no. What'd be the good of that? I want to know what you're doing, and I want to know you're doing well, but how can you do that if you're all tied up with me? Freedom's a big

ask, I know. It's a challenge, but I think you're ready to handle it. It's not an easy one, as I reckon you must know by now, but really, life's not worth a cracker if you have to tie yourself down to enjoy it!

Music At Night

Julie Cardross missed Joanna more than Trevor MacMurray or his children did. She kept telling herself that she'd never felt trapped until Joanna had gone away. They wrote to each other and there were phone calls, until Julie knew she was using her missing friend to do no better than pour out her certainty that she'd made a mistake. Her husband had bought into a dental practice in the town, so he was busy enough, but Julie, in the years before her marriage, had been a student of the piano and now she was in the position of trying to develop her music when nobody in the town cared for what she played. There were simply no opportunities, and she caught herself getting stressed over things that shouldn't have worried her. A Yamaha in the lounge was the piano she practised on, and she told her husband that she wanted a concert grand. He pointed out that in their days in Melbourne she'd never had a concert grand. She'd certainly played them at the Con., but in her home, never; she'd had an upright only half as good as the one she now possessed. When she spoke of returning to Melbourne he pointed out that he'd spent a considerable sum in buying into the practice and would only get the money out if he and his colleagues developed it. That would take a while. Couldn't she, he said, use the period usefully? Get on top of a repertoire she mightn't otherwise have time to learn, practise hard, and then, when they went back to the city, surprise people with what she'd made of her years away? When he said this she simply stood up and, as chance would have it, a timber truck rolled past their house, on its way to a mill. They heard the siren of the mill as it sounded, four times a day, to start and end the spinning of enormous

saws. 'Poor trees,' she said, sitting down helplessly, 'there's nobody to protect them.' Her husband felt her grief invading him. 'Julie, Julie,' he said, but nothing more would come. 'Julie ...'

'I'm trapped,' Julie said. 'You didn't mean to do it, but that's what we did when we came down here. Nobody wants my music. They don't want me!' Her children came into the room, two little boys. They sat beside their mother, who said, over their heads to their father, 'Everyone says this is a good place for children to grow up. What that means is that it's a bad place to be grown up. The walls push in closer every year, until they're squeezing your brain into a dried, hard little kernel. Like all the brains in this place. We're going to have to get the boys out, Geoffrey, before the damage is done.' Geoffrey Cardross stood up, torn in two. He'd thought the move would be the making of their lives, the creation of happy family years, of learning to live in accord with everything around them, and he'd ruined things for his wife. It wouldn't be easy to get out of what he'd bound himself to and he was aware that she might, in her sickly sorrow for herself, have been permanently damaged. She had a cupboard full of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Debussy and Fauré, and these pages never saw the light of day. Was music dead, in her life? Had he killed it? He hoped not, but how would he know?

Julie ran into Carl Nelson outside the chemist's. He was most affable and asked if she'd had contact with their mutual friend Joanna. She told him about her phone calls and letters, leading on to her problem with the town's lack of any music that mattered to her. He surprised her. He had a lounge which he described as huge, and if she bought herself a grand piano, she could house it at his place and play whenever she liked. 'Whether I'm there or not. You can have a key, not that I lock the house very often, usually only when I'm going to be away for a while.' She was suspicious, and yet it sounded like a heaven-sent idea. He explained. 'If you listen to people who've lived here for a while, I don't have any right to own my house. It used to

be owned by Doctor Mackay, it was a family home and that's how everyone thinks of it. Oddly enough, so do I. I'll get married one of these days and that's where my family will live. In the meantime, it's empty, it's full of resonance, I can assure you music sounds well in the house because I play the gramophone all the time. I feel I'm bringing the place to life when I put on music, so I'd love it if you were doing the same thing on a piano. It's a regret of my life that I never learned to play.'

So what was she to do? She thanked him, and took her problem home. Days passed. Nights. Then her husband woke up one night, hearing unexpected sound. There was nobody beside him. He tried to get his mind into operation; there it was! Music, something well known of Chopin. His wife was playing again, and it was the middle of the night. What was she playing? He never knew the names, but he could tell what she was up to. She was amusing herself by trying to have the music two ways – assertive and in strict tempo, a performance with authority to a crowded hall; and, by way of contrast, in keeping with his wife's divided mind, little hesitations and moments of consideration entering the confidence of the notes. She was playing in a way that resolved her doubts by expressing them. It's what music's for, I suppose, he told himself as he got out of bed and moved to the passage where he could see his wife.

She was mad, and she was happy; he could see both sides of her as she played, sitting forward, sitting back. He also saw that he was not alone in listening. One of his boys was at another doorway, trying to work out what was going on. Why was his mother, who hadn't touched the piano in weeks, banging away like this? Something about the child's observation relieved Geoffrey Cardross; he could be an understanding parent instead of a puzzled partner. He moved around the passage until he was behind the child. He picked him up, saying, 'Bed again, darling. Mummy's happy with her piano. You can listen as you go back to sleep.' The boy wanted to know why his mother was playing when everyone was supposed to be asleep.

'You'll do things in the dark, one day, that will surprise yourself,' Geoffrey told his son, tucking him in. He couldn't stop himself adding, 'Everyone does. It's what we're made of.'

He had to go back to bed himself, having said that, but another part of him wanted to be Julie's husband, making a claim. What claim? He had no rights, he could only plead, but what for? Didn't he want her to have music? Yes, surely. Who didn't? But the town? The town wouldn't understand, he knew. He'd seen Julie's face as she'd played and there was something in it he felt a need to protect. She was mad. She'd made herself sane by giving way to something unrestrained. The middle of her brain had needed the middle of the night to give it full expression. The piano was rumbling and rippling in the other room. Julie had described herself as 'trapped'; the piano, the music, had set her free. She'd felt incarcerated, and so, to liberate herself, she'd found a spot in the middle of the night, when darkness covered the town in all its mediocrity, its ruthlessness in smashing people's dreams. Sadly, and he ached terribly when he realised this, he mustn't show himself to his wife. She hadn't told him what she was going to do, she hadn't shared her decision with him, she very possibly hadn't made a decision at all, just woke in the dark and sensed that darkness could be made light, that black notes could be brought to life from the whiteness of the page if she struck the keys as she'd been longing to do. He asked himself, knowing he must keep himself in the bed and not break in on her, if she'd play again tomorrow night, and the night after. Was this the beginning of something, or a solitary expression? Chopin was with her in the other room. The mighty dead, the mystics, the geniuses who'd created a musical tradition, and the thousands of violinists, harpists, clavecinistes, trumpeters and what have you who'd played music down the centuries were hovering above the little town where he lived, and he knew his house was blessed, but felt none the better for that.

His wife was crazy, but crazy was only what people said it was. He hoped his neighbours were asleep because if they weren't, and

they'd heard her music, sonorous and spectacular, they'd know that unusual spirits had been abroad. They'd hold him responsible. He would have to represent the town in controlling, in *managing* his wife, with delicacy and understanding, of course. This repelled him. He was on her side ...

Or was he? He really wasn't sure. He hoped she wouldn't play again the following night. He hoped the small hours Chopin wouldn't happen again, would be a one-off occurrence, easily relegated to legend – 'that night when I woke up and you weren't beside me, and I heard you playing in the lounge ...' and so on.

And so on. How far, how far away, would the events of this night travel, till they were finished, done with, behind? He didn't know. Who could say?

Julie played again, for weeks, unpredictably. Watching her, or whispering in bed at nights, as they made love, or didn't, before they slept, he had no idea. Music, tonight, or not? If so, what music? His marriage embraced a mystery. A part of Julie was out of control. What did marriage mean? Geoffrey was married to Julie. The town knew this, so their expectations invaded what happened between the couple. Marriage was social. It drew its meanings from what people around a marriage – Geoffrey and Julie, any couple! – expected.

Part of Julie had withdrawn from the agreement; this Geoffrey knew. Yet she hadn't gone far. Her music was played in the house, and at night. Geoffrey was aware that another man had offered Julie a room in his house, because she'd told him. At the time he'd been almost as attracted to the idea as she had, but as the night playing continued, he found himself pleased that whatever was going on was restricted to the house. He wasn't ashamed of Julie's playing, but he wanted it kept close.

In the marriage. It was a part of the marriage over which he had no control, and knew that Julie didn't have any either. What was she doing? Then he noticed that there were times when she'd go

to the piano during the day to work on passages that had troubled her during the night. He took this to be a good thing. The mystery was emerging into the light of day. He asked her what it was with the Beethoven that she needed to work on. She opened the piano for a passage from the composer's thirtieth sonata, one of the late ones. 'After the Hammerklavier,' she said. 'That was the last time he seemed bothered about this earth ... on the piano, at least. It's a matter of his hands being able to do something I can't. Listen.'

Julie played a passage and Geoffrey thought he understood. 'There is something wrong, there. Or that's how it sounds to me. Is there anything you can do about it?'

'I'm not sure yet. I keep asking myself how he meant that passage to go. He had bigger hands than I do. More than that, I think he really had more brain connections to his fingers. He must have, to make sense of some of the things he did.' Looking at her husband, she turned her hands to another passage, with trills breaking out everywhere. 'Out of control, we might say, but the music's been published for others to play. He's telling us it needs to be done because there's something he's determined to say. It's why he's great. When he made up his mind to do something, it got done.'

It more than told him about her strength, it drew a line. Nobody was to interfere. When Geoffrey suggested a concert, she flashed at him, 'In the city? Or down here?' He knew he meant 'down here' because he wanted people to know how good his wife was – meaning, of course, that she wasn't mad, as they would certainly think, playing when she did – but he said, 'Wherever you wish.' What else could he say without being disloyal?

She was putting him through a trial. The town they lived in was a huge, but limiting, agreement. Life, which everyone knew needed to be kept under control, went no further than this. Pubs, barbecues, timber mills, dairy farms, wildflower walks, and sporting clubs ... they all added up to a limited basket of choices, and Julie had placed herself outside the limits. Geoffrey could see that he might have

to sell his share in the dentistry, and was reluctant. Why should Beethoven spoil a way of life? Streams of people sat in his dental chair, and he dealt with their problems. He had the deftest hands. Nurses who worked with him loved him. He spoke softly, and confidently, he knew when they had doubts and he nodded, or pointed, murmuring when necessary so they knew what to do. He was infinitely accommodating – but he knew the weakness: he could give anybody anything while he was master, but he couldn't bear indecision, waiting, having others in the position of making up his mind. It made him tense to know that something wasn't within control. Each of his decisions was like the planned release of a bomb-aimer, as they were called in the years of his growing up. Yet he didn't have to be ruler, dictator, boss. He liked to do what he was told. He cursed himself for having an urge to accrete possessions, his wife being the first of them. She was beautiful. That was good. Her mind knew caves, bright spots, starry places, that he didn't know. He added her to himself, yet he didn't know how to do this with her music. How had they got themselves to this pass? He wanted, he *needed*, to know. He had a feeling, quite a violent one, that he must do something decisive. Remembering the offer made to his wife of a room in the mansion where she could house play whenever she liked, he felt jealous, as if he was being dispossessed. He started to ask questions about the man who'd made the offer, and he was certain that he'd been right to be jealous ... and yet the same man, Carl Nelson, came to his door one afternoon, asking after his wife's music, clearly hoping that he'd be invited to listen.

Geoffrey asked him in, but when Julie saw who was there, she told the two of them that she had shopping to attend to, and hoped that Geoffrey would serve his visitor – *his!* – tea. And off she drove. So the temptations of an affair with a man outside the marriage, if they'd ever been there, as her husband suspected, weren't any longer a part of the problem. The problem was a part of her mind. Geoffrey knew enough about psychoanalysis to be suspicious of it, and yet the

mind did have its ways, and was clever enough to hide what it was doing.

What it, the mind, had in mind. Was there an end? How could you untangle a skein of thought? Was it possible to get things clear again, when they'd become cloudy? Obscure?

It was when he observed, in his reading, that there were people who prayed for mercy, that Geoffrey found his release. Mercy meant that something greater than oneself took charge, and eased the strains inside you. That was what mercy meant. Someone decided, out of kindness, to take the pressure off. If Julie was driven to play music by night, what was pushing her to do this? Could it be persuaded to act on her in some other way? Geoffrey knew he didn't know, but felt that he was moving in the right direction.

A night came when he woke to hear her playing. It was Bach this time, he could always tell Bach. The musician had faith, none greater. Bach had lived in small cities, had walked across Germany to listen to Buxtehude playing the organ, which he too, Bach, had wanted to master. So JSB had tramped miles, or whatever they were called in those days, to listen and learn, to absorb. He'd gone home to do even greater things himself. Geoffrey got out of his bed, standing in the dark in crumpled pajamas. Who am I, he wanted to shout; what's inside me, what's not? What can I understand, and what can I not? What's outside me, waiting, wanting to be allowed in?

He felt triumphant. His wife's craziness had won him. She'd brought Bach himself to their house, to another room, God himself. He was there. This was what music could do. It was what religions were supposed to do, but couldn't any more. The connections had been lost. They'd been handed over to the men who wore robes, who'd promptly lost them, leaving their followers without the very thing they'd sought to guarantee. We're helpless poor buggers, Geoffrey told himself, then he got back into bed. He wondered what Julie would play after Bach, but there was nothing. A long silence, then she slipped into their room. 'Bach,' her husband said, feeling a

great need to tell her he'd joined her, that night at least. 'Bach,' she said, 'yes, there is something beyond. It's only a matter of linking his world with ours.'

'That world with this!' said her husband, joyful as he settled. His world had changed, and it had been changed by what she'd been doing in the nights, when she'd been driven out of her old self by pressures he hadn't understood. Were they together again? He felt so but couldn't be sure. The indications, if they came, would come from her, or so he felt. Yes, Julie was not only his partner and the love of his life, the mother of his children, she was the one whose mind could tap into forces beyond his reach.

He loved being by her side!

Adele's man

Geoffrey had had a number of nurses in his practice but Adele was the one he was closest to. She seemed to know his mind. She had things in her hand, offering, before he asked for them. When he brought his head down to examine his patient's mouth, Adele was peering too; they almost touched. It was as if she saw through his eyes, and heard his thoughts as he did. When he was home, he spoke highly of her to Julie, but never examined the 'relationship', if that was what it was. Adele was beautiful, half the town wanted to go out with her, but she managed to sustain a reputation in a town where almost anything could lead to losing it. Patients knew the nurse enjoyed the dentist's favour, but few of them sensed how close the two of them were. Geoffrey made no secret from his partners of how good she was, but even in the to-ing and fro-ing of a busy practice she was rarely in their rooms; it was Geoffrey she was close to. Occasionally she mentioned men's names, but he never asked about her private life; he believed that what they shared in the surgery was something that wouldn't repeat outside. He was content to leave it at that, and so was she. Then an evening came – a late afternoon, perhaps – when he had to go back to the surgery for a meeting with

his partners; they'd been advised to alter their accounting system and felt they'd need an hour or two to work through the changes. Geoffrey, driving back to work, slowed down to watch fire brigade practice, something that was done on the lawns of the town's main street. A fire truck, parked beside the water tower, had extended a gigantic ladder into the air, and a man was climbing it, with speed. The ladder led nowhere but the sky, and the sky was draining its light away. The man on the ladder, which looked no more substantial than a graph on a piece of paper, was remarkably graceful. He seemed to belong, like a bee, or a honeybird, on something scarcely substantial, yet the ladder hardly trembled as he moved.

When he got to the top, he waved both arms, and men on the ground gave a shout. Geoffrey, intrigued by now, pulled over. On the ground, some distance from the truck, and with her back to him, was Adele. She was gazing up with adoration in her eyes. Something of her spirit was on the ladder, with the man, as surely as she partnered him when she was beside him in the surgery. 'So that's her fellow,' Geoffrey said to himself, wondering if, perhaps, he wasn't just a teeny bit jealous of this man who could carry Adele's heart with him up the pole of a fire-fighting team, and down again. 'Who is he, I wonder?'

He mentioned it to her the next day and she told him he'd seen Wally, the man she'd been going out with lately. 'He's good, isn't he? None of the others, even though they're good, can do it like he can.' She was a woman in love, and he felt a profound respect controlling him; no jealousy, no gossip questions or intrigue could be allowed to touch this extension of Adele's being. So he asked about the fire-fighting team, and why they did their exercises, when they met, and how often Adele went with them, and whether she wanted to be a fire fighter too, and so on, but no, Adele told him she had no ambitions to do the things Wally did. It was enough for him to be singular, and for her to recognise his abilities. 'He's something very special, for me.' Geoffrey felt sure that Wally, on the ground, would be simple, decent, unimaginative, disappointing really ...

But Adele brought her man to a Christmas break-up, when the partners dispensed hospitality to those whose services they depended on, and Geoffrey found himself talking to the man he'd only seen on the ladder, once before. Wally's eyes were full of respect, having heard, obviously, about the man Adele worked for. He explained why the crew did the exercise that Geoffrey had seen. 'You have to use the ladder like it's a part of yourself. You have to use all the equipment that way, otherwise you're no good. If you're staring into a building full of fire, you don't want to be asking questions about equipment. You've got no time to think. Your impulses have to be right.'

Geoffrey wanted to say that almost every line of work was the same. Skilful people didn't think about skills, they simply used them. But there was something he couldn't stop himself saying. 'The night I saw you, Adele was watching. She couldn't take her eyes off you.' He would have gone on, but Wally was both humbled and excited. 'Isn't it amazing? She looks at me the way I look at her. In wonder!' He breathed deeply. 'We're going to get married. I can hardly wait, except I'm scared. How can we live together when we're like that. I'm afraid I'm going to let her down.' He turned his eyes on the dentist, a class above him, as the town judged. 'Can you help us, do you think?'

It was Geoffrey's turn to be humbled. 'I'd do anything for Adele, she's that important to me. I see you feel the same way. But what could I possibly do for either of you, apart from giving you a wedding present, which, by the way, comes as news to me. The wedding, I mean. I wish you all the very best, by the way, but Adele hadn't mentioned it, there's been nothing in the paper that I know of ...' He was gabbling, but Wally took it as intended. 'I think what I really want is to be protected. When you've got something precious, like I've got with Adele, you need protection. Something's going to get you, you can't be that lucky and have it last!' Geoffrey's eyes summoned his wife, and Julie came to the two men, her boys beside her, wondering why she was needed.

What they do, not what they say

Adele married Wally, though she stayed on at the surgery, almost as intimately as before ... and yet something had changed. Geoffrey discussed this with his wife, and Julie said that she thought that discovering something – anything – changed it. ‘A thing that’s in the jungle on its own, and nobody’s ever seen it, is different, somehow, once it’s been discovered.’

‘How?’

She couldn’t answer but she knew what she’d said was right. ‘Once a thing is known about, it’s lost its mystery. Mystery is potential for action. Don’t ask any more questions, Geoffrey, they’ll only annoy me. How would I know what difference it makes for something to have mystery about it. It does, that’s all!’

He felt that if anybody in the world understood the importance of maintaining mystery, it was Julie, with her middle of the night music, but for some reason that wasn’t in her frame of reference when speaking about Adele. A few weeks later he told his wife that Adele had told him she was pregnant; she worked on for some time, then she left. She was replaced, of course, but by someone lacking the inner connection Adele and Geoffrey had known. Then Adele had a second child, and a third, this last one born after Geoffrey and Julie had moved back to the city, where Geoffrey set up practice of a different sort, one limited to the occupants of a comfortable suburb whose awareness, for the most part, didn’t spread to people with less worldly means. Geoffrey found himself missing the rougher types who’d been part of his days, but, on the other hand, Julie’s piano playing began to flourish; she partnered two other musicians to form a trio, and they teamed up with others to form quartets and quintets for Brahms, Fauré and the rest. Years passed, as they have a habit of doing, then Geoffrey got a note at his practice; Adele wanted to re-enter the work force and she wanted him to provide a reference. Her husband, Wally, was often in Melbourne and he’d collect the reference if Geoffrey would be good enough to write one. She ended, ‘I

know you could post it but I'd be pleased if Wally at least could see you, and tell me how you are these days.'

Geoffrey wrote a glowing reference and happened to be at reception when the country man came in. 'There's my man,' Wally said. 'I wonder if I've changed as much as you have!' 'The answer's yes,' Geoffrey said. 'Sit down a minute and tell me about Adele.' Wally said he mustn't take up time but there was a cancellation, so they had a few minutes before the visitor said he had to go. Somewhere in the conversation, Geoffrey told his visitor, 'I think the thing I miss most about the bush is that I no longer hear the stories that used to circulate. Stories! I'm surprised how much I miss them!' Wally asked him if there were any he remembered. This set Geoffrey back on his heels. 'There's one in particular. It used to keep cropping up in various forms, so that I never knew what really happened, or if it happened at all. It was a story about all the youngsters from the high school setting off on a run around the town ...'

He noticed his visitor getting ready to speak.

'... and what happened after that depended on who you were talking to. Only some of them ever got back! Or that's how some people told the story. Others had most of them getting back, but it took weeks, and they were still arriving. In another version I remember, the kids got back but the teachers who were supposed to greet them had disappeared. How people disappear off the face of the earth is something nobody ever bothered to tell me ...'

Geoffrey could see that his visitor had something to say.

'You'd know the story better than I do.'

Wally was a quiet man who'd never learned to rely on his education. He was what outsiders called a bush man: impenetrable to most. 'I ran in that race. It was supposed to be called a run.'

'You ran in it? Good heavens! Adele never mentioned that. What happened?'

'If Adele never mentioned it, that's because I never mentioned it to her. I just locked it away. It didn't need to come out till now.'

Geoffrey waited, unsure how the ground of his life might be about to alter.

'I was one of the first back. I came in about eighth or ninth. There was supposed to be lots to eat and drink at the canteen for the tired runners. Bullshit! There wasn't a thing. The door was locked. So I banged on the door and a lady came out. She didn't know why we were there. She gave us a bag of biscuits. One or two each, and that was it.'

'There was nobody to greet you?'

'No.'

'But you'd been led to expect ...'

'We'd been told there was going to be something special.'

'So what had gone wrong?'

The visitor didn't know. 'No good asking me. Nobody ever explained.'

Geoffrey was looking for some safe, common ground. 'This must have had quite an effect on you at the time?'

Wally knew about that. 'It's affected me ever since.'

'In what way?'

Again he was ready. 'I know what to expect from promises.'

'And what do you expect?'

Out of deference to the professional premises, Wally lowered his voice. 'Sweet fuck all.'

Geoffrey wasn't sure if the matter had been dealt with, but there was nobody else in the room. 'You'd have heard other versions of the story. You must have, because I heard enough, in my years down there. I suppose there's new versions of the story being invented, today?'

Wally stood up, his wife's reference in his hand. 'People've got big mouths. And they've got imaginations to match. If you've got to rely on someone, rely on what they do, not what they say. If you're relying on what comes out of a big mouth, you're a gonner. No way they'll ever save you.' And with that, he was gone.

A Farming Story ...

Neil Whittaker knew his father expected him to follow in his footsteps. Neil had three sisters and they belonged to his mum, his father thought. Neil was the male. He was too young to understand this, and much too young to do anything about it, but he *felt* it keenly. Boys were different from girls, and vice versa. Neil, pre-pre-sexual, was interested in girls. There were two systems in the world, and only one was his. He was curious about the other. What his mother called intuition lay on the other side, and it was also the preserve of feelings. Decisions were made in a different way. He took every chance he could to investigate the other territory, but chances didn't come often, because his own side, the male side, was always demanding. It was like being subjected to an endless loyalty test. Other boys, his friends at school, were scathing about girls ... until their bodies made them curious. This was when they said they wanted to *root* the girls, but they wanted more. They wanted to know, because they were afraid. Nothing more upsets the male than the idea that the female may know more. Neil's family had a farm, the boy was third of the four children. Would one of the girls take over the farm? No, they'd marry; the farm would be Neil's. He had to learn to run it. His father was forever talking about breeding – horses, cattle, sheep. Dogs, poultry, pigs. His father took him to sales, and to properties where stud animals were bred with attention to lines – of their bodies and their genetic lines as well. Neil sensed that genetic lines, *sexual* lines, entangled every living thing, and farmers were meant to know about these things, and then to manage, even control, them. How could you have a happy life with women, have fun and then marry,

if you were too much the manager, the controller, of things that brought men and women together?

It troubled Neil. At the start of his second year at high school, a few months after he and Sam Wybrook had snuck away from the run, he realised that none of his school subjects, even biology, was going to give him what he needed. In that regard, his hours at school, and hours of homework, were useless. He hung around the kitchen, hoping his mother would enlighten him, but his sisters chased him out. They wanted their world secure. If his father left to do something with the animals, some errand beyond the boundaries of the farm, his sisters demanded to know why he hadn't gone with dad. The space surrounding mum was theirs.

When Neil went to church, which was rarely, he wondered why clergy wore robes. Men, as Neil knew them, got around in rough fabric, un-ornamental, torn and dirty, and didn't care. Men were proud of their roughness. If they wore a suit for respectability, it was taken off as soon as duty had been served. Men spoke indelicately, with force and simplicity. Men led pared-back lives. Men took care of the world for others. Luxuries and comforts were for the protected, and those who did the protecting enjoyed austerity; the humiliations of mud and the scratches and scars on their hands from twisting and cutting wire were all part of their lineaments. A man created a house for his wife and children to live in, he entered it in order to see that it was being kept as it should, but was spiritually a visitor, a guardian, hovering around rather than belonging inside.

This was Neil Whittaker's inheritance. This was, he sensed, what his father was calling him to do. Neil didn't want it. He wanted to live in the house, part of it too. He envied his sisters' sense of belonging to their mother in a way he didn't know. He wished, sometimes, that he could be a girl. Somehow he had to find a way of being a man that suited him, and he couldn't see how that could be. So he attended his school, years on end, doing enough to get by while his real energies were located on finding a way out – if he could.

... And An Alternative ...

On the day of the run, years before, Sam Wybroom was the boy who'd lured Neil into the boat they'd stolen. They'd lost their paddle, abandoned the boat and walked back to town. They'd hidden until other kids got back to school, then they'd come out, telling nobody what they'd done. Sam noticed that the kids who'd got back early – the first twenty or so – were pleased with themselves, more so than the stragglers. This affected him. He'd thought himself smart for having thought of the breakaway, he'd needed an accomplice because things done secretly were no fun, but really it had been a waste of a good afternoon, buggerising around on the river. They'd caught no fish, they didn't have a story to tell.

What Sam did realise was that you needed a story. Others had to be impressed. A good story was a selling point. Stories had to be invented every day, because people remembered if you told them things twice. They smiled, or went cool, and you could tell they'd stopped listening. Stories about yourself were a way to make sure you existed. Sam was puzzled by people who didn't appear to need them. What would it be like inside their skins?

He realised he'd never know; he wasn't that sort of person. He needed to be present, somewhere, however modestly, in any story that he told. It was a condition of his being. At school, in the higher years, he knew, or claimed he knew, things about the teachers that surely no student could know? The women teachers had lovers in Melbourne, and secret, hidden, lovers in the town – and Sam knew about the ups and downs of these relationships – or so he said. Other boys and girls watched, and listened to, the teachers Sam talked

about, and occasionally it seemed to them that he was right. How could he know, without mysterious, intimate phone-taps? He said he read their lives on their faces. 'We give ourselves away,' he told anyone who'd listen: 'the things we do and the things we're thinking about are printed on our faces for other people to read. *If we're observant enough,*' he would add, dismissing most.

Sam left school after year 11, to become an estate agent. It was a district where properties changed hands a lot, many of them bought by absentee owners who came in summer for a holiday. The town was popular. Sam developed a reputation. When visitors asked locals about hiring boats, and good places for holding picnics (meaning parties) where nobody need fear the interference of observation, they were told to talk to Sam. 'He's the man to organise that.' And he was. He made a point of meeting the groups himself and he read their intentions swiftly. Sex, grog, drugs, people with irregular partners, Sam catered for all. Sometimes he skippered the boat himself, telling his 'crew' that nobody else knew the spot where he was taking them. He had numerous points on the margins of the lakes where lovers had discretion and when the parties were large enough there was usually somebody left over for him – or someone dissatisfied with their lover's treatment who was looking for someone else. Sam was not only full of stories, he became aware of the mysterious power of silence. People's imaginations ensnared them if you gave them room to think. They were full of needs, and if they'd come as far as the lakes and had money to spend, they were in the grip of forces they couldn't control. Sam became a master of giving them a feeling of being close to what they wanted. If they weren't entirely satisfied the first time, they would be the next. He became aware of human types. If they weren't as lying, strutting, as came naturally to him, they might be retiring types – bookish, inclined to sit for hours in the shade studying useless things like birds, fish, the habits of little land-based creatures that weren't any good to eat. There were people for whom history was still alive! Sam built up an inventory of

things such people wanted, and he learned how to time the delivery of their wants. If people were made aware of things that fascinated them when they were on the verge of despair – or boredom, its partner – then they could be caused to eat from your hands. But they must never be made aware that their subservient position had been brought about by shrewd deprivation. They must feel they'd been satisfied at the moment of becoming aware of what they wanted. This, too, became a specialty of Sam: his timing, his perception of need. He had always been an operator, but he had become the sort who's so good that you don't notice how good he is.

He sold land, houses, hotels, cruisers, yachts, and even fishing boats for the contacts the owners brought him. As his twenties ran out and he saw the plateau of his thirties drawing near, he thought it might be time to marry. He'd only hold his clientele if he looked 'natural' to the outside eye, and one or two unwelcome attempts by male visitors to engage him emotionally told him his situation was capable of being misread. He shouldn't stay single any longer. He started to look around. He'd marry a local, because it would more than double his strength. Who? She'd need to be chalk to his cheese so she'd add another segment to the circle he attracted. He realised he needed to study couples in a new way. After years of appraising them for cracks and weaknesses – sexual opportunities – he'd need to watch how they added to each other. Mostly, he decided, they didn't. This was a lesson in itself. If they bickered on a regular basis, they were wasting energy that could be better employed. Who? His life entered a fascinating stage. He was careful to ensure that his rate of partnering neither increased nor decreased. People made jokes about him getting to the stage where he'd be 'long in the tooth' when he married, to which he'd say, jauntily, 'Not getting desperate yet!'

Nor was he. He was working according to plan. There was a partner somewhere, and if she was already attached to someone she'd have to be detached. First she had to be identified. This took months. When he found her, it was in an unusual situation. The

police had a roadblock on the highway, a little way east of town, pulling drivers over for breath tests. Sam never drank while he was working, and it was early in the day. He was on his way to appraise a couple of properties that might be coming on the market, and to do a valuation of another. He'd left early and was in plenty of time when he was pulled over. The constables were very young, and they came from out of town; someone had complained that local cops let locals slip through, or didn't look at their readings too closely. One of these youngsters told Sam to go to the bus for a further test, and Sam knew that he'd got his tubes mixed up, but out of curiosity, he went without arguing. In the bus he sat where he was told, and looked around. The secondary testing was being administered by a dark and beautiful policewoman, almost exactly his age. The first thing Sam noticed about her was that she drove his thoughts in on himself. He wanted to know her name. An officer at the back of the van addressed her as 'Muriel', and Sam found himself rolling the name around in his mind. 'Muriel'? He attached the name to the face – the body – and it fitted. Muriel. He was pleased the young copper outside had made his mistake; otherwise he, Sam, wouldn't be inside. He waited a minute, then he was called for testing. Muriel was brusque, though she noticed that he didn't seem affected by alcohol. His eyes were too quick, but she administered the test so professionally that he was pleased. If people weren't good at what they did they were ratshit. That was a rule! Muriel glanced at the test. 'They shouldn't have sent you in. No reading at all. What are they doing out there?'

Sam gave her a card. 'Honest mistake. No hard feelings. You must get sick of this by the end of the day. Give us a ring at the office. I'd like to hear what your job's like.'

Men, and the feminine

Neil's life, though he didn't know it, became an exercise in compensation. The feminine, the thing he didn't understand but knew he lacked, became embedded in everything he did. As a farmer, when

the farm became his to operate, this showed in the way he looked after his animals. He saw the male and the female in them, clearly enough. It wasn't hard, and other farmers noticed how well his animals looked. He took prizes at the local show, and people said he should exhibit in Melbourne, but this was going too far. Melbourne could look after itself. He married a girl from the other side of a range that divided two rivers running past the town where he'd gone to school and as the children came along he was shocked to find his own life repeated – three girls and a boy. The boy, he found as the early years passed, was very different from him. A real boy, everyone said. He looked to his father for the guidance towards manhood that Neil himself had never really wanted, or needed – it was all too obvious – and the boy, the next generation, found his father wanting. Neil's wife, Ellen – Ellie for short, though it wasn't any shorter – tried to make up to her son for the lack of firmness, definition, or whatever it was, of his father, and it exasperated the boy. 'Don't tell me what to do when I already know!' he'd scream, and Ellie would sense that she was beyond the limits where she could make a contribution, even though she had some idea of what was missing. Neil had a habit of equivocating, of trying to use his mind in two ways at once. His son wanted a clear, bold and simple mind, buttressed with certainties. Neil couldn't be like this. He was kind to his son, made sure he taught him everything he knew, which was considerable, but he wasn't the father the boy would have preferred. They came to a grudging acceptance of each other. Neil felt he was hardly more than the stop-gap filling a generational span which should, mercifully, be short. His own father had been certain and his son would be even more so. I'm the bit in the middle, Neil told himself ...

But never told others. He put his effort into making his property models of what a farm should be. He read, he travelled, he observed, he picked up tricks from other farmers. Field days were held on his land. He was invited to talk. When people visited his property they found him hospitable, and his daughters had an instinct for making

visitors feel at home. People who wanted to comment on this normally did so to Ellen, who was adept at handling their compliments although she was aware that they belonged to her husband. She began to gather a group of friends that she invited to gatherings of one sort or another on the farm – mushrooming, picnics, firewood pick-ups for needy people – because the visitors' admiration for the way the properties were run seemed to help the side of Neil that needed bolstering. He was a farmer of extraordinary capacity and there was no official way of showing it except the financial success he took for granted. He gave to charities and was helpful to neighbours. What he needed, Ellie knew, and knew also that it had to come from outsiders rather than herself, because his love of her, though wide enough, was limited too. Its limits were the limits that narrowed, restricted, his self confidence. She could give him no more than he could give himself. Others must be brought in.

Hence the gatherings which became a necessary part of the way they did their farming. Ellie met lots of women on her visits to town, and one day she encountered Gracie Nelson, who'd been an active member of the mother's club in Ellie's days at the local school, and Gracie, always slim, had filled out a little, but she had her daughter Ingrid with her, slender as Gracie herself had been. Ellie invited them to the property the following Sunday, when there was to be a firewood gathering followed by a barbecue, unaware, Ellie, that she was presenting her husband with the temptation he'd been looking for. Gracie Nelson came, with her husband Jack, and Ingrid, a medical student looking for a philosophy of life before she assumed the powerful role of practice. They came, and Ellie sensed at the outset that the normal separation of men and women would be broken down embarrassingly if she didn't handle things with care.

She did. She kept the Nelsons together and asked Neil to show them around, and she made sure that she attached herself, as normally she would not have done, Neil, in her view, needing the opportunity to star; what he'd built, on the property, was so good, and he'd

never claim credit for it unless people were put in the position where they had to give him his due, so she'd chosen the Nelsons for the role, and she found, before a few minutes had passed, that she'd chosen only too well.

Ingrid Nelson thought Neil Whittaker marvellous. He said nothing that wasn't rooted in what he did, and everything he did, insofar as he showed it in his modest taking of them around, had a thought behind it, and Ingrid was modern enough, far enough ahead of her parents, to see what it was that had driven Neil all these years. He'd explored the uncertainty that other farmers – almost all other men – papered over with certainties. There was respect for life in the way he ran his farm. He knew about it from every angle. He sheltered them in a belt of trees while he talked. When he pointed, his arm, his fingers, were instruments of the wind. Clouds shaded him, or allowed him to be bright, according to their whims. He knew this. He was at home. He led the firewood gathering along a little valley where, he explained, the cattle like to find reserves of grass that didn't grow anywhere else. There was a rocky outcrop where, he told his visitors, the most plentiful wildflowers could be found in spring. In all seasons, but spring was best. When he invited the Nelsons to come back at the right time to see what the rocks would bring forth, Ingrid felt the invitation was made for her. Gracie Nelson felt the force of an opening heart, and was a little surprised. Jack Nelson would have said that Ingrid had won a heart. Even Ellie, who wanted very much to give her husband the scope that she knew she couldn't give herself, wondered if she'd started something too big for her to keep under control – like a fire on an unexpected wind. They walked, the Nelsons and the Whittakers, and it was as if they were being moved by impulses they didn't understand and hadn't expected to surface. Other people joined them, and separated, but the stirring bond between Neil Whittaker and Ingrid Nelson was a whispered compulsion that had never been felt on the property before.

When Muriel rang Sam the girl who took the call thought he was out, though he'd just walked in the door. Told about the call, Sam went to his office and rang the police station. They put him onto Muriel after a snide joke about needing to be quick because she was in demand. 'Cops are even worse than the rest of us,' Sam thought; a moment later he was with her again, a little closer to having things on his terms, yet, as he knew better than most, bargaining was what life was mostly about.

He suggested a drink in the lounge at the Railway, and when the two of them faced one another, Sam realised he had a contest on his hands because her presence reminded him that he'd always hated cops. How could you trust them? They spent their time controlling people. The sight of a police van made Sam feel he was a freedom-fighter! Yet he liked the look of what he saw; Muriel gave him a feeling that she could run as far and fast in search of freedom as he could. The truth was she made him feel respectful, and this was almost a first for Sam Wybrook, a man who normally used his range of tricks to get women where he wanted them. With Muriel, he felt cautious. He barely sipped his glass. He listened. He asked about her family. He noted all the detail in what she told him. How long had she been in his district, how much longer would she be staying? Were there any places she'd like to see? She wanted to go out on a trawler, fishing; she wanted to ski; she wanted to see an old goldfield or two, and she wanted to ride across the mountains and finish up in New South Wales. He had only to look at her to see that she'd handle any of these things better than he could; she was so fit. 'I'm going to organise every one of those things for you, Muriel,' he promised. 'Not all at once; that horse ride'll take a bit of fixing, but there's ways and means. Where would you like to start?'

Muriel didn't know the area well enough to name a kick-off point, but that wasn't what Sam had meant. He wanted to know which of the other projects Muriel would like to do first. That was easy; it was the fishing trawler. At that very moment who should walk into the

Railway but a huge man called Tiny Rawlinson who crewed a trawler that trailed its nets in Bass Strait. 'Tiny! C'm'ere! This is Muriel, friend of mine, I'm wondering if you can do something for her? She'd like to go out on your boat, she won't get in your way, she'll help you if you tell her what to do. She's strong as any of you blokes, believe you me!' Muriel's faint smile was all that was needed to charm Tiny. 'Pleased to haveya. I'll tellya when we're going out, the next few days, ya can see if ya can fit it in!'

Tiny wandered off after a while, leaving Sam with his fears; she was too strong for him, too strong for anyone, on his own, at least. Maybe a whole roomful of bruisers could overpower her ... but that would be an admission of defeat, to call on overwhelming forces when one to one was the rule of the game. Sam was strangely hesitant, and it encouraged Muriel. She began to question him. At first he thought of it as an investigation, but in a moment or two she made him aware that she was opening up his secret places, asking him to bring out the pieces of himself he treasured. 'How did you know I'd be interested in that?' Or he found himself saying, 'I haven't told anyone about that before, ever!' It was that sort of night. She said they should have dinner, and they did, at The Crown, because it had a better table, according to Sam. His real reason was that he didn't think there'd be anyone he knew at The Crown, a place he rarely went to: he was unsure what he was trying to do with Muriel. Get involved, or get away? After a long and intimate hour in the lounge at the second hotel, she said she was taking him home, and she did, to a motel at one end of town. 'Leave your car where it's parked,' she told him. 'I'll run you back in the morning. I don't want anyone noticing things that aren't their concern.'

She was as good a manager as he was. She took him into her room and told him to sit beside her in the dark. 'Till we feel comfortable.' He thought that might take years. Why was it so different with a policewoman? Their bodies were no different from anybody else. 'It's in the mind,' he told himself, and submitted to the examination

that was beginning. It occurred to him that he normally talked about what was happening by using the word 'seduction', though who was seducing whom was always an open question; that meant that if he, as the man, used the word, he was giving himself the pleasure of thinking he was breaking down resistance, whereas tonight, with Muriel, it was him, Sam, who was resistant and she, Muriel, who'd set herself out to bring him into her possession. She's sucking me dry, he told himself, even as he noticed how keenly he was enjoying the event. 'I'm yours,' he said, after a couple of minutes in the dark, seated beside her on an uncomfortable lounge. When she stood, he knew that the movement was the decision, the announcement, and that he must respond by moving too. He got himself out of his clothes and let them drop on the floor. Muriel was doing the same. She pulled back the bedding as if she'd been using the room for years. 'I want to know what you're made of,' she said, and he felt as if he'd known she'd say those words, as if being known, discovered, revealed by an eye more searching than his own had been his fate from the moment he'd had the hide to give her his card. 'In we get,' he said, climbing into the bed. 'Nothing to harm us here!' His nervous system sent signals of disbelief to his mind. He was afraid, excited yet afraid. She was too strong for him if they came at each other front on, too sure of herself; he'd have to be cunning, slippery, he'd have to use all his trickery in calling things something else. Muriel was quick to make play with him, kissing him, rubbing him as if her merest touch was a signal for arousal, whereas he felt shy. Slow. Needing to be stirred. She found this amusing, and her fluttering fingers challenged him to stay inert: he couldn't. He felt parts of him, characteristics, qualities, tricks he often used, vanishing into the darkness surrounding the two of them as they entered the contest of love.

It took some days for Neil to realise that he was in love; Ellen, his wife, knew at once. The Nelsons left something – a bag, a cardigan – behind when they left, and Neil swept it up and put it in his ute: 'I'll

drop that off next time I go into town.' Ellen's heart sank. Yet somewhere in her being she knew that what was about to happen had been inevitable; years of unpreparedness had left Neil vulnerable. He wasn't a reader, he didn't think much about his feelings: he acted. The property had always absorbed him. He liked working with animals or on engines, he liked fencing, building, doing things. He liked finding out how you did things you weren't used to; he was, in his way, a man whose whole life was a work in progress, and now ...

Ellen wondered what to do, then she rang Gracie. 'I've got a problem, Grace.' Grace had already discussed what was likely to happen with her husband, and he, Jack, had winced, backing away from any suggestion that there was something to be done. 'Things will have to take their course. Or maybe nothing will happen, nothing at all.' Jack Nelson thought, shrewdly enough, that when people acted with 'concern', they were throwing fuel on a flame that might die if left to itself. 'If you increase the number of players,' he liked to say, and he said it to Gracie, 'you increase the likelihood that something will happen. Break out,' he added, with the idea of a brawl in mind. Gracie thought it silly to think of love in such terms, but then, as the days wore on and she could see that Ingrid was brooding, within herself, and not talking, she too wondered if silence might be the lid that kept things under control. If you take the lid off, air can get to the flames and they'll erupt, she told herself, hoping that some folk-wisdom might dampen what was threatening.

Neil delivered the bag, cardigan or whatever it was to the Nelsons at a time when Ingrid happened not to be at home, so the visit was affable and harmless, Gracie thanking him for what he was returning and for his family's hospitality the previous Sunday at the farm. 'It was good, wasn't it,' Neil said. 'We must do the same again, pretty soon.' Gracie said nothing about the visit to Ingrid, or to Jack. There was no need. It was her responsibility to control what might be happening inside her daughter and she needed to think. What would Ingrid be seeing in Neil Whittaker, a man twice her age? What

would Neil be seeing in her daughter, a young woman starting out? She felt that her husband's warnings had something to be said for them; if you didn't know what you were doing you would certainly cause things to happen that you'd never expected. What was going on and why was it happening?

Gracie searched in herself for what had happened between her and Jack, when they'd been young and in that condition known as 'in love'. The whole thing felt strangely blurred. She'd felt good about it then, she felt good about it now, but it was as if they'd followed a path that brought them to a good spot without them having to think about the forces operating on and in them. That wasn't much help!

She talked about it with Jack in the privacy of their bed, and it made him both uncomfortable, and dogmatic. 'I've told you before, just watch and wait. If you talk about something you make it more likely to happen. Don't ask me why it's so, but it is.' Gracie was reduced to Jack's policy, and it didn't suit her. She wished the weeks would pass so that Ingrid could get back to uni where, surely, she'd be safe? Then one evening Ingrid told her mother she needed her car. 'Just a couple of things I need to get. I'll only be a minute,' and she was gone. Gracie felt certain that her daughter was meeting Neil. Where? How far would they go? What damage would be done by the time she saw her daughter next? She wanted to ring Ellie but knew that would be fuel on the fire; Jack would be right about that.

Ingrid drove her mother's car to the street where the council's offices were, and parked on the other side of the road, beside the car she knew to be Neil's. People made jokes about him parking on the 'wrong' side of the road; they seemed to think it said something about the man. She sat in her mother's car, in the dark, and when she recognised the man crossing the road, she tapped on the window glass, then wound it down. 'I was hoping I might see you,' she said.

Neil was both startled and brought wildly to life. He rushed to the other side of her car and got in. 'I was dreaming you might be here. How did you know?' She told him to hold her, but he was so far

behind his feelings that he could do no more than stare at her face. 'The whole world's changed because you're here. How do I know what to do?' Ingrid was clearer than he was. 'We need time together. Real time. Like days and days ...' It was clear that they weren't going to get them, but even to hear her say what they wanted brought some clarity to his wishes. 'Time together, yes, that's what we want.' It was not lost on him that they were together, yet talking about being together; this meant in some way that they weren't yet fully real to each other, and that was what they had first to achieve. 'I want to make you mine,' he said, and she, in turn to him, 'Then now's the time to do it.' She began to pull at her clothes. 'We have to make a start!'

Hastily and in the limited spaces of a car, they began their sexual union, stared wildly into each other's eyes, then rearranged themselves. 'How will we get in touch with each other?' Neither of them knew. 'There's got to be a next time.' Each knew the other agreed. 'We need time to make it good.' Desperately selfish as they were, each wanted to give the other happiness, because that would lead to possession and that was the first step to everything else. 'How will we tell each other where to meet?' Neither knew. 'I'll be here next week, same time, same night,' he told her, and that was enough. 'Can you get here?' She told him she'd be there. They'd work things out. 'Once you make the commitment, everything follows from that!' They both felt that was true. He got into his car and drove away. She started the engine of her mother's car and drove around for a few minutes before she drove home, managing to appear relaxed when she walked in with a couple of things bought at the shops. 'Everything okay?' asked Gracie; 'Everything's fine,' her daughter said in reply.

The trip on the trawler went so well that Sam and Muriel were soon making arrangements for a visit to a cattle station in the ranges near Benambra. Sam hired a van so they could go camping. Muriel, he noticed, was remarkably unrestrained. It seemed to him that he was

giving her freedom as well as love. He said so. She told him that the two things were one and the same, but only occasionally, and when they came together ... it didn't get any better than that. They drank at the local hotel before going back to their van, with its attendant fire, and Sam realised he'd never been happier. He told Muriel this. It made her very happy. 'I spend a lot of my time restricting people, it's great to know that I can make you feel released.' Sam was no thinker, but he saw a connection. 'Restricting and letting go,' he mused. 'Do you think they're connected?' The words felt strange. He added, 'I'm not sure what I mean by that.'

This made Muriel even happier. 'Build up the fire, Sammy. There's a bottle of wine in the fridge, it'd be great to open it now.' She added, 'Don't you think?' and he knew how deeply he was involved with her, he, Sam, who had thought of women as being there to exploit with charm, use for a while and then discard. He was too happy to think of slipping away this time but he knew she must have had other men before him, so how had they managed to get out of her grasp? Had there been quarrels? Had they disappeared without trace? It suddenly occurred to him that disappearing without trace might be the evidence of a crime. He laughed! She gave him an inquiring look. 'If one of us disappeared,' he ventured, 'what do you reckon your colleagues'd do to find ...'

He stopped. Did he mean him, or her? She was waiting. He didn't know which way to take his idea. Maybe it would have been better if he'd never started to say it, but he had, and had to go on. '... you, or me. Whichever one disappeared?'

Her confidence overwhelmed his awkwardness. 'I wouldn't disappear without you. You wouldn't disappear without me. It's not going to happen.' She handed him the corkscrew to get their bottle open. 'This is better than I've ever had before. I won't be disappearing, Sammy. Rest your mind about that!'

He opened the bottle, they drank. She was toasting their love and he ... he didn't know what he was doing. Celebrating. It had

seemed to him that men were the main players in the games of life, they made the moves, then waited for women to react. A cunning, clever man was always a few steps ahead of the women he desired ... but Muriel's desire was so frank, full and easy, that she wasn't subject to trickery. She was obedient only to impulses from within, and they gave her a marvellous rightness. If he thought of a question, she herself was the answer, not the provider of an answer that might be disputed. She pulled his chair beside her own, patting it by way of telling him where to sit. Beside her, that was his place. She had no idea of the totality of her demand, and, Sam saw, that meant that she was inescapable, and, as well, she was so involving that you wouldn't want to escape. He'd hired their van! He'd brought her here, to a spot by a mountain stream. They'd drunk at the local pub, they'd come back to the van to cook, they'd thrown themselves into the flames of a life together and there was no getting out. 'How much longer do you want to work?' he said. 'Are you after promotion? How high do you want to go?' He noticed that while he'd been talking, she'd held out her hand for the glass he was holding. He gave it to her and she raised it to her lips. Then she moved it down a little because she had something to say. 'When you're feeling really good ... no, I mean, when you're feeling really great with yourself, you don't make a list of things you're going to achieve. The list's only got one item to be achieved, and it's simple. Simple, Sammy, simple. It's this! We're going to keep things the way they are. They're really good, so we're going to make sure they stay good. While we're feeling really good together, everything's going to fall into line with that. It sounds simple, it is simple. We're going to make things stay that way. When we make plans ... you know?' - to Sam, she seemed as far away as a distant planet, but close also, forceful - 'When we make plans, they're all about the world around us. Things we want to go to, to achieve. That's not how I'm thinking, here and now, with you. My thoughts are all inner ones, and they're very happy. We've got something marvellous. You've already taken me to some marvellous

places and we're going to go to more. And you know why we can find so many wonderful places in the world around us? It's because we've got so much that's wonderful inside us. Inside and outside, the two go together. If you're feeling good inside yourself, the world around you's going to be good too. Everything seems to happen together, or that's how things are for us right now, my love, and I'm sure as hell going to work to keep things that way!

Sam eased himself into the chair beside Muriel. She was ecstatic. She was quite unlike him in temperament but he'd stumbled on the right way to bring her to her best. He could hardly disappoint her now, yet there was a part of his brain searching the sky above, and the bush illuminated by the flames of their fire, for a way out. Surely he'd never meant to lock himself as closely as this into something that wasn't ... or was it? Was it or wasn't it? ... him?

Ingrid's medical course resumed so she went back to the city. Neil managed to get himself on a state government committee looking into controlled-diet feedlots for cattle, even though it ran against the methods he used himself. A handful of farmers had used the method in his district over the years and he was sceptical. 'You're doing psychological damage,' he told Ellen. 'A lot of fellas think all you have to do to raise good animals is control them. They're wrong. Animals know what you're doing to them, and they appreciate it, or they don't. The animal that gets to market eventually is the animal you've made. Have a look at battery hens!' He threw up his hands in disgust. Ellen realised, watching his gesture, that he was making more such gestures these days, and expressing scorn at any opportunity; it was a sign of a man in desperation. She knew what it meant when he drove to Melbourne for his government inquiry meetings. Two nights in a city hotel, even three or four. His heart and mind went with him and Ellen began, slowly and quietly, to take over the running of the property. Her fractious, difficult son became her ally, because he was allowed to fill his father's shoes, at least to some extent. And the

girls, too, began to feel responsible for the animals and the land with its gates and fences. They started to feel responsible for the trees, the dams and windbreaks, with Ellen explaining their father's reasons for having done things the way he had, all those years when he was shaping the farm. Now he was trying to reshape himself and Ellen was torn. He needed it, it was the logical progression for a man with a bigger heart than the limits he'd been given imposed. Something had gone wrong in the making of his self and he was trying to patch up the weakness at a time of life when people were supposed to have their growing up behind them. Fifty and in love! Ellen felt sorry for herself only occasionally, and brushed the mood away when it came. She was the captain of the marriage, taking the ship they shared through a stormy patch. She knew that deep within herself there was self-hatred, and it mustn't be allowed to get out. Her management had to be calm. Her daughters knew there was something wrong but their faces when they looked at her, the assurance in the way they accepted her answers, told her they still felt sure that she had things under control. The essence of staying on top is to look on top. The most certain way to fail was to look like a failure. She knew this. It's funny, she thought, this madness of Neil's is making me strong. I'll finish up better for this passion than he will.

She wondered about Ingrid, and could tell herself no more than that she was young. Ingrid and Neil, her husband, were going through something she hadn't been through herself, and didn't particularly want to go through. It seemed to Ellen that love of the Neil and Ingrid sort was an obsession, it possessed you and it stopped you seeing clearly. You were so focussed on yourself and your lover that you lost sight of everything around: it was no way, Ellen told herself, to bring up a family, or run a farm.

That was her job now. She'd always played second fiddle to Neil and now she was ... what did they call it in an orchestra? ... she was *concertmaster*! First violin, holding everything together, reminding her fellow musicians, with a raised eyebrow or a questioning glance,

of their traditions, the mutual recognitions the whole body of them shared. She was standing at the garden gate of their homestead with her fractious son Brad, to wave as Neil drove away to one of his meetings in Melbourne, and a tryst with Ingrid, of course, when the boy stopped waving and said, 'Why's dad away so much, mum?' She told her son, certain that he'd understand, 'He needs it. It's a break-out. He's put so much into this place for so many years that he's turned it into a jail. Nobody else thinks so. Everyone thinks it's a model of how it should be, and they're right, but that's not how it looks to him. He has to get away. Just like you'll get away one day, my son, and when you've been away for a while you'll wish ... *how* you'll wish ... that you could come back!'

Young Brad was taken aback. 'You reckon I'll want to come back once I leave?'

'I don't reckon, I know.'

The boy didn't know how to answer. Parents were usually right when they spoke with that sort of certainty. 'Well, I'd better hang on, hadn't I? I'd better not go just yet!' The idea amused him, then he stopped for a thought, coming to him. 'What about dad? Is he coming back? Mum?'

'He'll be back, what's left of him. He'll need a lot of support – I mean propping up – when it happens.' The idea that his father might soon be very weak was shocking for Brad. It was easy to be strong when there was strength around to draw on, but if mum was right, this wasn't going to be so. Strength might flow in the opposite direction if his father fell down, or failed. He remembered his father telling him about the training of horses for races where they had to jump hurdles; confidence was all-important, and if a horse or its rider lost confidence, the game was up. Nobody could go any further. So his father, almost out of sight now, in his car and on his way to Melbourne – Ellen would have said to Ingrid – was beyond his safety limits, and didn't know it, and he and mum and the girls were the safety providers now, not the other way around!

Muriel was slow to see that she'd taken Sam into waters that were too deep. He hid it from himself because he needed to hide it from her. He wanted her kept happy, so he had to give her a little more each time she extended him. One night he said to her, 'I took you into that country near Benambra, next time we'll go further. Horseback, this time, across the top of the country, into New South Wales.' She was excited. 'How many horses?' He told her they'd need two to ride, and two pack animals. 'How'll we find them in the mornings? Or do we tie them up at night?' He'd already discussed this with mountain men, he told her what they'd do. They'd hobble the horses as pairs so they could feed at night without getting too far away. They'd follow streams in the lower parts of their journey and they'd find springs in the high country. 'There's always springs; the rivers have to start somewhere.' It was something Muriel had never thought about; she'd focussed her thinking on humans, and now they were looking outside themselves. 'And when we get to the other end?' Her mind was always probing, and that had affected him too. To show his love he had to show his preparedness, and this came easily; in the past, he'd always outsmarted his women. This time, his mind was being put to make his partner happy. He'd become almost unnaturally unselfish, and yet it was selfish too, because he had a need to satisfy her, and the way to do it was to serve her. She loved him in his giving mood, so that was what he had to show, meaning, that was what he had to live inside.

They set off. They drove to Benambra again, where they were welcomed as people already known, and they took charge of their horses at a property on the edge of the bush. 'This,' Sam told Muriel, 'is when we have to do two things. To get a good start, we mustn't rush anything. The horses will feel confidence in us if we don't push them too hard for a start. So our first two days and nights we'll spend around the edge of the bush, here, before we start to climb. The other thing we have to do is restrain our excitement. If we're silly in the way we go about this, we'll be in New South Wales before we feel the

trip's begun. No. It's already started. The things we do at the start, loading things into packs, for instance, they're a part of the trip too. Are you going to keep a diary of the things we do, or will it be enough if we do a check at the end of each day, listing things we did and how we felt about them?'

'Explorers keep journals,' Muriel said, 'that's what we'll do. I brought an exercise book to write in.' She flourished it. 'Write small,' Sam told her, 'I think we might need more than that.' The next day he drove back to the little local school and asked the teacher for some books to write in. 'Some of the kids must've tossed out some half-filled books at the end of last year. I did when I was a child.' The teacher obliged, and the two of them, by their fireside that night, amused themselves by reading what the Benambra children had written, months before. 'They didn't know their books were going into the mountains with us, we didn't know what they'd say that we'd take with us.' Muriel was affected by this overlay of children's thoughts and the experiences they were riding out to meet. 'The first thing I want to write down is my own ignorance. I don't know what the high country's like.'

Days passed, and she found herself. She felt wirier as they moved along. She noticed that she felt like the country they were moving through. Snow gums were a spiritual condition, austere, enduring, multi-coloured because tough as boots. 'Has anyone written about the effect these places have on people?' she asked. He didn't know. 'I'm not a big reader. I suppose that's why I'm out here with you. First hand knowledge is best, I always reckon.' They and their horses settled into a routine. 'It's funny, isn't it, it's best not to do anything strange. You see more if you're doing things the same way every day.' Yet when they woke in the middle of the night they knew how lofty their lives had become. Stars blazed out of a sky that was black. 'I never knew there were as many stars as this!' Lying on their backs, they talked, looking up. They were attuned to their horses and, they realised, the horses were attuned to them. They murmured to them,

talking, reassuring, merging what they experienced for themselves with what they perceived to be happening inside the animals. The bush, which had seemed empty at first, filled quickly with the intelligence of creatures, themselves and their horses first among them, but others a-plenty, surrounding. Sam found that he was leading Muriel in this: she was following, waiting to be led. When they'd been riding for a time, he knew when she needed to stop, to talk, to assert herself by starting a fire and making tea, or a meal. He was the leader and he did it by following, being guided by, her needs – and the wishes, or needs, of their horses. Those dark-of-night discussions, under and about the canopy of stars, were assertions of their developing minds: and yet they were no more than releases from the discipline of their days. 'We're being very obedient,' he told Muriel. 'It's the only way to survive. If you get silly ideas in your head, and you go off and chase them, you get lost, or go mad. We've got a map, we know where we're going, we just have to do a little bit, every day, and not get side-tracked.' He looked at Muriel, and he looked around, and he wondered how silly he was, and had been. There was a world around them full of secrets and delights, flowers and skies, ranges and stars at night, mists in the morning, and blazing sun by day, and every sensation of this surrounding, enveloping nature, was a sidetrack to explore. Muriel, he saw, was lost because overstimulated. Her mind, her impulses, were hugely open. She could go up any ridge, down any cryptic gully, and capture with her brain the mysterious dead-ends it contained, and follow leads from one to another until she knew a little bit more of the way the endless bush strung itself together ... and she was lost.

She was always wondering. 'What do you think the black people did when they came up here?' 'Well,' Sam said, 'they're supposed to have come into the high country to feed up big on bogong moths, which they thought very juicy. Yuk! I'm not sure how they managed to get them down, but they did.' Muriel was amused at his discomfort. 'The moths must have given them something that was missing

from the rest of their diet. If you think about it, we've got lots of ideas about eating a balanced diet. That's all right if you live next door to a supermarket. But when you depend on what's on offer every day, you can only balance your diet over a year. If there's something fatty available, and it won't be available till the same time next year, you gorge yourself on it. You stock up on fats when they're there, and the rest of the time you do without. We must be like that, in ways we don't realise?'

Sam looked at his lover, his companion. She was in a snowgum forest, with a more or less open high plain to one side, horse under her, and the two pack horses on leads attached to her horse, and she seemed to Sam to be both a million miles from any demands or controls the world might place on her, and at the same time more connected, more sympathetically complete than he'd ever seen her. 'I've got an idea,' he said. 'It's a good idea, I hope you'll like it. It'll certainly make the return trip different ...'

'What's that, Sam? It sounds like a pretty comprehensive idea?'

'It is,' he said. 'When we get to New South Wales, Jindabyne, let's say, we don't need a great big town, let's get married. So when we ride home again, we're ...

... man and wife!'

This is what they did. The Uniting Church minister at Jindabyne was vastly amused when this couple, with two pack animals, came to tell him they wanted to get married. He said to them, opening his diary, 'What day do you have in mind?' and they told him, 'Today if you like. Or tomorrow morning.' He told them that unfortunately there had to be witnesses, and the pack horses wouldn't do. 'They don't meet the requirements of the law. I suppose I can get a couple of people to stand in for you – my wife would be happy to be one, I'm sure. And we must be able to find someone else, the town's not all that busy – but tell me, are you going to have a reception?'

Muriel yelled with laughter, and she took Sam with her. The two of them were filled with joy at the unpreparedness of what they were doing. 'We know what we're doing's right,' Muriel told the minister. 'If we had the service at half past eleven, we could have lunch at the pub. It would be lovely if you and your wife could join us. And the other witness,' she added hastily. 'Mustn't leave out the second witness, that's no way to make a case!'

And so it happened. Muriel and Sam fronted the altar in their riding clothes, their horses neighing outside the little wooden church. The minister intoned the service and when the vows had been declared, the bride and groom signed the registry in front of the minister's wife and a Mrs Beckwith who'd hastily arranged some flowers for the altar, and a spray of wattle for the bride. Mrs Beckwith was famous in the district for her sharp tongue but something about Muriel softened her, and when the hotel lunch was ending, she went to the bar and gave her camera to the publican, asking him to record the event. This he did, as moved as Mrs Beckwith. He made jokes about the town developing a reputation as big as Reno in the United States, but for marriages, not divorce. This roused Sam: 'What's that place in Scotland where people used to go for hasty marriages? Across the border from England? Gretna Green? I think that's what it was called. People would hurry there to do what they couldn't do anywhere else! It's a good way to start an industry, come to think of it!' This amused the tiny gathering, and when the publican saw that the newly weds were thinking of going, he said, 'Hang on a second, I've got to get you a present, and after that we've got to see you safely out of town!' He dashed inside and came back with a bottle of bubbly. 'Have this when you get home, and think of us up here because we'll be thinking of you.'

Suddenly the enormity of what they'd done was apparent. Sam, holding the publican's bottle, said, 'Do you want to open it now, Mrs Wybrook?' and she, with tears in her voice, replied, 'We'll open it when we're far away, and it'll bring our thoughts back here.' She

kissed the publican, the minister and his wife, she kissed Mrs Beckwith, and her husband said, 'Everyone but me.' Muriel said, 'I'll kiss you next when we open the bottle. Tonight. It'll remind us of what we've done ... if ever we need reminding.' Again, the scope of what was happening put a gloss on the situation. 'You could've had a cathedral,' said Mrs Beckwith, 'but you chose this instead.' Her voice declared the rightness of what they'd done. The publican agreed. 'We can't let you leave the town without an escort. Hang on a sec.' He went in again, and when he came out, five minutes later, he had a handful of people with him and a couple of cars could be seen arriving. After a few more minutes, and numerous introductions, Muriel and Sam mounted their horses, each of them leading a pack horse, and they rode to the edge of the township trailed by the publican, Mrs Beckwith, the minister and his wife, and the well-wishers that the publican's phone had been able to assemble, including the town's constable whose eyes were full of admiration for a bride of his own sort, getting married in clothes that were more dusty than white. 'I think I'll call this a promotion,' Muriel told the other police person: 'Thanks for coming. It's good to have one of my own on hand.' The minister's wife wanted to know when Muriel would tell her family what she and Sam had done. 'When I get home,' she said. 'They know me well enough not to be surprised.'

At the edge of town, everybody stopped. Those in cars got out. Muriel and Sam remained on horseback. The publican called for cheers, and three squawky cheers sounded in the silence of a town surrounded by paddocks, then bush, then mountains. Sam and Muriel rode away, turning, at first, to wave, then fixing their eyes on the horizon, the future, to which their lives were now affixed.

The family takes control

When Neil returned from his trips to the city, he was sometimes elated, sometimes wretched. Ellen watched his moods. They lasted for days, sometimes dreaming, sometimes grieving. He worked

tremendously hard, wanting to exhaust himself, but it didn't work, because when tired he couldn't restrain the joy that blazed in his eyes. It looked like madness to Ellen, but she knew that he experienced it as exhilaration. His heightened states were prone to slumps, when he turned in, and rarely spoke. He did his best to be normal for the children, but was silent most of the time with Ellen; when he was outside late, or found some reason to check on animals at night time, she sensed that he was struggling with the question of whether to abandon her for Ingrid, or if not *whether*, then *how* or *when*. She knew she was in his mind, that a revulsion for what she meant to him had him in its grip and that nothing she did would please or even relieve him. She stayed quiet. One night when he was outside 'checking the cattle', as he said, she slipped out of the house by a back door so that he wouldn't see her if he happened to be looking down, and she looked up at the hill which overlooked the farm, the range that brought one section of the country to an end, and the flats created by the river on his side of the range. He was sitting by himself on top of the hill, trying to decide. Decide what? She knew he felt powerless outside his love and wanted to extend the lovers' power to the rest of the world. He wanted to do something decisive because he felt trapped, and the difficulty was that everything trapping him had been created by his own, earlier actions.

He wanted out, and he didn't know how to get out.

Ellen sensed that he must sometimes have thought of murdering her as a way of gaining the freedom he desired; she was most circumspect after this fear had entered her. Nothing must provoke him. She began to say, occasionally, when she sensed pressure building, 'You need a holiday, Neil,' as a way of encouraging him to have days and nights with Ingrid; after all, when he was away with his love in the city, it was Ellen, now, with the children, who ran the property. She would never have described herself as half the farmer that Neil was, but she understood animals, seasons and the management of money as well as most. She went to the bank manager during one

of Neil's times away and discussed the amount that would have to be borrowed if she, on behalf of the children, offered to buy her husband out of the property. 'I could be manager until one of them's ready to take over, and after that I can move into town and visit if and when I'm asked.'

The bank manager noticed her expression 'if and when', and suggested that she probably meant a great deal more to her children than the words implied. Ellen told him that she hoped, and believed, that he was right, but that what she was going through had shown her that you must be ready for unpredicted realities. Things you were ready for didn't matter, it was the wildly improbable that caught you out. The bank manager said he'd do some calculations and that he recommended that she pick them up next time she was in town. It wasn't the first time he's dealt with my problem, she perceived; others, too, had brought the same questions, and been advised.

This gave her confidence. She was defending the rights and interests of her children. Neil had been a good father but his mind was elsewhere now. He couldn't be relied on, she knew. Securing Ingrid's love would be uppermost in his mind and anything else might be sacrificed. She got the bank manager's figures, studied them, then put them in the fire. The properties Neil and she owned together were worth a fortune, but the later purchases, the add-ons, could be sold to buy Neil out of the homestead property. If he was foolish enough to run to his lover, he'd certainly be needing money! But so would his children! Ellen struggled with the sums in her head for a few more days, even when Neil was home again, and, by comparison with his usual self these days, quite talkative. Ellen wondered if some decision was in the air. If he's going to make an announcement, I must have one ready for him, she decided. I will: what will it be?

Neil went away, and she decided. After lunch one Sunday she proposed a walk. The children were unexcited, but she insisted. 'Where?' 'To the top of the hill,' she said. 'It's the best view of the

property, it's a good place to have a talk about what we're going to do with it. We'll have it in front of us while we talk.' The children knew there was no avoiding what was coming. They walked with her to the top of the hill. Ellen felt, as she climbed, that she was assuming command of all she surveyed – as she was. Ellen sat, the children sat. She began.

'We're up here so we can see what we're talking about. I want you to tell me whether you want to be farmers, if you want to be part of *this* farm, if you want to move somewhere else ... I want you to tell me what you'd like to happen in your life, if you could make it happen.'

Cynthia, her eldest, said, 'Mum, you've heard all that from us before. You're always poking your nose into things like that. It's dad we're worried about. What're we going to do?'

It was what the other children felt too. Ellen was ready. 'That's exactly why we're here. Your father's unsure. His mind's divided. If he comes up with an idea it may not be a very good one. That's why we have to know what we want.'

Brad, her fifteen year old, was next. 'I don't want to be rushed into anything. I want to stay here until I'm ready to go away. I don't want to be shoved out of the way by something ...' he meant somebody '... I can't prevent. I want freedom of action. That means I want choice. That means I want to be able to choose when I have to choose ...'

He'd have gone on but his mother interrupted. Looking at her second daughter, she said peremptorily, 'Jane?'

'Can we buy dad out? Give him some money so he can start a new business, somewhere, wherever he goes when he's away ...'

'With Ingrid,' Cynthia said sourly ...

Ellen took control. 'We're leaving her out of the discussion. It's ourselves we're talking about. We must know what we want to do, otherwise we'll lose if there's any conflict, as there may well be.' Sally, the youngest, started to cry. Ellen turned to Sally. 'We're not trying

to rob your father. We want to protect him from doing himself any harm. But it's my job, as your mother, to look after you too, because you might miss out if somebody hasn't been doing some thinking. Today, sitting up here, we're getting ready. You too, Sally, so, now it's your turn. What do you want to happen?'

Sally surprised them. 'I want us to run the farm. We'll tell dad he can leave if he wants to, and if he wants to come back, he can. That's what I want and if you feel the way I do you'll want it too.' Ellen was delighted. 'What do you others think?' They thought the same. They'd run the property, with mum as the boss, they'd keep going to school, but they'd work on the place, and they'd hire men to do the farm work they couldn't do, and they'd let dad come and help whenever he wanted to ...

'Which isn't very often these days,' said a sarcastic Brad.

... and at some stage they'd have to decide, each one of them, what they wanted to do. Some would want to be farmers and some wouldn't, and they'd have to find a way to let some get out of farming and others stay with it if they wanted ...

Ellen said to her children, 'Now you see why we came up here. We've decided things about the farm and about ourselves. Your father would be surprised if he'd overheard us but I think he would be proud as well. You're capable of thinking for yourselves ...'

Brad burst in. 'But he's not bringing his lady friend in Melbourne here! She's staying in Melbourne, where she belongs!'

Ellen said, 'Don't blame her for what's happening. She's only a few years older than Cynthia. That's what happens in this world, older men see beauty in the eyes of young women and young women get swept away. It's happened before and it'll happen again ...'

Cynthia was less charitable. 'Not to me it won't. Dad should never have made this mess.'

Ellen again: 'I don't think the mess is such a mess any longer. We're taking charge. We've made our decision, now we have to stick to it. If any of you want to change your minds about things we've

decided today, don't think you can do it on your own. You must tell the rest of us and we'll come up here again, to sit down and talk it through ...'

Brad, very loudly: 'Even if it takes all night!'

'It won't,' said his mother. 'You've made me proud of you today. We can handle the situation we're in because we know what we're going to do.'

What Had Once Been Their Town

Wendy and Erica ran into each other in the main street of what had once been their town. Wendy said, 'I lost track of you when you moved, and then we moved too, and I lost track of everybody. Where are you living now?' They spoke in that way of people resuming where they'd left off. Erica was both gossipy and guarded. 'So what brings you back?'

Both, it seemed, had children who were curious to know about their parents' lives before they, the children, had been born. 'Funny, isn't it, how you think you run your life, until you have kids, and then they take over!' They chatted, commenting on Council's changes to the main street gardens, then Erica observed that she was going to take a drive to investigate places that had once meant something to her. Would Wendy like to join her?

Wendy would. They drove to the end of town where their school had stood, and that was the first major change; the school had been moved to what had once been the racecourse, which, in turn, had been relocated to an area out of town. The school had been rebuilt by an architect who appeared to enjoy showing the limitations of its 1930s façade. Bright colours and spectacular shapes claimed attention from the highway. 'Wonder where that fellow got his ideas from?' Erica showed something sour in her reaction to the changes. Wendy found herself thinking that changes were of themselves wrong, as if they had been designed to dislodge the securities of those who'd known things as they were. 'We've got to expect a few shocks, Erica. You know that, don't you?'

Erica did. Shocks would confirm her view of the world as bent on breaking down her security. 'Where will we go now?' Wendy suggested they follow the course of the race they'd run as teenagers. 'Remember the run around town they made us do?' Erica remembered it well. She took the car through twists and turns as she recaptured the route of their Form 1 days. 'They call it Year 7 now.' Wilma knew this. 'You notice how often they do it, these days? Change all the names? You go into a shop and they don't know what you're talking about until you remember the new name. Oh, they say, yes, we've got plenty of those, but I didn't know what you meant!'

By the time they reached the Wy Yung bridge they were conspirators themselves, ganging up on change. They felt both resolute and vulnerable as they made their way into the past. 'We were supposed to run along the other side of the river, but we crossed the bridge, do you remember?' Erica remembered. 'There wasn't anybody near us at the time. I wonder where they were? Maybe we were at the rear of the field, we weren't running very fast!' Wendy was looking about. 'We walked up this slope. I think we walked pretty well all the way, after this. Didn't we?' Erica thought she was right. 'I'd decided that if anyone picked on us for being in the wrong place I'd say I was doing what the teachers had told us. I'd even picked out the teacher I was going to blame.' She thought. 'No, I can't remember his name now, though I can see his face. I think he thought the run was silly, so I thought I'd use him as an excuse if anybody had a go at us.'

And so they retraced their run, or walk, of years before, until they reached a spot in River Street where Wendy asked Erica to pull over. 'There's something different. Something's been pulled down, that used to be there. Hang on a sec.' The two of them looked at a building that didn't recognise them. Wendy said, 'I can't bring it to mind. Do you remember, Erica? We stopped here, where we are now. We looked at the building that used to be there, and you said it was haunted, it had ghosts, or something. You made me really scared.'

This amused Erica, who liked to take power over people's lives. She thought of her mother, who'd enjoyed frightening her children, a powerless woman enjoying the use of power. 'Mother couldn't go past that place without telling us things that had happened there. It used to be a hospital. People died there. They did operations, and made mistakes. From what my mother told me, I thought it must be a gruesome place. I was scared.' Wendy said, 'You made me scared too. It wasn't anything you said, it was the way you were. You couldn't stop yourself showing you were afraid.'

The modern building looked over their heads, quite indifferent. 'Funny how buildings affect us. I don't exactly believe in ghosts, Erica ...' Wendy stopped. 'Neither do I,' Erica said, 'except I sort of do.' The two of them were searching for a way to define themselves. 'For instance, I never dreamed, this morning, that I'd run into you. I hadn't thought of you in years, and there I was walking along a street I haven't walked in twenty years, and I spotted you fifty yards away. Erica, I said, and then I saw you'd seen me!'

The two of them sat in Erica's car, outside what had been a hospital, and now was something else. 'After it was a hospital,' Erica said, 'it became a guest house. What it became after that, heaven knows.' Wendy's memory began to revive a thought she'd lost. 'Didn't somebody write about it?' This excited Erica. 'There was something! What was it? Oh yes, that writer fellow, he was the librarian for a few years, his mother died there, and he wrote about it.'

'About his mother dying?'

'She was singing and crying because she didn't want to die, and her husband was there, and her son ... he was the writer. And there was the matron, and a clergyman, who ...' She could have kicked herself for letting out so much; Wendy broke in: 'What did the clergyman do?'

Erica forced herself to go on. 'He took the son across the road, after the mother died, and he seduced him, because he liked the look of him ...'

‘Seduced him? When his mother had just died?’

‘That’s right. Shocking, isn’t it. A clergyman! They’re meant to set an example for the rest of us. And he seduced this poor, unhappy boy.’

Wendy said, ‘Funny how we know about this, you and I. That’s the sort of thing you’d expect to be hushed up. Seducing a boy whose mother’s just died. How could that ever have got out? Was there a servant in the house, do you think?’

Erica said, ‘I believe the boy later wrote a book, and he put it in what he wrote.’

The two of them studied the new building that was staring past them in complete indifference to anything they might say. It didn’t care in the slightest for reminiscence. Yet in the library of the town, only a block or so away, the book itself was housed, with a certain amount of honour, for anyone who cared to read.

Wendy went to the library when they finished their drive. Erica had to pick up her family, she couldn’t have lunch. Wendy didn’t know the book’s name, or the writer, but she told the lady at the desk what she was after, and in a moment she had it handed to her. *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*. She dipped in it here and there, then, by chance, she stumbled on the place.

Her eyes close.

They open. She has closed them to think up another voice which she now uses, an abraded version of her ‘charming’ voice. She has controlled her eyes too, *just*. They look sly.

‘I should like to be left alone with my son for a while. Do you mind, Matron? *Deah?* It may be the last opportunity.’

‘Now, now, *now*, deah,’ says Matron. ‘Theah’ll be plenty of taim, dear. Many yeahs. But we’ll pop out ...’ She looks at the minister. ‘... and hev a cup of tea whaile you hev a little chat.’

Wendy found her eyes slipping over, in a state of denial, the lines that follow, where the minister's fingers touch the fingers of the boy he is to 'seduce' a little later. She was angry with the minister, angry with the writer who made her think about such things, and disgusted with herself for being fascinated. She gripped the book tightly.

'Shahmpeen, whenever she wants it,' says Matron, touching the bottle as she goes.

'She's the cat's mother,' says Mother. 'Give me some champagne. From that thing with the spout.'

I pour. I feed the unsteady mouth, as though feeding a pot-plant, from the white spouted vessel.

Shahmpeen Charlie is m'name,

Shahmpeen-drinkin' is m'game

sings Mother.

I make little noises. I begin to cry. I am forced by myself to bend to kiss this silly frightened face.

'Don't kiss me,' the face says sharply, twisting itself aside from my face which is dripping like a hung-out sock. 'And stop that crying. Don't cry, Laddie. Don't cry. I'll be home to cook your next Christmas dinner.'

Her eyes, however, must leave us. The woman and her fear argue with each other.

'Next Christmas. Of course I will.'

'No, I won't. I said good-bye to the children this afternoon.'

'I'll be there cooking the mince pies.'

'Johnny's only six. I'll never see him again.'

'Next Christmas ...'

It seemed that there were suddenly, mysteriously, more people in the library than had been there before. Hal Porter, his mother, a woman full of songs, impish and vastly understanding, Johnny the little brother, the dying woman's husband ... Wendy wondered how

she'd brought about this situation which, she knew, was something created by her imagination from words on the page. She wanted to go back to the page, and she wanted to run away. She wished she hadn't come to the library, she wished she hadn't gone for the drive which had woken all this inside her. She wanted her family to reassure her, and she wanted to be in that room, in a building now vanished, because torn down, and never to be rebuilt, except ...

... of course ...

... in the minds, the imaginations, of readers. The dying woman raved.

'Don't worry about the black suit,' she says. 'I forgive you.'

'Look after your father,' she says.

'Be a good boy always,' she says.

'Comb your hair,' she says.

'I owe Mr Dahlsberg twenty-five pounds. Pay him,' she says.

'Don't tell your father.'

'Don't worry about the black suit.'

'Be a good boy, a good boy.'

'Sell the Renardi ...'

'Your hair ...'

Soon enough after long enough, she leaves the littered and dirty shore, she is off and away, adrift in her rudderless skiff on the weedy shallows of delirium ...

Wendy flicked through the final pages, not sure whether she was reading or refusing, or both. It was both, she decided. Life could only be borne by refusing to accept it, yet those who denied it completely had never really faced it. So it had to be glanced at, at least, its realities acknowledged inwardly, allowed for, so that its nature could safely be ignored for most of the time by most of the people. What were undertakers like? She let out a sob which amazed her, as if it had come from someone who'd come up behind her without

being noticed. The librarian came over. 'Finished now? If you're a registered borrower, you can take the book home. If you're not, we can ...' She gestured vaguely, suggesting that a form or two might do the trick, if properly filled in. 'No, thank you,' Wendy said. 'I had a need to look at this.' She felt most uncomfortable, explaining. 'I used to live in this town, and this morning I was taken for a drive by a friend ... and we stopped outside the hospital ... what *used to be* the hospital where this took place ...' the book quivered in her hand '... and we got to talking, and I felt I had to read this book.' The librarian was practised at understanding. 'Shall I put the book away, now?' Wendy nodded. She handed *The Watcher* to its guardian, and with some effort, she stood. She thanked the librarian again as she left the room, and then left the building, aware that the man who'd written what she'd just been reading had once worked in the same building. It was all too much for her; she wanted to find her family and get back to Melbourne as soon as she could, but they would protest, and her husband would want to know what had happened to interrupt their idea of revisiting all the old places and showing them to the children, and what would she be able to say to that?

She'd have only nonsense and gibberish until she'd come to terms, and that, she sensed, was going to take a while.

The book changed Wendy

The book changed Wendy. It followed her to Melbourne. She couldn't stop thinking about dying. When was she going to die? Would she die before her husband? Would either of them have to watch one of their children die, that terrible reversal of the norm? Everyone has to die but what, exactly, would bring her down? Would she die surrounded by a loving family, or unexpectedly and alone? And there was another thing about going back to her old town: what memorial, if any, would she have? A stone? A cube of ashes in a wall with a rose or two in the ground nearby? Would anything be named after her, to keep her memory alive? She hoped so, but couldn't see

how that would happen; there wasn't anything remarkable about her. The woman in the book had given birth to a remarkable son, who'd written about his mother. She lived, even as she died, on the page. Who was going to do that for Wendy Smith? Wendy Smith! How anonymous was that? I wasn't born to be great and famous, Wendy told herself; I was put on earth to be a nobody, a nobody I will remain, and a nobody ...

... I will die. Something powerful in her resisted this. Her husband and children knew she was changing before she realised herself. She was not an inward-looking woman. She stopped her car one morning outside a rather decrepit looking club maintained by the local council, a place where the elderly could gather for a cup of tea and what was euphemistically called 'a chat'. Run down, Wendy told herself: this is going to change. She looked at the kitchen bench. Awful. She looked at the tatty papers and magazines. Out of date, therefore no good because they told people who came to the place that they too were out of date. Unwanted. Wendy felt rebellion in her belly. Nobody should die unwanted. She was realistic enough to know that there would always be people who were unwanted, and they were lucky if they found a place, even as miserable as this refuge, where they weren't turned away. This has got to change, Wendy told herself: so what are we going to do?

She found a couple of like-minded friends, they got themselves on the committee that ran the place. This wasn't hard. They sat in the clubhouse, as it was called, one Sunday morning and they told each other their ideals. Fresh food, coffee and cake. Welfare workers rostered to manage the place so they got to know the regulars, the drifters, and the fringe people of the neighborhood. It was supposed to be happening already, if you believed the various welfare agencies, but a focus was lacking. That was what Wendy was determined to find. People had support systems, she knew; it was a matter of making links between them, links of knowledge, mainly, so that nobody fell between the cracks. The people she wanted to help

didn't like things written down, so it had all to be done by conversation. People's talk must save them. It was all about links, and habits, because people followed the paths they were used to, even when they'd brought them down. Above all, people needed to reinvent themselves, all the more so when it was impossible. How are we going to do this, Wendy asked herself, and she had enough patience to wait for answers, knowing that when you worked in the field she'd chosen, despair would come a-calling. I'm the watcher now, she told herself, but not on a balcony, I'm in the turmoil of people's lives, and it's where I need to be because anywhere else is only a waiting room for death. I'm not sitting, waiting, Wendy decided, when he comes for me he'll find me so busy I won't even know he's entered the room.

Wendy's husband and children were hoping she wouldn't want to bring the confused people she cared for home to their place, but she sensed this, and didn't, or not very often. 'You don't have to take care of them,' she told her family. 'That's my job. Just be nice to them if they come to the door, get their details and tell them I'll be around to see them as soon as I can. I'm not dragging you into this unless you want to, and you can make up your own minds.' This kept the family happy, but they couldn't help noticing how much extra cooking mum was doing, and how many visits she was making in the little car she'd bought herself. People rang, of course, there was no stopping that, and notes were left at the door, and the children began to realise that there was a commonness between their needs and the needs of all the people their mother visited in hospital, and saw to in a hundred different ways. Wendy's eldest daughter was called Tina, and she told her mother one morning, 'You're becoming a saint, mum. It's going to be funny, when I'm old and people ask where I grew up and I tell them I grew up with a saint. They won't know what to make of that!'

Wendy told her daughter, 'Never mind about all that. Jesus said, the poor are always with us, and the question is, what are you going to do about them? Anything at all, or aren't you going to bother? The

people I work with don't expect very much. They expect people to forget them, but I've chosen not to. I can't forget them, I'm not going to. Everyone's got some good in them, and I need to find a way to find that good in people, and make as many people as possible see it, and do something about it.' She could feel the pressure rising in the veins across her brow, so she stopped. It was no good bursting your boiler, as the saying went. What mattered was getting the work done, building up the contacts, getting as many people as she could all pulling in the same direction. 'What started you on this, mum?' Tina asked. 'You weren't always involved in all this work for ...' She didn't want to put a name on the people her mother helped because it would have derogatory overtones annoying to her mum. Wendy stopped to think. 'You remember when we visited my old town, and your father said he'd take you out on the lakes in a boat and I said it'd be too rough for me, it'd make me seasick ...'

Tina remembered this.

'... well, I ran into a girl I'd been at school with, and we took a drive around the town.'

'Erica! That was the lady's name,' Tina said, 'why don't you see her any more?'

'She's too different,' her mother said. 'We don't really get on all that well. But we've got a few things in common from our growing up and when we see each other, even though we annoy each other quite a lot, we can't deny what's there!'

Tina was curious. 'What is there, mum? What is it that's there between you?'

Erica

Erica went to the city six months after she left school. Having passed year 11, she worked behind the counter in the town's department store, where her intelligence was under-used, and there was also a danger inherent in her position. Shop girls were seen as contestants in the marriage market, and also, less respectably, as available. Erica came home after her first week saying, 'I never expected so many invites out!' Her mother knew what that meant, and so did her father. They encouraged her to look around, and she surprised them by doing so. A friend who'd made the break told her that the state's Roads Board had jobs in their head office and they were always 'looking around'. Erica showed interest and the other girl, called Sally, told her she could stay with her and her friends for a while until she got a place of her own – if she wanted to: people were always moving in and out where Sally lived so, if it suited her, she might become one of the regulars pretty soon. This was good enough for Erica. She made the move.

Her mother and father took her down, inspected the rented house around the corner from where Erica would work, and went home again, saddened yet pleased. Their daughter had taken her second step and it looked a safe one. There are risks when children leave home but the alternative is too awful to contemplate. There are risks in being alive, and we have to live with them. Erica's mother told her daughter she'd be writing every week and was expecting a reply. This was agreed to; it was, as it were, the settlement.

Letters went up and down. Erica told her parents little enough, preferring to soothe them rather than raise doubts. There was a risk

that they might call her home again if they didn't like the signals they were receiving. Besides, she was happier than she'd been. She was working in an office where men ran everything, but welcomed women with attention, manners, and curiosity. Erica was always being asked out – for drinks, to parties, weekends away, though she turned those offers aside as being too early. Later, perhaps! She was curious about men, and sensed that learning the rules of interaction was the next big step. She accepted an invitation to a party with a young man called Ron who treated her with exaggerated courtesy – caution, really – and was surprised to find that the party was in the grounds of a large old home whose owners were overseas; the young man giving the party was their son and he told people when they arrived, 'The party's outdoors, but you can go inside if you need a bed.' The beds were well used, despite the tables of grog outside. A little before midnight Ron asked Erica if she'd like to go inside and see if the house was as comfortable as it looked, and she went with him. They found a bed, already used a couple of times that night, and made use of it themselves. First time for both of them. Erica was surprised at Ron's reaction, when they went outside again. 'That was beautiful,' he told Erica. 'I never dreamed it would be so good. I hope every woman's as beautiful as you, I'm in for a good life if they are.'

Erica never forgot this response to her, even in later years when it seemed that nobody respected her as she felt they should. She went out with Ron a few more times before the very limited interests they shared ran out and they turned to other partners, but she maintained a warm spot for him in her affections: he'd been good to her and she was pleased that she'd gone through sexuality's gate with him. She ran through a number of partners before a nasty quarrel made her stop, and ask herself what she wanted from a man. Most of the girls she knew, using their place in the workforce as their way of maturing as women, had a fix on marriage, so that their minds wavered between the impossibility of the happiness they hoped to achieve through their domestic situation, and that other impossibility, the

immaturity and emotional blindness of eligible young men. What was the answer to that?

Erica, however, knew that she was different in some way she had yet to discover. Her relationships with men were the schooling she'd never got at school. Why had she been blind, back then? She decided that the town she'd left, and was now growing out of, had such an over-riding scheme of values that it took control without you realising, and it offered simple solutions to every problem, whereas, away from home and in a big city, she had to work things out. Character-building, she decided, but good for you – if you survived. This was when her letters became more guarded. Her parents sensed the change and sensed, at the same time, that their grip on their daughter had gone. She wouldn't have come home if they'd told her to. She was out! They wondered how good a foundation she'd inherited and knew there was little more they could give. Erica sensed the same thing. She knew she was in that stage where a young person dramatises what they've received from their family against what the rest of the world appears to be offering: everything can be evaluated in terms of what it offered and the price you would pay to have it. At the heart of the whole business was men's willingness to trade something of themselves and what they controlled for the love of women. Women didn't have much under their control but they had their bodies and a world of feeling that men coveted without understanding. The silly ones were manageable, the intelligent more challenging. Erica was curious. She didn't mind giving because, as far as she knew, in those years before she turned twenty, she was getting more than she gave. Every man she undressed with was undressing himself, and she wanted to know. How much could they give? What could she see inside them, as she peered through their efforts to please? Not as much as I expected, she decided. I'm not a poet, or a novelist; I'm not even a film-maker, showing the insides of people through my inspection of their outsides. No, Erica

decided, I'm a slow learner, but if I keep adding experience, I'll get there after a while.

Erica had what her parents would have called a long 'loose' period, but she never thought of it that way. A woman had to place herself, that much was obvious, and it happened, first, by learning how to handle men. They had to be understood, in such variety as they happened to possess. Her mother, sensing what must be happening, said in a letter, 'One of the most difficult things to do is to explore wisely, because most of us get our wisdom through others and most of us do our exploring without telling anyone what we're doing.' Erica knew that her mother was allowing her the invisibility, the secrecy, she needed, but it didn't make exploration any easier. Secrecy; having things in the open: everyone said that being open was the best way to live, but nobody could do it all the time, and if they could, it was because they'd been through their period of secrecy and they'd got things worked out. Erica wondered how long this was going to take. Would she achieve it, or would she go on to later periods in her life with unresolved problems from the period right back at the start of her adult life?

The period she was living in now?

Erica married quickly, however, when the moment came. Ivan was a Roads Board engineer and he came on Erica, strangely enough, at a party at the same house where Erica had given herself to Ron. Ivan sat beside her on a bench in the garden and said, 'You and I work together, don't we? I'm sure I've seen you around the place?' They did work together, of course, and they'd have slept together that night if it had been for Erica to choose, but Ivan was different - a man with a Christian background who believed that sexuality belonged in marriage, not outside. Erica was amazed, and when, after a session of kissing and cuddling, she felt him beginning to withdraw, to restrain what for her was inevitable, she asked him how he managed to stop when anybody else would want to go on. He told her he didn't find

it easy to stop when impulse pushed him forward, but he had control of himself and he knew what was proper. This word was amazing to Erica. *Proper!* She was attracted to a proper man. He had an unusual effect on her, the more so as she got to know him; he made her feel she lacked *virtue*, that perhaps she didn't have the standards for the sort of life that a proper woman would lead. Her own parents, she knew, were well married, but she didn't quite fit their mould. It was as if she herself had been conceived on the wrong side of the sheets, as the saying had it. The difficulty centred, perhaps, on the fact that she *respected* Ivan; had she scorned him as being sexless, she wouldn't have questioned herself, but respect him she did, and the doubts he caused by his stance came back to her to solve from within herself. On a night when they'd seen a sex-comedy and there was nothing stopping them from love-making except his principles, the principles, the stance, that Erica both despised and yet went within a whisker of admiring, they kissed in his car outside his house and Erica began to feel that at last, and perhaps, he might invite her in, when he surprised her by saying he thought they should get married, and did she feel the same?

She said she did, and, still amazed at the words she'd heard herself utter, she was expecting to be taken inside when he said he'd drive her home, and the next day they'd start making the arrangements. This they did. Parents were told, friends, relatives, a church was booked, a reception, and a flight to New Zealand for their honeymoon. 'It seems too easy,' Erica told her friends. 'All you have to do is say yes!' The friends, knowing how often Erica had said yes in the past, or let events take their course, were amused, yet happy for her; she wasn't showing anything more than the normal rituals of a young woman's doubts.

Erica and Ivan married, they had a honeymoon in New Zealand, each came to terms with the way their bodies united with the souls they contained. Ivan was both ardent, and constrained. His sexual urge was considerable and he liked to count the number of times

they 'did it' in a night, but he didn't loosen his emotions or become a broader, more humorous and engaging person when he was intimate with his wife. She surprised herself when the two of them got back to Melbourne after their fortnight away, 'getting to know each other', when a friend asked her 'How was it?', by saying, 'You turn the shower on, you turn the shower off, it's still the same old bathroom!' Her friend didn't really understand what this could mean, but it got passed around the Roads Board, and laughed at as if it was witty, when it proved, over the next few years of Erica's life, to be the principle, or base, on which her life would be led.

The Roads Board sent Ivan to America for a couple of months, to learn how things were done in various states of the union. He went, after swearing to Erica that he'd be faithful and hoped she'd exercise the same restraint. She said she would, because there was nothing else to say, but had little intention of keeping to her word, because she knew half a dozen men who'd like to play in the sexual garden with her, and she knew she was ready and willing.

Ivan went to the USA and had barely landed before she was opening the door to the first of her lovers, a man who worked with Ivan and whose wife was in Western Australia because her father had had an operation and she felt she must go home to see him. That was her first night of infidelity, or rather half-night, because she told her partner, 'When we start to get tired and feel like sleeping, that's when you should go home. My neighbours, and yours, will notice any little irregularities, we don't want to start any gossip.' He said he didn't mind if people talked, but Erica was cautious and told him that you never knew what could happen if the wrong people got to hear about things, it was much better to enjoy yourself, but to keep things under wraps.

Two other lovers followed, in the weeks while Ivan was away, and when he got back, he asked his wife if she'd kept to her vow. She said she had. 'Of course.' They were lying in bed when the question was put, and she was ready to sleep, but something in his silence com-

pelled her to ask what it wouldn't have occurred to Erica to ask: 'And what about you? How did you go?' She half-expected a list of temptations overcome – after all, they'd had their problems in their premarital nights! – but he groaned, and stayed silent. Erica, surprised, sat up. 'What's wrong, Ivan? What's wrong?' After another long silence her husband said, 'I failed. After being with you for so long, I got used to it. I started to think it was my right. I'd lost my control. I was tempted ... and I failed.' Something ominous, wretched, in the silence that followed told Erica that he was expecting judgement, and it had to come from her. Erica, to her credit, felt a rush of relief that was on the verge of turning into joy: they might be rid at last of his primness, his tension, they might turn into laughing lovers, and let the world laugh with them as they rollicked in their bed of passion ...

... but she didn't. Defensively, and nervously, because she couldn't imagine how long it would take to sort things out if she told him what she'd done while he was away, she asked, 'Why, what happened?' The wretched Ivan confessed that he'd become involved with a Cuban 'girl' – Erica wondered how old she was – who'd been appointed to show him around. A week after his arrival in Missouri, they'd begun a relationship, and the Cuban 'girl' had quickly become pregnant, because Ivan, who left contraception in the marriage to Erica, hadn't taken any condoms with him ... because he was a man of principle. So he'd had to take his Cuban to an abortionist that she couldn't afford to get things fixed up, but the Cuban wanted him to stay with her, even after the abortion, because, she said, he was a good, straight man such as she'd never found before, and there weren't any men like him in the States and would he stay and spend his life with her?

"Did you want to?" Erica found that she had to ask.

'Of course I did,' Ivan said.

So that was where they were, the two of them, one lying, one sitting up, in the bed which had been bought for their marriage. Erica wished she was somewhere else, and Ivan was divided: half of him

wanted to be back in America, and half of him wanted her to hand down a judgement of notable severity. He could only excuse himself if she, Erica, condemned him; he would cry beside her, ask for forgiveness, and feel forgiven only if he was in some way able to make her withhold the righteous anger, the vengeance, inside her, waiting to be unleashed.

It didn't occur to her until the following morning that she could have changed the situation by telling her side of the story, and telling always-in-denial Ivan that she'd thoroughly enjoyed bringing home her lovers, or visiting them, and that undressing with a man you wanted to give love to was the most liberating thing, and that if you let any grief or anxieties creep in you were spoiling something nature made perfect. Sex was wonderful! The only drawback it encountered – it didn't *contain* the drawback, it ran into it afterwards – was that it didn't fit into society's schemes of how things ought to run, so whoever did it with whom, there was always someone who felt aggrieved, and wanted to punish the lovers, or whip them, or slap them into jail ...

... or something! Erica thought, the next day, and that night, after Ivan's confession, that people were mad to get their knickers into knots about sex. All they needed to do was enjoy it and work out, afterwards, how to go on. No more than that. She managed to get Ivan to calm down, she assured him that she thought no less of him for what had happened while he was away, she managed to convince him that they'd re-establish the firm ground of their marriage, and she managed to restrain herself from laughing when he told her, almost crying, that the Roads Board wouldn't be sending him overseas for another year at least, probably more!

So finally they slept, with everything changed between them, but with the surface, the marital agreement still officially in place, though both had broken it. Erica realised, a day or two later, and after a little reflection, that she'd always thought marital agreements were silly, because human sexuality was so unruly, to put it mildly, that really

nobody could guarantee anything, and if you tried to, you made yourself look stupid, so why not be sensible about things, and not a fool, while Ivan, on the other hand, was so saturated in his sense of failure and shame that no sense would be obtainable from him for ... years, probably.

So, as stated before, they slept, and slept, and slept, for night after night, month after month, getting no nearer any truth between them, and each having to find it, and fight for it, for themselves.

Erica had two children. She felt a wish for four, but it was too risky, given her situation with Ivan; it was safer to get herself back into work, and then a career. You couldn't be sure when things might blow up. Her years at home with the children suited her, while at the same time she felt restricted by the limits to the world of mothers and their kids. She both felt fulfilled, as you were supposed to feel, and cut off from the dangerous, exciting world of interacting with every man as a possible lover. Remaining faithful to Ivan, she wondered how long it would last. He was demanding, sexually, but their frequent intercourse left her wanting more – not more frequently, but a different experience. It dawned on her after a time, after many piecemeal conversations with mothers attending to the wants of their children, that women's wants were rarely attended to. Erica summed it up with the thought that women were categorised by what they did rather than what they felt. Did a woman 'do' it, men wanted to know, not whether she felt better for having done it. Something, she knew, was changing in her, and she wondered if this change had a direction yet, or was it forming one she didn't know about? She rather thought it was, and found it disconcerting to imagine that the shape of her future might be laying a foundation somewhere in her personality but out of sight.

This led her to ask if she would have been different if she'd married a different man, and she thought she would. She began to handle Ivan more easily after this, and she looked around. The other moth-

ers all had partners, some of them nice enough, but the social groups were too tight for her to become involved with the men she saw; she put her mind back to the time when Ivan had been away, and she'd experienced other lovers. Three. She wondered where they were and what they were doing. She felt a readiness to experiment, at least to have a look down the pathways, strange to her, perhaps, that they offered. The first of these pathways opened before her in her local shopping area one Saturday morning when she ran into Silver, a man she'd only ever known by his nickname. He recognised her before she noticed him, and he greeted her attentively, the very thing that was missing at home, where she was taken for granted, because, perhaps, she had to be. Running a household isn't easy.

Silver had always been flash, glamorous, and a swirl of energy, but he'd changed. The later Silver was tender in the way he spoke, interested in the children, curious about what she'd done since they'd seen each other. 'What have you made of yourself?' Erica wanted to know, and his response disarmed her. 'I don't know what to make of myself,' Silver told Erica. 'I was looking in a jewellers shop window the other day, and I thought, half of this is rubbish, there's a few good bits, and one or two, maybe, *real* items that are valuable, and,' he added, 'I realised I wouldn't know which was which. That's what I thought the other day, but you see,' he went on, 'when we describe something else we often describe ourselves, don't we? I think I'm like that window. I don't know where I go from there.' He looked at Erica with appeal in his eyes and she took control. 'You probably need analysis but a bit of conversation'll do for a start. I can't stay now, but give me a ring next week.' She showed her intentions by adding, 'At home, in working hours.' She gave him her number, she took down his.

Ivan's work conveniently sent him interstate soon after, so she had Silver calling when the children were asleep. She surprised herself with the passion she showed this visitor, but couldn't help noticing how casual he was. Looking into his feelings, whether

expressed in words or in the way he did things, she realised that he didn't seem to be any more present, or expressive, in his lovemaking than in anything else. That meant that though she was welcome in his life she wasn't special. After a few visits and a few kisses-at-dawn departures, she told him she thought they shouldn't take it any further. She put it this way – 'Ivan'll be back soon and I think I need a little break before he gets here so I'm clear in my head of the man I've been seeing' – but she knew he'd disappointed her. He hadn't been able to make her feel special about herself, and that was what Ivan didn't do for her and that was what she was hoping some other man might do.

What she'd do if another man did this was too far ahead for her to have any plan.

On the day Ivan was due back, Erica went to the airport to meet him. She had the children with her in the gate lounge when she noticed a man she knew, also waiting, or was he? It was Gordon, the first of her post-marital lovers, and he had his back to her, dipping into a magazine. Was he waiting for someone, or early for the next flight? She told the children, 'I think it would be better if we sat over there,' and then she waited for him to see her. He was delighted, or feigned it well enough. What was she doing there? She told him. 'Still living with a husband who goes away? It does create opportunities.' Part of her was at once back in that pre-marital world of opportunities to be seized and sucked dry. She could tell Gordon wasn't married, or not any longer if he'd ever been. She'd been wondering what he was doing these days; she asked. 'I left the Roads Board. They had procedures for everything. They wouldn't let you make a mark for yourself. So I went to the Pilbara for a mining company, then I went to Malaysia, building roads again, but very different roads, then I went to China. Which was good, and now I'm home again.' Did he have a job? No, he was 'looking around'. It was an opportunity made for Erica. Her university group was having an away weekend a couple of weeks later and she suggested he enrol;

he had only to ring a certain number to get a room at the university's conference centre, he might find it interesting and they could have some 'time' together.

This appealed to Gordon, who was at a loose end. If the discussions bored him he could always read a book. Or take a drink or two, he knew the conference centre she'd mentioned. He made the booking, there was no further contact till the Friday night when the weekend started. The buffet dinner had just been served when Gordon arrived. People were standing around, getting to know each other, and he saw Erica, looking smart in black, an orange juice in her hand. Apparently strangers, they began to converse, but anyone close enough would have heard her ask, 'What's the number of your room?'

'Sixteen.'

'Guess what? I'm in seventeen.'

'That's handy. Very handy!'

There was an introductory talk after dinner, and some getting-to-know-you activities, then a musical group in the central lounge, so that people could sit up talking late if they wished. Erica and Gordon didn't advertise their connection. They kept apart, on the understanding that when one disappeared, the other would follow a few minutes later. In bed, they started out tumultuously. When they finished, lying in each other's arms, she said, 'We've never had a whole night together before.'

It occurred to him to ask, 'Are you missing your kids?'

'I am a bit. I knew I would. But they'll be all right, and I'm making up ...'

This interested him. 'For what?'

'For lost time.'

Erica tries freedom

Erica threw herself into her affair with Gordon. She said to him on a couple of occasions, 'I'm making up for lost time.' His answer:

‘Sounds great to me.’ He was curious about her. He was full of questions, and she noticed that she was discovering herself through her answers. ‘I’m not going to be at home with kids forever,’ she told him. ‘I’ve got to make something of myself.’ He wanted to know her next move. ‘I don’t know yet. Isn’t that strange? I’ve had a few years to think about it, but I really haven’t bothered. All I’ve done is improvise. And it’s worked, but it can’t go on forever. I’ll have to make some plans.’

Gordon told her to include him in her plans but she knew that was men’s talk. He wasn’t asking her to divorce Ivan and marry him, he just wanted to be on the receiving end of anything she had to give, and she knew it was plenty. This, though, only revived the problem; she had so much to give but who was going to give back as much to her, or even, if a miracle was in the offing, more? Gordon did seem to understand her, though; it never occurred to her that he’d used women like her before and knew what to say to keep them thinking about themselves so they didn’t interrogate him. It was months before she saw him in this way, but she was bitter only briefly. ‘I used him,’ she told herself. ‘He used me, sure, but I used him, and I got more out of it than he did.’ This was a weakness in her way of seeing herself, and hence the world around her. She imagined herself as being a small-scale person, someone who’d never set anything on fire, someone people didn’t expect to matter very much, and she’d learned to like this because it made it easy for her to stay out of sight, her feelings hidden. This had suited her when she became a sexual woman because it made it easy for her to shift from satisfying herself – her curiosity, she would have said – to being what was expected of her. ‘People live their lives by clichés,’ she told herself, ‘and if you stay in the shadow of a large, resounding cliché, they won’t notice when you slip away. They don’t go peering into the darkness because they think you’re still there.’

She saw that this also held good in the political world; there were people full of rhetorical thunder who flew big ideas like banners of

achievement, and there was another sort, far more effective, who kept out of the limelight to negotiate on the edges who got more done though they rarely got credit. They were too smart to ask, Erica saw: it was so much safer, and more effective, to be anonymous.

Gordon remained a part of her life, out of sight, for several months, until she decided she wanted something more. Bigger. Something she couldn't delimit with a couple of quick and easy thoughts. He only wanted an affair, and the perception that made her change her way of seeing him was that for many men, especially men who hadn't, like Gordon, ever been married, an affair was the whole scope of men and women interacting, whereas she knew from her life with Ivan and her children, however unsatisfactory the marriage might be, that having an affair was to separate the sexual from everything else. She didn't want this any more. There was something smart, or crafty, about keeping an affair hidden, but there was something more natural, and much bigger, about being sexual as the centre of everything else. When was this going to come her way?

She wondered about her next move for many weeks, living quietly with Ivan and their children. Both went to school, Erica did some mothers' club things, but had her eyes out for a job: that post-children career question was beginning to surface. Ivan, her husband, was helpful at this point. 'What you need is something you can work on whenever there's an opening in your week. You're tied down by getting the kids to school and picking them up again, so you're not looking to work office hours, you're looking for something that gives you opportunities you can create for yourself. What about mail order jewellery? You can work from home, sending out brochures and that sort of stuff, and then you go on a visiting round when you've got the time.'

Erica saw it in a flash. 'That sounds good. You're right. I think I will.' That led her straight to the third of her years-back lovers, a Jewish man called Arnold Goldberg. He was easy to find in the phone book. She rang him. 'I need to talk to you. I need some advice

about starting a new career.' Arnold was nice enough on the phone and suggested she come to his office, say mid-morning, any day that suited her. She did this two days later; he had rooms above a suburban shop. 'First rule of business,' he said. 'Keep your overheads to a minimum. Okay, you want to rake off a few of my millions, how're we going to get you started?'

He'd always been humorous. She said, 'I've learned a few things already. In some businesses, you have to spend up big on front of house stuff. Not Arnold Goldberg. You keep out of sight.' This amused him. 'What some people really want is glamour. They'll do anything to get publicity. Other people, women mostly, want to believe they're only a step away from glamour, which means beauty and fame ... the whole lot. They're not, they never will be, but their dreams have to be catered for. That's where I come in. That's where you come in, if we can think of something. The first thing you have to do is get your mind in the right place. If you do, the money will start rolling in. If you don't, you can jump up and down on the spot and nobody will take any notice. So it's up to you, Erica. Why do you think I operate out of cruddy quarters like this? Because I don't want anybody to take any notice. If my name gets mentioned, I don't want anybody putting up their hand and saying, Hi, I know all about that guy! No sir. I want to be a blank. Look at these leaflets I put around. No style at all. You know what? Years ago, someone talked me into using a designer. Quality paper, high class printer, they looked real smart. And what happened? Sales went down fifty per cent in a month. I got back to the way I'd been doing it, quick smart. It took a few months to recover, but I got back after a while, and I've never made that mistake again.' He looked sharply at her. 'Have I convinced you?'

It was a relief for Erica when she started. At home, with Ivan and the children, she had something outside. Her husband had to respect that, just as she had to take messages, and calls, from his work at

times. It was several weeks before she and Arnold resumed their sexual relationship, and there was something oddly businesslike about it when it happened. She said to him, one day when they were in bed in a house whose owner she didn't even know, 'I reckon you studied my sales graphs before you consented to bed me. Am I right, Arnold?' He laughed. 'Well, if we're going to be partners, you have to have some numbers on your chart!' He'd been single when they'd been lovers years ago; now he was married. 'Jewish women,' he'd say. 'I know you think the men are bad enough, but have a look at the Middle East. If there were no women there, the men on both sides could get down to killing each other off, and after a few months you'd have no problem! It's the women that are the trouble. They insist on having kids and wanting them brought up in the faith, that's where all the troubles lie.' Erica never knew how far this was seriously misogynistic and how much a stage routine he scripted to amuse himself. But she listened whenever he did any business analysis because he saw with clarity. He told her to study the jewellery and dress of the sub-stars, the aspiring stars and starlets of tomorrow. 'Whatever they're wearing is what we produce. Keep an eye on the big names, sure, but watch really closely the lesser people that *our* people model themselves on. Don't forget they're not successful yet and they never will be. Somehow they sense this. They know it, the buggers! They imitate, because they've got to, those who're on the fringes of what they think's desirable. It's a pitiful world, but it's where we make our money, so we can't be too hard on them.'

Arnold was shrewd, and smart, he had a team of people making things and he gave them photos of the pseudo-stars he said were his people's models. He tore photos out of magazines and gave them to his makers, with quantities scribbled on the corners of pages. Hundreds, thousands, and sometimes a word or two about the settings, the black or purple velvet. 'There's nothing so awful that it won't be glamorous for our people,' he liked to say. 'Can you smell'em out now, Erica? In a group, a party, a gathering, can you

recognise them? They're not trying to hide. They're desperate for recognition, and nobody's going to give it to them, so they have to buy it for themselves.' Sometimes Erica knew what he was going to say, and she'd take over his harangue. 'We're sorry for them, but if we don't sell them what they want, someone else'll make the money. What we do is despicable, sure, but it's an act of public kindness!' Erica started to compare Arnold with her husband, and to her surprise, in Ivan's favour. If he thought something was wrong, he didn't do it. It sounded simple, and it was. She respected him, even though she was alarmed when she realised that her children were far closer to Ivan in their personalities and their ways of making up their minds than they were to her. Studying her children, she concluded that there wasn't much in the way they operated that could be traced to her. 'Heavens above, if my children aren't going to carry me on, I've got a few things to establish before I leave this world!'

It took time before Ivan came to the realisation that the Jewish jeweller, whom he never saw, was his wife's lover. The thought came to his mind when he was away for a couple of days, inspecting mountain roads in the east of the state. He flew into a rage at being deceived, but was acute enough to see that his own system of shades and blinkers made it easy. He swore he'd have it out with her, then he decided, calmly, as he thought, that he'd wait until it would be a useful advantage to spring his knowledge, trapping her in a negotiation he'd already begun. What would that be?

Driving back to the city, it came to him. It was time they moved house. Their children would soon be at secondary school and he wanted to live in an area where there were good schools, by which he meant private schools. If he was going to stay with Erica they'd buy a big house together, one that required all her earnings to go into paying off their loan, and they'd make wills that ensured everything was locked in for their children. If Erica was going to work she'd be doing it for the family, not for herself. He wondered what she'd been doing with the money she'd been earning; he hadn't been allowed to know.

That was going to stop.

When he got home, there was a flaring row. He told Erica his plans for a move, the sort of house he wanted them to buy, his plans for the children's schooling, and the banking arrangements he proposed. He, he said righteously, had only his salary from the Roads Board, she knew how much it was and it got paid into their joint account – though it was money she never touched unless he handed it to her as cash. She listened quietly at first, working out what he knew and what he didn't, wondering what had caused these 'decisions' to spring out of parts of his mind he couldn't control. She felt sure he'd sensed one or more of her infidelities, but had no proof, hence the enveloping nature of his scheme. It was designed to give her no freedom. Anything she earned, and business had been good lately, would go into schooling and paying off the house. And, of course, the justification was that she, as a *good mother*, couldn't refuse to put her earnings in the family estate.

'Estate!' The fraudulent word almost made her smile ... but instead it put her in a rage as sharp as Ivan's. Wanting to destroy him, she saw how couples killed each other. Men killed women by getting the argument onto violent terms: she would stay calm, and still. She'd fight him with the weapons he feared, and didn't know how to use.

She'd appear to agree.

'When we do this,' she said, using 'when' rather than 'if' as her disguise, 'we'll be looking at everything as an investment. It's a logical way to see things in today's world. We'll need a business manager ...'

Ivan broke in. 'Multiplex Investments. Run by my good friend, *our* good friend Warwick Smithson. A more honest man never breathed. He'll be in charge of the estate!'

Erica was unperturbed. 'Warwick's a man without children. I'm sure he's good with money, but he doesn't know what it means to be a family man ...'

She was going to fight her husband with his own weapons, but he wasn't having it. He insisted that Warwick would control the money and she insisted, just as hard, that *she* would. 'I'm not going out to work, and making as much money as you do, just to let control of it pass into the hands of a man who's far closer to you than he is to me.' It wasn't the arguments she used, but the fact of her resistance, that enraged Ivan. He was shouting, soon enough. She warned him not to wake the children, but he seemed not to care. She saw that he'd been building up to a decisive encounter and rather than lose it he'd lose everything he owned ... or thought he owned.

Well, he didn't own her.

'Let me show you what I've earned, the last three years,' she said. 'Let me show you what I've invested in. That is, what I've made that money do on my behalf. Then I think you'll have to admit that I could do as much with your money if I was given the chance. Then you'd see why we don't need anyone outside this room to manage what I'm perfectly capable of managing myself!'

The battle lines had been drawn. It wasn't long before she was pointing out that he couldn't put any of his schemes into action without her signature on the appropriate bits of paper and she had no intention of complying with his wishes. 'Marriage is meant to be an agreement, Ivan,' she told him. 'We're not doing too well tonight, are we!'

'We've never done well,' he told her bitterly. 'Right from the start.' Rage overwhelmed him. 'That bloody jeweller mate of yours, how often do you see him? Where do the two of you go to when you want to get it off together? Tell me that! Let's get a few secrets out in the open!'

Contempt was her dominant feeling. 'Arnold's a good friend. He knows how to work with other people ...'

'Meaning, of course, that I don't?'

Erica didn't even bother to nod. 'He's been good to me. He's put our finances onto a really good basis by giving me a few simple rules

to work by. I probably don't need him now, any more than he needs me, but we work well together, so I suppose ...'

'You suppose you might cut down on the fucking, and let him be faithful to his wife once in a while?'

'Fights in a marriage aren't very nice, are they?' she said to him. 'Have we finished? You put a proposal to me, I listened, but I haven't agreed to do what you want. I'm not signing. Tonight or any other night. So have we finished for tonight, or do you have some other proposals?'

He left the room without saying another word. They'd finished, and not only for 'tonight'.

The marriage lasted another four years. Erica built up her business, intermittently continued her relationship with Arnold, trying, when she saw a chance, which was rare, because of his continuous band of self-protective talk, to bring herself onto equal terms in the relationship. She felt there was hope in this, as there wasn't with Ivan. Her marriage was doomed. She knew this because, from the viewpoint of her present way of appraising a relationship – that is, that it must be both equally balanced *and* full of adoration on both sides – it had always been an awful marriage. Marriages, she decided, like any sort of human bonding, only get better in the early stages, when one or both parties are working to create the thing. As soon as it stabilises, it's in decline. The moment you can say *that's* probably the peak, Erica knew, was the moment when you could feel the rot setting in. She had friends who said you have to work on a marriage to maintain it, as if it was a car that needed oil and grease every so often, but it wasn't. A marriage was a mutuality of feeling and it was pretty close to being beyond repair. Once people started to have doubts and didn't want to put the effort in, it wouldn't get any better. Anything not getting better was in decline. As for marriage as an electric fence that kept the animals of sexuality in, nibbling only the permitted grass ... that was a laugh! Stepping out of the shower one

morning, catching herself in a steamed-up mirror, she saw that her body, though sustaining itself well enough, was without the bloom of youth. I need a new way of accounting myself, she saw: what have I gained, because I've certainly lost?

This seemed a form of cheating. I'm the only umpire I respect, she told herself, yet I'm changing the rules? But if she didn't make the rules, nobody else could be trusted. This led to an examination of her values. I'm about as ordinary as a person can be, she told herself, but – *but* – I'm unique and I want it recognised. I've got a husband who values his own value system higher than he values me because his system is a way of controlling himself and he thinks that if he needs to control himself then everyone else has to be controlled. Paradox – only the liberated can give liberty. She developed a hatred of missionaries, trying to spread their own restrictions in the name of charity. She realised she was radicalising herself, and it pleased her. She was becoming more austere, unconcerned with luxuries, kinder with her children but less indulgent because it seemed good for people to go without.

Except, she thought, I'm without love, and I don't want to be. Everything I do is done without fuss, except, I want an exception: I want someone to be extravagant with me because they see me for the person I know I am. This went further. Arnold's Jewish wife ran off with a man who flung money at her silliest wishes, and Arnold would tell Erica about these extravagances, making mockery of himself as unable to correct in any way what was obviously in need of correction. 'All I want is divine intervention,' he would say, laughing at himself. 'That should be easy to arrange. It's not as if I haven't given to the Party over the years. There are people up there,' he would say, pointing in the direction where heaven was generally thought to be, 'who've given up on this world. You know, I'd swear they're leaving the prison to the inmates. Erica,' he would shout, desperation undermining the belief systems that had sustained him for forty-something years, 'there's nobody running the prison but us! You and

I, sensible people who know what the score is. If our sort don't take control, the prison will be run by warders. People who are mad and carry guns! That's what the world's starting to look like.' He'd groan. 'Why do I say start?'

Initially when Arnold talked like this Erica would laugh, and soothe him as she thought he wanted, but she realised that there was something he wanted more: he was only a hurt little child who'd lasted into the years of adult sexuality when wives and husbands got all they could from each other under any vicious pretext, so long as it was successful. 'I don't want to be where I am,' he'd groan, and Erica realised after a few final and unsuccessful attempts to make him love her that he was unutterably selfish, and although he needed her near him it was only so he could use her feelings as a salve, an ointment, for his wounds. His generosity, his help, had been available in the years when he was going well, and now that things were bad he was an endless demand. A bottomless pit. But so, Erica realised, was she. She wanted love, admiration, she wanted to be seen with the eyes which harboured, behind them in the brain, all that mad ardour of someone possessed. If someone was out of control in their love for you then your least indication of favour or otherwise was equally- and all-powerful.

This, she realised, was what she really wanted, and she didn't want to die without having known it. Die? How many years did she have to live? She was thirty eight, she'd be forty in a couple of years. It was an age that needed inspection. When she'd been twenty ... she had to smile at herself, having such a thought ... she'd thought women of thirty-eight were living in a world of pretence, their good years behind them, but pretending, by keeping their bodies lively, that they were still in the years when things could happen, though they weren't. Things only happened in the late teens and early twenties. Those were the years of decision. The crises, the dramas, of those years brought opportunities which you had to seize. Impulsively. Cerebration was useful in the years that came later, the

years of maintenance, when you had everything you needed, and your job was one of keeping things in order as you'd managed to get them for yourself.

Human beings were unutterably selfish. They wanted everything their own way, and it couldn't happen. Commonsense could tell you that a few people would be satisfied and they'd achieve it by robbing others. Whether it was houses, cars, or money in a bank, those who had the stuff got hold of it only by doing others out of it. To gain wealth, you must create poverty in someone else's yard, on someone's empty table. The world was a struggle, and she'd been pushed aside, so far.

Erica began to separate her business interests from Arnold's, discreetly and without making anything too apparent. He knew what she was doing and didn't say anything. He was lonely and needed her to listen to him, to lean on. They gave up being lovers, and she knew he wanted things this way because she noticed that he was kinder to her than he'd been, even at first. 'Why do we tolerate each other, Arnold?' she asked one day. 'If I look at my behaviour, I seem to be more married to you than I am to my husband. And kids. It's as if I can only be tolerant with them because I've got you. I've shifted my base, without realising. I had a bad marriage, so what did I do? I exchanged it for an impossible one, with you.' Arnold laughed in the way he had when he wanted to cry. 'Now you've got to strike out for yourself, Erica, my love. You've given me strength, and what have I done for you? I've made you strong. Now you've got to take a few big strides. You're always telling me you're thirty-eight ...' She broke in. 'I've never said anything about my age! What on earth are you talking about?' He pushed this aside. 'Three times in the last month you've let it out, like a complaint about being alive. Thirty-eight, you keep saying. The figure's an obsession. Maybe you don't even realise but believe me, you're saying it!'

She wanted to deny, to argue, but, seeing the way his mind moved on, taking residence in another mood in the swift way he did,

she saw that there was nothing to argue about. He must be right. 'Thirty-eight,' she said, solemnly, as if it was both a binding agreement, and a declaration of independence from a man who'd stabilised her through some poverty-stricken years, 'thirty-eight ... where do I go from here?'

'I can't tell you where to go,' Arnold said, 'but you're at the half-way mark, that's for sure ...'

'The half way mark? You're talking as if I was in a race,' she said, and then a thought from years back, years earlier, crept into the spaces at the edge of her mind, haunting her but not letting her see what was there. 'Funny you should say that. I was in a race, once, years ago. I cheated, me and another girl. We took a short cut. To get to the end early, and guess what? There was nobody there. No reception, like we'd been promised. I've never been so disappointed. We thought we had it all worked out, and ...'

She spread her hands, wanting sympathy, understanding, all the usual benefits that nobody gets or gives, and all she got was a sombre Arnold telling her to keep running, maybe something might turn up. 'Out of the blue,' as he put it. 'Blue' was, apparently a colour, a zone or realm, holding a promise of hope. 'Keep running?' she said. 'Our bodies run out. They're fuelled on hope, that's the only thing that keeps us going.' It seemed obvious to her but it didn't seem to be affecting Arnold, giving way to depression or despair. She saw that she'd been a necessary part of his life, his emotional make-up, and that without realising it, or intending it, she'd declared independence. She'd made him accept that the old relationship was over, and she hadn't taken the time to ascertain how important it had been to her, or to him, except that now the damage was making itself visible, it was clear from the misery staining his features, that he wouldn't be the same man when she was with someone else.

Tenderly, and surprising herself with the tenderness, something she didn't often release, she put her arms around his shoulders. 'We're two greedy, selfish people, and we made use of each other,

and we didn't think too hard about what we were doing, and now that it's run out, it's suddenly looking very precious. An old story, eh? It's only when you lose something that you realise what you had.'

Hard as he could

Ivan made the divorce as hard as he could. Courts and counselling filled Erica's life. Even so, her jewellery business grew, becoming trashier as it did, though she had some specialty lines with an element of glamour – or what passed for it at the level of taste where she operated. Just as Arnold had split off an area of his business for her to get started, she found herself approached by a young man called Daniel Whitman who was looking for opportunity. He was twenty-five, careless, hasty, and keen. Erica told him she'd give him a trial. He asked for six months, and she conceded. Why not? He couldn't lose her very much, and he was ... appealing. The inevitable happened. He played the inexperienced junior at every turn, with Erica as maturity, wisdom, motherly, managerial care. He was impulse, she was certainty. Her marriage settlement, heavily influenced by Ivan's evidence of her infidelities – misdemeanors in marriage – meant that custody of the children was shared, week and week about. Daniel said he shouldn't call when she had the children, it wouldn't look good, the children would talk, and she might lose her custody if Ivan had anything to do with it – and he would. Erica found that this arrangement suited her. Her feelings for Daniel were so intense that she needed time off. She told a friend, 'When a woman gets to my age she should have learned restraint, but I'm the opposite. I've learned to give myself totally at last!'

She could see it in her mirror, her friends could see it too. She dressed herself better, and took herself, and Daniel, to things she mightn't have gone to in earlier years. She went to concerts and plays with him, and they took airline trips to King Island, Uluru, Bali, Vanuatu and Fiji. She danced as she'd never danced before, finding layers of self that hadn't been used because they hadn't even been

addressed by the man she'd lived with all those years. 'My god am I free compared to what I was,' she told anybody who'd listen, and she told Daniel, which was perhaps unwise because he sensed his leverage had everything to do with the imbalance in their ages. He was giving her the feeling of being young, while she was giving him lashings of herself. In bed, she rode him from on top, at work she listened to him as nobody had ever listened to him before, and he prospered, managing to make money for himself as well as for the woman he was using. Erica was only a stepping stone for Daniel – 'Don't call me Danny, or even Dan, I want my full name, thank you!' – and he, Daniel, Danny, Dan, knew quite well that his time would be limited so he had to make the best possible use of it. He kept away from Arnold, who, he knew, would see through him, and he wrote nothing down. Everything was done on the basis of personal connection between Erica and him, and he let her have full control of the relationship, knowing how much she had to give and how much she needed to give it. Her adoration showed in the way she undressed him, slowly, tenderly, revealing him to her adoring eyes, full of a liquid love she'd never felt before. Seeing her, when she got into these moods, he knew to lie still, his eyes fixed on her eyes, reaching for her fingers, touching her with his own fingertips in the caresses she'd never been given before. She said to him one night, with passion, and belief in every word, 'I used to think I'd passed my best but now I know that ageing is wonderful, because it brings you appreciation of what your youth was. Age gives life to youth and youth renews what age is taking away.' She pressed herself against him and they made love again. She said she'd make him a partner in her business, he said he didn't deserve it. 'It's beautiful that you're helping me to get a start, don't divest yourself of anything that's yours.' He had a genius for thinking of these red-rag-to-a-bull things to say, stirring her to flamboyant gifts, of passion, first, and then of expensive things to share. Trips away in the weeks when the children weren't in her care. Her days and nights as a single mother, devoted to her young,

were amusing for her, the mask behind which she built, at last, the reality she'd always longed for, the life of passion she'd never had.

It couldn't last. She had a phone call from Wendy, whom she'd been at school with, and hadn't seen since they drove around the town that had once been theirs. Wendy had made another visit to their old town, had run into a number of people and had heard a few stories she'd not heard before. She was dying to talk to someone who'd know what it all meant, so could she and Erica have a cuppa one day, fairly soon? Erica chose a morning in one of her with-the-kids weeks, rather than the Daniel-weeks, for the meeting, and she turned up at the elderlies club where Wendy reigned. 'We could have it here,' Wendy offered, but Erica wasn't doing that. 'I passed some nice places back a little way, let's go to one of those.'

Each asked the other what they were doing, and Erica was horrified to find how stultified Wendy had become. She'd put her life into the service of the dullest, most miserable people; indeed she glorified in the misery, the dreariness, with which she'd not only surrounded herself, but for which she'd made herself responsible. 'Money's not everything, I know,' she said to the drably-dressed Wendy, 'but you've got to have a bit. How else are you going to express yourself?' She spoke urgently because it was vital to her; if she didn't, she'd be caught up in the moral universe Wendy had created for herself in the guise of doing it for others. Wendy, on the other hand, didn't think self-expression was what life should be about. She told Erica a story of a woman she knew who'd got caught up with a younger man: 'Someone half our age,' she said, incredulously. Erica had a sudden pang of alarm: had Wendy got in touch to tell her she'd heard what she was doing with Daniel? It crossed her mind that all she knew of Daniel's life when he wasn't with her was what he told her; she had no way of checking his tales, or his silences. What did he do? Who was he with when he wasn't letting her passions ride him in a surge of love like a river in flood because a dam had broken, somewhere far upstream? What did he do? Who were these people Wendy was

telling her about, and why, if it came to that, was Wendy telling her? Was it meant to be a warning signal, given by a friend, or was it what the rest of the world called a coincidence, one of those things that happened to happen, a pure accident, but a light as clear as truth for a mind ready to receive the message it contained?

‘What happened to this woman our age?’ Erica asked Wendy. ‘I hope it all ended well?’ She looked strangely at the woman providing her with her story, this factual fable she didn’t want to know about, and it occurred to her that Wendy might be seeing her as strangely.

‘What happened?’

‘He started to rob her,’ Wendy began, and something, some fuse, blew inside Erica. She knew what she was going to be told, and she didn’t want to hear. The young man Wendy wanted to tell her about had skipped overseas with a woman his own age and left his middle-aged lover with nothing but her deeply-despoiled self. ‘Imagine her feelings when she looked in the mirror,’ Wendy said, and Erica imagined, as she’d been told to do. Her mirror had been showing her, lately, a woman swollen with confidence, and as close to blooming with happiness as it was possible to be ... at her age. She’d been feeling great, and now this bloody Wendy’s tale was making her feel she’d created an illusion to live by. ‘Why are you telling me this?’ she burst in. ‘Why!’

Wendy was startled by the shout. ‘Why? Well, I suppose it fascinated me. It’s the sort of thing that happens to people of our age, unless we’re watchful. Careful. We’re all open to temptation ...’

Coming from the drab Wendy, guardian of the world’s lost, this was ridiculous. Erica didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh in Wendy’s face, or slap it. Which? She stood up. ‘Sorry, I need a breath of air.’ She went to the door of the café, only a pace or two. She stared at the street. Had some mysterious power sent Wendy to warn her? Why had this narrative been laid before her, as if its characters’ steps were hers to tread? She had a feeling of being caught in a story in which she was compelled to play a part. Bloody Wendy and this crap!

She went back to the table, standing over it. 'What you're talking about ... why are you telling me ... that's not going to happen to you ...' She wanted to add 'or me', but the words wouldn't come. Her silence was an admission of sorts, an acceptance of what might be happening ... probably *was* happening ...

'I'm feeling shattered, Wendy. That story could be happening to me!'

'I'm sorry Erica, I didn't mean to upset you. It's just something I heard the other day. Put it out of your mind. I didn't ask you here to tell you that, I wanted to tell you about my recent trip back home ...' Wendy looked foolish, where a moment before she'd been speaking with zest. 'I'm blown if I know why I call it home, it hasn't been that for years ...'

Erica got away as soon as she could, and tried to calm herself. She told herself she'd heard a silly, if disturbing, tale, but knew it was more than that. A realisation had hit her, and hard. She'd been a fool, and she wouldn't have any peace until she'd got into some other, some new, form of business. A new career had to be made. She didn't want to exist anywhere near where she'd been in the last few years. Her divorce from Ivan hadn't been simply a rift, it had broken her old life and she had to start again, and that meant she couldn't prop herself up with somebody young who was using her. She'd used Arnold, but that had been mutual. It hadn't been blatant. At the heart of her mistake with Daniel – it *was* a mistake, she knew it with bitterness inside – at the heart of her mistake was her need to be loved as nobody had loved her, with her consequent move to go out and find the love she longed for. She had wanted it so much she'd found something else, much more easily available, and allowed it to misrepresent itself to her desperate yearnings. What a fool!

What was she going to do now? The next step would be the vital one. It would show whether there was a balance available for her to find, or only a long decline into bitterness, that being the outcome of a passion that had never really arrived, a passion that had deceived

her into thinking it was happening when it wasn't. Oh dear, oh dear. What next, she asked her mirror? What have you got tucked away in that glass? The mirror didn't show anything that she didn't know about already, a face that was filling with distrust, a face that showed a woman who'd been deceived and had allowed it to happen because she'd needed it, or something like it, to happen. The sort of mask that formed when what lay inside, behind the face, was unacceptable to the mind that looked into the face, seeking itself and not liking what it found.

Keith and Wilma

Keith and Wilma tracked each other through high school, patiently enough. Each was the other's first sexual partner and, after a couple of years of mixing around, they firmed up again. They left town for university, renting within a few blocks of each other. They graduated on the same day, and married a year later, when each had a well-paid job. People described them as 'devoted' while they were still in their twenties, everything suggesting they'd been made for each other. Other couples had turbulent times that didn't affect Keith and Wilma; nobody knew whether they were adept at avoiding trouble or whether some powers were looking after them.

A family came, they brought them up with love and care; the children in their turn grew up and their parents grew old. Someone asked them on their fortieth anniversary if there was anything they'd like to have had differently, expecting them to say they'd had the best possible lives, but Keith surprised them: 'Everything. We're all part of our times and the times we've lived through have been pretty rotten, in my view. Not the years I'd have chosen to live through.' Friends who'd been expecting no more than a ritual of candles and the singing of simple songs, as if they'd been as brainless as they'd been well-controlled, got a further surprise when Wilma took up her husband's theme: 'We're not separate from everyone else. They're not separate from us. You can't have things the way you'd like because you have to fit in with whatever's going on around you. Like it or not. Often enough, Keith and I haven't liked things, but we've learned how to put up with them.'

So they were truly a couple, in step with each other and unafraid of telling the world that it wasn't always, or often, in step with them. Those who'd attended the anniversary luncheon (on Wilma's birthday) went home wondering if the pair had changed recently without it being noticed, or whether they'd always had reservations about the times they were living through.

Wilma was asked to speak after she'd blown out her candles, and she was brief. 'I'm not the speechmaker in this family. That's Keith's job. He knows me well enough not to go on for very long if he does say something. Most people make speeches about things after they've happened. That's what I'd be doing if I made a big speech today. I'd be telling you about being married for forty years. The time to speak is before something happens, not after. But why speak at all? If you know what you think ought to happen, well, make it happen. If you're making a speech after the event, you're wasting your words.'

She thanked a few people who'd helped create the event, then challenged Keith: did he want to say anything?

He got to his feet, sure of his audience, all friends of his marriage. 'Everyone here will know I'm on a time limit. Two minutes at the outside. Ideally, about ten seconds. Wilma values silence above sound. It's the first rule of this house.' He smiled. The group in the room knew that he loved his wife, and always had. For Wilma, it was just the same, except that she was unsentimental about Keith. She trusted him more than she loved him. Trust was more of a priority for Wilma than love, a treacherous emotion, she'd have said. Everyone knew how foolish lovers were, but trust was a bar of steel, two bars welded together, resistant to everything. Keith took up his theme. 'Wilma and I got together when we were too young to know what we were doing. But we trusted each other. I've never trusted anybody – sorry, folks – the way I've trusted Wilma. Never will. I can't tell you why. I didn't plan it this way. What we've got together is something that happened without us knowing we were doing

it. I think we were made for each other.' A certain broadening, or opening up, began to come into his voice; Wilma stared sharply at him. 'Yes, love, I'm going to stop before I get carried away. Life's too short to waste it talking. I've often thought of when it was I knew we were made for each other, and of course, you go scratching around in your earliest memories and you know you've forgotten things so you can't really be sure, but, the way I remember it, I knew that Wilma and I would spend our lives together when we were in our first year at high school, in a town a long way from here, a town at the foot of mountains, with lakes and the sea on the other side, and farmland all around, and a lot of timber milling going on too, a holiday town, a quiet town, really, and a bit of a backwater, but that's where Wilma and I grew up, and as I say, I think we knew pretty much at the outset that we were destined to put our lives together, as we have, and I'd like to thank you ...'

That was how Keith began to draw the threads together for the gathering in his home, but Wilma knew that thoughts were dashing to the borders of his mind and that he'd be talking to himself, and to her, if she'd listen, for weeks to come, because the anniversary was a big thing in their lives, and it did really need to be examined in a way that led to understanding. They'd succeeded, but it mightn't have been so, and few couples had done half as well as they had, so what had been the recipe for success? Wilma put an arm around her husband and raised a glass. 'To everyone! May you all be as happy as we've been!'

Keith never imagined he was more than the democratic one; Wilma didn't even get that far. When he described himself as a citizen, she didn't respond to the word. Keith would have told you that Wilma was either incandescent, or invisible. Blazing, or not there. When she heard him say this she didn't even bother to smile. Why words? Marriages were agreements, for Wilma, though some people agreed across a distance, while she had to be close. Had to. If she sensed

Keith getting away on something, she insisted he return; their inner connections meant he couldn't deny her call. Back came he! People getting to know them sometimes wondered how they'd met, or why they'd got together. The couple could never answer such questions. They were connected, that was all. Weren't other people connected too?

Mostly they weren't, or not to the same degree. Couples operate in many ways. Keith and Wilma occupied a psychic space hardly greater than one. He used to joke that they were cheating when they went to the polling booths. 'We've only ever had one opinion, why should we get two votes?' Friends weren't sure how seriously to take this sort of remark. Keith liked to laugh about things where he was unshakeable. Inviolable. He never used the word 'integrity'. He would almost certainly have thought that if you named it then you didn't have it. 'I do understand,' he might say, 'that sometimes people have to check out what they're going to do, but by and large, if people talk about something, they're not going to do it. They'll talk instead. Sometimes, I think, they talk as a way of getting others to do a thing they're not game to do themselves. Why anybody wouldn't be game to do something they believe in is beyond me.' So Keith set his guidelines. Act, and take the consequences. Wilma was different. People who didn't know her noticed her silences; they might have described her as withdrawn. This was true, if inadequate. Shakespeare said all the world's a stage. This means that the world has the equivalent of curtains, and wings where actors wait to come on. It would be truer of Wilma to say that when she was quiet she wasn't waiting to come on so much as waiting to be born into the action. She had a friend called Halinka, who was Polish, and said of Wilma that she should have been born Russian because she alternated between periods of blazing passion and long shrouded silences. Wilma might have said – if she'd bothered to reply – 'Nobody ever found me missing when I needed to be there!'

Certainly her children knew they were psychically connected to their mother. There were two of them, with contrasting names: Joe and Chantelle. When Keith was asked about these names he looked to Wilma. If Wilma took up the question, she might say, 'I called him Joe because I wanted him the same as everyone else. It's dangerous to be different.' Why Chantelle, then? 'I wanted a name that people would notice. It's dangerous to be the same as everyone else.' The inconsistency was deliberate. The children's names were provocative, as if the mother was daring the world to vary its policies if it had the courage to bear her rage. Wilma was a powerful mother and other kids' parents were careful not to cross any lines she drew around her two. Joe and Chantelle were easy to get on with, both for friends, their friends' parents, teachers, anyone at all: why? Because their battles had been won without the need to fight; Wilma's presence, in the background, if not out of sight, was enough to deter others. Anyone who wanted to restrict, let alone fight, Joe and Chantelle knew they'd have Wilma to contend with, and by and large it wasn't worth doing.

You'd lose.

This is where, and why, Keith was an important figure for the children. Not only did he have no ideas *above* his station, he had no ideas *about* his station. He was truly the democratic one, no more and no less. He wasn't introspective. He saw no reason to examine and then explain himself. He had a right to exist exactly as he was, as did everyone else. There was no need to adjust one's personality beforehand; matters would arise, as and when they did, and things would be sorted out agreeably enough, with a concession or two. Keith didn't know why anybody thought life was hard. You simply moved forward on your own line until you came to a crossing, and then you negotiated. There was nothing difficult about that. Everyone had to get through places so they could move forward again. Little Joe said to his parents one evening, after dinner, as they sat before a heater, 'Other kids don't get it as easy as me and Chantelle. They worry a lot

more and sometimes they don't know what to think. Was it always easy for you, mum? Dad? Was it always easy for you?'

Both parents thought, and Wilma spoke first. 'It wasn't always easy when we were young. It's grown easier as we've grown older.' Keith was listening attentively. Chantelle jumped in. 'Well, I'm twelve, and I don't want anyone to tell me my problems will all have gone away by the time I'm fifty, or forty, or whatever. I want to feel good about myself now!'

Wilma said to her daughter. 'Well, you won't, or not for a few years yet. You're entering the most difficult stage.'

'How long's that go on for?'

Wilma said, 'About four or five years. In the years you're heading into, you suffer a lot and you don't seem to be making much headway. Then, all of a sudden, you're free.' Calm restored itself to her face.

The best, because most prying, question Chantelle could think to ask, was, 'What were you like at my age, mum?'

Wilma looked at Keith, whose eyes never moved. 'I was full of lust, and I didn't know what it was.'

Little Joe, of course, had to say, 'What's lust?'

Wilma said, 'Most people would say it's sex. Men wanting to possess women, women wanting to possess men, own them entirely, control their lives, be the boss of the person you're involved with.' She paused. Her husband added, 'But ...'

'But,' Wilma went on, 'what lust really is, is wanting to be unchecked. To have what you want, to get your own way, without anybody interfering. That's what's wrong with lust. It's too simple. You can't have anything in this world without affecting someone else. So if you want anything – anything at all – you have to reach an agreement. You may be lusting after the thing, but you have to get an agreement with the others involved. It takes a while to learn how to do this.'

'Unless,' her husband put in, again.

Wilma smiled, and it was not lost on her children that their mother was giving them a hint, at least, about the secret she shared with her husband, and which many other couples didn't, apparently, know about. Wilma's smile broadened, and the children found their wishes converging on their father, hoping they could force him to force their mother to say what they needed her, or someone, to say ...

'Unless,' Keith reminded Wilma.

'Unless,' Wilma called, triumphantly, 'you already have an agreement, an understanding, so that a message passes from one brain to the other and the decision's made without any argument. If you can get that with somebody, that's when things are starting to look good!'

'How old were you and dad, mum, when you got that sort of agreement together?'

Keith smiled. Wilma smiled. 'You're in Form 1, darling ...'

'So? What's that got to do with it?'

Again, the two parents, man and woman, mother and father, were smiling so hugely that their children were amazed. 'Your father and I started to understand each other in this way when we were the same age as you are now. Naturally, we didn't really understand what this agreement we had, this overlap, was all about. It took a few years to sort it all out, and get it understood, first, and then agreed on, but that all happened eventually, and really, we've never looked back.'

'Never,' Keith added to what, for his wife, had been a lengthy statement. 'I think we both felt that once things started to feel right, that is, they were moving in pretty much the right direction, we knew we shouldn't interfere. Just watch, and find out what was the right way. Talking doesn't always do the trick ...'

'Talking,' his wife put in with contempt.

'It's often better to say nothing, and just listen ...'

'To what?' This was Joe.

'Your own inner voices. And in my case, your mother's voices as well. Most of the time, if you're a lucky couple, and I feel sure – I *know* – both of you are going to be lucky, then you'll find someone

with a like mind.' He concluded: 'If you can get to that point, you can't go wrong.'

Joe never got there

Joe never got there. Joe died in a car crash when he was eighteen, one of those stupid, teen-age crashes that fill our papers and television over the summer season when there's nothing but sport and sudden death to give the public. There he was on page 1 and the TV screen, with a policeman to comment: 'This is the worst I've seen in thirty years of doing this job ...'

Wilma went more deeply into herself. She clung to Chantelle even more than she did to Keith, who had to make the arrangements, liaise with other families and the rest of it. When it was all over and Joe was buried, she, Chantelle and Keith sat at their kitchen table to talk about the years that lay ahead. Where to begin? It was clear to Wilma that Chantelle was at risk: she, Wilma, had her husband and he had her; Chantelle had had a few boyfriends but didn't have anybody serious at present and would be needing all her strength for a while. Falling in love to get away from what had happened would be a disaster leading to disaster; of this, Wilma was sure. She pursued every line of thought that came to her, brooding intensely, saying nothing. Keith, waiting for his wife, realised he'd started to wait for Chantelle in much the same way. It was a sign of confidence in his daughter, and a sign, too, of his dependency on the women of his family, but there wasn't anything he could do about that. He was dependent. 'The trouble with us,' he said, after a long silence, 'is that we're too quiet.' Wilma turned her eyes on him, her way of disputing what he said. 'It's up to me, is it? Is that what you're trying to say?' Keith spread his hands. Wilma looked at Chantelle, who dropped her eyes.

'We're in damage control,' the head of the family said. She looked at her daughter. 'You've got your study. Something to focus on. You'll work hard. No excuses for not getting assignments done.'

You've got to succeed. No social life until you know you're going to romp through your degree.'

'That'll suit me fine,' Chantelle said. 'I couldn't get in anybody's car right now, except ours. Driven by you, mum, or dad.'

It was a statement of what they meant to her. Her father said, 'You'll move out of this phase, but it'll take time.'

Wilma took over again. 'Now Joe. What's his memorial going to be? We've got to give him one. Maybe a scholarship for a boy like he was. Maybe something else. Any ideas? Neither have I. We'll think about that. Something will come along. There's no hurry.'

Keith broke in. 'Clinging to each other, that's going to be the problem. It's what you and I do, darling, and we mustn't do it to Chantelle. How're we going to avoid it, though?'

The three of them looked at each other. Chantelle had the answer. 'In a few weeks time, when we've gotten over the first shock, I'll go into college. Be a resident, I mean. That way, I'll be forced to make friends with people who never knew I had a brother. They won't know anything except what I tell them. They'll like me, or they won't. I'll have to make that happen for myself. I'll always have people around me, that's the good thing about a college.'

'You know which one?' her father said.

'I'll ask around.'

She moved, and an awful silence descended on the house. Respecting his wife, Keith said as little as possible, until one evening she told him, 'Why don't you go out and get drunk?'

'I've no wish to be drunk.'

'Well?'

'I find myself wanting to talk.'

'What about?' As if there was nothing to say.

'Until a few weeks ago, I would have told you I had a positive attitude ...'

'Yes?'

'... but I was kidding myself. Putting a good face on things when I felt otherwise.'

'So?'

'Losing Joe has changed all that. Putting a brave face on things won't help in the slightest ...'

'What else is there?'

'That's the question.'

'What's the answer, then?'

'That's what I'm curious to know.'

'How're you going to find out?'

'I know how I want to start.'

'Tell me about it.'

'I want to go back to things I did, or we did, at various times, and look at what we did, and then look at them again, because I think we got a lot of things wrong, and this time, if we don't get it right, we'll die with Joe. We absolutely must know what we feel about losing him, and then live in the right way after.'

'We'll collapse if we don't.'

'Exactly.'

'Start then.'

'Thanks, Wilma. I'll start with just after we got married, when our bloody government was sending boys to Vietnam ...'

'... to die in a war the Yanks told themselves they needed to be in ...'

'A loony war!'

'Waged by loony people.'

'Some of them running this country.'

'Tell me about it!'

'If you don't mind, I will. That's where I'll start.'

And he began.

'The government had a ballot. Conscription. Not enough volunteers to fight, so they brought in that birthday idea. Lucky days and the opposite.'

'Get on with it,' Wilma said, impatient already.

'The government had a big majority because the last election had been fought on Vietnam and they'd won. Result? I not only lost faith in government, I lost faith in people.'

'How many?'

'I was never sure. There's a difference, isn't there, between scoffing at your government ... most people do that, most of the time ... and distrusting the people around you. That's a serious condition to be in.'

'We're in it all the time.'

'No we're not. We needn't be, if people have got hold of the truth of their situation ...'

Wilma waved her hands at the stupidity of this idea.

'You have to ask, how do people form their idea of the truth? Most of them just repeat the crap they've heard, and why? Because it's safe. When there's war about, people run for cover. They're scared of getting picked out because of something they've said. So they only say what everyone else is saying. Madness takes over ...'

'Vietnam?'

'The Vietnamese people were trying to do what we're supposed to be able to do in a democracy, and that's decide for themselves. But no! Our American allies ...' the word came out of his mouth like vomit '... smelt the smell of communism ...'

Wilma was amused by the word.

'... and they were afraid, so they went for their guns. Do you remember those cowboy films like, ah, *High Noon*?' She nodded. 'When it comes to the point, the Americans have no time for morality at all, though they talk about it all the time. What matters is getting your gun out first, and shooting straight. Nothing counts but that. Pow!'

His wife looked at him, as if he might emit a cloud of smoke.

'And we believed in them, even though it meant sending our sons to die in ...' The name of the country refused to come. Wilma looked away, then looked back, and he was still too moved to get the word out. Helping him, she said, 'Gough brought them home.'

This was a reference to the change of government in 1972. 'Well,' he said, 'even the Liberals could see the writing on the wall and they started to pull out of ...'

'That place!'

'... but people had woken up by then, and wanted a change ...'

'It's time!' Her voice rang out, for a moment, as if the people of 1972 were still alive, and young!

'And change swept through everything. Those first few days of the new government!'

'Fatal,' Wilma said. 'Egotists don't know how far to go before they slow down. You have to take people with you, and the Whitlam government was hopeless. They nearly lost the next election, and the one after, they got thrashed.' Knowing this was so, Keith didn't bother to answer, and his reticence gave her the opening she wanted. 'Into the wilderness again! For a few more years of thinking they were more virtuous than the world around them, until they had enough defeats to give them a bit of humility.'

'That's about the last of virtues to wave in front of the public. In my view,' he added.

Wilma was certain, however. 'Humility's the first of virtues. Being in government puts you in the position of deciding what people want, and how they think. Nobody can know that in advance, so if you're in government, it's essential that you be humble and stay that way. The moment a government starts to think it's better than the crowd that elected it, that's when people smell something wrong. Out the government goes.'

'Then tell me,' Keith said to his wife, 'how can people be so silly as to back a government that wants to fight in ...'

'Say it, Keith, say it!'

'Vietnam?'

'Because people were as scared as the government, and the government knew they were surrounded by a scared population, so they could do what they did ...'

'Back the bloody Yanks!'

'All the way with LBJ! Who'll ever forget that?'

'A national shame!'

'Out of the mouth of an Australian Prime Minister.'

'A subject people! A nation full of shame, that lost its pride ...'

'Our glorious fighting men!'

'You can't trust tradition,' Keith said. 'There's nothing you can trust at all, of all the things around you, so you have to look inside yourself ...'

'And what do you see there?' his wife wanted to know.

'Not much at all, but an impulse or two needing to be probed. Examined. It's the way we are every minute of our lives. We've got impulses, giving us the drive to act, if we think they're right, but we mustn't rush in without looking, we have to weigh things up ...'

'In the balance?' She was laughing at him and he couldn't do anything about it because he felt he was as stupid as all the others who thought it was okay to rush into whatever war was going at any given time. 'There's no way of knowing with any certainty,' he said, 'what's the right thing to do. So most of the time, you should hold back ...'

'Except?' This was Wilma, reversing roles.

'... except that you have to act because if you don't, it'll be too late. The crowd will have decided something, and rushed off to do it, and you'll have been left behind!'

'Oh dear,' she said, 'wouldn't that be terrible? To be left behind, all by yourself, because the mob had rushed off to do something silly.' It bothered her not one whit.

'You, my love, are very privileged, because you are one of the few people I've ever met who has actually known the insides of your own mind. It's the reason I love you, and it makes me very humble.'

She took his hand and rubbed his palm with hers. 'We've always got each other, Keith. What about our girl?'

Chantelle made her move

Chantelle made her move to college when a vacancy occurred, a few weeks later. She showed her parents around, then they sat under a tree. 'Another enormous change,' Keith said to his wife, and the daughter who was taking on a tradition they didn't know about. Wilma noticed a couple of students acknowledging her daughter with a lifted hand or a meeting of eyes. The process had begun. They'd been a tight family, they'd lost Joe, and now they were letting Chantelle go. Where was she going, though? It was easy to say she was off to find her future, but Wilma had trained her family away from clichés. She had a feeling that her daughter was going to become like the people around her, and who were they? For perhaps the first time in her life she began to admit the force of tradition. 'Janet Clarke', where Chantelle was living, was known as a 'hall'; the old-fashioned word came from somewhere Wilma and Keith, early Monash graduates, didn't know. The word led back into the past, like a lightless tunnel, releasing vanished thoughts into a world that had forgotten them. Reformers can't stop the past having its influences because for the most part they can't be seen. Sitting under the tree at Janet Clarke Hall, Wilma and Keith could feel them. It was Wilma's habit to confront ideas, and Keith's to grumble about them, but they could sense that Chantelle's new world would be subtle. Keith felt awkward. He picked some grass seeds out of his socks, wondering how they got there, and why it mattered. He began to study the youngsters going past, dressed unobtrusively, but well enough. He sensed they had better in their wardrobes so that no occasion would catch them out. He and Wilma had assured their daughter that they

looked forward to meeting her new friends but would they ever get the chance? Keith had a feeling, based on what he was like as a young man, that a selection process cut in as to which friends were shown to one's parents. Besides, he'd studied Science and switched to Engineering, Wilma had done Commerce, and now their daughter was doing Arts. Whatever that meant. Arts was where all the theorists, the social engineers and the would-be experts on the human race found their haven. Arts? What could come of that? Something would; their daughter, sitting with them on this last day of their already-broken family, would graduate one day, of that he could be certain, and, whatever it was that had become her basis, it would be the foundation of a life – the one Chantelle was going to lead.

Chantelle would be a University of Melbourne person, and that meant something. Quite a lot. Janet Clarke had been the wife of a landed knight in the area where the city's airport now stood, it was said that the cricketing tradition of The Ashes had begun on a visit to his property by a touring team in the days when people spoke of England as 'home'. White civilisation hadn't built very much in those days, but it was building, and it recreated what it knew from the old country, and its institutions were recreations of what the pioneering colonisers felt simply had to be rebuilt in the new land. Much of what they did was foolish, or at least quaint, to the modern mind, but their visions were the first for the new society and everything that came later had to stand on or beside what they'd done. Chantelle was to be a resident of Janet Clarke Hall. Chantelle had lost her brother. Chantelle was in the process of losing one past and gaining another. How wise, how right, had her decision been? And, to put it bluntly, how useful had her parents been in her decision?

Keith thought that the best thing he and Wilma had been able to do when their daughter was making this decision which would affect generations yet unborn was to keep out of the way. Not to meddle. That was wise, and good, Keith thought, but now, as they sat with their daughter, their once-little girl, he felt that their seat, their bench

under an elm, a tree of England, not their own land, was a place of attention to the world of spirits that watched over mortals' confusion. Spirits! Keith didn't believe in such crap; this meant that he did, but instead of letting them into his mind, he battled to keep them out. It was simply another way of acknowledging their existence. Feeling helpless, he wanted to cry. Instead, he said, 'Why are we sitting out here? Where everyone can look at us? Why don't we go somewhere for a cup of coffee? Tea?' He could hardly have sounded more desperate. His wife looked at him silently, his daughter said, 'We can go inside now father. I wanted you to feel the atmosphere, though. The place has a lot, I can feel it seeping into me already.' Her mother smiled at her daughter noticing the changes as they happened, and agreed that they could now with profit go within, again, to Chantelle's room. 'You can tell us if there's anything you need.' So they walked the passages that would delineate the young woman's days, they noticed her greeting other young women as they passed, and they arrived at Chantelle's room, small enough and simple, with a single bed through an alcove, and a desk of considerable proportions to the fore. Chantelle patted it with her dainty hand. 'I'll be spending an awful lot of time here.' The desk lamp her parents had bought her years before had made the move to the residential hall. Some clothes Keith recognised were here and there. 'Not many books yet,' he said, wondering why this was. Students' lives were supposed to be swamped by books. Chantelle said, 'I had a big clean-out before I left home, as you know. I'm only at the start of the acquiring stage. Don't you worry, dad, the shelves will fill!' 'What with?' her father said, as if there could be an answer when there couldn't, except some empty statement like 'whatever the future brings', and that wouldn't do, would it, when he and Wilma were about to leave their daughter to get on with her life, a work-in-progress that they, her parents, were relinquishing.

The sadness of it hit Keith again, though this time he felt there must be something better than crying. Anything was better. The

afternoon, their visit, were supposed to be joyful. They couldn't leave Chantelle depressed. She had to feel supported. Her father looked at Wilma. His eyes told her, since she was used to reading him, I don't know what to do so it's over to you. Wilma stood. 'Don't bother about the coffee darling. We'll go now. You've got lots to do. Just get on with it. You know we're behind you, always. Stay in touch.' Chantelle felt a clutching at her heart and at the very same moment an exultant feeling of release. A surge of joy ran through her and a surge of sadness because what was good for her was making her father and mother unhappy. They were parents, after all, and she'd be a parent one day, she supposed, so that the moment she was living through in one way would come back in later years to be experienced from the other side. 'Thanks, mum and dad, for letting me go. I won't forget anything, ever. You can be sure of that.' She led them down the passage again, not taking much notice, this time, of the other young women who were about, and when they got to the front door of the Hall, already an ancient place in an almost babyishly young country, she held her father's hand as she kissed him, then embraced her mother with all her heart. The open door stood watch over the parting, then allocated to the parents a bright sunlight and the overarching heavens of Australia, and, to the daughter, the passage she would come to know well, and the room which was already hers, and in which she'd create the future which was to be her inheritance.

Chantelle got into the diplomatic service after graduation, worked in Canberra for a couple of years, then had overseas postings – Yemen, Riyadh, Tokyo, Tel Aviv, Berlin, before she was brought back to Canberra. She married along the way, but had no children. She knew her father had hoped she'd have children, but wasn't sure about her mother. Wilma's objectivity was steadfast in the matter. 'The line's gone on,' was all she'd say, and only to Keith, 'it's not in our hands any more. We've had our moment in the sun.' He felt she was writing herself out of even family history, but that, after all, was con-

sistent with what she'd always been. He and Wilma arranged their long-service leave to coincide with each other, travelled briefly, then stayed at home for the remaining weeks, 'getting things done', as Keith liked to say. What he meant was that he and Wilma would be able to centre themselves on each other again, undoing the estranging influences of years of working for large organizations. Wilma worked for British Petroleum and Keith for a firm that specialised in a variety of steels; each had reached a level immediately below management and there they preferred to stay. 'What would life be like if I couldn't garden?' Keith would say as he took off muddy, or dusty, boots and left them on the verandah before coming in to drink tea with his wife. He marvelled at the fact that he felt closest to her when they were separated by a short distance: apart but aware. One mild day in their city's autumn he was pruning and clipping when he felt he heard something, put down his secateurs and went inside. 'Did you call, love?'

Wilma was lying on their bed. 'I felt a pain.' She touched her chest. 'I lay down, then I felt an awful pain. I thought I was going to die.' Before her husband could show any reaction, she went on. 'It's gone, though. I seem to be all right now. But don't go outside again, Keith. Stay inside so you can hear me if I call.'

Keith wanted to drive her to hospital, he wanted to call the doctor, he offered to give her mouth to mouth resuscitation ... Wilma laughed. 'I am feeling weak, but better than I was. I think I'm over it, whatever it was. I'll have to have a check-up, but not this minute.'

'Tea, darling? A glass of water? What about that pillow, is your head high enough? Would you like it higher?' He took her by the wrist, as if he was going to read her pulse, something he'd never done, in a medical sense, in all their years of marriage, although it might be said that he'd done nothing else in those years but adjust himself to her varied states of being. She assured him she was fine, but he wanted to ring Dr McLintock, and she agreed, scoffing as she did so at his over-protectiveness. She knew that when the doctor

came Keith would apologise for 'dragging' him to his wife's bedside and he'd justify his anxiety by saying, 'She's all I've got!' Wilma couldn't resist needling him. 'You're all I've got, darling.' He knew what she was up to, straight away. 'I'll tell McLintock when he gets here to stick a needle in your bum.' She didn't laugh at this, but, instead, he saw her trace a pattern with her fingers across her breast. 'What is it, darling?'

She said, 'Do you think there's an afterlife, Keith? After all? We've always said it's a rubbish idea, but do you think we can be sure?'

He came to her and sat on the bed they'd shared for years. 'No, I don't. These chest pains have certainly set you thinking.' She looked at him, her lifetime partner, saying, 'When I had the bad pain, I thought to myself, that was so much worse than the one before it ... if the next one's worse again, I'm going to wake up somewhere else. Then it struck me ... if I wake up at all. And I wasn't sure. We've always said an afterlife is impossible, we've listened to the evidence, such as it is, and decided it's rubbish, but a minute ago, when I was wondering if I'd come to the end of the road, I did start to wonder ...'

Keith said, 'That just shows what a distressing experience you've been through. It doesn't prove a thing. Humans feel a need to think they can go on after they die. It's ...' he wanted to say 'natural', but what he really meant was 'forgiveable' – '*... common* to have ideas like that at a time like this, but no, the reality of the situation is that it hasn't changed, nothing's really changed ...'

She saw that he was ready to make a rambling restatement of all his views on everything. 'Was that someone at the door?' He said there wasn't anybody at the door, McLintock couldn't possibly be that quick. 'He said he was at the hospital, doing his rounds, he said he'd be here in half an hour. That was only ten minutes ago ...'

Wilma said, 'That gives us twenty minutes before he gets here, if he's actually on time. They never are, even the best of them. Most of us die alone ...'

He broke in. 'But fortunately, in your case and mine, we don't have to. You hang on hard, Wilma. If you were to die I wouldn't last another week. I know it. It's written in our stars, whatever that means. We do talk crap, don't we, whenever the big things crop up, but that's how I feel.' He said it again, more loudly. 'That's how I feel!'

Wilma said, 'I feel a bit better. I'd have got worse if I hadn't had you to look after me. Maybe I would have died after all. It's good to know you're wanted, it stops you slipping away without resisting ...'

'No more of this slipping away talk, Wilma!'

'I'm not leaving, darling. It was just a turn, that's what Clinty's going to say. And there he is, by the way, I'd know his driving anywhere. You'll have to let him in.'

'The front door's open, the back door's open, what more does he need?'

'He'll need a calm, wise head to tell him why we've called him. He's going to want to know what's been happening.'

'And I'm going to tell him I was getting ready to follow my wife into the next world ...'

'And he's going to say that'd be a good idea ...'

'... because the absence of me would relieve the world of a load of anxieties ...'

'... it could well do without.'

Keith stood up. Doctor McLintock was at the door, calling. 'In here, Doctor. She reckons she's going to recover. Give her a once-over and tell me if she's right.'

Enter Diego, of Guatemala City

The run around the town by Form 1 students was one of those stories revived every few months by someone: country towns all have their stories, adapting them as the years, and the tellings, go on. The history of a place is an endlessly adapted Wikipedia of no more validity than that whatever is being told is the moment's version of what it wants to represent it. Truth, after all, is little more than an ideal. What's being said is what counts. Enter, upon the scene, a handsome young man called Diego ('Dago' to the locals) Martinez, who claimed, though nobody could verify it, that he had been a runner in the event which lingered in the town's memory. He can have been no younger than twenty when he arrived in the area but, hearing its stories, began to work himself into them where and as he fancied. Diego was entertaining. Those who listened to him said he would say anything, but he had a gift for detail. For instance, he remembered, or claimed to, that the runners in the by-now-historic race (or *run, pace* Dick Hart) had been guided by fluttering red triangles of cloth at the beginning – as far as the policemen: there were no women in the force in those days – blocking the traffic on the bridge over the river, and for a couple of hundred yards afterwards, but the flags indicating the way had then changed to square bits of cloth, and had continued in that form to the very end. When he conjured this from his imagination over beers at the Railway Hotel, it was assumed that he was making it up, but someone checked with an elderly Arnie Longmire, one of the run's organisers, and Arnie confirmed that the flags had been as Diego said.

How did the man know this?

Someone put the question to Ron Ardeer, one of a family that had run the town's newspaper for generations. Ron went to Arnie Longmire to ask about the run, what the young people had been told about finding their way, and so on, and Arnie, after a good deal of introductory mumbling about how hard it was to recall details so long after the event, brought out names of parents who'd assisted in organising the thing. 'Men marked the route,' he said, 'and women did everything else at home.' Arnie stated this as if solving all the problems caused by the feminist wave. Men outside, women inside. Making beds, sweeping, but mostly in the kitchen. Didn't that make them important enough? Besides, Arnie began to go on, causing Ron Ardeer to wonder if he'd made a mistake in visiting the man, besides, Arnie said, boys and girls set off together. Undivided. Nobody put all the good runners out the front for a favoured start, the way they do these days in marathons or city to surf runs and that sort of thing. No, it had been one big happy outing, and the emphasis had never been on winning ...

Ron wanted to know why the flags guiding the young people had been of two or more shapes, and Arnie's answer was simple. 'Confusion! We had so many helpers, you couldn't be everywhere, making them all do the same thing in the same way! Besides, what's wrong with a bit of variety? What's wrong with doing things more than one way? We've all got different ways of doing things, haven't we? You want to know how this fella got to know some things he couldn't have known because he wasn't there? Someone must have told him, that's all. There were plenty of people on the run, most of them are still alive, and there's plenty of others, like me, who were there on the day. Any of them could have told him! It was never any secret!'

Ron left. Diego was right. Arnie had confirmed. Two, at least, perhaps more, types of flags to show the way. Some of the youngsters had nicked off and never completed the course ... one or two had never really begun it, if you believed the stories floating around

... but all the rest had got back without any problems, so, really, when you thought about it, there had been no problems with the flags!

Diego had begun his ownership of the town's inner life. He'd claimed the run, though he'd never been in it. Anyone who thought about it, who counted back from his present age to when the run happened – and that was firmly dated, everyone knew that – could see that he wasn't old enough to have been on the run ... but, and there was always a but ... he'd laid claim to the thing that occupied their imaginations. What was it about the run? They'd all set off, bright and youthful, on something of no importance, but somehow it had entered their imaginations, a chaotic world where there were no rules, not even from those controllers of the mind, the Catholic clergy, not even from the town's councillors, or its senior Rotarians ... nobody claimed the town's imagination because it belonged to everybody. It was like the topsoil brought down by the river over thousands of years, and dumped wherever it fell, to lie fertile until seeds happened upon it. Then something grew. That was what the imagination was like. Anything grew. Whatever wasn't ripped out or hacked down and burnt, got bigger until it was established. It was then said that it had always been there!

What would Diego's next story be? Ron Ardeer asked himself this, feeling sure, with a reporter's instinct, that the man wouldn't stop while he was establishing his ground. He was a presumptuous outsider, he'd shown his hand, he needed to be watched, and when necessary, rebuked. Reminded of things the town held dear, and told not to do any more inventing if he wanted to stay in the town and not be eased out ...

... or thrown out (it could be made to happen)!

Diego started to drink with some of the timber workers, and asked them questions, very deferentially, about the biggest trees they'd seen. What the trees had been like in the early days of settlement. The *early days*! He'd found another nerve. Then he turned up at football practice and asked if he could join in.

The coach let him have a run. 'Let's have a look atya!' It was clear that he'd never played the Australian game, but he moved quickly, anticipated, and managed to pull the ball out of the air. Kicking was no problem; he simply hoofed the ball as far as he could. They gave him a run in the seconds to get him used to the game, and a couple of weeks later, after a miraculous acclimatisation, he was in the town's first eighteen, playing in the ruck. News of this spread, and there were red and white streamers a-plenty in the street full of modest housing commission homes where he lived. Diego (Dago) was playing for the town!

It was a few weeks before he looked as if he was in an element he understood, and the first sign was that his innate sense of drama told him a decisive moment had arrived. Shouting from over the fence and the energy of the players told him when something extra was required, and he gave it. He charged into packs, he ran alongside, calling for the ball, he took a towering mark when the moment demanded. It was as if he was wired to the game so that when something special was needed, he produced it. Two goals he kicked from the forward pocket gave his town a win in a game against the competition's leading team. The adoration of women followers followed. Diego, from being an outsider, was in demand. His humility and natural courtesy served him well. When he went out with one girl he was nice to those he couldn't see till later in the week. Word went around that he believed he shouldn't go to bed with someone the night before a match. This was passed around with something close to hysteria. Not go to bed? Not grab a fuck when it was offering?

Spare me daze!

Wherever Diego came from – and it was thought to be an offshoot of Spain in Latin America – he never gave away his origins but it was clear that he was the product of big city anonymity because it puzzled him that he was always under observation. He became a product of the town's imagination, and this suited him, because he didn't really know who he was. He acted like a man whose parents

had left him early on. He was always in need of guidance, which he got from the town's best jokers, until popularity put a stop to pranks that made a fool of him. He'd become too well liked. He preferred to be the last of his team to run on the field but the calls of the public meant that officials put him after the team's vice captain. This embarrassed Diego and he tried too hard. At half time one match he told a complaining coach, 'You let me run on last, I give you first class game,' and this was granted.

Last it was, but as we know from an old saying it might as well be first. Diego played a winning game, in the way he had of rising to occasions as he scented them. Great players know where the ball's going to go. They're there when it arrives. Diego ran after the ball so awkwardly, that spectators despaired, until ... they guessed, they knew it would happen ... the ball bounced the wrong way, was knocked in an unexpected direction, into the hands of Diego. The hefty booting of his starting weeks had been coached out of him by endless screening of city league grand finals. Diego had learned by watching the greatest of the great. He saw that the ball, once won, had to be moved to the best advantage. This was when he showed that the Australian game could be a form of moving chess; opposition players began to follow him instead of the ball, so that he became a drawcard of the play, or what it might become. He disconcerted opposition players because they didn't know how to counter him ...

He was, though he didn't know it, in his golden days. He made love with lots of girls, while others, those tightly or not so tightly attached to his team mates, laughed and giggled about the possibility of finding themselves alone with him; this, it seemed, was a female ideal. His humility protected him. He loved being with women, and he didn't think of them as conquests. He was quite reverent with girls he'd been intimate with, even if it hadn't been repeated. Girls he'd 'gone out with', meaning they'd been his for a few weeks, noticed how respectful he was when he saw them, and held nothing against him for moving on. It was all light-hearted enough, until ...

Until. It's a word of omen, isn't it. Until. In Diego's case the word was the shield worn by Shirley Verity, daughter of the area's biggest timber-milling boss and employer of many of the town's hardest men, ex-footballers themselves, some of them. Shirley's mother had been beautiful, once, and was weak. Shirley took unto herself her father's sense of self-importance. He had only to indicate what he wanted and he got it. That was the town's way with a man who had a fortune and jobs to hand out. He mattered. His wishes counted, everywhere, with everyone. He had a flash American car and policemen nodded to him as he passed. Shirley had grown up with this so she knew what was expected of anyone she took a fancy to. She was no better educated nor did she have any better judgement than her mother, but she could read the town's valuations and it ranked Diego Martinez as *numero uno*: those were the words they used. One! Glamour attended him, he was in everybody's hands, he was desired and admired, the woman who took possession of him had skimmed the cream of the town's milk.

As it were. Cunning, and subtle as the town's judgements were, they were also couched in terms of crudest simplicity. What was said to be good was good, what was called desirable was what everyone wanted. Public opinion was the dictator that levelled the most inquiring of minds. Didn't you want what everyone wanted? If not, who the hell were you? Shirley Verity wanted the town's new star as a way of creating stardom for herself; it was what everyone desired. When the club had dances at the rooms after a home game, Shirley danced close to Diego, smiling at him occasionally. Diego, for his part, knowing who Shirley was, was too humble to approach. He had to be prodded. 'She wants you to dance with her, Diego,' girls told him, and when he checked with his mates, they said the same, albeit enviously because Shirley was thought to be far above the likes of them, and here she was, letting people tell their mate Diego (Dago!) that she was interested ...

Diego, Shirley: desire has a way of creating the opportunities, the situations, it requires. Diego, as perhaps he sensed, was doomed to get what he wanted, once he admitted his desire to himself, which took a time. The second night Diego sensed her tempting him, he abandoned pretence and swept her into his persona, which was generous enough. Shirley knew from the way he smiled at her that she'd won him on her terms, that, in accepting her, he accepted on the basis of the reputation her father's wealth and position in the town accorded her. A queen had a fancy for a commoner, in Shirley's mind, and the queen would have her way.

A difficulty arose for Shirley. Her father thought nothing of Diego, a man of no background or importance. A dime a dozen sort, Ted Verity thought. Shirley couldn't take him home, so she used a room, a bed, in an apartment belonging to a friend. Word soon got out. Shirley Verity was on with Dago Martinez. Wow! Ted Verity heard soon enough, and considered his moves. If it blew over in a week or two he didn't suppose it mattered. But something lasting? Oh no thank you, things weren't going that way! Ted was used to getting his way, and his daughter was no different from anyone else.

Janice Verity, Shirley's mum, was no use. Most of her mental effort went into preserving her appearance and pleasing Ted. Ted was one of the dangerous men, with power and the habit of using it. The idea that women had other forms of influence hadn't penetrated Janice's mind. She was scared. Shirley was a danger to her position because whatever she did would be seen as some sort of reflection on Janice. Sleeping with a man like that! People did all sorts of things under wraps, and Janice thought this was safe so long as nobody found out, but doing things in the open ... practically! Things mustn't be allowed to get out. Shirley, however, wanted Diego to be invited home for Sunday lunch so that she and he would know that what they were doing was 'respectable'. Things were safer, she told her mother, in the open. Admitted. 'I'll ask your father,' was the most Shirley could get from her mother.

Ted Verity put the whole thing off for a couple of weeks while he did some talking around. Then he conceded: Sunday lunch. Janice roasted pork, served after a dainty Japanese-style soup. Ted offered Diego beer and whisky and wine. He took pineapple juice instead. Ted wasn't sure whether to be impressed or scornful, so 'Whatever you please' was what he said. In the rambling conversation that followed Ted managed to insert the news that Collingwood, one of the most famous clubs in football, had approached the local coach, an ex-Magpie himself, looking for a mobile big man. Diego had an idea that Melbourne clubs trained harder and took the game more seriously than he'd ever done, but Shirley was thrilled. Daddy had found an opportunity! Diego had to take it! Diego was astute enough to say that he'd talk to his coach the very next day.

And he did, and the coach said, 'We're going to missya if ya make it in the big time, Dago, but if ya gottit inya, we're gonna be right behindya!' So after another week or two, Diego found himself in Melbourne, training for a club with premierships and tradition. On his last night in his old town, clinging to Shirley in the bed they shared at her friend's, he told his lover that he was scared. 'I don't think I'm gonna be any good down there. When I come back, I'll be a nobody all over again. If I fail in the city I can't play football again down here.' Shirley couldn't see that he'd fail, she believed that he was *that* good, so she couldn't get her mind around the idea of him returning to the town she was getting ready to leave herself. Diego had only to create a new level of stardom and she'd be with him, didn't he see that? He didn't, but said he did. A rift was opening between them. She wanted him to cover himself with glory, and he knew he was on the way to losing the casual side of his nature because he'd heard so much about the training at city clubs.

And so it was. The coaching staff at Collingwood saw that he was no use until the quirks of his game had been trained out of him. They played percentage football and there was no room for accidents, however brilliant they might appear at a lower level. 'We're gonna

make you one mean, hungry machine!' they told him, and they set about changing the man's nature. Fitness experts mapped out programs and dieticians told him what to eat, how much, and when. No grog except on the night after a game, when he could have a couple. Late nights? Uh uh. They approved of relationships, in a prudish sort of way, because they gave a player an outlet. Diego had never heard anyone talk like this before, certainly not the workers of his bush town. He began to feel nostalgic for what he'd lost and wondered if he mightn't go back. That was when Ted Verity came to town, bringing Janice and Shirley. They called at the club and Ted watched the players training. 'You've found your level,' he told his young protégé. 'I hope you're enjoying it.' What he didn't tell Diego, and he made sure that Shirley didn't get a chance to tell him either, was that he was blocking her idea of a move to the city, at least for another year. He wanted Diego out of her mind before that step was taken! For Diego, his life at the famous football club was one long exacting pain. There was nothing in it he enjoyed. There were experts watching to make sure he didn't do any of the things that had been normal – back home. Home, something he'd never really had in his life, had been his idea of what he'd experienced in his country town and it had been taken away. He was deprived of it so he could become a star and therefore worthy of the woman who said she loved him.

What was the good of love if all it did was make you unhappier than you'd ever been? He didn't even get a game, all he did was train and train ...

A split round gave him the chance to slip back to his ex-home one weekend, and he did it without telling Shirley, or Ted or Janice, what he had in mind. He got a ride with a mate who drove trucks and slipped into town shortly after midnight. Walking to the little quarters where he hoped to find a bed, he heard partying in the apartment attached to the domestic training wing of the school. It sounded good. He went closer, listened for a minute, then went in.. Everyone was dancing the bossa nova, and singing a song about the

very same dance. They were belting it out. They knew the words and everyone was singing. The words didn't mean a thing but they linked people in the room every bit as much as the movements the music pushed into them. Feet stamped. Heads swayed back, elbows jerked the air. Knees lifted sharply, shoulders spun. Rhythm had control of the air, pounding it, exercising it, had control, too, of the bodies in the room. That was what dancing was, it was when movement took on meaning for itself. After weeks of heavily managed training, freedom, disciplined, mightily enjoyable freedom, was around Diego again. He stepped into the crowd and danced, wildly, rhythmically, energetically: 'Doin' the dance of love!'

It was life handed back to a dying man. He'd forgotten what it was like to be connected to everyone in a room, and was he connected! His spirit flowed freely in the air, swirling, swinging, stamping, exultantly, exorbitantly free at last! After weeks of training! It was great to be away! It was greater to be back! He never even thought of Shirley, or her father or her mother, in his release, back in a place that made him feel it was home. Then he noticed that the leader of the dancers was the tallest person in the room, a slender, tightly-cut blonde woman of twenty-two, perhaps, whose elbows, knees, feet and fingers ... those fingers, those air-caressing palms! ... whose movements had that little extra spirit in them which meant that she was infusing meaning into the movements of everyone around her. The words 'Doin' the dance of love!' came out of her as if she'd liberated herself into the movement of the song. She seemed to have taken control of time by giving herself to it utterly. 'That's dancing, oh, really, yes!' Diego told himself, and he moved close to her, this tall woman who was the biggest explosion of energy he'd ever been near. 'Doin' the dance of love!' Oh yeah!

The tall woman noticed the stranger and shifted her place in the room so that she danced on a spot diagonally related to his. That was enough for Diego. If she was released, he was released. He wouldn't be going back to the city after this, he'd be staying where

he felt best. Wasn't that what life was for? Someone tapped the tall woman on the arm to tell her something, and Diego caught the name 'Jane'. He moved a step closer, caught her eye, and said 'Diego Martinez, Central America!' He said it with a pride that challenged. She straightened her shoulders, flicked her hair, and flung herself into the dance.

It took days before the city football club found out what had happened, and even the country town gossip network was slow to find out that Diego and Jane were so entranced with each other that they had little time for anything else. The dance of love had drawn them in. When Jane was at work Diego talked to a couple of the timber men he knew, nobody connected with the Verity mills; he didn't want to be anywhere near the family he'd let down. He was up, now, and staying there! He and Jane spent hours in the excitement of each other and he found it hard to let her go. She got out of bed one morning and stood in their room, near a window, bathed in early light, and the admiration of her loving man, not so much thinking as adjusting to the coming day. 'You see anything out there?' he said to her, tall, slender, in her glory. She murmured with the confidence of someone fully appreciated, 'I see a world that's waiting for me.' Diego wanted her back. 'Let the world wait, darling. Let it wait!' She was amused. 'It's telling me it can't function unless I bring it love!' Diego thought this funny. 'You need help from me!' A moment later he was out of bed, holding her, and they were laughing like souls released. Then she slipped her clothes on; it only took a moment and she was ready for the day. The world. 'I've got to get dressed too,' Diego said. 'I can't lie here if you're not here.' Jane worked on the social pages of the local newspaper, under the wife of Ron Ardeer. She had a way of keeping her thoughts hidden because Elizabeth Ardeer was a harsh critic of anything she considered immoral. Jane knew how much of the tumbling ferment inside herself fell into Elizabeth and Ron Ardeer's category of immorality, and she thought it funny to maintain her veneer of purity when she admitted everything about herself

to the world of possibility, given the circumstances. Diego was a circumstance! She saw that he loved womankind; she'd give him a good run for his money, and so far he hadn't failed her. Other men could be sucked dry, but not Diego, generous without limit, it seemed in their first few days. Jane was satisfied beyond her expectations. Most men had failed her demands, but the man from Central America, who'd run away from the prestigious world of top-league football to be with her, because he felt it was the right place for him, had caused her to dig deep inside herself for richer layers of tenderness, of womanhood, and she was surprised. She hadn't known that love, that treacherous word, could be so good. At the end of their first week together, she said, 'We'd better get you a job?' Diego showed no interest, but she told him, 'It's a way of extending things. Everything runs out unless you make arrangements that keep things going. It's being smart, that's all.' Diego didn't greatly mind having things to do, though he felt that anything but making love with Jane was a waste of energy, but what could he do? He could go out in the bush and cut trees, but that'd mean he'd only see Jane at weekends, and that simply wasn't enough. 'You could own the mill and come home every night,' she told him, laughing, but he didn't have any money and neither did she. 'We're richer than anybody I've ever known!' Diego told his lover, but she did no more than smile, enjoying the bravado and turning foolishness aside. She had to work, he had to work, there was no avoiding that.

A darkness came over Diego's soul. He'd thought his passion so great that it'd reshape the world from within, and here was Jane saying it couldn't happen. Jobs! Who wanted jobs? She seemed to; she told him scraps that had come into the office and he was surprised that she found any sustenance in what seemed trivial to him. 'This is testing us!' he cried out, one day when she rang him from the office with some juicy titbit of gossip. She laughed, calling down the phone in the moment before she hung up, 'Enjoy!'

That was what he wanted to do, but it seemed hard to sustain. He worshipped her, he wasn't her boss in any way at all. Morning after morning, as she stood beside their bed, looking out the window, those all-accepting eyes studying the street outside and the park that was opposite, he studied her perfection, and wondered if there wasn't a better word to describe her condition than 'naked'. He knew that his thinking was limited by his ability to manage a language that wasn't properly his, but, really, naked ...

It meant that you were without the clothes you ought to be wearing, but who, on seeing Jane, would think she ought to be in clothes? Jane was dressed in the splendour of the morning light, so clear, so precise in its rendering of the beauty she accepted as if it were clothing laid out by courtiers. He changed. Where he had, at first, wanted her to stay beside him, responding to tender caresses, he began, he found, to anticipate the moment when she'd stand out of the bed, on the carpet beside it, staring, head high – how wondrously tall she was! – at the park across the road, letting trees, early cyclists, birds and whatever else arrive as harbingers of the day. His own inadequacy at expressing adoration made him weak, yet, weaker as he became, his passion became stronger. She knew this was happening, and made a point of letting herself fill with strength, of purpose and passion, as she stood for those moments before she slipped, ever so quickly, so lightly, into her clothes. Beautiful as she was, she spent little time on her appearance. A glance in the mirror after a shower, a quick brushing of hair ... The real effort went into the choosing of her clothes, and she began to allow Diego to come with her, looking at things she might buy. He was discerning, and the women who worked in shops became fond of him. Jane had got someone who was worthy. Diego's humility was his salvation. He liked to see other men admire her. He felt sure enough of her passion not to mind. The fact that she was tall somehow made her unassailable. Silly males didn't feel provoked to try to get off with her, or even to capture her attention. Men were respectful, and no one more than he. Then a

thought entered Diego's mind that he wished had not entered: how long could this last?

Why not forever? It was the mark of a great love that it endured. He had no doubt that he was caught up in a great love. Nothing half so powerful had ever happened before. Casting his mind around the horizon, looking for threats, he could see nothing that might break down his passion for Jane. They swam in a torrent of love as they'd done the first time. Nothing had been lost. That meant that if there was anything in the world that might separate them, or give them a lower degree of passion for each other, it must be – it *had to be* – something inside one of them: Jane and Diego. Was there any such thing?

Weeks passed, and it seemed there was not. Diego began to relax. Jane seemed unchanged, but then, in his mind, she was a force of nature and subject to rises and falls like rivers and tides, or the moon in its cycles. He felt he could, now, get himself a job. He discussed it with her and she agreed that perhaps it might be all right if he worked in the bush, cutting trees, as he rather fancied. Once he'd made a bit of money he could buy a car and come home to her at nights, at least some of the time, before, of course, they had their weekends together. He wouldn't want to be far away. He said he'd see what he could do. A mill in a timber town said they were getting ready to cut an area near Mount Desolation, they were moving huts out there but they didn't care whether their men used the huts or drove in and out from town each day, so long as the job started on time and got done before anyone knocked off. Diego said they could count on him.

Diego was up very early on the day he was supposed to start. 'So soon?' a sleepy voice said from the depths of their bed. 'Bugger of a time, isn't it?' he said. 'The worst thing is I won't see you looking at the park when you get up. That's the highlight of the day, for me.' Jane spoke to her pillow as much as to her man. 'Things have to change as a way of making them stay the same.' He asked her what

she'd said but she mumbled and turned to the other side. 'Think of me darling. I'll be thinking of you.'

So he worked his first day in the bush. He'd talked, often enough, with bush workers but now he was learning their ways. This on top of his lessons in love! How much in the world was there to be incorporated into his ever-growing self? This was better than being straitened for a football club! When his fellow workers asked him when he'd be going back to his team, he amazed them by saying he had no such plan. 'Never! That's over now. Forever and a day!' They looked at him in amazement. Standing there before them, a chainsaw in his hand, was a man who'd run laps at Collingwood, holiest of sporting places, and done the bidding of the coach of that mighty band, attended by great names of the past who came back to life in the black and white players of today: Dago, the bloke who did the same job as they did, sipped a beer at the midday break like they did, and skipped out of falling trees the way they did, had been to Mecca and wasn't going back. What sort of man was he?

What sort of man was he? He asked himself this because he sensed that Jane was asking the same question. She had a way of looking at him that told him she was wondering about things she wasn't asking. One morning when he was in town – home – for the weekend – he hadn't got a car as yet, though he expected to get one soon – he saw her standing beside their bed, looking at the park across the road, in the way he loved, when it occurred to him to wonder what she saw that he didn't see. He felt sure there was something. He sat up. He wanted to know, but he'd lost the power of words. She looked at him. 'Why not get up too? You're up earlier than me these days.' These days? So their life together had already passed through a stage or two. What was to come? He realised he wanted more of what they'd already had, and that things never worked out that way. No more of the same, always something new! 'Jane?' She said nothing, but extended her hand to take his. He got up and stood with her, the two of them in their glory, though the

morning was what is known as 'nippy'. 'Jane?' She was smiling, and he had a feeling that the right word for her at that moment, though he didn't know much about words, was 'accomplished'. She was so good at managing things, good at digging out stuff to publish in the paper he barely looked at, he felt she was just as good at things like peering into the future. 'What's going to happen to us, Jane? Like ...' he really didn't know what to say '... like, in years to come?' There, he'd said it; what would she say?

She surprised him. 'Let's get dressed and go somewhere that's sacred.' Sacred? Yet he sensed she didn't mean a church; what did she mean?

They dressed and she drove to a spot with a famous outlook. It was early so they had the place to themselves. 'Great view,' Diego said, feeling compelled. She said nothing, but led him to the edge. There was a river beneath them. 'Some places have this effect on you,' Jane said, 'that you have to tell the truth when you're there.' There was no doubt they were in such a place. She pointed to mountains in the distance and named a few of them. Then she indicated a mountain on the horizon to their north. 'I come from the other side of there. A little place you haven't been to yet. We'll go there one of these days, but only when you answer my question.' His knees began to weaken. 'Tell me,' Jane said, and her quietness made her more than ordinarily formidable, 'tell me your future. I want to know how you see it.' This surprised him. 'My future? I don't know what's around the corner. We haven't even worked out what we're going to do today.' False optimism showed him a way out. 'We've got a whole new day in front of us to decide what we're going to do.'

The words were no sooner out than he wished he could get them back. He'd failed. 'No, that's not what I meant to say. Let me think!' When he couldn't find anything to add, she took his hand, encouraging him. 'The future, Diego. What do you see?' He couldn't see a thing except lakes and sky, mountains and clouds, the horizon and a boat or two on the water, smoke drifting away from chimneys ... He

couldn't see a thing. 'I don't really try to read the future. I just let it happen?'

She tickled his palm with her fingers. 'That's what I think too. We haven't had any breakfast yet, my darling. Don't you think we'd better do something about that?' He nodded. So it was over. He'd been opened up, searched, found to be empty, and she was forgiving him? Yes, it appeared so, but the emptiness she'd discovered would never be forgotten. It was in the open now. He wasn't taking her anywhere, it wasn't in him to lead her to a future she desired. If she wanted a leader, she'd have to do the job herself, that was the truth of the matter. He was too weak, too directionless, to give her anything but the adoration, the love-passion he was already giving. As a man, to tell the truth, he wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't one of those who reached a goal. If they stayed together, she was the boss. Always had been. She'd come, she said, from a little settlement the other side of the mountains and she'd got as far as having him. She was going further, of that she and he were sure. Further by a long, long way for Jane. Where to? He'd renounced his chance of giving any lead. She'd have to do the deciding, something she was good at. She'd decide ... would there be any place for him? For how long? Were his hours, his days with her, his nights in their bed, running out? He felt they were. He'd run out of whatever it was that took people further, Jane was nowhere near her limits and wanted to go on, discovering, exploring, all that ...

He wanted to use the word 'shit' as an expletive, a word he didn't know, but he also knew that if that word had even been allowed to surface in his mind then he'd reached a very low spot indeed. Was there any way out? Up? Back? He did the only thing he could do. He waited for her to say. To rule. To decide. Such moments come to most relationships, early or late. Two people know that one cannot and one can deal with a crucial decision, and therefore rules the relationship. There's no avoiding it. It comes, and if one is silent and the other speaks, the decision's made. Jane tickled Diego's palm again,

patiently loving, but full as he was of knowledge which would prove fatal to them as a pair. With a faint pressure she turned him away from the view, which had told them a great deal, and had indeed been a manifestor of truth hidden until the moment, and by doing no more than looking at the car which had brought them there it was clear that she was saying it was time for them to leave. The fortune-teller's tent had no more to give. They got back in the car, Jane driving still, and moved back to town. They had breakfast at a café, Jane turning the pages of the paper she'd helped prepare, then putting it on the seat beside her to look into Diego's eyes. 'We've still got a lot to do for each other,' she said, but he knew that she was implying that though they had a lot to do together, there was more, much more, to come in the time that would come after. Later. When the two of them were no longer one.

Diego and Jane, Diego and Prue

Diego got his car, and was able to spend weeknights with Jane. Occasionally though he stayed at the bush camp, if there was reason to make an early start. One Monday morning, after a loving weekend, he arrived at the timber camp very early to find a fifteen year old looking into his tent. Challenged, the boy said his mother had sent him to see if Diego was awake, because she needed help with a tree that had fallen onto another tree during the night, and was threatening the shed with machinery and equipment inside. Diego drove the lad back to the farm he'd already passed, and met Prue Kitchener at the gate. She introduced herself and showed Diego the trees and the shed. He scratched his head in the way of the men he worked with. 'Tricky job, but we'll find a way. How are you off for ropes?'

She had ropes and he noticed how familiar she was with everything in the shed. He knew she'd been working the property since the death of her husband, but he hadn't given it much thought; he was either working or in a rush to get back to Jane. This time, Diego and his men spent a couple of hours on the trees endangering Prue's

shed. They used the ropes to lower the branches they cut, sometimes dropping them on the ground, sometimes resting them on the shed roof until they could toss them off, or swing them aside. It was painstaking work, and Prue invited them back to the house when it was done. Diego felt he had to go but the others said they should get back to the work they hadn't started. So Diego found himself in Prue's kitchen, with Prue's boy Graeme, a youth of fifteen, beside him and her daughter Samantha, six, across the table, and plainly curious about this man in her mother's kitchen. When the girl went off to get something to show the visitor, Prue explained that her daughter was unused to having a man about the house; she had only faint memories of her father before he died.

There were a couple of times in the following fortnight when young Graeme Kitchener asked Diego what to do about some problem, so that he sensed he was an object of curiosity in the isolated farmhouse. He mentioned this to Jane when he was home and noted how attentively she asked about his interaction with the Kitcheners. He felt she was investigating something he couldn't see. 'What is it?' he said to his love; 'Am I doing something wrong?' Jane smiled faintly. 'Keep your eyes open. If you don't, you might find yourself in a trap.'

'Who'd set a trap for me? Look at the car I drive, it was the cheapest that would still run.'

Jane looked at him as if he'd been born retarded. 'You're an unusual man. There's so many things I don't need to tell you that I sometimes think you and I are going to go on for a long time. Other times, you're as blind as anyone else.'

'Blind? What don't I see?'

'The woman who runs this farm where you're working, what does she want? Tell me, you must have worked it out by now.'

'It's not so much what she wants as what she needs.'

'All right then, what does she need?'

He sat back in his chair. 'So much. So very much. Just about everything ...'

'Anything special?'

'Money. She hasn't got any. Workers. She does everything herself. It wears her out, it must. How she keeps going I never know.'

'Ever heard of hope?'

'What's she got to hope for?'

Jane didn't bother answering. She took four peaches, a sharp knife, and cut the fruit into slices. A bowl received them as she dropped them, one by one. Diego knew it was a way of making him think. 'I'm sorry, I'm too stupid, you're going to have to say it. Like the men say, right between the eyes.'

'She's waiting for you to make a move.'

'A move? We're going to be there for months, probably.'

'That'll give her time, then.'

'Time?'

'To plant the seed of thought.'

Somewhere inside himself he was squirming, and he knew it. 'Seeds grow.'

'They do, don't they. She's got two children, and you say the little girl ...'

'Sam.'

'... needs a man around the place. So does her mother, you've told me that already.'

Starting to see the drift of her thoughts, he said, 'And suddenly there's a camp not far from her property. A bit of bush never been opened up before and there's a row of tents ...'

'And who is it she's interested in?'

He scoffed. 'Not me, believe me, not me.' He tried to laugh. 'I drive past quick as a flash. When I'm going to work, I've just come from here. When I'm leaving work, I'm heading back here, quick as I can. Simple as that!'

She was getting annoyed with him. 'Nothing's ever that simple.' She dropped half the peaches into a second bowl and pushed it to him. 'Should I put poison in these or let nature take its course?'

'Nature' was a word he felt strongly about. 'When we saw each other that first night, that was natural forces. They swept us together ...'

'They could sweep us apart. They probably will.'

He thought of her pointing out the mountain on the horizon, and telling him she came from somewhere further back; of the feeling he'd had that morning, and often enough since, that she was on a long journey, and that he wasn't adventurous enough, and the pain this caused him because he'd found, in her, the woman he could worship, and worship, not the establishment of a career, whether for him or her, was what he'd long been seeking.

'She's got a silly name. Prue Kitchener. She doesn't mean anything to me. I helped her, I told you this, the whole gang, we helped her move a tree that was going to crush her shed. Apart from that, a few odd jobs, it's nothing. Nothing at all. I don't read her mind. If she was smart, she'd have sold up and moved to a town where her children could go to school more easily ...'

He rattled on. Jane got herself a spoon, handed another to him, and started eating. He kept talking because he couldn't stop himself, but he felt he was digging a grave that his wreckage would be pushed into before too long. 'Isn't it so? Everything I say to you, isn't it true?'

'Yes of course.'

'This is our first fight.'

She stung him unexpectedly. 'Our last, probably.'

'What?'

'Diego, I'm more ambitious than you.' This made him look glum, hang-dog, perhaps. 'It's simply a matter of how things are. No blame, no fault, just a fact. I'm working for a little provincial rag. I have to keep my mouth shut, I keep my mouth shut. But not forever.'

I showed you the horizon. I've got my eye on other horizons. I've got a long way to go. This woman ...'

'Prue, she says it's a name she wishes she didn't have ...'

'Prue! Prudence!'

'That's what she doesn't like. She says she's not.' Jane snorted. 'Her family name's Kitchener, it was her husband's name, she says she's not a kitchen type of person ...'

He could see that Jane was enjoying the glibness of his defence, but why was he defending? He wasn't keeping anything out!

Then he remembered little Samantha, Sam, staring longingly at him, wanting to ride in his car, wanting him to see her things, to play with her, give her a share of the apple he was eating, and he recognised at last the yearning of the Kitchener family for a man to replace the one they'd lost. Their needs had settled on him. He was the chosen. The elect, select, the wanted, needed, who had only to spread his arms around them, a family lacking a man, to make them whole again, full of love for him, their source of stability. He'd have a wife, a family, a farm, a place in a country where he was an outsider, something to do that wasn't stupid, like his efforts to turn himself into a football machine, he'd have a reason, a purpose, a centre to his life ...

No! He wanted to be as he was, he wanted Jane ...

... but Jane had seen what he hadn't allowed himself to see, she'd played it all out in her mind, something he realised she was good at, and really, Jane had finished with him. She'd reached the end of the course and was waiting for him to get there too. He said, illogically, but she was following well enough, 'When I got to this town, I heard a story about the children of the school all going for a run. I liked the story. I heard it a few times, this one and that told me about it. I put myself in the story. I found out all the details, well not all, but a few, and I put myself in the details ...'

He was getting mixed up, but she was listening patiently, wanting to know ...

'I told people I was one of the second batch to finish. I was number twenty-two, I told them. Twenty two was my age at the time. Nobody noticed that. I came in at number twenty two, I told them. I didn't run in the race at all, it was before my time. But I liked the story ...'

'Not a bad yarn,' she conceded.

'I thought if I put myself in their story I am part of their town. I am not part of their town. I am not part of your town either.' Suddenly he was crying. He'd never see the little settlement in the mountains where Jane had come from, extracted herself from, in an act of determined self-creation. 'I'm not ambitious. I don't want to be anybody big, and high. I have no plans that way at all. As you know.'

She was looking at him with interest, listening, too, to his last song.

'Perhaps I will surprise you when I say that I will not marry the lady with the farm. I will not be daddy to her children ...'

'You'll have to say goodbye to them. You can't just run out.'

'I will say goodbye to them, I will say goodbye to my mates I work with. I'll sell my car, I've got a few dollars in the bank, I'll buy a ticket and go home ...'

'Where is home, by the way?'

'Guatemala City. That's where I call home. It's a dump. I don't want to go back there except it's where I belong. I don't belong here with you. I wanted to, I still want to, a part of me, but I don't. In the morning, I go back to the bush. A few days, I'm on a plane. Cross the Pacific, fly down to where I came from.' He said with indescribable bitterness, 'Home!'

He was hoping he could get past the Kitcheners' place unnoticed, but Prue was checking on the cattle. She gave him a wave. He waved back. It meant the understanding was there, which meant that he'd have to drop in at some time ... and tell her he was leaving.

At once he looked around. The town he'd come from had a frontier, a whole nation, of bush to its north. This nation was populated not by people, but by trees. This country he was leaving was full of trees. Bush, not people. It affected the way everyone thought, even himself, in the years he'd been here. He and the men he worked with were cutting down trees all the time, and more were growing up to replace them. There were national parks everywhere. It was a nation of trees, and he'd be glad to leave, or so he told himself.

Crap. He wanted to stay. He'd become like the men he worked with – sociable only when there were people around, but happier to be on their own. It was an odd thing that a dozen men could camp together in a few metres of clearing, and somehow be separate. What did that say? He looked at the bush as he drove to the camp. It meant they loved their isolation. They could accept being social as long as there was somewhere to be alone. Oddly enough, the men in Diego's camp were alone together. That was their achievement. It could only be done by a group who understood each other's rules. He was going to miss this when he got back to the place he'd come from. Nobody would understand it there. He wondered how he'd cope; he supposed he'd fall back on the ways he'd known when he was growing up. When you've got no choice it's not hard to know what to do. Diego reached the camp, was greeted by a few who were out and about, like Prue Kitchener, then others appeared from their tents, fires were lit, or restarted, chops were eaten, tea was drunk, and they got down to work.

By late afternoon they had logs cut and stacked, and reckoned they could call it a day. Fires were restarted at the camp and the clearing began to fill with smoke. 'Seeya tomorrow, boys,' Diego called to his mates, then drove away, but not far, because he had a call to make.

Prue's boy Graeme was excited when Diego came to the kitchen door, saying he'd call his mum, but standing there trying to remember what he'd wanted to ask the man who took up a lot of his thinking

time. Samantha came into the room and gave a squeal of delight, bringing her mother to the room. 'Cup of tea,' announced Prue in the way of covering indecision with the appearance of firm decision. Diego put the hat he was carrying on an empty chair. Prue indicated that he too should occupy a chair. She saw that he was less than comfortable, and wondered what had brought him to call. 'I better tell you straight away,' he said. 'I'm leaving.' The Kitchener family looked at him. 'Is the mill moving you?' Prue put to him, and he shook his head. 'Going back where I come from. Between America and South America. That's where it is.' It sounded so odd that his host didn't know what to say. 'What's brought this about?' said Prue, trying to cope with his mood rather than the words he put before them. He rubbed his forehead, then he sat. 'Good to be able to get a cuppa at the end of a day,' he remarked, flying off at a tangent. 'Something I'm going to miss when I get back ...'

'Home' was the word he couldn't say. Home, he began to see, was a notion carried around inside himself. No more than that: not a place, only a state of mind. He felt at home with Jane, with the Kitcheners – that little Sam looking into his eyes – but in a few days he wouldn't be seeing them any more so he wouldn't be feeling at home, not anywhere, not at all. Was he already homeless, then? He rather thought he was. Already. He looked around. 'I'm going to miss being able to drop in. Not all that many places where I feel as welcome as I do here.' He was trying very hard, not only to be nice, but to stop his hosts feeling uncomfortable. He wondered if they'd ever talked about their wish to have him stay. He looked into the eyes of Prue Kitchener in the way Jane looked into his. He saw that she was more direct than Jane, and just as honest. 'I must say I'm surprised,' she said. 'There are people around here who are trying to sell out. It's not easy to sell farms these days, as you probably know. Nobody wants to take up working on the land ...'

'I do!' announced young Graeme, bold as brass.

'Yes,' said his mother, 'and that's why you've got to go away and get a really good look at the world outside before you come back, if you ever do. There's a whole wide world out there and maybe there's a place in it for you that you don't know about yet.' The boy said, 'Huh,' and sat down. Prue smiled for her son, but directed the smile at Diego.

'So where will you be going?'

'Guatemala City.'

She'd hardly heard of it. 'Sam!' she announced. 'Go into the dining room and get the atlas.' The little girl went, and came back, quickly enough, so obviously she knew both what it was and where it was kept, with a Times Atlas of the World, a volume almost as big as Sam, who struggled to keep it aloft. 'On the table, darling,' Prue said, carrying out the instruction herself. 'Guatemala?' she said, looking for the index. Diego had less experience than she did, but he pointed at a spot in the endpapers where he could see the country of his birth. Prue flicked the pages. 'Oh, Central America,' she said. 'I thought ... I really wasn't sure.'

The atlas lay open. Mexico dwindled to the twisting strip of land that joins the two continents. Guatemala sat between its boundaries. 'You know these other countries?' He shook his head. 'I got out when I was young. I never saw much of them.'

'Well, you'll be seeing them now. When you get back, and have a chance to travel. Look around ...'

Prue chattered on. Samantha chattered too, learning from her mother, as she would never learn from Diego, acting as her dad. Graeme showed an interest in the map, for a moment or two, mainly to locate California, which had some hold on his imagination. The map lay before them, bound in the open atlas, like a book of the future, or more accurately, a book of futures because they all had different fates to discover. Diego said, by way of affirming what he was going to do over any other ideas they may have developed, 'I wanted

you to know where I'm headed. It's a long way to go, of course, but aeroplanes are quick these days ...'

'Go to sleep in one country, wake up in another,' Prue said, quickly pushing away the plans she'd half-conceived for Diego to be part of their lives. 'Well, you can write to us when you get back, you know our address ...' She rattled it off as if he didn't, and she went on rattling by way of filling the gap opening up between them, which Diego himself, who'd opened it, could do nothing to close. 'You're going to find lots of changes to the places you remember. They'll all look strange until you get used to the old ways again ...'

Prue might have gone on, but Diego had Jane to leave, as well. He stood up, excusing himself, once he'd finished his tea. He touched little Sam on her golden hair. 'You can come and visit me when you're a big girl and got some money to buy a ticket. If I'm still there.' He knew he was babbling and confused. What was he offering the girl? Nothing at all. He was running out when he knew he was needed. He ought to stay, it was a shameful thing to ...

What, exactly, was his shame? What was wrong with doing what he had every right to do? He put it to himself as he took a backward step toward the door, the eyes of the Kitcheners on him as he negotiated his escape. What was shameful in what he was doing? What? He wanted to yell at the world, 'Tell me what!'

And in the same stride, he knew. He was saying no to a life full of purpose so he could accept emptiness. The void was what he wanted. He didn't have it in him to give what he should be giving. Those who were in need would stay in need, until somebody else came along with a mind to give, and if no such person came then they must go without. For his part, he realised, he wanted nothing. He'd been given his chances but there was nothing that struck a passion strong enough to cause his imagination to fire up, and dream ...

... of things to come, things as they might be, things that could be built by two people's dreams, or a whole family's dreams, and plans ...

There was nothing. He wished them well in a voice turning sour as his rejection took over, he got in his cheap car and drove away. The Kitcheners were both stunned, and desolate. 'I thought he'd stay longer,' Prue said to her children. 'I thought he was happy here, but apparently no. Strange, the way people make their decisions.' Graeme asked things and Sam pestered her mother as a way of ignoring the questions she could feel rumbling inside herself. Diego, driving through the bush and towards the sealed road that would take him back to town, and Jane, who would be colder, because more clear-sighted than the Kitcheners, because less dependent on his gifts, which, in his case, were exhausted now, Diego, driving through the bush, knew that he was doing it for the very last time, and felt a final numbness entering his soul, as if to preserve it now that it was no longer alive.

Hidden Signs of a Painter

A knock at the door brought Eleanor out of her thoughts. 'Today? What day is it?' she asked herself, although it would be as true to say she asked the world around her: she had little idea of the difference, these days. She'd grown old and if it hadn't been for her daughter and her daughter's friends she'd be in an old people's home, incarcerated; it's a judgement people make about those they once obeyed, respected, that they can't 'manage' any longer. Ageing is a process of destruction, though sometimes we think we're still growing when we're decaying from within. A two-way process, then, of addition and subtraction, flowing in and flowing out, and once the balance has been tipped ...

The knock again. 'Hilda never knocks, so it's someone strange. Why are they bothering me today?' She went to the door, with a feeling that someone unexpected had come ...

... for her, perhaps? He who arrives with the dark purpose of taking us away? Does he knock, or enter without asking? She opened the door. It was the man next door, Wally, whose wife had recently gone back to her job as a dental nurse. He had a letter for her that had been put in their box. 'Thought I'd better bring it in. If Hilda doesn't think to look when she drops in, you wouldn't know it was there.' She saw that Wally was keeping a lookout on her house, and her as well. If anything went wrong, he'd be in. She looked at the stamps. 'It's from Germany,' she said. 'Whoever from?' Wally smiled. 'I brought you a surprise.' Then he was gone, and she took the letter to the kitchen. People are curious about letters, as they grow old, in two senses: curious to know what's inside, curious in their behavior.

The letter was turned over, then back again, the handwriting inspected, the date when it had been franked. In Frankfurt! She sipped her tea, holding the letter, then put it against her cup, reading her name: Mrs Eleanor Curtis. It caused her to tremble. She found courage and sliced it open. It was from a friend of years before, a fellow painter; it told of a coming exhibition in the German city, and asked Eleanor if she was still painting too.

'Am I still painting?' Eleanor asked herself. 'No, but I'm drawing. Will I tell her that?' She pondered the difference. Drawing was like thinking, painting a speech. She'd never been keen on the latter – speechmaking, that is. She'd had to say a few words at openings, and when she'd given paintings to be auctioned for some cause. She'd liked to do good, she wished she was still capable of influencing the world but that was beyond her now. If she read the morning paper or watched television, she realised how detached she was. Since nobody was going to take her home away from her, she had nothing to lose but her life ... and that was nearing its end. Her exit, when she made it, would be simple. Unobtrusive, as she'd preferred her life to be. It was peaceful to be coming to the end. In her active years, when her mind had raged with curiosity, trying to see ways to get things in focus, she'd painted, drawn without cease, and written ever so much – diaries and letters to her friends. How many letters had she posted to Frankfurt? She had no idea. Wilhelmina was having another exhibition! She must be going strong. Eleanor couldn't remember when she'd last shown her work. Not so terribly long ago, but one day's memories ran into those of the next. She felt a need to get out her letters, and her diaries of years before, to see what she'd done with her life. Her memories of being young were fading, her memories of everything were fading, not like those people who forgot today and yesterday to achieve crystal-clear visions of years before. No, that hadn't happened to her. She went into the large room that had been her studio, and opened a cupboard. Shelves full of things that proved she'd had a life. She started with a bundle of letters from

Wilhelmina, from years before, then something in them sent her to the diaries she'd preserved, even though she'd felt embarrassed by them, sometimes, when re-reading and had thought she might throw them in the pot-bellied stove ...

But this she'd never done. Before long she was seated in a low old chair, surrounded by letters and diaries ... and that was how Hilda found her, the following day, when she came to check on her mother. A smell of incontinence fouled the air causing Hilda to fling a door and two windows open: 'So that was how it found you, mother. Your life around you, going back for a last look, except you probably didn't think about it being the last one.' Hilda took the open diary from her mother's hand, and put an envelope – a recent one, from the date stamp, probably arrived yesterday, from that friend in Frankfurt – in place to mark where her mother had been reading her diary of ... Hilda had a look ... 1967, when Hilda herself had been two. 'Ah, mother, mother, there's going to be so much sorting out to do.' Hilda saw that her mother's cupboard, normally closed, was open. She'd have to go through everything, of course. Why? Curiosity, sticky-beaking in her mother's guarded life? Perhaps. She'd have to do it to give herself and her mother peace. They were one entity now, they couldn't be separated, what one needed the other needed. Eleanor had opened the cupboard door and Hilda must decide when to close it.

The contents of the cupboard

Hilda was nothing if not organised. A schematic person, she liked to say. She rang the clinic to fetch Eleanor's doctor to sign a death certificate, she called the undertakers to make arrangements, and the lawyers holding her mother's will. She rang a number of Eleanor's friends, not that there were many left these days, and some of her own who would come to the funeral ... and she closed the door on the diaries and letters she meant to go through when the time was right.

It was almost three weeks before she went to the cupboard again, to look at the mementos, the records, of the life that had produced hers. She had a feeling as she checked the dates of the first and last diaries that she should have a bottle of wine beside her. What she was about to do was rather like launching a ship, in her mind; except that there wasn't any ship any more, only the evidence that there had been. Not a life but the documents to prove that a life had taken place. A poor substitute, she thought, remembering how, when she was very young, on holiday on an uncle's farm, she'd thrown a bucket of water across an ant-bed; the water had gone down the tiny holes and ants had come up, those she hadn't drowned, in a fury of activity. Little Hilda had laughed to see them scrambling around: she assumed, in the grandeur of her size, that they wouldn't 'think' that she was responsible for their flood. To the ants in their turmoil, she was god. However, they didn't pray to her, they ran everywhere madly, until they settled. What damage had she done to their underground city? She'd never know. Ants couldn't talk to little girls. The girl was grown up now, looking into her mother's cupboard, getting ready to reconstruct her mother's life, ready, perhaps, to have her idea of that life reconstructed. Was this going to happen? She thought it must. She moved away from the cupboard to look out a window, preparing. She needed to know who and what she was at the beginning of this project so that she'd recognise the changes as they took place.

She picked out the diary for 1957, letting it fall open. 'Day of the run. Kept Edward home because he wasn't keen. Went in to check things for next day's fruit salad. Knocks. Children finishing the run wanted treat of some sort but there wasn't anybody there apart from me. Gave them biscuits, only getting rid of them. Muck-up somewhere.' The next entry said, 'Big turn up at canteen. Mothers righteous about yesterday. Nobody told us, etc. Sports master blamed. Heard him defend himself. Said he told president! Said run was to be an annual event but if he couldn't rely on people to support it he'd

have to cancel. Quite steamed up! Ladies took it but had plenty to say when he'd gone. Couldn't deal with that man! Etc. All a mystery to me.'

Hilda put that diary down and riffled through the papers, most of them letters. Wilhelmina in Frankfurt, cousin Dolly writing from Charleville, Queensland, talking about erecting a tent near a big heap of sand next to a railway line. The children, Hilda's second cousins, had heard the hooting of a train, and had stood on the sand pile to wave as a goods train went past. 'I was so grateful to that driver,' Dolly's letter said. 'He not only waved to the children, he tooted the siren of the train and it made an enormous noise. The children laughed and laughed and they rolled down the heap in their dressing gowns, because it was almost night, and got sand everywhere, and I had to get them to take off their dressing gowns and pajamas so I could flap them about to get rid of the sand. They wanted to know if there would be any more trains, and I told them I didn't think there'd be another but I didn't really know.' Hilda smiled; she dimly recalled that she'd heard her cousins – second cousins – talking about this train when they got back from their trip, and that was almost four decades ago, now, and it had stuck in Hilda's mind, even though it had happened to her cousins, not to her. She'd borrowed the experience and added it to her memories, even the shaking of the sand from the clothing the children had taken off. The driver had given the siren a blast, and Dolly, the mother, had been excited. Thrilled. He'd done it for her little ones, and they'd rolled down the sand, laughing. Hilda had always thought of it as one of the lovely moments in her life ... and she hadn't even been there!

Next! She was in a good mood, unexpectedly. Next was an envelope with half a dozen photos of a flood, also in Queensland, and dated two years later. From Dolly again? The writing on the back was different, so perhaps not. The words said, 'Bogged. Nothing to look at but this.' Hilda put the flood pictures away, and took up another, much later, diary. 'Hilda to marry. Wish she wouldn't. Too

dense for her. We should stop ourselves from doing things because we only learn from mistakes, and they rob us at the same time as they teach us.' Hilda flushed, and looked at the date again. A month or so before her wedding. Her mother had been right, Barry was dull. He was terribly well-intentioned but usually managed to miss whatever point there was to be picked up. Why, only that morning he'd ...

She shut the diary, then, still feeling unprotected, she shut the cupboard door. How long was it going to take her to come to terms with her mother's thinking if every second thing forced her to close the door? There were books and books, she noticed, of her mother's drawings. She expected clichés but knew she'd get surprises too. In a sudden rush of dissatisfaction she walked out of the house to her car. It was going to be painful, she saw, as she started the engine. This morning, the first morning of her prising open of her mother's soul, she could indulge herself and walk away with bad temper flooding through her, but she'd have to do better if she was to stay the course. Perhaps she could have an afternoon with some of her mother's friends sorting out the papers *they'd* sent to Eleanor?

No, wouldn't work. It was up to her, and she hadn't done at all well, this first day.

Hilda was back the next day, looking at her mother's things. She saw that the diaries had tiny diagrams, drawings, that referred to things she hadn't wished to mention. She decided that some of them must refer to her husband, because they stopped shortly after his death. One of these symbols looked vaguely like an emu: what did that mean? She remembered that her father was fond of using the expression 'an emu parade', meaning a line of soldiers bobbing up and down as they picked up rubbish. She felt sure there was some chain of transferred association between the saying and the diary symbols, but what could it be? She had no idea. Another recurring symbol was a leaf, causing her to remember how her mother had gone through a period when she learned a host of botanical terms.

'Falcate' meant bent, or curved like a sickle. So Eleanor had told her child, and Hilda could recall the faint smile on her mother's lips as she said the word: it had had a private meaning. Falcate; bent, or curved; perhaps it referred to something opposite, that is, straight, direct, without curve? This thought brought a flush to her cheeks, and she could feel her ears tingling. She was embarrassed, the thought of an erection came into her mind, and she studied the diaries more closely. The falcate leaf symbol occurred close to three or four names of men who were otherwise unexplained, as if the diary already knew who they were. Had her mother had lovers? Three or four? Over how many years? If she had, how on earth had she kept them hidden in a town where everybody was scrutinised for this very thing? At some stage Hilda put down the diaries and began to look at the drawings, another indicator of her mother's thinking. Many of the things depicted were obvious enough – garden scenes, people playing on a beach, flowers, an avenue of trees, a cat or two – but others had no obvious association with her mother's habits. There were horses, for instance, and Eleanor Curtis had never ridden a horse. Or owned one, or had any reason to be drawing them. It occurred to Hilda that the horses were depictions of something secret, some inner feeling, in her mother's life, and again she found herself assailed by the idea that the horses contained a sexual reference, but that, if it were so, must mean that they showed her observation of something strong, even huge, larger than her mother; Eleanor had been a small woman. How, or where, had she shown her feelings? Hilda began to look through the drawings again, more closely, and she found one which showed a man and a woman working in two gardens, with a low fence between them. On the man's side, sitting on the ground, and apparently not used, was a basket with cups, and a thermos of tea, while on the woman's side was a spade with an old army coat – the army again! – dangling from it. The coat and basket were on the wrong sides of the fence? That must mean something. Hilda had a feeling that she knew very well. She started to look for draw-

ings showing her father, and there were quite a number, but he was always in the background, at the side, bent, or turned away. Again she felt she knew: Eleanor had put her husband in positions which showed that he didn't know. Wasn't aware. Was benignly stupid, left out. When he was shown full face on, his expression was empty. This was a man locked inside his own limitations, which was how Hilda remembered her father; she'd always taken her mother as her guide, not father. Her father had always said, as his maxim, 'Keep things simple, and be honest, if you want to avoid trouble.' He'd avoided trouble and his daughter had a feeling that his simplicity had been exploited by her mother, more cunning by far. It hit her that she was her mother's daughter in using her mind to outsmart her partner ... Barry, Barry, what have I done to you? ... and that this examination of her mother's cupboard was turning into an investigation of herself. 'How much more is there to find?' She said it aloud and closed the cupboard again. It was not lost on her that she would almost certainly unpick her mother's hidden ways if she stayed at it, and she would because perhaps she was meant to do this work of sleuthing. Had Eleanor intended it to happen? Probably yes, because she'd never put the papers in the stove she'd had installed to warm the room where she did her work. The hidden life, and thinking, could all have been turned to ash, but they hadn't, because Eleanor Curtis had been a proud woman. Hilda knew that her mother had wanted her to find out what she was discovering because knowledge had been a burden to her when what she'd really wanted, and found impossible to find, let alone *live*, was freedom unashamed. Had her mother suffered from shame? Hilda didn't know. She left the house determined to find out, which meant more searching, for weeks yet, perhaps, and she found relief in doing her searching, her uncovering, in a chair by the stove where her mother had been fond of sitting. Hilda knew that at any time she could throw the papers in to burn them. The knowledge, the choice, gave her freedom to act as she had, so that meant that she, Hilda, had the same freedom, sitting in the same chair. She

could burn anything at any moment. Into the stove, a match flaring, applied, then the secret was inscrutable as ash. 'I have a way out whenever I want it,' Hilda saw, and knew she'd go on.

Eleanor's work was full of hidden signs, then: so how could they be decoded? The first thing to do, Hilda saw, was to know them when she saw them. She made it her practice, for the first half hour of her visits, to riffle through her mother's drawing books, followed by the many sketches for later paintings. She wanted to sensitise herself to her mother's thoughts. She noticed that there was a period when a certain car appeared frequently – a Chevrolet coupé, with its canvas hood rolled down. When it appeared in a water colour or gouache, it was an orange-yellow, always. The same colour was occasionally used for a woman's dress, or a man's tie. Orange-yellow, Hilda decided, was a statement of sexual arousal; it meant that lovemaking took place in the car, or the car took people to assignations. In some of the drawings the car was parked among tea-tree, near a beach. Sometimes the coupé looked quite grand, as if it was aware of what its driver had been doing, or was going to do. 'That car heard my mother laughing when she was making love,' Hilda told herself, and then she felt an urge to pry on the people in the car when drawings showed it parked among bushes, seeking privacy. Mother was fucking the man who owned this car, Hilda thought, then she scurried through several books of drawings; the orange-yellow car only featured for a volume and a half; a bit less than a year, probably, and then it was out of her life. I was already born at the time, Hilda saw, and I never had the least idea.

Nor did father, as far as I can tell ...

Hilda felt angry with her mother, violently so, wanting to punish her as she hadn't been punished in life. She'd had the man in the car, and there'd be others, once she'd worked out how to read the codes of the works her mother had produced, something she couldn't do, yet. Mother! How much of her mother had come down to her?

Her discovery of her mother was affecting her view of herself, even though she'd never lived out her wishes the way her mother had. Yet Eleanor Curtis hadn't been caught out, she'd got away with it, and enshrined her rebellions in her drawings, all looking meek and mild. Hilda tried to work out how much she'd been influenced by things about her mother that she'd never known. We're all like our mothers and fathers, unless we consciously rebel, and here, in the diaries and drawings of a modestly successful painter, the rebellion was done so discreetly that anybody might have been fooled.

If she, Hilda, had woken up, then that must mean that somewhere in her personality she must resemble her mother: she did! Somewhere inside herself she'd known before she found out. She was not as surprised, or shocked, as she should have been. That meant that she was simply admitting, recognising, now, what she'd kept hidden for years. If she'd never known about her mother's secret life it must have been because she was compliant in what Eleanor was doing. This meant that she had her secret life too, whether or not she acted on inadmissible thoughts.

She slumped in her mother's chair. Eleanor would have enjoyed laughing at people around her as they voiced their foolish reactions to her work; what was she, Hilda, to do? Invite people to a retrospective exhibition and pass around a booklet, telling people what to look out for, once they got on the hunt? 'If our parents change, we change,' she told herself, and wondered what to do next. Put the problem down and go away? She'd done it several times already, she'd do it a good many more. She could circle the problem, skirting around it, but sooner or later she'd have to bite the bullet or whatever it was people said. They only did it when they were on top of the material of change, and she wasn't yet, but she was going through things, day by day, until the unavoidable could not be run away from any longer. 'I wish,' she told herself, 'I knew the end of this, but I have to follow it where it leads, and I know it's a long and devious road. Oh mother! Mother, mother, mother!' She was calling, in a voice that sounded

like her mother's, from the chair where her mother had sat. Mother gone, she was in the chair now, and everything she turned was over-turning her as well.

Hilda decided that lovers after the yellow-orange car man would be present in Eleanor's pictures in different ways. How? She found herself drawn to a picture of a garden, seen through an ornamental gate. The columns of the gate were not identical. One was a little shorter, and their duality was repeated in two trees further back in the picture. The columns were the public presentation of two selves, the trees what they felt, and knew, about each other when out of sight. The columns had escaped themselves, apparently, and taken up temporary residence in the trees. Again, one was a little larger and its foliage merged with that of the smaller tree. Hilda wondered if the gate depicted was an actual gate or simply a means to represent two people offering a façade of respectability. And again she felt furious with her mother for giving herself such freedom, finding a way to satisfy her desire with an unknown man – but would there be clues to identify him, if you could read the signs? Hilda felt there would. She began to search the drawings from the same period and noticed a name, Emilio Santorini, which occurred twice in the drawings, once on the door of a truck, and once in a streetscape showing a line of shops. Santorini Bros. sold fruit and vegetables. Predictable, thought Hilda, and they're still there, in the very same shop, though she didn't know who was running it now. Hilda had always felt scornful of businesses operating in the Italian family way. She thought they were indistinguishable from mafia-run places, because, she realised, she'd long held views about the morality of public life which were more widely espoused than practised. So her mother had had an affair with Emilio Santorini, well-disguised, no doubt. Certainly it was as much hidden as announced in her art. Hilda felt an increase of pressure inside her. She'd have to tell Barry, her husband; indeed, her scattered comments had probably given him more than a clue

about what was troubling her; he was much quicker than Ron, her father, had been. She wondered if what she saw in the drawings was as obvious to others as to herself; she decided to put this to the test.

She made inquiries and discovered that the head of art at the High School was a man called Anthony Geering; she met him and told him that she was clearing out her mother's works and had certain doubts about how to view them, doubts which she'd like to resolve by inviting Mr Geering to see the works and comment on them. He wanted to know how many works there would be to view, and when Hilda told him he backed away. He was a busy man, et cetera. She invited him to select a picture for himself if he saw one that he liked; this decided him, though she could see that he wasn't expecting much. He arrived at the Curtis household on Friday afternoon and got to work, spreading albums here and there, open at drawings which resembled the paintings around the studio walls. 'You've chosen the partners of the drawings very well,' she told him. 'Have you chosen your picture yet?' Anthony Geering laughed, and produced a painting from the floor of the cupboard which sheltered everything not on the walls. 'This'll do me,' he said. Hilda laughed too; there was a woman in a dress the colour of the Chevrolet coupé. 'It can't fall over,' he said to her. 'It looks like something's directing it to me. That often happens.' She wanted to know why he'd chosen the one he had. 'Sense of mystery,' he told her. 'Something's going on which isn't explained, but you know it's there.' He looked at her, appraising her reasons for bringing him in. 'I don't think I'm telling you anything you didn't know already, eh?' The little query was so full of jollity that she saw he'd seen more than she'd seen, because he was trained to look for people's quirks, and if they were obvious enough to her ...

'One more thing,' he said. 'They're far too good not to exhibit. You'll have to have a show. Don't let on anything to people before they see the works. Tell people your mother asked you to organise a retrospective. Don't say any more than that. This is a very con-

servative town. People will back away if they think there's something funny going on. To put it bluntly, they're not all that bright when it comes to looking at pictures and they'll resent the show, and those who put it on ...' he studied her, expecting there might be a reaction '... if they sense that they're under the microscope themselves. So what your mother's done needs to be presented in just the same way that she presented it herself. Safe and sound. Nice pleasant work for anybody's lounge at home. No worries, no problems. That's the way to do it, in my view at least.'

A retrospective? But what if people started to notice hidden agendas? What would she say to that? What if the Santorinis got wind of what was buried in the work? The family of whoever it was that had owned the Chevrolet? They might notice the colour first, then follow their instincts from there; that, after all, was what Hilda had done. What if people saw more of her mother's secrets than she'd done? There must have been friends who'd seen, or sensed, some of what had been going on? Such people would think she, Hilda, was a fool for not seeing what was obvious to them, or would see through her pretence of an innocent gathering of the artist's past work, and gossip against her for setting out to trick the public. It occurred to her that she needed to distance herself. Could she persuade Anthony Geering, a man from out of town, not a local, to put on the show at her request? That's what they'd tell everybody when they invited them. She, Hilda, would be motivated by respect and Anthony by his professional interest. Each would protect the other by accepting half of the responsibility. Geering could say, if anybody saw the hidden, secret narrative, that he was a stranger to the town and such interpretations were way beyond – meaning beneath – his way of looking at serious work. That was what he could say. What would she say, if questions were put?

It shouldn't be hard. Eleanor had been talking about a show, in the last weeks of her life, then she'd been caught out by the sudden

stroke, so that nothing had been organised at the time of her death, so Hilda, out of dutiful love and caring sense of responsibility ...

That sounded as it should. Now Hilda had to make sure that the works in the show wouldn't reveal any unexpected surprises, and she'd have to talk Mr Geering into the idea too; this plan couldn't work without two players, one with artistic credentials, the other with a daughter's love, and neither of them responsible for any unsolicited thoughts or suspicions that might arise. So she had two things to do – to make herself familiar with every last work of her mother's that had been left in the house at her death, and to get Anthony Geering inside. A little time would be needed.

Exhibiting Eleanor

What could she show? What should be shown? These were the two sides of her question. She ought to show the hidden sides of her mother's work – the Chevrolet man, still unknown to her, Emilio Santorini, whose name sprang off a truck door and from above the family shop, and what about the rest? She had a feeling there were more and she hadn't found them yet. But what could she show? For a moment, wavering, she felt she could show nothing except what Eleanor had couched in respectable terms; anything other than that would be giving herself away. What *was* she doing and why was she doing it? She had a feeling that her idea was both hypocritical and dangerous. If she couldn't carry off the exhibition she'd have shown herself on those hidden, cryptic terms she'd acquired from her mother and still didn't want to own.

What would she show? Answer, the best, but the best that put the world on trial. She asked herself why she wanted to have a show at all, why didn't she simply let it be known that her mother had left a body of work, and anyone interested could see it by appointment. Sales were possible, why not do it that way? No, she wanted an exhibition. Why? Because she wanted to take the risk her mother had avoided by concealment, by showing, then hiding, what she'd

done. Hilda, who was without blame, wanted to take the risk. Was she risking anything, though, really? If people saw what she'd seen, could she not pretend, or deny? Yes, obviously, but she had a feeling that her deceit would be more easily seen through than her mother's. She was ready to talk to Anthony Geering again.

They met at Eleanor's studio. She told him she wanted to have a show of the best work, and she would like him to choose it. She wanted objectivity in the selection, he had it and she didn't. They would choose a venue, work out its capacity, they'd offer a variety of work and they'd invite a variety of people to the opening. Anthony suggested that they appoint a gallery or two to act as agents for Eleanor's work once the show was no longer on the walls. 'People develop an interest in someone's work but they don't necessarily buy straight away. They might buy later, when they're doing up their house, or they've got a bit of money they didn't have, first time around.' She agreed. Two galleries, one local, one in the city. Anthony had ideas for the latter, and Hilda was firm about the local choice. It was a motel that had a restaurant attached where visitors entered through a hallway featuring local work; the restaurant was popular so local people saw the works on show, as they should if country people were to see Eleanor's work. This suited Anthony, who wanted to make a name for himself in the town, and he reported to Hilda a few weeks later that he had a place in Malvern, a rich area of Melbourne, lined up as the city agent. 'They want to have a show straight after her show down here, or preferably at the same time. I said you'd want the strongest show possible for down here so, if they wanted the best, they'd have to respect your wish that her home town should also see her best work.' He added, 'I was able to convince them of that.'

The next step was his and he asked her for access to her mother's studio for a couple of weeks, so he could make decisions at his leisure; he'd be at work at the times that suited her to be with him. She had a feeling that he might be smarter, more perceptive than she could be, and that he was freeing himself to take the risk she

wanted him to make but might try to stop him making, if she knew in advance what was coming.

She agreed, knowing it was decisive. He borrowed the key to the house and a fortnight later he gave it back. He'd made his choice and she asked him to take her through it. What had he chosen?

They went to the house. She was surprised, delighted, and a little horrified. He'd seen what she'd seen in Eleanor's work and he'd chosen pictures that made his reasons clear. There was a sprinkling of conventional subjects, to give a setting, and then the very works that had caught her notice – the Chevrolet pieces, with their hints of secret assignations, and the link between the colour of the car and the colour of a woman's dress made clearly. He'd picked up on Emilio Santorini, adding even a couple of pictures she hadn't noticed which developed the theme of love; and he'd been bolder, that is to say, made more assumptions than she'd have felt free to make about other associations. Two pictures were of gatherings which were innocent enough but had an aura of amorous potential, latent rather than localised in particular people. The love, if it ever settled in the souls of men and women, hadn't made its choices yet, so everyone present was a candidate. 'I like that one very much,' said Anthony, pointing. 'It says there's no such thing as innocence, only moments when there's nothing much happening, though anything could. Don't you feel?'

The question surprised her, and warned her too. People would ask questions when the show was opened, and she'd have to be ready if she wasn't to give things away. 'No such thing as innocence? Yes, I see what you mean. I think,' she said, 'that that's a discovery I've had to make for myself, and I might have wanted to hide it, but then that's why I asked you to choose the show, because I mightn't have had the courage to put forward the ones that most claim attention.' He seemed satisfied with this answer, and why not? Perhaps he'd seen further into her than she knew, and perhaps, again, that was what she'd required of him. They'd already firmed up their venue, and

there and then, standing beside the pot-bellied stove and the old, low chair where her mother had suffered her heart attack, they agreed on dates that gave them enough time to have everything organised, they shook hands and he gave her back her key.

The opening went well, a couple of pictures sold, lots of people said they were interested, others moved around, talking freely. If those she'd invited saw anything of what the artist had intended to show while at the same time wishing to keep secret, they didn't say. Hilda's ears were pricked for any hints of impropriety observed, but caught none. The pictures were down from the walls and in the Malvern gallery before Barry, her husband, came home in ill-humour from the Railway Hotel. 'That show of your mother's was a mistake. People are taking it the wrong way. Or maybe it's the right way. They're talking about your mother and a bloke called Bub Crowley. Did you know that?' Hilda looked at him, giving nothing away. 'And that dago greengrocer, Santorini. There was a picture of his truck, and his shop.'

'There were pictures of lots of things in this town. That's why we had the show here, where she lived.'

'Might've been better to have it a long way away, so nobody knew.'

'Knew?'

Barry had about as much tolerance as he had patience: not much at all. 'Maybe famous painters have painted pictures of their mistresses. Maybe it's what made them famous!' He was even a little amused. 'But in a town like this, if you're going to get up to things, you want to keep it quiet. Especially when you're starting rumours about the mafia!'

They argued. He said over and over, 'I've got to live in this town. So have you.' Both knew what it meant. A reputation for purity was the only armour against attacks. Nobody went unobserved. Barry said, 'Eleanor must have been smart. Nobody knew. That's quite an achievement. So why ...' He left the question unfinished, as if

it was for the dead woman to answer, not his wife, though she was being addressed. 'Why?' Barry worked for the government agency in charge of forests. 'I've got to keep on the right side of people. I can't afford false steps. I'm in the bush with blokes that I can't choose whether or not I want to be with them. Some of them, fair dinkum ...' He shook his head. 'You're in their hands. You're depending on them for warnings. Falling trees.' He waved his hands at the air. 'Branches that have been caught, and they'll fall next time there's a wind. You need the blokes on the spot to warn you. You can't find out about them for yourself. Well, if you do it's usually the hard way.' Something about the thought of death cheered him up. 'I know you wanted to do the right thing by your mother, but you shouldn't have let that school teacher say what went in the show. He'll be back in Melbourne in a couple of years telling everybody what a bunch of hicks we are. And why? Because he stirred up trouble.' Increasing intensity could be heard in his voice. 'Because he meant to! Did he ever come to you and say, I'm not sure if what I'm doing's wise? No, of course he didn't. Never gave it a thought. He said to himself, I'll stir up the hornets, and he did, knowing he'd be able to talk about it in a couple of years time, when he's back in the city, and he'll have made himself famous. It'll probably earn him a job!'

Hilda knew she was the target for all this, although Barry was careful not to fix blame on his wife. 'All right,' she said, 'you want to know why I did it. I wanted to give mother what she wanted. She'd led a double life for years and she'd never been able to bring it into the open. That's a terrible thing, Barry, terrible. I believe she wanted to confess. Yes, confess. She wanted to get what she'd done into the open ...'

'So why was it you that did it, not her? Couldn't she have organised it for herself, while she was still fit and healthy? Of course she could. Now there's men out in the bush talking about her all the week, and the weekends come and they flock in to the towns, they

drink, their imaginations get loose, they remember times when they heard stories she created ...'

It was the sort of thing he hated, and he was at the centre of a whirlpool of gossip, dragging in innocent people who knew nothing about what Eleanor painted and the studio where she picked off her worshippers. Hilda was stung. 'Oh for heaven's sake, try to imagine those who've known what she's about. I know what's going to happen to the places she's painted. They're going to become precious to the town, and people will look on her as a kind of saint who was ready to find reasons why people should get out of the sun in the middle of the day ...' She was incoherent. Barry jumped in. 'Oh it'll quieten down after a while. Nothing lasts more than a day or two, then the heat's gone out of it. A pity though, that's the thing. Her pictures stir up things in people's minds ...'

Angrily, looking for a culmination of triumph, Hilda said, 'Yes, I did it without consent because it wouldn't be myself. Damn the people of this town, they don't decide. They don't decide who can lie among us and no other. Damn the people of this town ...'

She would have forgotten who she was blaming, but he'd raised the matter with a clear intention. He wanted her to be warned, and careful. 'Don't let yourself be drawn into talking about the paintings. Keep right away from the subject. Just say to anyone who mentions it, it's out of my hands, now. Anyone who's interested in buying a picture, I'd welcome that. Put up the money or shut up. Bang it home hard and simple. But watch. Keep an eye over your shoulder. When trouble's brewing, it's usually in places where you wouldn't expect it. To be ready, you must be looking for the unexpected. Look!' he said. 'That bird just about burying itself in the grass! It won't be around for long. It's ... what's it called? What do you say?'

Hilda had no idea what bird he was talking about. 'What do you expect me to say? I can't read your mind!'

For Barry, this was easy. 'When there's trouble, it usually comes from unexpected quarters. The people you don't expect any trouble

from, that's who it comes from. Pity you never thought about that before you had your show!

My show? She writhed under his attack but the fact was she deserved it. She was the cause of the brouhaha, and she'd wanted it that way. She'd lived so quietly for so many years and she wanted to release herself as well as a bunch of paintings. What a pity she hadn't been able to do one thing without doing the other.

She and Barry stopped their fighting; Hilda withdrew. She developed a manner for people who praised her mother's show. Her style became lofty, as if admitting converts to a higher plane of existence; she also conveyed a feeling that it was her mother's work that had brought change to the viewer, so that respect, reverence even, was not only appropriate but necessary.

That was her public manner, but privately she sensed that she'd been changed by the exhibition and that there were other, wider, effects that had still to show themselves. What would they be? She was afraid to think about it. The exhibition, though off the local gallery walls, was active in her mind. She was still coming to terms with it, and that meant, for the most part, watching for signals that might tell her what effects the show would have on her life. Her mother, Eleanor, was beyond being influenced by Hilda but could still affect her child. What had Eleanor in store for her? What would happen next?

In an attempt to protect herself from being caught by surprise, Hilda gave up certain activities and replaced them with new ones. She altered the levels on which she participated in various community activities; for instance, after several years of taking afternoon tea in the town's most stylish coffee shop, the Albergerstrasse, a chic place run by two Viennese jews, she took her business to the distinctly unstylish Airport Lounge, where she chose a table, not so far from the street that she got the blast of cooking from out the back, not so close to the street that she was noticeable. 'It's only a compromise,'

she told herself, 'and only for the time being.' She would revert to the Albergerstrasse but for a while she wanted to tap into different voices, hear different assumptions in her ears when she gave the town's folk a chance to flush her mind with their thoughts. She felt this was allowing changes that might decide to creep in, and then, slowly, as she acclimatised to the Airport Lounge, she sensed that she was changing more seriously, more profoundly, than she'd intended. Forces she'd kept hidden from herself were seeing her vulnerability and closing in.

Sitting in the Airport Lounge one afternoon, she became aware of the kitchen. An assertively-voiced young woman called Stavroula was being addressed with respect by an older woman. Stavroula? Who was she? And why treated with respect? The Airport Lounge people weren't Greek, they were Italian. Mafia, Calabrese or Sicilian, one or the other; what were they doing, letting a Greek hold forth? Hilda listened also, keeping a magazine open and occasionally turning a page as if that was where her mind was. What was happening inside her? What was changing in the way she understood the world? Why was she in this dispensary of steak and onions? Greasy food, the Aussies said, though they ate it without complaint. Why am I here, she asked herself, and the answer was, because I want to hear what these people say to each other. They're an unknown I want to know.

The question why arose in her mind again, but she shut it out. I'll know when I know. That was Hilda's thinking, if the word can be applied. What she wanted to know was what had happened between her mother and Emilio Santorini. What pleasure had come to her through being handled by him? It occurred to her that if Emilio was dangerous, it was only to men. Then she thought that if Stavroula could hold forth in the Airport Lounge kitchen then she must be held in high respect ... she saw in a flash that Stavroula, Greek, must be Emilio's current lover. Had there been anyone else between Eleanor Curtis and this woman? Yes, no, perhaps? It hardly

mattered. Stavroula was being voluble, taking hold of the women in a kitchen full of Emilio's produce. She'd be held in respect as long as her man's gardens gave fruit and vegetables. Stavroula was Greek and Eleanor was an earlier generation Anglo-Saxon; this Emilio was ambitious, then, hoping to conquer surrounding peoples, and he'd done it. He was not restricted in the conventional ways of men, who won fear for themselves by dishing out violence and death to other men, especially those who tried to uphold the law. When he entered the kitchen he came as the grower of things valued by the women who cooked. He too knew his tomatoes, beans, his veal and lamb. And he asserted himself over his fellow Italians by choosing women of another sort; that was certainly a coup. Hilda realised that she was interested in Emilio; she rather hoped he'd walk through the café to the kitchen while she was there. And if he showed interest in her? Would she tell him whose daughter she was, and why she was there?

She paid, and left, to return the following day. No Stavroula, no Emilio, but the women's voices from the kitchen were the same, and their presence was stronger. She was used to adding the meaning by now: the voices extended beyond the lives of those in the kitchen to those they circulated with. The kitchen women were part of a larger group. They had men to control and children to shape, priests to be advised from time to time. Hilda had seen the respect the occasional priestly invader conceded the kitchen, women with a centrality greater, even, than the priest's himself. Indeed, the priest owed his privileged role in society to the same sharing agreement that gave the women theirs. The priest had his role to play, the women a sector of life to maintain; it was the only way the males could bargain to give themselves the freedom they wanted, and had they dealt themselves a winning hand, or a losing one? Hilda saw the fascination of the problem. Her mother must have seen it too, and decided to taste it, at first hand. She'd have had the advantage of being able to withdraw behind the line of her ethnicity, and that of Emilio. She could step out of his world when she chose, and within its range when she wished.

This may have suited him? Hilda, her fingers holding whatever page of a trashy magazine she was reading, was like her late mother in that she was maintaining the appearance of a life while venturing into another. Hilda left, unsure as to whether she would return. Was she about to resume her visits to the Albergerstrasse, or commit herself to another change of life? At the moment she reached the street, she heard a chorus of welcome from the kitchen; it could only have been for the café's owner? Emilio Santorini had entered his kitchen? And had he Stavroula by his side?

Yes, he had. Hilda could hear the rampaging voice, full of excitement at being the owner's woman. She spoke in an assertive Italian which was almost certainly ungrammatical, but supported by Emilio's suavest tones, asserting the bounds of such empire as he ruled. Hilda felt strangely assertive herself. She had a wish to rush into the kitchen and start giving orders by way of reminding Emilio and the women who had ruled them at an earlier time. This meant, Hilda saw in a flash of recognition, that she was for the moment thinking, and wanting to act like, her mother. Her mother, curious about the male-dominant society which was mysteriously more respectful of its women than was her own, had brought herself into her daughter's being for a last look, an assertion ... Hilda didn't really understand who held control of her being. This was really odd! Was she substituting herself for her mother, or was it vice versa? Was she two women? One? If one, which? It was so confusing, but also a moment of unforgettable power!

Days passed, Hilda felt herself changing. The clothes in her wardrobe looked as if owned by someone else. When she felt herself taken over by whimsy, or a sort of entertainment based on scorn, she knew her mother was resident in her. Sales at the local gallery space encouraged her: would she use the money for some project of her mother's, or her mother's-in-her? She should. A scholarship at a local school to send a boy or girl away? Some sort of fellowship that would

change the nature of the place? This last had a subversive appeal, and she knew that her mother had seen the world that way in her later years. Hilda noticed herself becoming impatient with the most conservative of her friends, the ones she'd chosen as her reinforcements; if she was impatient with them she was impatient with what she'd been for so long. The effect of looking at her mother's art was that she felt ashamed for not continuing it herself, for not extending the underground that her mother had begun to dig. What was she up to, she asked herself, and every time the answer was the same; her mother had wanted to leave the surface more or less unchanged, but to undercut its reality with a new layer where truth subsisted. *Sub-sisted*: it was the prefix that mattered. Under was where the real truth would relocate itself, leaving only the shell of its former existence on the surface. Exactly, she realised, what's happening to me! She felt scared, again. Her mother was at work more strongly inside her than at any time since her earliest childhood, and, it seemed, she couldn't be stopped. What was Hilda going to do about that?

She turned to Barry. She told him everything that had happened since the day of her mother's departure, and she confessed her fears. Then she asked his advice about what to do. He took her seriously, she noticed. His first question was why not let things keep going the way they were? Why try to stop what was happening? 'Your mother was a strong influence, so you rejected her. Now she's not there any more, you don't feel the same need to keep her out. So why not let the change continue?' Hilda listened, saying nothing; then she saw her husband's brow darken. 'Next question. You're asking me what you should do. How genuine is that? If something suggested to you to do what your mother did, and take on lovers, would you do it? If you did decide to go ahead with it, wouldn't I be the last to know? I think I would. So isn't there something a bit hypocritical about the question? Isn't it a way of trapping me into deluding myself while you look for excitement elsewhere? Eh? Tell me that?'

Hilda recognised in what he said the very same thoughts she'd noticed entering her mind in recent weeks. With Anthony Geering the art teacher, with a man who'd bought a painting and a drawing. With a man who was a chef at the restaurant where her mother's work had been displayed. These men, and others, had captured her attention and she knew it would be welcome to her if one of these 'mild interests' became something more compulsive.

Something underground ...

Her life was slipping away from Barry's. She wanted him to rescue her, and of course she didn't. Was it possible for anything to save her now, or was she ready to topple into deeper water when the next wave swirled by, giving her a push? She thought that was how it was, and that she was waiting, half-afraid, but only half, for the next step to take itself. 'I don't trust myself,' she told Barry, her husband of almost eighteen years, 'I only trust you. I know I'm trying to wriggle away somewhere and slip out of your grip but I'm also hoping that you'll hang on hard, then reel me back in until what we used to have is secure again ...'

This clearly annoyed her husband. 'You never gave me much. All this stuff you've been going on with lately has made me ask how satisfied I am with our marriage, and the truth is, I'm not very satisfied at all. You never wanted kids, you never wanted me much either, except as ...' he stopped, knowing that what he had in mind to say would make change of some sort irrevocable '... a sign of reality for people to believe in without too close a look at what was actually happening. The fact is,' he said, 'I think I'm the sort of card that can be led to make other players think you've got an entirely different hand from what you've actually got. A hand of cards! Not very impressive, is it? I feel I've been maintained for show, and if that doesn't improve pretty quick smart, I might just slip away. There's plenty of things I could be.' His brow wrinkled and his eyes wandered off to have a look at his prospects. She sensed him going and did nothing to hold

him back. For a moment, at least, the separation between them, the opening gap, was welcome

‘As easy as that?’ she said, and he nodded. ‘Property?’

‘Half and half,’ Barry said. ‘Unless you’ve got something else in mind?’

She shook her head, empty-minded. This was so sudden, so quick!

‘Perhaps we should wait a few days, think about it? There isn’t any rush, is there?’

But he thought differently. ‘It’s already happened, why not turn it into fact. Straight away. Force ourselves to face reality instead of dodging it. What’s that lawyer bloke’s name? John Gates. We’ll live apart for a year, then divorce at the end of twelve months if there’s no change and I know there won’t be. We’ve woken up to our situation. We kept our minds covered for too long. Maybe we thought there was a chance our problems would fix themselves, but when I saw you going the way your mother went, I knew there was no hope. It’s better to be clean and decisive. No rows, no quarrels, a separation for twelve months and then, unless there’s an almighty change, that’s it. You got anything to add ...’

He wanted to say ‘Hilda?’ but the name would have brought him undone. She shook her head. She too was unable to call him by name. Had their marriage been no more, then, than two names printed side by side on an official paper? That was how it looked. ‘Give John Gates a ring,’ she said. ‘We’d better brief him together, make sure nothing’s overlooked ...’

‘... or forgotten,’ Barry said. ‘Wouldn’t do for that to happen, would it?’

One Year Nearer The End

There were rather more of them at the boathouse this year, the efforts of Tom Ambrose to extend his list having succeeded. Tom was at the door, looking not a day older, welcoming effusively, especially those who hadn't been to a previous luncheon. He was taking money, ticking lists, watching the path approaching the door, and keeping track of several conversations. He had the skill of remembering those who'd spoken to each other at earlier functions, re-uniting or separating them deftly and unobtrusively. Tom had all the skills of making a function go. For some reason he was going to divert Ely Jenkins from Carl Nelson but Ely had something that needed to be said. 'Carl! We talked to each other last year and you didn't tell me you'd had books published!'

Carl was amused. 'It seems to put some people off. I usually don't say anything about it unless people indicate it's something they want to talk about.'

Ely's mind was packed. 'Well, I've got quite a bit I want to say!' Without further ado he started. 'When you were teaching down there, you had a lot of friends in remote places.'

'I did. At the time, I took it for granted. Looking back, I have to say I'm amazed.'

This was no surprise to Ely. 'I often say that people who live a long way from others are forced to make up their own minds instead of relying on others to do their thinking.'

Some of his experiences in remote places began to filter into Carl's mind. 'I think you're saying there's more than one way of being crazy!'

It was Ely's turn to be amused. 'Don't get me started. Now! You wrote a book about the area where you worked, all those years ago.'

'I did.'

Ely named the book, then asked Carl how long the writing had taken. 'I wrote the first part very quickly. I had it finished before I'd even left. The second part was much longer, so it took more time, mostly in working out my approach.' He'd have gone on, but Ely's interest was in the first section. 'Suggan Buggan. Wulgulmerang. Black Mountain, my God they're wonderful places!'

'They are, aren't they. I remember the first time I saw the mountains fall away into Suggan Buggan ... I was standing on the back of a truck, holding onto the cabin, looking at these ranges, stretching out forever ...'

'You describe it in your book. It's good. It didn't take me long to be captured, it's an area I knew pretty well, once.'

Carl was surprised. 'I thought your people lived closer to the lakes ...'

'By the time I got to know you, yes. But years before, much earlier, my parents had a property out in the mountains ...'

Mystique flooded in for the pair of them. Such mountains! Nobody had ever been able to think of anything to do but name them, and once they started rattling off names, they were displaying their captivity with exultant pride. Mount Despair, Mount Seldom Seen, the Cobboras, the Pilot, and then you were in New South Wales with only a line you could stride across separating you from Victoria, two states made to seem unimportant by their merging alpine plains: Ely laughed. 'It's grand, isn't it? But what I liked was the way you showed how mad those blokes were. When they weren't drunk. Mad, drunk, thoroughly objectionable, and bloody marvellous to boot, if you could get them in the right mood!'

Carl knew why Ely was excited. He'd felt the same way. In fact, he'd structured the opening section of the book to show his mixed reactions: First, a great opening up to the wonder, the glory, of it all;

then the awful, painful awareness of senseless self-destruction closing in on his central character, Lochie. It had been wonderful to be with him and it had been awful. He was impossible, violent, yet he knew so much and felt so strongly. He had been acutely sensitive, he knew more than he could keep under control, he was always looking for opportunities to break loose, anything but regular work. He needed to show off. He needed to sing ...

Every mile or two he burst into song, his favorite being, 'On Top of Old Smoky.' 'Not one boy in a hundred,' he thundered, 'a poor girl can trust.' A little farther down the road; 'There lies a poor lover ... for courtin' so slow.' 'Shit!' he said, 'Pathetic, isn't it?' The difficult drive stirred him to nothing more reckless than a few jokes at his own expense about earlier accidents, and his handling of the curves of the Murrindal mountain was exemplary. All the same, young Nigel found the curves, on top of his very modest intake of beer, too much for him. He wanted to stop. So when we got to the W-Tree Bridge, Lochie obliged. Nigel made a dive for the table-drain and started being sick. 'Oh dear oh,' said Lochie. 'Poor Nigel. He is in distress.' Nigel's face looked very pale in the headlights. He was in no shape for witty rejoinders, so Lochie left him, grinning amiably, and strolled back towards the bridge and the precipitous falls. He flung his arms wide and gave us one more snatch of 'Old Smoky', with the words revealingly altered. The tail-light showed up his hands, his neck, and faintly, the white railing of the bridge. 'Oooh ... the grave will enclose ... me,' he bellowed into the night. The incident was never very long out of my mind after that. I believe he did not expect to see the Ord River; but if daring had trapped him, while he lasted, he would continue to dare.

'You called him Lochie,' Ely said. 'Was that his real name, or did you hide things?'

'Real name Sandy,' Carl said. 'Sandy McDonnell. 'You know, when I was writing that book, I felt I had to change names. To give people a bit of protection. I had a friend at the time, David Armfield, who did the cover art. I remember discussing the changes with him and he told me to change nothing. But I felt I had to.'

'And what would you say today?'

'I'd say my reasons for changing were good ones ... but they never made any difference. People still knew who was being referred to. I might as well have left things as they were.'

Ely was interested in the question. 'But there is a difference, isn't there, between fiction and reality? Between a book and the world around it?' He looked curious, almost anxious, as he said these things to an author.

Carl spread his hands. 'You ask me as if I know what I'm doing, and I'm not sure that I do. Yes, I do think there's a difference between a book and the reality it pushes aside in favour of itself. But the difference between the two is too subtle for me to say.'

Ely laughed. 'At least you're modest enough to admit it. That's something in your favour.' He took Carl by the elbow. 'I rather dropped that on you, didn't I? But I've been thinking about it for almost a year, now. Thanks for putting up with me.'

Carl considered Ely and the thoughts he'd proposed. 'We writers drop things on the public all the time. We tell ourselves it's our role to make things awkward for them, and we say it as if it isn't making things difficult for ourselves as well, as of course it always is. If I make things hard for you, I make things hard for me too. Blind Freddy can see that. I'm not a different order of being from you. I'm simply a man of words ...'

He might have gone on but Ely noticed that Tom Ambrose was putting a rather special-looking bottle of bubbly on a table at the side of their room. 'What's Tom up to?' he said. 'He loves to surprise, that man. Wouldn't you expect he might grow up one of these days?'

Following Carl home

Ely's questions followed Carl home. The difference between fiction and reality? The trouble, he decided, lay in the terms. Fictions were created by the imagination; what was wrong with that? The public, the mob he was supposed to be writing for, loved to have their imaginations called on, yet they also demanded that imagination's gifts bear some relation to ... reality. What a presumptuous word! It was about as modest as the Pope claiming to be infallible, and nothing could be sillier than that.

Yet was he any better? The passage he'd been quoting was from his first book, when he wasn't as good as he later became at setting things down in words. 'The truth is,' he told himself, 'the book amazes me because I don't know how I did it. Something guided me. I put down so many things I would have thought were beyond me at that time. It's not very modest,' he told himself, 'but the fact is I went far beyond anything I'd ever dreamed of being able to do. All those years I spent dragooning my students ... search your thoughts deeply, think of your mind as being a great big rubble-box full of rewarding things if you only have the courage to pull them out ... that's what I told my students to do and then I found I had to do it myself ... and I did!'

He felt relieved. The material had not been failed by the writer. Was it some sort of moral testing? He felt it was. He remembered his weeks of struggle, worried stiff about what to do with his material. He'd been inspired by Gustav Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, in the recording where Kathleen Ferrier says goodbye to the world. Such a singer, such a song! What a strange use Mahler had made of his imagination, putting himself in a position where remembering was the prelude to forgetting, and the forgetting, because it was final, was unlimited in its recall. Chinese mountains stretched away in the mind of a composer from Vienna, that cortex of the European mind. Why were people so desperate for art, so suspicious when it was brought close? He felt he ought to know that, if anybody did; he

asked as much of himself as Mahler had, as the poet had, the singer, conductor, orchestral players, et al. He ought to know, and what was it he ought to know? He ought to know the line between reliability and untruth in art, because it was a line he patrolled night and day, like a soldier close to the front line, knowing where the enemy had their guns, watching for the appearance, the briefest glimpse, of his head.

Ker-pow! If you gave the other side a chance, they'd take it. That meant you had to take every chance you got, or you were lost. Art was conceived in desperate moments of truth-searching stress, and in moods of receptivity when thoughts that came to you along regular channels were rejected in favour of the inspired apprehension of those finer truths some part of you believed it could see. Could? It said so. That is, it had confidence, and you had to have confidence, because once you doubted yourself, once you weren't in touch with your own reality-making, you were no more reliable than anyone else. It was only in truth-ascertainment that anyone could be trusted, and even then, only if they were found to be right. How hard it all was, this business of sorting out the brain.

Ker-pow! He thought about it. How could you write if bullets were whizzing past your ears? You'd have to concentrate on staying alive. Artists needed ... or they wanted ... to be guaranteed a life, which they would use self-indulgently in creating life's look-alike, a book, a song, poems, a play. Or music, the most abstract of all, and therefore the hardest mimicry to perform. He thought of things he'd written. This is a man saying goodbye to his parents before he dies. To his children. To the world, like Mahler. To his orchestra, which is to say, himself. To himself? How strange, but then some artists are so busy making noises that they haven't had time to talk to themselves, it's something they need to do. What had he needed to do when he set out to write about the region where he'd lived twelve impressionable years? He'd needed to find a suitable aesthetic, and he'd done it, by and large, through self-effacement, making others more

important than himself. He'd performed the trick pretty well. People who'd known him for years had told him they didn't find the man they knew in the writing. This pleased him. He'd written a respectful book, he'd let it ramble, and it had grazed here and there, unchecked. Re-reading the thing in later years he'd surprised himself. He'd described a funeral at Briagolong as if he'd been there himself, and he had; he'd made a special trip because he knew that whatever the day presented would never be offered again.

This, he thought, was where the arts of living and writing encountered each other with something more than courtesy. One had to make the most of moments when they came. Bill Gillio's funeral had meant a lot to him. Lochie's life and death had meant a lot to him too. They told him that life and death couldn't be kept apart. Death told you about life, and vice-versa. We die as we've lived and we live as we're going to die. All eras end and things run out of period every day, it seems. It's a good way to look at life, slipping past. People are inclined not to recognise that time's running out until it's run out, and suddenly there's hardly any left, and the shortage is painful. Once the writer, the beholder, is aware of this, some useful writing can occur. Bill in his last years had been Bill in all his years, and those who'd told him about Bill had been part of the man, as they, and Bill, had become part of him. To write, then, was to limit yourself as you realise that you've taken in so much that you're almost in the position of becoming too swollen, too enlarged, to make yourself into an artistic shape any more ...

... and that was the condition he liked eternally, inescapably, to be in.

He reached the front door. He walked in. There was a stack of CDs near the gramophone, a Green Guide near the TV. A white Wedgwood teapot on the kitchen table, a lovely thing he'd picked up at a sale. There were willow pattern plates and some cups he'd bought in Limoges. Chinese plates from Launceston, years ago. In the lounge were more precious things and paintings by friends. He'd

built a life around him in objects of what he hoped was taste. It was a house full of things he liked, most of them bought cheaply enough. It was a house full of memory, a house where he could write. It was a house with readiness, expectation, for what he tried to do inside it. The house understood him by now, and wasn't in a hurry. He liked the way his house stayed quiet, waiting for him to make up his mind. He felt it wouldn't let him down, wouldn't misjudge his wishes, needs, and so on. They were well-trained, he and his house, something the poet Judith Wright would have said about her house too. Did the way you treated your house categorise you as an artist? He thought it did. Well, if the categorising put you in the same basket as Judith Wright, you were doing pretty well. Fiction and reality were the words others used to talk about your subjects, and he wasn't happy with them. People who weren't artists never knew what it was you were doing, because they used terms you didn't use yourself. So what was he doing, when he wrote? Did he have a word, or did he let himself escape?

He thought. This wasn't easy. It's my job, he told himself, to turn something into something else, and in doing it, to take people in. To catch them unawares. Richard Strauss had written about Death and Transfiguration, weighty subject matter. At the end of an era, it might be possible to handle it, but the task was not for him. So what was he doing? He'd set himself the task of drafting the obvious, the everyday and particular, and revealing it for what it was. It was his job to give himself work to provide, and he did, keeping himself busy. He thought of a tussock of grass that had produced seeds near the front gate for years. 'A gentle reminder.' He noticed that there was something near the gate, a rolled up newspaper, was it? No. An envelope? Yes. Advertising litter? Junk mail? He bent to pick it up ... and he dropped it into a bin. 'Don't let crap through the front door,' he told himself. 'The best rule you can have for making a home a happy place.'

Carl wandered around the house before settling in the room where he wrote. He had a photo of Carl Nielsen on a cabinet; he'd had it copied from a book almost fifty years before, when copying was done by an overhead camera. Times had changed. Or had they? Carl was too old for war, now, but it hadn't always been so. His long-dead brother had missed out on the war with Japan only by the war's cataclysmic ending. Carl had been too young. He was too old for Vietnam, though he'd had friends, and ex-students, caught up in it. America, with its habitually servile attendant, Australia, had been looking for an anti-communist war in Korea but neither Russia nor newly communised China wanted to play the same game, so Carl, who'd done military training, hadn't been dragged into service. And Carl Nielsen, the composer he adored?

Carl studied the face of the other Carl, as he'd been doing for decades. It seemed as simple, as true, as ever. He'd listened to the man's music so often that he read it back into the face, now, and the face, lying on a table with a film of dust on it and rays of sunlight reflecting, was a statement, a reminder in turn, of the music Carl Nielsen had made before he left the world in 1931. 'Two years before I was born,' the later Carl told himself, wondering, for the thousandth time if there had been any connection as their two souls passed each other, one leaving, the other waiting in the wings. You could think of someone dying as being like a bulb going black after years of giving light; did it have a final chance of passing on what it had learned? In a relay race, this had to happen; there was a baton and if it wasn't handed on correctly, the team making the mistake was disqualified. Some such rule must surely obtain in the handing on of life? Australian Carl smiled at his stupidity. You had only to look around to see no evidence of generations learning, the present from the past, much as they talked about handing on. What had Danish Carl meant when he called his 4th Symphony 'The Inextinguishable'? Surely he'd meant that life could learn from its own experiences, could rise to challenges that confronted it, could actually be an 'it', meaning

that not only could it not be put out, like a fire doused with water, but that it could increase in consciousness when it needed to do so to survive. That was how Danish Carl had been forced to think once he became aware of the madness that had run away with the minds of Europeans. They were hurling their soldiers into the battles of northern France, releasing poison gas, charging each other with screaming bayonets, studying each other's armies from aeroplanes in the sky. Warfare was madness: look at the bodies, shell-shattered and lying in the mud. Look at the wounded, being treated in hospitals behind the line, put on ships to get them home, never to be the same again, even if they survived. Warfare was madness, but madness had taken hold of civilisation's most developed centres – London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna and the rest – and civilisation itself, meaning consciousness built up over centuries, was in the process of being torn down. Carl Nielsen had been furious. We must do better than this! No doubt he was far from alone in his thoughts, but when the mighty passion got itself to the point of being desperate for expression, his was the available nest for these thoughts to be nurtured. He wrote the *Inextinguishable* symphony, he played in it, and people who were better conductors than he directed it. He wrote it in 1916 as a protest, and it took a lived generation, in time, and who knows how much digested experience to be absorbed, before the world, with another war behind it, was ready to listen.

Carl Nelson, Australian Carl, was proud of the Dane's achievement. The world mustn't be allowed to ignore itself: what else is consciousness for? In asking such questions, and answering them in music, the musician had wrested moral superiority from the great powers and had held them, briefly, himself, a boy from a poor family on the island of Fyn (Funen). The moral centre of the world didn't have to be in a palace, or anywhere in a capital, it could reside wherever mankind's mind was focussed on what most needed to be said.

Australian Carl looked respectfully, humbly, on the photo he'd had copied fifty years before, when he'd realised what the earlier

man had done. Those mighty drums hammering away to stop the progress – the human intelligence – of the orchestra of which they themselves were part. That was what humanity was like. It needed balance to keep itself in motion, but at times it lost the plot, and couldn't move on until one part of the mind had achieved a conquest of another. Humanity! Danish Carl had been sceptical enough and so was his Australian counterpart, a couple of generations on. Health was something lively and springing with love in a swamp of ugly things. To be positive, progressive, was a choice, and anybody could choose wrongly. They had only to be too bound to a tradition and they were almost certain to be wrong! So we could look over our shoulders from time to time, and we would almost certainly need to, but nothing was guaranteed as a way of choosing the best path. Anyone, everyone, could be wrong! It occurred to Carl that he might put the other Carl's music on, and listen, but he chose against. He knew it so well! He knew the music's moments of choice. He knew how various conductors had shaped it – Launy Grondahl, Erik Tuxen, Herbert von Karajan, Jean Martinon and others. He'd heard it in the concert halls of his own city, and somehow it was always more alive in his mind than in the halls where he'd heard it played. It had got that far into him. It had occupied a central place in his thinking. It was a part of him now. He was old and he'd never lose it ...

But could he do as well, himself? He thought not, but the matter was out of his hands. He'd written many books, he'd done the best he could, but what they said was in the hands of those who read them ... or read other things entirely. The public could ignore you if they chose, and you couldn't do anything about that! You struggled for the mastery that let you press your thoughts into form, yet, even if you succeeded, the public might be distracted. Otherwise occupied. Artists took the gamble that what mattered to them could be made important for others. Obviously, it might, and it might not. Artists are in the hands of their chosen public and the public are fickle ...

A thought entered Carl's mind. He went to his cupboard, looking for a disc. He put it on. Hans Hotter sang, deeply and soulfully, Schubert's *An Die Musik*. The piano died away. Carl took it off. There were more songs, sung almost as well, but none of them were as definitive as that one. Had Schubert known how important it was going to be? Probably yes, but there was no way of being sure. And Hans Hotter, had he known what he was doing when he made his recording? Almost certainly, yes: it was in the ring of the voice. To music: what more could any artist do but dedicate himself, produce his best, and leave the rest to be tossed into history's potluck stew?

In bed, as in his house, alone

Morning came, bringing another day. Carl lay in his bed, as he lived in his house, alone. The day was an opportunity, as were they all. He got up and washed. His city had water restrictions, he showered on odd-number mornings, and this wasn't one. He took himself to his desk. He'd been working on a novel, and it was about halfway through. Interestingly, he had, for a period of some years, given himself a number of pages when starting a book and treated it as a limit, proud of finishing on the nominated page. This was restriction working to give freedom. He liked rules, decisions to be followed. They released him. He loved the way that his sentences came out in mixtures of complicated and simple, long and short. It seemed to him that while his sentences controlled themselves in this way, the book couldn't be far wrong. What was this one about?

It was an idea that had occurred to him when he'd been a teacher in the east of his state. He'd been teaching, in those days, at an old school perched above the camping park adjoining the river. Mountains were visible from the bank of the river. He thought of it, now, as a scene for the spirit to draw on. The children at the school had never taken much notice of the river. It had little representative value for them. Carl had seen it differently. He'd spent a lot of time in those mountains and he knew how the waters drained

into the lakes behind him, visible from the staff room of the school. The students, understandably enough, took the rhythm of their days from the arrivals and departures of the buses that brought the outlying people in ... allegedly to be educated, more accurately to be together. It occurred to him, in his old age, and at his desk, how people allocated meanings, then didn't re-examine them until generations had passed. For instance, the city where he lived was full of old primary schools and post offices built with pride, proof that society concerned itself with schooling and the distribution of letters. Many of the schools and most of the post offices had been sold off. They were no less functional than they'd always been but they represented opportunities for private enterprise to turn them into cash-producing places housing offices – some art auctioneers had taken over the handsome school a few blocks down the road from Carl's. He deplored the school's front garden being razed so that would-be painting-buyers could park their cars. The nation state was dying, not so much actively being killed off as failing to be replaced when needing attention. He had a feeling that should he fall over on the footpath he'd better keep quiet and let rescuers grant him attention before he confessed that he didn't have private health insurance because he felt that it was the state's duty to provide hospitals, not only for him but for everybody. Lots of people thought as he did but the state's policy was closer to the gibberish that poured over you in television breaks: consume! Buy! Get it while it's on special at ...

Insert your own screaming song!

So he'd grown at odds with the values of the world around him: nothing new in that! It happened in every generation. Nature's trickery of replacement and renewal was working, except that this time it was his turn to be one of the ageing, not one of the replacements. Once, he'd been one of those waiting for silly old buggers to get out of the way, and now he was one of those the young were waiting to see removed. Suddenly he remembered an idea he'd had when he'd been the young teacher he was now remembering. He'd seen the

sports master of his day, a man called Dick Hart, cleaning a starting pistol. He'd tested it by firing a shot. Someone standing by had commented, 'Didn't have much effect, Dick!' and the sports master had smiled, putting the gun away. No effect had been intended. Carl had thought about Dick and the starting pistol and it had occurred to him as the start of a story; a group of youngsters could be sent on their way by the sound of the pistol, they could go right around the outskirts of their town, and come back to find ...

... that the promised welcome of delicious food and drink had not been prepared, as they'd believed they'd been promised. No, the run they'd set out on had been the race of their lives, it had gone on for decades, and insofar as it had any ending at all, each young person, had had to find their own ending whenever it came their way, young or old, successful or wretched. The young Carl had been attracted to this idea but he'd never written it, though he dimly remembered that some sort of attempt had been made to stage the running more or less as it had been proposed. Hadn't Dick Hart ...

He couldn't remember. He wanted to tell himself he didn't care what had happened, but the idea still had some power, in his imagination. In his mind. He knew the idea well enough for it to have lost its power to stir his imagination, but he hadn't lost sight of it entirely. It was lurking still, a useful idea, perhaps, one he should be able to make use of. He looked at the blank screen of his computer. A race, a run, or not?

Carl visits Bendigo

Nothing came of the idea. He moved on to other things. If anyone wanted to write about a run around a town where he no longer lived, they could have it. He made a trip to Bendigo, one of his state's regional cities, made wealthy by gold. The gallery was showing work by Hilda Rix Nicholas and he found her painting strongly supportive of sides of him that he'd begun to apologise for. Hilda Rix Nicholas had gone to Paris and London as a young woman, to study, as so many

– and so few – of her compatriots had. A few men needed higher qualifications in the economy of the day, a few – richer – women felt they needed to attend finishing school. Art was the best finisher of all. War was close, and things didn't go well for Hilda Rix Nicholas. Her sister died, then her mother. She became engaged to a man who went to France as an officer and within weeks of his arrival was shot. The catalogue told Carl that the young widow had slept on her late husband's greatcoat for years, but she had returned to Australia all the same, and remarried. This time it was to a man with a property at Delegate, at the bottom of New South Wales. Carl had been through it in the days when he'd been exploring, looking for the new limits and undercurrents of his life, when he'd been searching for what he was going to be, a marvellous if disconcerting time, with considerable power to upset and overthrow fixed ideas. Delegate was linked in Carl's mind with Suggan Buggan, Wulgulmerang, Black Mountain and all the other places he'd been with Sandy (Lochie) when he was exploring the Gippsland which kept itself well-hidden: apologised for, perhaps. There were no apologies in Hilda Rix Nicholas's paintings, a-brim with the light of south-east Australia, bold with vistas and high vantage points, men, and women too, made demi-gods by their horses. Women who were confident and men who knew who they were. There was a painting with a man on a horse, looking at a broad valley, and in the centre of it, beside a stream, willows were maturing next to the house where, anyone could tell, could feel, the man lived with what he possessed, including a loving wife. The house was a home. The difference was a woman, and a woman wasn't meant to be on her own any more than a man was. They belonged together. In giving love they took responsibility for each other, their children too, and those who worked for them. Man and woman were the two curving arcs that held up the heavens. There are such heavens, stars and skies anywhere in the world but none so blessed as those of Australia, which, in the eyes of a handful of Hilda Rix Nicholas's generation, had long been waiting for settlement. Its

golden age had come. There was a painting of her husband, a man in his fifties by then, classifying wool. A small white mound of it lay on a table before him, filled with light from above and also from his judgement; his eyes were shrewd. The painter loved her man, loved the fate which had brought her to the mountainous district when she might have failed, heart broken, many years before, with a dead man's greatcoat given to her. She'd been able to make another start, in a remote spot in the colony she came from, a place unknown to the men who'd sent her first husband to die in France. The Empire was big, in those days, and chance might serve you up a second lot. It had served her well, after some awful opening dishes, and she'd recorded what she'd been given in a mood both possessive and grateful. Carl had stepped outside the gallery wondering who, if any, there were in the world of his time with such wonderful confidence to express and share. He looked at himself. No, not me; I'm not in her class for confidence. And yet, he thought, I can recognise what gave her confidence, I've been to the same places, or similar, and felt the same disparity between the tiny and the huge. He thought of his first and only visit to the schoolhouse at Suggan Buggan, a wooden shed with a huge fireplace. It had been a warm day so the missing boards hadn't let in anything but the mildest air. No such gaps would have been allowed to stay unplugged in cold weather. And how much knowledge would be transferred to the children in their little shed? Little enough, Carl knew. If they learned to read, what books would be theirs to read in the surrounding homes? If they learned their tables, what new powers would be extended to them by the financial systems into which they were growing? They'd be servants of forces situated in England, keeping themselves afloat on the activities of those who worked remote properties in Australia. If they sensed anything limited, even wretched, in their circumstances, those youngsters growing at the junction point of two tracks, one leading to Sydney and the other to Melbourne, they could always

ride away and offer themselves as sacrifices – new forms of sacrifice – to the empire to which they belonged.

Hilda Rix Nicholas had been proud of her place in the empire; more than that, she'd felt such pride in what she and her husband were doing that she and he, as her paintings made clear, could hand a tribute of nobility and idealism right back to the centre of the empire of which they were a part. A part? A glowing coal, a flower, any beacon at all, really, so long as it shone, was noticed, and wondered at ...

Carl went to his car, humbled. He'd expected the show to add to his historical knowledge, but hadn't been ready for it to show him a world transformed. So that was the painter's husband, classing wool? So that was their *home*, at the bottom, the heart, of a broad valley, with its mountains pressed hard against the top of the canvas, that was the painter, confident on horseback, and quite daring, it seemed, as captured by a camera and wielding a brush! Her jodhpurs, and the riding trousers of the men, in other pictures, had command in their very cloth. Those who wore them had power to say what would be done. Carl got in his car, started it. It was a Japanese Toyota, they never failed. A press of the key and the engine started. Remember the old days, the old cars ...

Not any more. The modern car gave none of those unreliabilities. The modern car was the driver's slave, or perhaps, simply, his or her *machine*. It did what it was supposed to do without any pleading or subtleties of thought. Hilda Rix Nicholas must have loved the horses she rode at Delegate. The horses must have known they were loved. The men must have known how to give affection too, to dogs, horses, animals generally ...

... and in the centre of their lives, those who ran cattle stations, or sheep, big loosely settled properties with occasional streams meandering through, and tales spreading around like flies following manure, at the centre of their lives were *homes*, places where a woman, a man and their children made the only sense that could be

made of human life, that is to say that it was an opportunity for the all-caring tenderness that carried life and love from one generation to the next.

After the gallery, Carl went to the home of a friend who was a composer, and had set some of Carl's librettos to music. A performance had been proposed, so two others were present, a woman who would be stage director and a singing teacher whose students would yield a cast. The opera would be 'The Disappearing Trick', its central figure a young woman called Leslie who had the gift of making people fall in love with her, then gave them her love, magically, until the outlying one, the attractee as might be said in law, filled with a longing to turn the magic into something the world understood as a recognisable arrangement, a firmity with a basis of some sort, woke up to find that he was not to get what he yearned for and – this always happened – Lesley had disappeared. Moved on, with nobody knowing where she'd gone.

The composer had outlined the requirements of each part – so many bars in total, vocal range from here to there, and so on, setting out the demands for the singing teacher to allocate someone for the role. The stage manager had settings for the various scenes; were they as Carl imagined them, or had she missed out on anything? They looked, and all was well. Simplicity was the key to production of this sort. Carl had written his scenes, his librettos, so that they demanded almost nothing, except, and this was vital, an imaginative response on the part of those present when the music was made. The character of Lesley shared the central space of the opera with Circe, a statue by 19th century sculptor Bertram McKennal, who'd given his city a version of the temptress of *The Odyssey*. McKennal had struck a spot in his city's thinking, because his statue had always been popular, but it must have been more than this, because it struck at the responses of children and the children still hidden in the adults who

came to see his black bronze, arms upraised, whose power turned mortals into swine.

Nobody should be able to do that to another, Carl would have said, but he knew that lovers did it to each other all the time. He'd been in love not so many years before, and it was why he was on his own. For a moment, as the discussion wandered here and there among details that had to be attended to by one or another of the opera people, he let his mind drift into the past. He'd known perfection of love, as many people had not, it had affected him to the foundation of his being, and he'd come out of the experience changed. There have been plenty of people in my position, he told himself, but my story's as good as anyone's, now. Let's see myself live it!

The discussion centred for a minute on the composer's vocal demands. The singing teacher asked a few questions about the range of this or that role, and had his queries cleared up. Carl's mind absented itself again: the difference between me as I was and as I am now is that I've lost the magical power I possessed to transform the person I loved into something wildly more exciting than she'd been until we fell – what a terrible word: we soared, we flew, we rose out of sight of ordinary mortals – in love. Love was as transformative as anything in life, though its opposites were just as powerful. Look at what the Nazis had discovered in the souls of their fellow Germans when they'd been beaten in a war which, apparently, they'd thought unlosable. No doubt military tacticians had considered what Germany had needed to do if it was to beat France (again) and Great Britain, with its long string of allies, people who'd fight for it when asked. They too were part of British civilisation, and Germany hadn't so many supporters to maintain its struggle, so it lost. The unthinkable had happened. The disaster for which they hadn't prepared found them unprotected. The evil which was the other half of the European dichotomy of mind had visited them, and look what they'd allowed to happen ...

Carl's wanderings were reclaimed by a question. Had he looked at the entry and exit points for the end of scene 1 and the start of scene 2? Was he happy with them? Yes, he was. He said so, though he'd taken hardly any notice. He'd be seeing the performing space immediately after their meeting, that would be the moment for any comment if he wanted to make it. 'Looks okay to me,' he said.

The following day, he drove home. It was a trip he'd made often enough for things to unroll as expected. There was a point on the road which made him recall driving to an Australian literature seminar held at Mount Macedon when he'd first started teaching. Alec Hope, the country's best known poet of the day, had been there, with students around him, waiting for a bon mot or two. If he uttered any, Carl and his girlfriend of the time hadn't heard them. They'd found themselves pulled along by a group intending to visit the memorial to young men of the district who'd paid the supreme sacrifice, or whatever had been the formula of words deemed honorable enough for the granite of this cross. Fifty years later, Chris couldn't remember the site, though he could remember very well a discussion he'd had with one of his girlfriend's friends about Hope's collection of poems, 'The Wandering Islands'. The young woman, whose name had been Barbara, Carl remembered, had pronounced the poems 'lascivious' and wouldn't be budged by the young Carl's argument that the lasciviousness probably wasn't innate in the poems but in the reading mind. Barbara had gone off in a long statement about the nature of judgement, and recognition; she said that we carried archetypes in our mind to refer to, so that, by an act of comparison and then of judgement, we could know if something was lascivious if an impulse moved us towards thinking that it was. We could know by making a suitable comparison. Barbara was even prepared to allow that ways of making judgements altered over time so that a condemnation made today was not final; it might be rendered out of

date by the passage of a decade or three 'if we're still around when the argument's re-presented,' Barbara had said.

Looking along the Macedon Range, with the memorial at the highway end, Carl spared a thought for Barbara, whom he hadn't seen since his teaching career, now ended, had begun. He was aware that Barbara had married a gifted actor, whom Carl had rather liked but again, hadn't seen for years. He looked a little to the left of Macedon and *there* was Hanging Rock, a place made famous by a novel, later a film, about a group of girls who have a strange experience at or near the top, and some of the girls disappear, and nobody can work out what has become of their bodies, which have disappeared ... and so on and so on. It came to Carl's mind, driving home after his musical meeting in the city of his birth, Bendigo, another connection which he didn't know how properly to make, that Ludmilla, the young woman who'd taken him to Hanging Rock a few years earlier, was a passionate believer in its mysterious powers. Ludmilla believed that the girls in the story had disappeared because she'd felt the powers herself as a schoolgirl when a little batch of nuns and religious ladies had taken their charges to Hanging Rock. 'There was a girl in my class who fell,' Ludmilla had told Carl, showing him the very spot from which the fall had happened. 'We went down to pick her up and carry her to the bus so we could get her to hospital, or a doctor, but she wasn't where she ought to have been. We called up from down there to the girls who were still up here, and they said they couldn't see her. So where was she? We looked around to where she might have fallen, or rolled after she'd landed, but it took ages before we found her in some bushes that had broken her fall.' Carl, who had a healthy scepticism for any intersection of catholicism and natural forces, wanted to know why this girl had stayed in Ludmilla's mind? Ludmilla thought this was obvious. 'She was never the same again. She'd been nervous about coming here, she hadn't wanted to come at all but she couldn't think of a good reason to get out of it, and that was what happened to her. She'd fallen, she'd been injured, but more

than that, she'd been really damaged by the encounter so she wasn't the same again. Ever!

Ludmilla, at this point in her narrative, had gone into herself; Carl had stood still, waiting, until Ludmilla recovered. 'She was never really normal again. It would have happened when we were all fourteen, or pretty close. She'd have lived till she was twenty. At the funeral, all the girls that had known her were about twenty.' Ludmilla closed again, and Carl had known her well enough by this time to sense that he'd be able to get no further into the matter, because it had taken its place in Ludmilla's thinking as a mystery, and mysteries stayed mysteries in the minds of people who needed them unsolved, as Ludmilla did, and Carl did not. It was a fundamental difference between them as people and probably explained why their relationship, often surprisingly close, never grew more intimate. 'We were different types of people,' Carl told himself, knowing as the idea came to him that it was poverty-stricken; what were you telling yourself if that was the best you could say?

He looked at the road – Mount Macedon along a stretch of the horizon, high or high-ish, and Hanging Rock to the left – and it occurred to him that there were scores of attachments connecting people, and incidents, in his mind to certain parts of the road. There were little patches of the road which linked him to the great love of years before, and others earlier and later, a scattering of people great and small in his thinking. There was a place where the road climbed, coming out of Melbourne, and it reminded him of his father, driving north to his farm in New South Wales when Carl had been a child, changing down a gear and telling Carl's Aunt Ella, 'We're climbing all the way now. Engine's working hard!' This in a land famous for being flat. On Father's farm there were no hills, no slopes, except the dam banks, piled up clay excavated by horse teams dragging scoops that dug the ground to make holes where muddy water was stored for the sheep, cattle and horses, not to mention dogs, birds, snakes and whatever else depended on them. The world as Father saw it

was the world as I knew it, Carl told himself: I was lucky to have such a model. Had he been as good for his own children? It was one of those things you couldn't know. Born at a certain place and time, there were things you saw with clarity, and others which were closed to those whose perspective was yours. My own son, Carl realised, had watched hundreds of hours of David Attenborough films, learning the skills, the abilities and the limitations of underwater creatures, of brolgas, chimpanzees, tapirs, pandas and the rest of the world's varied life, so that for his son thinking in the Attenborough way, never available to Carl's own father, was easy and natural.

Carl, moving down the highway still, knowing that before long his car would take him past the western edges of the Macedon range, could see how important the imagination was to humans: the imagination told the receiving mind about its limits and the limits of other people, close to him, perhaps, as his father and his son were, and had been. To get the best use of your mind you had to know where its limitations were and have means to over-step its limits. You had to ask yourself what you could see – *he* could see – that his father couldn't, and what he himself was blind to which was obvious to his son. And so on, until all humanity's scopes had been included. For a moment he wanted to stop his car and ponder ways of defining limits so that they intruded on, couldn't be kept out of, what he was experiencing. This, he decided, would have been self-defeating; better to keep going, and let the air streaming in his window bring him such fresh thoughts as the country suggested. He was being passive, receptive, and reactive; it wasn't proper for him to be in control. This was another change of recent years. Once he'd have been looking for signs of obvious development, but now he needed reassurance as much as anything, and he even saw how people could sit in front of television with the stuff they were handed as their spiritual diet. If it wasn't rich enough to trouble them they probably glugged it down without disparagement.

Home as a moment of truth

Getting home was, as always, a moment of truth. He'd been away, he was back. This and that had taken him elsewhere; they'd been dealt with. Returning was a reassurance and a challenge. Was he productive, did he have something in him, demanding to be done, or was he merely vacuous? It was good to feel spent, but better to have energy. He had a feeling, as he grew older, that there was a moment of emptiness ahead of him, out of sight so far. He would recognise it when it came. It would be, for him, as a writer, the equivalent of the deathly figure who comes, knocking, to take the doomed away. It would be a sensation rather than a persona, and it would say, 'Today, there's nothing. Nothing left to say.' It would go on, this part of him he'd kept at bay so long, 'Don't be sad. Emptiness is the common lot of mankind. Your soul has been special, now it's to join the others. Don't get up,' this last visitor would say, 'I'll sit with you a while. This silence is the last thing that keeps you from being common. Let it purify you, empty you. Then, when you're ready, I'll disperse you in the ether outside.'

This was a thought Carl had known for many years, but it seemed so apparent to him this morning, his car's engine still warm beside the house, and his case still unpacked, that it was a closer, more intimate message he was receiving. He looked around, as if for a signal, and he could see the red light that meant messages on his phone. Two, the thing said. Not yet, he told it, and went to his writing room and turned on the computer. Email first, assuming there was some. There was.

Tom Ambrose had sent a lengthy message. He'd had talks with the senior staff, and the council, of the school where they'd once worked, about developing an ex-students' association as a means of supporting the school in its job within the community, and as a mechanism for funding things that government couldn't provide. It was an idea that had surfaced regularly down the years and the regular response was that it was the sort of thing that worked with schools

where parents paid fees, but wouldn't work in the state system. Why not? Because people didn't believe they mattered. 'They've got to be made to realise that everybody matters,' Tom had to say. 'Everybody counts! That's what government in a democracy means!' Tom had been passionate about this for years, but had never been able to get headmasters or councils to take notice. Finally, he felt he'd made some headway, and one of his arguments – his bargaining points – was that the school needed to publish accounts of ex-students' lives, showing that most of its graduates were useful people and that even the failures had lessons to teach, if only of avoidance of certain pathways, mainly easy short cuts. Tom wanted Carl to write a series of bios of unpretentious people who'd made a contribution of some form or other: humble people, of no great natural ability, who'd served their families and communities well.

Carl liked the idea. He felt it was worth doing. He also had an idea that someone had had the same idea, many years earlier; he couldn't remember any names, but he'd talk to Tom about it. Tom's memory was a sieve that held anything of value. Carl, a part of him still on the road, began to think of Tom. He'd never been a special friend of Carl, in fact Carl couldn't think of anyone who'd been close to Tom, but then Tom was one of those people who forced himself on your consciousness through learning to respect him for what he was. Carl went to the phone, with its flashing red light, and number two, also in red. He pushed a button and voices, one known to him and one not, came out.

'G'day Carl, Tim Heneberry here. Haven't talked to you in ages, sorry about that. You used to be pretty strong on vision, something I was keen on too. Never got us far in those days, but we're needed now, or so I think. State government's in trouble, they're going to lose the next election unless they change the way people see them. That'd be good, but it's not going to happen unless ...'

The voice vanished, came back, coughed, then disappeared again. Suddenly, as if space had relented on wrecking the call, the voice

returned with a string of digits and a quaint whisper, 'Give us a ring, mate!'

Carl wrote down the numbers, then pressed again. A woman's voice came out, unknown to him. 'Good morning, Mr Nelson, Juanita here from Calder Motel, Bendigo. I hope you had a good trip back. Sorry to interrupt you, but you had a couple of odd visitors not long after you checked out. Not really the sort of visitors we'd expect to see if you know what I mean. They didn't stay long but I'd be glad if you could give me a call so I can explain what happened. Give us a ring on nine-eight-four, double seven zero, one six. Thanks Mister Nelson, no rush, just whenever you're ready ...'

'What's that all about?' Carl asked himself, and wondered if he was ready to ring back yet. Not quite, he thought. Instead, he made a cup of tea. Tom Ambrose, yes. Tim Heneberry? Well, it sounded interesting, maybe he would and maybe he wouldn't. Juanita from the motel? He was suspicious. Something had happened, and Juanita wanted him to clear himself, no, she wanted him to clear her whenever she got around to reporting whatever it was. Oh, bugger it, why hadn't it happened to someone else? What a pity that we couldn't drag events around a corner so they no longer had anything to do with us!

He rang the motel, and it was disconcerting. Half an hour after he'd set off for home, and while the rooms were still being done, a man and a woman had turned up, asking for 'the gent in number seven'. Juanita had been cleaning number seven. 'She shouldn't have rung you. I had no idea that's what she was doing. These people were out to do a bit of business with visitors, offering something in their social lives, shall we say. The girl was too young to be doing that sort of thing, seventeen, perhaps. The man? Nasty piece of work, had the girl under his control. Selling her, that's what he was doing. I've never seen either of them in my life before, we certainly don't operate that sort of service here. I'm sorry Juanita mentioned it, it's

something I'd have investigated before I'd said a word to anybody. Let me assure you that we run a clean and honest business, but you know that already ...'

Carl was amused. He assured the motel lady he hadn't the faintest idea why these people had come to the room that had been his; he'd never gone looking for 'room service' of the sort in his years of visiting the city. He found himself curious to know what they'd looked like, this young woman and her standover partner – 'a yard wide', Juanita had described him, 'and a mop of gangster hair!' *He*, at least, had made an impression on her! They were looking for the wrong man, perhaps they'd got themselves to the wrong motel; there were a number in the same stretch of highway, before the famous cathedral came into view. Talking about the cathedral, did the priests telephone for visiting services? Stranger things had happened, Carl decided. Whenever a line was drawn between things people desired and the positions of virtue they felt impelled to adopt, ways around the line, or across it, had to be found. Appearances were all, and discretion vital. And yet there was a young woman involved, and Carl wondered how voluntarily, how compulsorily, she did what she was told. What percentage of the money did she get? Was there a payment to the motel, or were they not supposed to know? How long could you do business of this sort without bringing the room-provider into it? It made Carl aware of how little he knew about the way the world was run. He remembered that there was a large and very modern police headquarters not far along the same stretch of highway. Someone there must know about the services to overnight visitors? Was that someone paid to keep quiet, and stay out of the way? Possibly, who could say? It occurred to Carl that he had never in his life paid money to have a woman. It seemed a very odd thing to do. Hand over a fistful of dollars to go through the motions of intimacy and excitement ...

Did these people have his home address in Melbourne? That wouldn't be so funny! He was going to ring back and leave firm

instructions and then he realised he'd only be making a fool of himself. They'd knocked on the wrong door, and the best thing for him to do, the only thing, was forget it. Laugh. He remembered the paintings he'd seen in the goldfield city: he wanted to tell Hilda Rix Nicholas that there were people who lived on a lower level than she had! That greatcoat, that change of life! There were people who had to defend their standards, they told others, protesting too loudly and too much. If your standards were an effort to maintain they weren't really yours. That was the fact of the matter. Who else? Tim Heneberry and the state government; they faced an election later in the year and it was beginning to seem, despite their large majority, that they'd lost the public's trust. Carl had voted Labor all his life yet he found himself wanting the party to lose office. They hardly deserved it. They'd been in long enough, it'd be good for the state to have them out and the others in. It wasn't good for governments to hold office too long. They needed to be kept humble and that meant being dismissed from office the moment they thought it was naturally theirs. It was the only real power of ordinary people and it was a great one. Holding office affected people. They came to think it was theirs by right. The gift should no sooner be offered than taken away, and offered elsewhere. That way, people were reminded of whose the power was. Democracy, whacko!

He didn't ring Tim. He might, in a day or two, but he'd need to be in a more charitable mood. Now Tom, and this business of an ex-students' association: what was he going to do about this? He'd speak to Tom, of course, but the other man was so persuasive that he needed to get his thoughts sorted out before he made the contact. He needed to get his boundaries, his limits, clear first, otherwise he'd find Tom moving him into positions that were not his own. What would be useful, what would he enjoy doing, what would be useless, what would be going too far?

At once he saw difficulties. The sort of people who saw themselves as having been successful, the shining lights and beacons

for others to follow, were the sort who gave him the shits. The big pretenders. Swimming pools and tennis courts, costly overseas trips, and cars brought home, or bought before they went. The right-hand drive vehicles they used in foreign lands then exchanged before they boarded their plane for home ... what a lot of consumerist self-gratification! The only people Carl admired were the ones that didn't find things easy. There were people who thought they should be rewarded for following a bunch of crafty rules, and they shouldn't. Or perhaps they should? Perhaps their reward was that they got what most they wanted? They got the big homes, the boats, the travel, the glamour, such as it was, that was distributed via attentive headlines. If people wanted these things it seemed uniquely fitting that they should get them, while the smaller, quieter way of living belonged to those who chose it. Carl thought of the people he'd most admired in the town where he'd lived, years before. He thought of the people he'd loved, the women in his life before he married. Whatever he'd done, or his lovers had done, it was always problematical. There was always tension between whatever was supposed to be going on, and what was. That was the precarious, the testing line, between life as it was and as it was supposed to be. If your life didn't force you to consider the way you lived, you were getting it too easily ...

So what was he going to say to Tom?

Writing about people

He knew before he rang; he'd try. He asked Tom for a list of people he might write about, and any information, or contacts, Tom could provide. Tom promised this, cheerfully. Tom was always cheerful; Carl felt he'd be doing his friend a favour if he told him to be glum or gloomy once in a while. 'People wouldn't take you for granted,' he wanted to say. Did people take him for granted? Yes, he thought, they probably did because he'd worked hard to make something consistent of himself, and that meant recognisable ... and so on. Now he'd given himself a related job – of describing people in ways

that made them both special and well-known. 'Give me a variety of people, Tom,' he'd said. 'Ten or a dozen is enough to begin with, with all you've got on them, and I'll make a start. When I've sketched in a few we can see how they look. You'll have lots of new ideas by then as to what we will and won't want to do with their names – the sorts of places we want people to read them, and so on. My idea is that I'll try as many deep ends as possible, jump in, splash about for a while, and then, when I've got a range of approaches, you and I can decide which are suitable and which are not.'

Tom was happy with this. He turned up, later in the day, with a large folder. A piece of pink card divided the material – stuff on people Tom wanted him to write about at the front, and everything else at the back. Carl found himself laughing to Tom. 'I know where I'm expected to look and I know very well where I want to look!' Tom was as sharp as Carl. 'How do you know I haven't anticipated you and put the stuff back to front already? Eh?' Carl had a feeling that Ely had already played that trick on him, and then, suddenly, he remembered Clive Wright, a teacher from years before, who'd contacted many of the school's former pupils in a similar attempt to form an association to give the school strength. Whatever had happened to him?

'Clive Wright,' he said to Tom. 'He's just come into my mind. However did I forget him? Didn't he start to do the same thing as us? How far did he get?'

'Unfortunately for us,' Tom said, 'he put very little down on paper. I've been in touch with him. Everything he could give us is there. The back half of the folder!' Tom grinned. 'Now! Which is the front half and which the back? Eh?' He was laughing at his friend by now. 'It isn't going to get us very far, but it's there for you to look at.' He went on. 'Here's my list of a group to start with. Six men, six women. Two of them got married to each other, so, all up, the list represents eleven couples. Which raises a question ...'

'I know,' Carl said. 'Are couples separate, or are they couples? When does a couple become a couple, for our purposes, and when

are they still single, even if happily married? Yes, I've thought of that. It is a problem, isn't it. You say you're going to tell people what a group of people did. If you talk about them as a group, that shouldn't be hard, but if you decide you want to talk about them as individuals, you discover that people do very little on their own. We're all a part of everyone else. But then, if you decide you want to emphasize the communal aspect of people's lives, you'll notice that after a while, as one period gives way to another, that these lives which are embedded in their period do change. Lives are not always, not forever, lived in quite the same way ...'

He paused. Tom said, 'That's our problem.' He looked into the air, or a corner of the room, perhaps. 'Let's just try a few people and see how we go.'

Together, they looked at the list. Arnold Boucher. 'Who was he?' Tom flipped a couple of pages. Lilly Curtis. That reminded Carl of something. 'Curtis? Curtis? Didn't I ... ah ...?' Tom said, 'You're thinking of Eleanor Curtis, aren't you, that woman who did the paintings. Caused a bit of a fuss when they were shown after she died ...'

'Any relation?'

'Not that I know of.'

Carl looked at the list, then he read the names aloud. 'Arnold Boucher. Lilly Curtis, with two ls. Bob Davis. Any relation to the footballer? Vivian Forge. I remember her as Viv. I can't remember what became of her, I suppose I'm about to find out. John Grant. Heavens, that's plain enough. Look at our list, Tom. We don't have any Ahmeds, no Chinese from the goldfields, no Italians, is this list representative, or not?'

Tom was ready for him. 'We've got something about these people. We actually know a bit about them. As we progress, we'll make sure we put in a few others to balance them up.'

'All right. If we can, that is. Jeanette Ince, Lance Loughrey, Sylvia Main.' Something about the name made him think, but whatever the

association, it wouldn't come. 'Mick O'Connell.' He laughed. 'Why not call him *The Railway Hotel*?'

Tom laughed too. 'We could put in a picture of the pub with his name underneath. That'd tell our readers a thing or two!'

'Silly bastard. Maureen Richardson, that name rings a bell. Somewhere. Sid Vickers ... makes me think of an opera singer. Indira Wightman, that's an uncommon name, I wonder where she got Indira from?'

Tom tapped the folder. 'Something about it in there.' He added, 'I think you'll be able to do something with each of them. That's the point of this exercise, isn't it. See what we can do by way of getting people to identify with the people we offer them, try to get them thinking about what the school's done for the community. Done to it, also.' He looked at Carl. 'It's not easy, what we're setting out to do. We're talking about the way people see themselves, after all, and then the way they see the area where they lived the early years, maybe all the years of their lives. That's something special, after all.'

He started with Mick O'Connell because he looked the easiest. Half an hour later, all he had was a lot of laughs. He'd remembered Mick picking up a phone. 'Railway. Yes, of course it's a hotel. Come round and try our beer. I'll pour it now, the froth should be settled by the time ya get here.' Mick hadn't liked anyone else picking up the phone. 'Waste of a good opportunity,' he used to say. 'Ya use a phone to drum up business! That's what I reckon.' There had been the murder of a woman's lover by her husband in the lounge, and Mick's recall: 'I wasn't there at the time, I was about a fortnight away.' He meant he'd been out in his predictions by a couple of weeks. He'd done nothing to prevent what he'd thought was inevitable. 'God's the only one allowed to interfere. All the rest of us make things worse. We never know what we're doing.' It was why he didn't bet though he allowed starting price bookies to operate. 'They give people a thrill. It's money chucked away, of course, but so's beer money. Most

money's chucked away, it's the misery of the working class, give'em money and they don't know what to do with it. I'm doin'em a kindness in giving them a place where they can spend it for some pleasure.' Mick said the Irish working class was better off in Australia than they'd ever been in Ireland, though many suspected he'd never been to the country he called his home. He'd caught a boat to the British isles one time and there were those who said he'd never got closer to Ireland than London. 'Got no idea at all o' the dialects, we need an expert to try him out!'

Experts of this sort never came. Perhaps they didn't exist outside of folklore, which was where Mick belonged. He created it for his cover, his shrubbery, like a low-nesting bird, and he never moved out of it, apart from a visit to the races occasionally or an appearance in court when some case came up including customers. He was a garrulous but courteous witness, aware that His Honour had to be made to feel important: 'Most sairtainly, Yr Honour,' was the way people reported him when he'd been called, and they liked to remember the magistrate who said, 'If every witness I had to hear was like you Mr O'Connell, my life would be different indeed.' How was this to be taken? It was repeated with amusement, so that the folklore implied its own compulsion. It wasn't to be broken into and investigated, it was to be allowed to cover everything it touched with its peculiar atmospherics. Mick, Carl Nelson decided, had solved the problem of life in a way peculiarly his own. His life was a creation, a tale, that he'd made up. Nobody saw all of it. Everyone knew bits and told them under the influence of whatever they'd had that day, so nothing was beyond suspicion either. What could you say about Mick? He ran The Railway Hotel, that was a fact, and had done so since ... nobody quite knew when, though there would be records of that, at least, with the Licensing Court. But who wanted to bother? Mick was an institution, and institutions have a past rather than an organised history. Mick's wife had left him years before. He was known to have had relationships with various cooks and housekeep-

ers but they were a steady stream rather than a series of fixtures; in other words, their replacement, one by the next, was part of Mick's way of doing things, which was not to be questioned because to pry into it, to nose about, was an act of disbelief and Mick, though not a churchgoer, and only a spasmodic giver to the church and its causes, was himself an object of belief. People believed in his consistency, even though their stories pointed in the opposite direction. Perhaps he was consistent in being inconsistent, and that was what people loved. Pub behaviour, and the way people got treated in stories told in and about his pub, were a more understanding, forgiving system of judgement than was dished out by cops, lawyers, courts or anyone else. Fallibility was the one thing ensured by Mick's flow of beer, and the life of the hotel was endless because even when the grog stopped the stories went on, underground and overground, in the air, inside the hats, through the words of liars, inventors, scandalists, journalists, the respectable, the opposite, those who knew and those who claimed they didn't ...

Carl put down what he could and he realised it was hopeless. He couldn't print this! He rang Tom. Tom said, 'I thought this might happen. It might've been better to start at the more respectable end of the spectrum if you see what I mean.' Carl saw, but he'd thought the Railway end might be more amusing. It might give more people a place in the story the two of them had decided should be told. Tom said, 'You'll have to have a go at something entirely different. We need a few different attempts to look at before we decide on our final approach. I'd better join you with a couple myself, if the first hurdle's brought you down. I'll pick a couple from that list, it won't matter if I tackle people you've already written about, we'll be able to compare.'

Thus it was agreed.

Tom came around with a piece on Arnold Boucher, to find that Carl had written about Bob Davis. 'Three men,' Carl warned his friend. 'That's going to be one of our problems. The world's changed and

you have to do more than write about men. Women understand things differently and unless you include what they know, they won't look at you these days.'

Tom knew. 'I've had this out with my wife. Speak for yourselves, I tell her. You won't let us speak for you any longer. I accept that. Most men do, these days. So don't leave a gap, fill it! Move in and say what you have to say.' He looked beaten. 'She usually says something she's picked up from me, like "I'm working on it".' This time he looked frustrated. 'Working on it! It doesn't mean anything! It's just a way of shutting me up, getting me off her back, and so on. She's not working on it at all. The truth is, women don't trust people talking about themselves, or each other. They call it gossip, and boy, they ought to know! They won't tell us anything, they won't release anything, until they've got everything worked out so they're in charge. That's what I think, Carl. What about you?'

Carl wanted to stop him making things harder. 'Tom, my friend, we've taken on a job. We've got something difficult to do. Read me what you wrote about Arnold Boucher. Or would you prefer I read it myself?' Tom handed him what he'd written, so cursorily that it was a statement in itself. Carl, amused, because his friend wasn't usually so cranky, started to read.

'The first of our former students is from a family that's served the development of the Tambo valley for generations, beginning with his great-grandfather in eighteen XXX.' Carl looked up. 'There's a date for that, somewhere. I know there is.'

'But can you believe it? They wouldn't be the only family that shifted their arrival back over the years. They all want to be first settlers in this place or that so they move the dates of arrival until they are. For a year or two!' He laughed. 'You know what I mean.'

Carl did, having encountered the same problem. 'Their first holding is believed to have been near Wattle Circle, on the Omeo Highway, but after a year or two it was transferred to Doctors Flat,

in the Swifts Creek district.' Something in the word made him jib. 'District? District? Why not "area", Tom?'

'Don't quibble. What's the difference, I don't care. "Area" if you like. If someone thinks it's better. Go on about Arnold.'

'Other members of the family came down from New South Wales and a small enclave settled close to each other so that it was said that they barricaded the Tambo Valley's northern end. Jokes about this family gateway, as it was called, can still be heard today.'

'Rather ungracious jokes, to my mind,' Tom said. 'But jokes of a sort. If you think they're funny.'

'I'll bet they're not,' Carl said, 'but we'll get to jokes a bit later. Jokes are tricky. There's insider jokes and outsider jokes, and insiders don't like outsider jokes, and vice-versa ...'

'And outsiders know they're meant to feel excluded, which means inferior, when insiders crack insider jokes,' Tom said, 'but let's keep going, we can't afford to get tangled up in that.'

Tom's piece continued. 'The gateways of the Boucher family are not so concentrated today, because they are further apart. Travellers today can encounter properties in the control of the family at a variety of places between Bruthen and the southern outskirts of Omeo, and the family's intimate knowledge of the region extends along many of the tracks leading away from the highway itself, into ...'

Carl lifted his head because there was a list full of crossings out and additions. Tom explained, 'Skip all that. It's not up to date. That's just me scribbling down a few that I could think of. The actual places can't go in until I've checked with members of the family. Arnold himself, probably, though I didn't want him to know what I was doing until it was finished. He'll argue over everything and want every second line changed. People give you the shits, at times.' He put his weight back on the chair he was sitting in. 'They think they embody some lasting truth in themselves, and they don't. No matter who they are and what they think about themselves, they *don't!*' He looked at his fellow writer. 'You know that.'

Again, Carl could feel a weakness exposed, and wanted to comfort his friend. 'It's not easy writing about someone else's family. We'd be just as cranky if they were writing about us. So we get prickly, and difficult ...' He went back to Tom's written words.

'Here, this is a good bit!'

'What is?'

Carl tapped the page with a finger. 'You're talking about the road surveyor and Arnold's grandfather telling him which side of the river to put the road.'

Tom was happy again. 'Oh yes, that's delightful. The surveyor had arrived with a plan in mind and Boucher, the local identity, could see what was wrong with it. It'd get washed away in the first flood ...'

'... and did!' Carl added, as if affirming his own story. 'Remember how Peter Gardiner wrote down all those stories about how the Omeo Road got its names? We should have him in on this.' He looked at Tom, who wasn't enthusiastic. 'We'll ask Peter if we want to borrow any of his work, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. What do you think about what I've said about Arnold Boucher?'

Carl had to go quietly because he had another piece of his own to read. 'I think it's good. I think you do make it clear, if the reader's got any discernment, that Arnold, like most members of his family, could be a negative old bastard when he wanted to be. Obstructive. People have a huge demand to be taken seriously and when your daily work is bush-bashing of one sort or another, you're inclined to be pushed aside by anyone official who comes from a council, or state government, so you've got to become expert at putting those people back in their boxes. You owe it to everyone around you, or this is what you feel, to protect the local way of doing things.'

Tom was with him, he could see. 'A lot of the time, it's outsiders who bring us new things. They come in from outside. Like TV. Nobody down there invented that, but we learned pretty quick smart how to handle it. Fix it, install it, all the things you've got to do. There's local ways of doing things and there's ideas that come from

the outside. The two have to mix, because people want the best of both worlds. They want the new and they want to be aligned with the old thing, the resistance. Silly, aren't we?'

Carl nodded. 'What you're talking about is at the heart of what we're doing. We're trying to support a school that's been good at creating careers for young people to go away and leave. But we also want everyone who's been through the school to feel that they're a part of this place where they grew up, and we don't want them to be ashamed of the ways of their homes, wherever they were. Isn't that part of it too?'

Tom nodded. 'Who else did you write about? Bob Davis, was it?' Carl nodded. 'Glad you took him on, I don't think I'd know what to say about him.'

Carl: 'I don't think I knew either.'

'So what did you say?'

Carl took up his pages and began reading in an impersonal voice, trying to be like a newsreader. 'Bob Davis is one of those men who's likely to confront you in unexpected places. If you stop to photograph a view from some cutting in a road, you're likely to find his name on a brass plaque let into a stone which some bulldozer driver has pushed to the edge of the track as a memorial to the men who did the job. Or you visit a little school that's had to be moved so it isn't too close to the road to be safe, and there's a list of the men who moved the school, one weekend probably, when they volunteered their labour to make sure things were safe for the children. Bob Davis will be on the list. Bob pushed himself in his efforts to help others. It was the nature of the man to listen to anybody who asked him something, and to help where he could. This means that if you go into VicRoads headquarters in Melbourne and ask for him they probably won't know who you mean, but if you go to small communities dotted along the roads we use every day, people will smile

when you mention his name. People like Bob are the underside of everything that gets done ...'

'Very nice,' Tom said. 'A well-deserved pat on the back. There's a lot of blokes like that.'

'Women too,' Carl said. 'Though they're usually even harder to see than people like Bob.'

'What are we supposed to be writing, Carl?' Tom asked. 'Bottom-up history? We have to be careful. We want people to join in, join us, after they read what we're saying. We don't want them to feel they don't want to be associated with the people we're talking about, because if they do, we've achieved the opposite of what we set out to do.'

'Which is?'

Tom looked prickly at having been put on the spot to say. 'We're trying to give official recognition to people who say they don't want it when they want it very much, in fact. They'll say, leave me out of anything you write, only put in the bigwigs, but you know that what they really want is to be mentioned. But they're lowly people, so they expect to get left out. And you and I want to make sure they're included, these ordinary people, but we don't want to do it in a way that embarrasses them. We're trying to put the lowly people back into history and we're trying to give them pride in being there, and we're trying ...'

'... at the same time,' Carl put in, his voice rising loudly, '... and that's why it's difficult, we'll be lucky to get away with it, but it's still worth trying to do ...'

'My word it is!' Tom said. 'My jolly word it is! It's always worth trying to do things that little bit better, more justly ...'

He beamed!

'... than anyone's ever done it before! But you were saying. Bob Davis, road worker?'

'I was saying,' Carl said. 'Yes. I was saying.' He fumbled with his papers before he began again. 'There's so much we can't say.'

For instance, take Bob Davis. There was a year or two when he was working on the road north of Omeo, somewhere out near Glen Wills. In the shadow of the snow, you might say. He had a wife and kids at home, but he didn't get home every weekend. He had a very accommodating lady at Glen Wills, who had a child with Bob. Little girl. I don't know what became of her, but I know she existed. She was a byblow of a roadworker, you might say. Let's hope she had a good life, but ...'

'You wouldn't want to bet on it!'

'You would not! Life's chances aren't handed out very evenly, in case you hadn't noticed, Tom.'

'I've noticed. Go on with what you were saying.'

'You and I know that. Everyone knows that. But can we say it? In this stuff about an ex-students' association?'

'Why shouldn't we say it if everyone knows it already?'

'Because ...' Carl was struggling, and Tom, who knew very well, didn't want to help.

'Because?'

'Because ... most Australians, especially working class Australians, want their true beliefs kept just that little bit out of sight. If we were running a church, we'd say Credo, Credo, singing out all our beliefs. But people who haven't had much of a go don't like to act that way. They'd prefer to keep anything and everything they own under a bit of shelter ...'

'You can't blame anybody for that.'

Carl agreed. 'But you and I, we're trying to have it both ways, aren't we.'

'I suppose we are.'

'That makes it hard. If not pretty close to impossible.'

'Why's it impossible?'

'Because we want to appeal, publicly, to something that's usually kept hidden.'

'Well, we'll just have to be smart, won't we?'

'Yes. The trouble is, I'm not sure that I'm anywhere near as smart as I need to be.'

They agreed to think about it, and try again the following week.

Each had tried to write about a woman. Tom had chosen Maureen Richardson, and Carl had overcome his nerves, or faced them head-on, perhaps, to have a go at Indira Wightman. 'Who goes first?' Both groaned. 'I will,' Tom said. 'You're going to hate this. I know it isn't any good.'

'Why so negative?'

'I don't notice that you're any keener than I am,' Tom said, 'but, since you ask, it's because what I've written is so bloody negative.'

'Negative? She was pretty effective, in her way, Maureen.'

'In her way. I make her sound like a little terrier, a bloody nuisance, someone who, once they got hold of you, wouldn't let anything go until she got what she wanted.'

'That's what she was like. I remember very well.'

'Yes, but it's awful to read.'

'The truth is, she was awful to be with.' Carl shuddered. 'I'd classify her as a get-on-the-other-side-of-the road person. If you saw her you went into a shop until she was past. If you let her get hold of you she wouldn't let you get away without promising something, and once you promised, boy, that was it!'

'Who wants to write about someone like that? Who wants to read about someone like that? What I've written sounds awful.'

'Let's hear it.'

Tom passed Carl a couple of sheets. 'Here, read it for yourself.'

Carl read. 'No one espoused more good causes than Maureen ...' He said to Tom, 'You say "espoused". Spouse means marry, you know.'

Tom waved an unhappy hand. 'Read on.'

Carl grinned, having made his point. Maureen had never married, except the causes she took up, and used to beat people with.

He threw in a thought of his own. 'She was the town's witch. Every good cause she took up was a broom to beat the rest of us with.' Tom waved his hand again. 'Get on with it.'

'She was, in her way, a register of everything that needed to be done, and wasn't. She never took kindly to having her ideas resisted. Councillors, and state and federal politicians learned to avoid her wrath, if possible, though avoidance was not always easy. She had influence in surprising places and a refusal here might mean a protest from a surprising there. Many of those who stood, briefly, in her way must have been surprised at the forces gathered to alter their position. There was the famous kindergarten case where the council moved, over three successive meetings, from nought-thirteen to thirteen-nought. Nobody quite knows how she did it ...'

'Pure bloody cussedness,' Tom said. 'What a woman!'

'... but the kindergarten was built where Maureen wanted it built, and to this day bears the name of the person Maureen felt deserved the honour of having her name enshrined in it.'

'Enshrined. You've got the right word there, Tom. It was a holy life, if you stand back and appraise it, which isn't easy.'

'Very difficult, because every thing she did stirred controversy. Passions. That was how she was. She didn't just bring out the best in people, she brought out all the worst in them too, the negatives, she staged a ding-dong fight, and she bloody well won, nearly every time. How she could live like that is beyond me.'

'She loved a fight. Fighting for good causes was the marriage she never had.'

'You and I know that, but we can't say it. Or not that I can see.'

'We might, you know. There could be a way.'

'Read on.'

Carl continued, aloud this time, enjoying his friend's assertions and his discomfort. 'Along with the council's reversal of its position on a kindergarten, perhaps her most famous cause was her assertion of a child's right to be represented by two parents, even when

the child had only one. In her capacity to find ingenious arguments to support this notion she never exceeded her achievements in this area, even though she wasn't ultimately successful in pleading her case. Her opponents claimed that she'd set out to make common-sense and logic laughable, even farcical, and she would say, "They're only describing the way they go on themselves. My ideas are simple enough." Then she would argue one of her most persuasive themes – that if a child is left to carry disadvantage they will ultimately unload it onto someone else and at the cost of all.'

Tom put in, 'And she was right about that. It's why we need to remember her.'

Carl: 'I'm glad you say "need", because we do. The reason we find her so painful is that we had to be reminded of so much.'

Tom: 'After that final page I've put a picture I think we should use.'

Carl had a look. 'Hard as nails, but you can see what she was battling for. Justice.'

Tom: 'She was battling society at large because it hadn't given her a position she could handle well, and it was keeping her excluded from everything because people knew she wasn't going to marry. Hence the emphasis on women.'

Carl: 'A pity she never married. Perhaps that McNaughtin man, he was just about righteous enough.'

Tom: 'Huh. He ended up in jail.'

Carl: 'Well, you know, I think it would have been the makings of Maureen if she'd been married to a man who went to jail. It would have humbled her, and if only she'd been really humble, then I think that people could have stood her. Understood her, certainly. People like virtuous people so long as they've got enough faults, so that ordinary people aren't made to feel unworthy by them. It's having people who make you feel you're below par that upsets people. It's all very well being virtuous but you have to be ordinary as well because if you seem to be too virtuous nobody wants to be like you. You're left

to be virtuous on your own and you're a pain in the neck to ordinary people. I have a feeling that people want to be shown the way to lead a virtuous life but they don't want to feel too virtuous, so that anyone who leads the way, so to speak, mustn't stand too far out in front.'

Tom: 'So what are we trying to do with these people we're writing about? We're trying to set them up as role models, aren't we, but not so obviously that readers will feel they've been left behind. We're trying to win support for an organization that's full of leader type people. They're people who inspire others to follow but they cause amusement and opposition too, and people need to work out what they think of them before they'll be prepared to commit to following them.'

Carl said, 'That is indeed our aim.'

Tom said, 'So let's hear what you said about Indira Wightman.'

Carl opened his folder as unwillingly as Tom, a minute before. He read as if he was alone in the room. 'Indira was not the sort of person we would think of as a Gippslander. She had an air of having dealt with people who were important, secretive, and probably international in their outlook. The word 'secretive', which I used a moment ago, was an unusual characteristic. She was, apparently, assertive and confident, but she had also a way of respecting people's defences, their weaknesses, which suggested that she knew how vulnerable people were to things they feared, or feared known, about themselves.'

Tom nodded, thinking it a nice opening.

'She was not what most of us would call "Australian", because her way of opening up topics for consideration, or plunging confidently into the hardest aspects of any matter under discussion, had none of the delicacy, even shyness, which Australians like to think are theirs. Something of her parents', or was it her grandparents', experiences in India seems to have shaped her way of dealing with matters. Personal difficulties, personal inadequacies, were treated in her con-

versation as public evidence, things that everyone knew about and mentioned without inhibition. This offended some people, but Indira was relieved, rather than the opposite, when people reacted in this way. If they couldn't take part in a conversation which touched on their own failings and inadequacies the discussion would be better off without them! Those leaving a discussion with her feeling humiliated need never have expected any sort of apology from Indira; to speak in our own vernacular rather than hers, it was as if she wanted the temperature in the kitchen raised so that those who couldn't deal with things at their proper heat would be persuaded to leave matters to those who could.'

Tom: 'Nice again.'

'It was typical of her to clarify this point, as if some misunderstanding of that earlier experience of her family might be confusing the issue. "I wasn't born a white man," she used to say. "I only became a Wightman when I married, here in Australia. The family name in India was Lalith, an unusual name for a family, and one that I'm sorry, I simply can't tell you anything about. I've heard a couple of explanations of its origins but neither of them seem right to me, so, if you don't mind, I'll leave them in the cupboard where I think they belong.'

Tom again: 'Spoke with confidence, didn't she. We haven't had many of her sort around here.'

Carl: 'She had a way of calling on anyone who might offer leadership, and that included personal as well as financial leadership, to do what she expected of them ...'

Tom: 'So she was really the opposite of Maureen, wasn't she?'

Carl nodded as he read on. '... and it was part of her expectations of people that if she'd selected them as able to play a leadership role in some activity then they should rise to the occasion she'd presented them with. They should, in other words, feel her expectations as a natural extension of their present position, not some sort of new thing calling for adjustment in their lives. This, although it was not

a matter she was ever willing to discuss, as far as I am aware, must have been a constant in her social activities.'

'Sure must,' said Tom. 'Remember Marilyn Miller?'

Carl sat back. He'd been thinking of the same thing. 'Who could forget Marilyn?'

The two men sat, joined by a name not on their list. They hadn't meant to leave her off, they simply hadn't thought of her, and now she'd resurrected herself from the thoughts they associated with another woman, Indira Wightman, and the all-male balance they'd suspected themselves of carrying began to adjust itself in their minds. Tom said, as if recalling a better time, 'I wish we hadn't lost her.'

'Marilyn?' The woman they were thinking of hung in the air. 'Yes,' Carl said, affirming nothing but a life he'd thought well led. 'Yes. Yes.'

Tom again. 'Young Billy rose to his occasion, we have to say. We have to give him that.' The two men had found a moment of consolation for a loss too hard to bear. Tom said, 'I was in Melbourne by the time she died, but I think you attended the service?'

'Yes.' Again there was a hesitation about words, as if they were hardly needed. Then Carl: 'Young Billy lost his father when he was ... what, fourteen? Thirteen. Got over it, as best he could, had a wonderful guide in his mother. She taught him the business as she created it. Quite a feat when you think about it. Then he lost her too. Honestly, if you'd seen him at her funeral you wouldn't have thought him worth anything. He was a total wreck. Sixteen, I suppose, neither a boy nor a man. Nothing in particular, really ...'

'That's what we all thought,' Tom said, 'but Marilyn had made him in the years after his father died. She'd showed him that you could lose anything, and if you had a good head on your shoulders you could make another life on top of the wreckage of the first.'

'Inspiring. That's the only word.'

Tom again. 'To look at him today, you'd say he'd never looked back, except ...'

'... except you feel he must have looked back every night of his life since he lost his dad and mum ...'

There was a silence, then they both said, 'Marilyn.' They looked at each other. 'We'd better add her to the list.' They thought. 'Who's going to write about Marilyn?' Carl had it: 'Billy. I see him occasionally. Once we've got our approach sorted out, I'll explain it to him, and ask him for a few words about his parents. His mum.'

'Good idea.'

The two of them went to Ron Ardeer, who was boss of the newspaper by now. The ex-students' association, which had been talked about for years, was on the verge of being set up. A committee was waiting in the wings, waiting to be elected. Ron was keen on the development. 'For most of my lifetime, governments have run education from Spring Street. They've sent us our principals, they sent inspectors down to tell us how we were doing, they doled out bits of money, and never enough, they built an occasional building, and, apart from that, they've been looking the other way. I think this is going to be a significant move.' He wanted Carl and Tom to tell him how he could help.

They hastened to point out that they were simply *enthusiasts*, they might not be on the committee of the association once it was formed, and that, for the most part, they thought it best that the association start without any particular agenda. 'It'll come to life as people see its possibilities,' Tom said, Carl agreeing. 'We see it as more of a layer of consciousness draped over the life of the area.' He said this last word with deference to Carl, who, for his part, politely suggested 'district'. Both smiled. Ron looked at the papers they'd brought in. 'These people on this list, the people you've been writing about, they're all graduates of our high school, I take it?' He studied the names. 'Marilyn Miller. Written by Billy,' he added, though the

piece was signed "William Miller". It's good that you were able to get him. He's done well, hasn't he. I remember when he was sixteen and he'd just lost his mother. Oh dear. You wouldn't have put your family fortune on Billy making much of himself, back then. He was a wreck. Totally lost. You'd have said he had no hope at all. I remember telling my dad when I came back to this office after Marilyn's funeral, that the kindest thing we could do would be to forget his existence for a few years. Give him a chance to see if he could make anything of himself.' Ron beamed, indeed he almost glowed. 'It makes me feel good to think about him. He hasn't put a foot wrong, and somehow we know it's all due to Marilyn and especially what she did with him, getting him centred, after the pair of them lost his father. Mind you,' he said, his mind flicking in another direction, 'we started out this morning, you and I, talking about what a good school could do for its students, and the district at large, and it's quite a lot, but ... but ... when it's all boiled down, we're all finally responsible for our own souls. We're given one life, all that sort of thing, so what do we make of the chances we were given? In Billy's case, I don't think you gentlemen would be claiming too much credit for the school, would you?'

They weren't, and said so. The newspaper man, having established this, began to look at the other sketches. 'Bob Davis, a real country product, wasn't he. Every region's got them, names that keep on popping up. There's always a bit of mystery about them, and stories galore. I don't mind telling you gentlemen, because I'm sure you'll feel the same, that it's both a privilege and a rather severe examination of someone to be a writer about a region where everybody knows everybody else. Or they could. They might. Or we could even say they do, in ways that are not easy to understand. We're a bunch of individualists, after all, and we're connected in ways that surprise us. Look at these names. Someone might say, how could you put Arnold Boucher with Indira Wightman, but you have, and they do belong together, if only because it's hard to see them side by side. That, after all, is what a community is, it's a whole lot of

people put side by side who would probably never have chosen to go together, if they'd had a choice, and they didn't. What did you say about Indira?' He glanced. 'Yes, yes. The Indian name was Lalith? I never knew that. I wonder where that came from? You say, she says she didn't know. Probably a bit of censorship there, I suspect. And why not? We've all got to keep some sort of control over what gets said about us, otherwise ...'

He smiled at the window, then shook hands. They left, the two of them, thinking the paper would give them most of what they wanted.

Achieving Mount Macedon

Clemens deVille was at his most gracious, welcoming to his property the couple who were interested in buying next door. He waited until the arrivals were out of their car, then he shook the driver's hand, a man he hardly knew, and kissed Anita, the man's wife, on the cheek, tenderly took her hand, and pointed at his own large, and rambling home. 'Denise is getting things ready. Come on in.'

This was at Mount Macedon, an hour's drive north of Melbourne. Clemens and Denise had lived there since his earliest success, the best part of a lifetime ago, when Clemens, who'd made his first fortune from television, was looking for other investments. He'd caught successive booms on the property market, got himself in and out of petrol at appropriate times, and had done all this under an umbrella of weekend parties at the Macedon home, endless phone calls, close attention to state and local politics, and a way of knowing things that required people to do him favours. Clemens' hands were as clean as any. And Denise ...

What are women for, in a culture run apparently by and for men? How many answers are there to this! Left to themselves, men would probably produce a mono-culture, but women won't allow it: can't, because the business of reproduction, continuity, is largely in their hands. Besides, men are cunning as well as forceful, and it assists them at times to be able to divert from the single tracks of money, power, strength and control, to the diversities that women use. It might be said that life is in endless tension between simplification and its opposite, between chaos and the making of order, between management via simple and clearly understood law-making, and, on

the other hand, impulsive new ideas running every which-way. In this sense, women are handy for men because they are less bound to the firmness of arrangements, more in tune with those aspects of the psyche which welcome change. Denise deVille had always kept herself to one side of the predictable. It was part of her controlling of her husband that she never let him be too sure, except that there were large areas of their life where his word was law. She knew, for instance, that he was proud of the home they lived in; rather, of the three homes that had gone into the making of it – of which more in a moment. She insisted, however, that the home be ‘modern’, a word with many meanings. The looseness of the word made agreement about using it easier. If she disliked the lighting of an area, it wasn’t *modern*, and change could proceed. Any matter to do with the buildings themselves was to do with their age, period, identity, and these belonged to Clemens. They added to his patrimony, to everything, mostly money and commercial shrewdness, that he’d bought to the marriage. He liked to apply the word ‘heritage’ to each of the home’s three stages, as if the arbitrary developments that had taken place down the years had some narrative linking them, even if it had never been imagined at the beginning.

Anita and Hendrik Helmskirk needed to have it explained, something Clemens enjoyed. The first building, he showed them, had been a Federation piece, modest in scale but exuberant in character, but real wealth had arrived after the first world war. A large block of 1920s building had added itself to the earlier house, dominated by its entrance and, at the back, a huge kitchen giving onto spacious lawns outside and a dining area within, with bedrooms spread across the top of everything and a spacious staircase linking ground floor with first. People had dressed upstairs and come down, displaying. Then the owners before the deVilles had added something of the wealth and internationalism of the early 1970s, in the form of vast internal spaces defined only by endless units of couch and seating, spaces dominated by screens, and vistas of swimming pool.

Clemens confessed to his visitors that it was the oldest part of the house he loved best. 'It releases my imagination,' he told them, then asked them how far they'd gone in researching the house they were interested in. 'We've been given a couple of books of photographs,' Hendrik Helmskirk told his host, 'but now we want to study more closely. Which is why I asked Anita to contact you. We need a sense of the area, any drawbacks we don't yet know about, and, above all, we need to know what it's like to live up here. After all, it's quite an investment, so if we make it, we want to know we'll be handing on something our family will be grateful to receive, and not be cursing us for leaving them with a problem.'

A talkative man, Clemens thought: 'And you, Anita?'

'The only thing I could add,' she said, 'is that if we buy up here, we need to be sure that we're not drifting into a dead end, but connecting ourselves with a living tradition, and one of the best that's available in this state. We could buy ourselves a house on Sydney Harbour but I've never particularly wanted to do that.' Hendrik shook his head, Clemens waiting to see if he was going to put in something, then allowing himself an historical excursion that always pleased him. 'Mount Macedon isn't all that high, you know,' he said. 'A couple of thousand feet, but that's a significant lift above the plain.' He smiled. 'We've even got some snow gums on the mount, believe it or not. If we've got time later, I could show you ... if you're interested. Not so very many, mind you, but a reminder that we do get cold snaps up here, and that was what appealed to many of the first settlers. They found the summers very hot, especially on the plains. They liked the little bit of altitude they could get up here, and the change of climate that came with it. Many British settlers said it reminded them of going to the hill stations, as they'd done in India, and something of that sort of mentality attached itself to the buildings, as they were put up, one by one. Cool climate trees did well, even some things that people had grown used to, in India. It's been one of the earliest examples of a particular form of gardening in this

country, not one that's based on heat and dazzling light, rocks and grasses and all that sort of thing, but a more withdrawn, introspective form of gardening ... but I mustn't go on, it's Denise that should be telling you this ...'

Over a graciously poured morning tea, served in Minton seaweed pattern china, Denise told them what to look for when they made their inspection of the property next door. What they could provide for guests, what they might have to add. Gardening work that needed to be done urgently, things that could wait a while. 'The place has been neglected for a couple of decades. You're going to have to do some cutting back, but you won't want to do it until you have a view of how you want the garden to look when you've finished. The people who've had it for the last three quarters of a century ...'

'Three quarters of a century!' Anita put in, surprised at encountering something longer than her own lifespan, which seemed short enough to her.

'... had a passion for creating secluded little spots. Meditative corners, they used to call them. Well! I'm all in favour of a little meditation but only if you can do it somewhere out of the way. What you need in a *big* garden, such as the ones we have up here, are vistas with little defined areas providing variety. Contrast.' Denise, perhaps without realising it, had taken in enough from earlier owners on the mountain to give newcomers, at least, a sense of being a secure, stable, settled and well-established woman herself. Clemens was never prouder of her than when she was talking about the Mount. Somehow she made it her own by the simple act of discussing it. The cleverest thing she did was to talk about it as if she herself was a late arrival on what had been the creation of something earlier, in history. She pretended, as it were, to be recovering something from the past when the Mount, as she knew it in her own mind, was something she'd imagined. Her genius as a social figure was that what she imagined was something desired by many people, each for reasons of their own. In the versions of events put abroad by

Denise, company directors made key decisions during long walks with their wives, or colleagues, or alone, along one of the mountain's many paths, regardless of where these decisions were actually taken. Denise gave the mountain credit for much that had happened in the human mind, but the mind, unaware of this, could do little by way of protest! She attributed the wealth of many of the older estates to the purity of air that had led to purity of thought and simplicity of direct and immediate action. Human qualities of many sorts were summarised, by Denise, in her anecdotes of life on and off the mountain. Children went away to the state's famous boarding schools, but they came home better for it. The mountain also summarised serenity, and achievement; having established oneself there was a sign of well-favoured striving. Denise was too clever to be single-minded about her place of retreat. She took good care to be part of the best circles at Portsea, at the entrance to Melbourne's bay, she was in lots of social circles attached to hospitals, racing clubs, charities of this and that sort, everything that contributed to the paths taken by people as they made their way towards rarefied upper air. Denise had an innate sense of rhythm which meant that anything she associated herself with flowed into and outwards from events of widespread appeal. Fiercely competitive, she was never heard to say a harsh word about anyone; whenever she was silent she made a point of affecting ignorance as well. Endlessly in need of social validation herself, Denise provided it for whole classes of people beneath her. And Clemens watched, admiring. They'd married young, they'd had no children for years, but in the time before the children came they built themselves an irreplaceable spot in their city's social life, using their home to provide something of a home for classes needing to establish a desirable identity that they didn't possess. The mythic nature of Mount Macedon, as Denise understood it, was therefore a foundation for the lives of all who followed Denise and Clemens. Hence her endless creation and re-creation of the place's history. Its history was Denise's creation, and nobody needed it more than her.

Clemens needed it less. Though he marvelled at the way her imagination created a whirling life of society that he didn't actually need, he saw well the advantages that a wife of her sort was giving him; it was a source of benefaction, not a limitation, that he didn't really understand what it was that she was doing. If he'd understood, he'd have been able to do it for himself, and would have felt obliged to work very hard at it: otherwise, and in fact, he could leave it to her and simply pick up the benefits. Someone looking at them from the outside might have said that his contacts, money and confidence gave her the ground from which she operated. Perhaps it was so. Clemens did things with sweeping confidence; Denise did likewise. Could she have done it without him? Probably, but much less easily. Certain human qualities and characteristics go together, and couples that balance are more formidable than others who combine less easily. The deVilles were a byword in Melbourne society for making the life that wealthy people wanted, and it was no accident that Anita and Hendrik Helmskirk had come to them.

There was also the longstanding connection that Anita and Clemens had been to school together, in a place far from possessing the prestige of the city's better circles. Clemens had done this easily, and as to the manner born; for Anita it had been less easily achieved.

Anita's father, to her mother's dissatisfaction, had driven a truck for years. If this placed him in rural or any other society, it troubled him not at all. Her mother wanted him to do better. In hot-tempered rows they argued. 'Tell me how to do it!' the driver would ask. 'Give me a workable plan!' His wife, Anita's mother, had no such plan, but she had that more penetrating thing, desire for change. After years of tension, the opportunity came. The Ambulance Service of the district enlarged, and wanted drivers. Anita's father got the job, and it changed him. Time after time, when he got home after a shift, he took himself to a chair by a window, whatever the time of day, and sipped beer, staring out. What could he see? His children, especially Anita, a teenager by then, knew that he was reviewing some crash

he'd attended, his mind lingering on bodies, young and old, that he'd handled in the shift he'd just finished. Anita could tell by the way he looked at her – an impossible tenderness – when he'd had to treat someone of her age. Her father had been a hard man, but he became tender. 'Gently,' he would say to children if he thought they might trip, or fall. His daughter knew that he was changing and was desperate to follow; she'd accepted her dad the truckie easily enough, but now that he was spiritualising, she knew that to follow him, to stay within distance of her father, she would have to rise too. This contrasted with the all-too-easy habit she had – it was hardly more – of staying in touch with her mother. That longstanding dissatisfaction with her husband's work – driving trucks – had its basis in the company it compelled the mother to keep – truckies' wives and girlfriends. She'd always yearned for a more refined circle of friends and interests, yet it had never been on offer. There was nothing quite like it in the place where she lived. What she longed for wasn't available. There being no models for her, or competition, she didn't know how to shape herself. All she knew was that there was a hollowness inside, a feeling of dull incompetence when what she felt a well-brought up woman would be like was ... stylish, in some way. Ready-witted. Hospitable. Offering charm, in a sophisticated way that tested people as it welcomed them. In short, a smart person would force others to be smart, too, in some way that improved them.

And around her, where she was, this never happened. Her husband had been unsatisfactory as a truckie, and, now that he was something else, he'd slipped out of her grasp, in an upward direction. There was no doubt about the direction. He was superior, because his understanding carried pain that he couldn't escape, and his past had only partly trained him to bear what he'd acquired. One evening, as he left his seat by the window to fill his glass, he said to his daughter, 'Be ready for change when it hits you, Anita. You won't know when it's coming, so you'll have to prepare yourself before it's time. You'll find it's worth it, though. Otherwise you won't know

what's struck you.' What did he mean? Anita found her father's change, his move upstairs, perplexing, and yet she knew its locality: it was *inside* him, it *was* him. What had happened was the man, there was no escaping that conclusion, because the man was her dad, rough, careless and kind as he'd always been. Now he had another layer of consciousness to deal with and he was neither well-equipped to deal with it nor to block out what had happened. Sometimes when a quarrel with his wife caused her to leave the room, he would say to their daughter, when she came in to see what had happened, 'Your mother means well. I'm not blaming her. I never gave her the world she wanted and when she thought I should be able to, it changed me. I'm not the man I used to be.' He would say things like this, charitably enough, but always with an edge that told her that he, and probably her mother too, had a problem they couldn't solve. Her mother didn't really know what she wanted because nothing viable had ever presented itself. Her mother, the teenage Anita saw, was like a shopper; she might well go home happy if she spotted the thing she wanted in a tray, on a table-top of a quality department store, but if she happened not – or never – to see the required item then she would never be able to imagine it for herself. Whereas her father, who was shrewd with money and with tangible objects, had been moved ... not so much out of his quality, or even class, as his *type* of thought. 'Drive safely,' he would say, and he would drive safely himself, his daughter fully and his wife partially aware that he was looking for maxims to guide him through this world he'd entered at another's bidding. Anita perceived that he never rebuked his wife for the change she'd brought about; that meant, to her, that in one way or another he felt he was better off for the change having taken place. It had brought him painful, perhaps insoluble, problems, but their existence meant he himself, his whole life, was now on a more meaningful plane than before.

Anita knew, when the time came for her to marry, that she'd resolved none of these things her origins had entangled her with;

there would simply be new problems, additional ones, brought by her husband, to deal with. She married willingly enough, not so much happily as with a wild jubilation, as if adding to her problems might give her a better chance of dealing with the whole lot of them in one blow, whatever that might be! She had little faith in thinking her way through, and out of, problems, because she'd never seen her parents do it. They were stuck inside their problems, and as far as she could see they were like most of the people of the district she came from. Defensive, skilled in dodging, not very good at constructing, paths of relief. There was only a way out if you found it for yourself, or the one you wanted to help. Would anyone ever help her?

She doubted it, yet she had a little, lingering hope. Such things appeared to happen, now and then, here and there. Nobody ever knew where relief might present itself. In carrying this hope, this need, into her marriage, Anita knew she was undercutting the vows she'd sworn. She married Abel knowing they wouldn't last a life together; she wasn't trying to make it happen. This freed her of responsibility so that the marriage, which might otherwise have deteriorated into a weight to be carried, was hardly a burden at all. In an important sense she never took Abel seriously, which made it easy for her to be good to him, to bear his miseries, his dependence, his expectation that she would provide answers when and as he needed them. Some pages back, I asked, 'What are women for, in a culture run apparently by and for men?' and I said, 'How many answers are there to this!' How many, indeed; we have managed to arrive at one. Women are men's answer to loneliness, because they can be lonely too. If we – I speak for males – have an insoluble problem, it is a comfort to see our problem replicated, the same yet different. The difference gives hope, promise, that a solution may be there, though whether for man, woman or both remains to be seen.

Women too, by being where and what they are, provide men with the possibility of another answer: their dissimilarity allows men to use them as repositories of blame. Women do things differently,

even when it's clear (to men) that men's ways are logical, therefore they (women) are almost certainly wrong. The existence of an alternative is a reassurance, to the male mind, because, men think, something's got to be right and (our) commonsense tells us that it's more likely to be what's certain than what's uncertain. We may sum up this point of view by saying that women are there to do what's necessary and to carry the burden, as lightly and with as much charm as they can, of mostly being wrong.

Not always of course. Men too make mistakes and *some* men, as most of us know, are stupid too, so that opens up another and quite important role for women, that of graciously, kindly, lovingly pointing out men's mistakes and redirecting them when they're wrong. This, in turn, opens up for men the opportunity to be gracious, loving et cetera in their turn, that is, to admit their mistakes, to learn from them, to inquire into the perceptions that led to these errors, and thus to go on a little more wisely in the future. We are talking, here, about two ways of being in charge: the first is to be the absolute ruler whose every word is trusted; and the second is to be the listener, the confidant of all, who chooses among the advices given to him the best to follow. This choice is made a little more available to the would-be-ruler, sheik, king or politico, by the existence of woman, who is similar to and even more dissimilar to that more generalised figure *man*.

Man is the subject matter of novels. Writers know that our books stand or fall by the quality of the view of man that they present, hence these frequent discursions into thinking about man, woman, fate, fortune or what you will. How can novelists, and their readers, not be concerned with such things when the characters they deal with are concerned, cannot stop themselves being concerned, with the very same things?

But I was speaking of Anita Helmskirk, as she later became, and her first husband, a man – a first man, I dare say – called Abel. He worked for an insurance company, which meant that he had policy to follow. Nothing ever came up that couldn't if necessary be

referred upstairs. To higher opinion. Insurance is a statistical game, which means that individual cases can be dealt with in any number of ways, so long as the overall numbers fall as they are desired. Nobody knows every case that comes through. Everybody knows the generalities. This has a strange accord with the way that all of us want to be given special treatment, even if others suffer, or miss out. Somebody always suffers ... well, don't they? Abel brought home enough money for him and Anita to be comfortable, first, then quite well-off. He began to invest. She asked him to buy houses and put them in her name. He did this, more or less, using Argo Investments as his holding company. 'Three As,' he liked to say – 'Anita, Abel, Argo.' This had no significance for her but if it pleased him, so what? This word-game business, this playing with letters, told her, again, that their marriage had a limit to it, somewhere just out of sight. She found herself wondering what would cause the rift, when it came, and decided that either they would have children and he would seem more childish than his own offspring, or another man would bring her life into focus. That was what she lacked! How many years had it taken her to see the obvious. The people who did best had sharply-clarified goals. They set targets, and went for them. They achieved. Other people, slumming along in a shoddy state of contentment, wore their days like old clothes, never fitting properly, but comfortable enough because not demanding consideration. Where do we get our standards from, Anita asked, and realised that the answer was, normally, the circumstances of our childhood, and in that respect she had little to build on. There had been her mother, who'd never found anything she could build on, and her father, whose promotion – ascent, if that's the word – had left him perplexed. No, there was nothing to be learned from looking back. Her past had to be left where it was, disregarded.

She had to find a new way of doing things. Enter Hendrik Helmskirk. He was an engineer turned financier, he'd reached Australia in his early twenties, decided that the place was receptive

to men like himself, and that he would stay. He was forty-six when Anita met him, and that, oddly enough, at a weekend retreat for company types at a guest house on the mountain where various speakers were trying to persuade people from a range of companies that the best way to ensure a fortune was to imagine, correctly of course, the nature of the economy in twenty years time. 'Things we call green will be the norm,' speakers told their groups. 'Parcel your money into slabs of one-tenth, invest nine of these parcels where money's being made today, and speculate with the other part. Then, every year, move another tenth into your emerging area, which should be starting to consolidate, to firm up, a little more with each passing year. That way, you'll always have an income and you'll be making the transition carefully. Anita had gone for a walk with Hendrik after an hour or so of this, and they'd walked to the memorial cross at one end of the range. Hendrik, Anita realised, had never looked closely at such a cross, with names, before. He wanted to know about it. She told him what she could. 'In this country,' he said, 'I don't know about anything in detail. I haven't got your history in my head. This makes me shallow, and ignorant; it also gives me freedom. I can improvise. I'm not restricted by what my parents were. I can be something new entirely; think of that!'

She did, and saw that she would guide him, and he would lead her out of the territory she'd inhabited thus far, and they'd arrive somewhere new that they'd found for themselves ...

... which brings us, more or less, to them investigating a house on the same mountain as a possible purchase. The house they'd come to look at, though separated by a couple of hundred metres from that of Clemens and Denise, was simpler, older, and of one period, a broad Victorian villa, as they were called, with, at either end, a generous room bowed forwards, forcing a curved verandah. The house front was essentially straight, there were short wings of bedrooms at the rear, and a long rising curve of approach. One's best view of the house was achieved via the approaches; Anita saw this as a success-

ful trick, while Hendrik was ambivalent, partly because his personality sat athwart ambiguities differently from most people's. Having separated himself years before from his childhood and youth spent in another place, he couldn't recreate them in his tastes as a mature man. Things which people sought to use to *anchor* them were, for him, opportunities. Reassurances lay, for him, in the future, not the past. Strolling up the driveway of this house, called *Bedford*, though why, neither of them had any idea, they could see that whoever had built the house had had confidence enough to let it make one simple, challengeable, statement to last it for all time. The carpets and curtains inside might be replaced, and would no doubt, the vines trailing along the verandah and the ramshackle chairs waiting for people to make themselves at home ... they would surely be shifted, or replaced with something in later style, but the house, as a personality, had no change built into it. It would speak forever of the aspirations of its time. 'It's seriously simple,' Hendrik said, and his wife not only agreed, she knew they'd buy it and in doing so they'd both have reached something unattainable till then.

'It's the next step,' Anita said. 'I haven't even been inside but I've got a feeling we're going to buy. Hendrik,' she said, causing him to pause in their advance on *Bedford*, 'this is going to be our home.'

Hendrik and Anita, on the one hand, and the house, on the other, considered each other. Each would own the other, whatever the word 'ownership' was going to mean. They were going to take each other on. It didn't occur to Anita at the time but this encounter was going to be more sustaining than either of her two marriages. The first had never been more than a step that placed itself as an obstacle of sorts between her growing up and her maturity, the second had been a declaration of willingness to go to a further but as yet undiscovered place, and the third stage, which she'd now come upon, was one of arrival. 'Our search is ended,' Anita said to her husband and he stepped forward so boldly that she knew he'd been persuaded. By her? By *Bedford*? By an atmosphere, a layer of meanings suggested

to them and partially interpreted for them by Denise and Clemens deVille? It hardly seemed to matter. A new stage had begun. 'I suppose there's someone home,' Anita said. 'They agreed on the time, over the phone ...' Hendrik glanced at his watch. 'I'm here to do business. They'll be there.'

Bedford

Bedford did not disappoint. The front steps, the hall, felt inevitable. It had outlasted its original owners, and those who'd come after. The Helmskirks could hardly disturb it now, a seeking couple. The house knew it held what they wanted. Is this a silly thing to say? Houses hold experience, affected by things that have happened there. How else do houses come to shelter ghosts? *Bedford* had been the home of confident people, built in the 1880s by people who thought their fortunes might run on forever, and in succeeding years its owners had sustained it well. It stood above a plain, and far enough from the city where its owners' money was made to have detachment, and with it came a feeling that what it had to give was what was needed next. By the time the Helmskirks reached the back door, to peep, momentarily at the rear garden, stretching away into a tiny beech forest, Hendrik's body language was asserting itself. 'I'm not bargaining. They can have what they ask. It's worth it.' He looked at his wife. 'You agree, Anita?' He knew she did. She was smiling an inward smile that he'd never seen. 'We'll bring our friends up, one by one, to show ourselves what we've reached. When they've all seen it, we'll have an afternoon party, and that will be our celebration, when our friends understand it well enough to celebrate with us. We'll have tents ...' and for a moment she began to let her imagination populate *Bedford*, then she stopped herself because it wasn't really theirs. It was a promise, a beckoning future, a feeling of acceptance, that is to say, it still lay ahead of them, although they were in it, at its centre, really.

Anita said, 'We will be very happy here, my love.'

Two months later she directed a team of men with vans who placed their furnishings as directed. Then they drove away. When Hendrik arrived, late in a working day, she met him at the door for an embrace which was like the signing of a treaty. 'There's any number of things to be done,' she told him. 'I've made a list. You'll think of more.' She saw that he was smiling. 'What, my love?'

He answered in a way she wasn't expecting. 'We ought to have another list, hidden in the back of our minds.' This didn't sound like Hendrick. 'In the back of our minds?' He took a few steps down the hall. 'Pour me a drink, Anita, and I'll tell you what I was thinking.'

She got him a beer and a sherry for herself. They sat in the lounge to the left of the house as it faced the afternoon sun. 'Feels empty, doesn't it?' he said. 'It'll be better when we've got a few things on the walls.' Then he went into himself, hardly bothering to sip. Anita waited. 'What were you saying about the back of our minds?'

This time he sipped decisively. 'It's been a long journey for both of us. We're going to settle here, we'll make everything comfortable, and we'll probably forget how much it's meant to get to where we are. It was never inevitable, was it? Both of us were at full stretch, for years and years. There's any number of times when either of us could have gone wrong.' The room, filled with afternoon sunlight, seemed to be saying that nothing could stop serenity and loveliness alighting where they chose. He added, 'I could think of half a dozen without trying.'

Still trying to establish his thought, she asked, 'Half a dozen what?'

'Times when if something had gone wrong at the crucial moment, everything would have been buggered, and we wouldn't be where we are today.'

'Tell me one of them so I know what you're thinking of.'

'Andrew Pebley.'

This was the name of an associate of Hendrick's, involved with him in the acquisition of a harbourside property in Elizabeth Bay,

Sydney, later to be sold under the cloud of a police investigation into drug distribution, and the many notorious accusations that had flown at Pebley's trial.

'He's in jail.'

'For a few years, but he'll be out one day. The question will be, when he gets out, is he too beaten up by his years inside to go back to dirty work, or will he have it in him to start again? I think Andrew will come out with a few years' worth of trouble inside him.'

'And if he does? Can you handle that?'

'Not with an order from *Bedford*. We've got something to keep clean now. In arriving, we've left a lot behind.'

She saw how he was thinking. 'That other list you were talking of. Do you want to get it into the open, or would you prefer the two of us to go quiet, knowing that the other knows?'

He considered. 'We ought to say it, but not here, in this room, the very first afternoon. Tomorrow, and the day after, you make a list of the things we'll never mention, here at *Bedford*, and I'll do the same. On the weekend, outside, down there in the beech forest, maybe ...' – his eyes sought relief from whatever it was he didn't want inside – '... we'll compare our lists, yours and mine, until we're sure we've got everything covered. Then we'll come back inside, and *Bedford* will be safe. We'll kill off all the ghosts with one great uproar of flame!'

They did this. Next time they were in the city, checking out a new luncheon place in South Yarra, they ran through the failings that each felt burdened with. 'My life only started when I left the east of the state,' Anita said. 'I was barely human for the first twenty years I spent in this country,' Hendrik said. 'Twenty years of searching! It sounds impossible, doesn't it. You wouldn't think anyone could go in the wrong direction for so long, and not realise. But I did.' Anita wanted to support him. 'You couldn't have been wrong all the time. Nobody's wrong for twenty years.'

She'd contradicted what they'd been saying to each other. Was she right or not? They went inside themselves. 'You left Holland ...'

she began. He broke in. 'Holland's not a bad country. I didn't know anything about this country. I still don't, much. I remember getting on the plane. Europe's run out, I thought. Whatever it is I want, I'm not going to find it here. It's better to go somewhere where I don't know a thing, and take my chance with whatever comes along. I'm looking for opportunities, and I'm secretly hoping that they're better than I bargained for. So you see, I was running away, that was the first thing, and I was hoping, that was the second. I couldn't have told you what I was looking for. I didn't have a goal, just to be happy one day when my stars were in alignment.' He put his head back and laughed. 'What stars? I never knew. What stars? I don't know now, either. But they're in alignment, darling, aren't they?' He looked at her as if she was a stranger to him: 'You've never lived away from your home soil, it would have been easier for you?'

The question burrowed into her. Easier? Home soil? It was just as easy to be lost, and confused, by things close to home as by things far away. 'Most of us put too high a value on our origins. We think if we can get to the bottom of where we started, we can know about ourselves. For me, that isn't true. Truth's always waiting to be revealed. If you say you've arrived, it's because you've stopped looking.'

Hendrik: 'Because you've found what you were always looking for, and you don't need to go on any longer.'

She glanced at him: 'Our feelings when we saw *Bedford*. Darling, we were going to list all the things we're escaping from, now that we've got where we wanted to be. Do we still want to do that?'

Hendrik shook his head. 'There's no need. I don't think. We've got to where we wanted. One thing, though ...'

Anita looked.

'... our neighbours. Clemens and Denise. How close are we going to be, to them? Denise is a pretty high-class organiser. If she wanted to put you down, you'd be put down all right. No troubles at

all. Are we out for parity, superiority, no contact, indifference with occasional courtesies, what? Tell me what we're going to do.'

'That's easy,' Anita said. 'Much easier for me than it is for you, because I come from the same place Clemens comes from, and you're from somewhere else. We'll do whatever suits our mood. We'll live in each other's pockets for days at a time, then we won't see each other for weeks. Remember you and I made an agreement when we first got together, not to kill our love by working too hard on it. Let it be, we said, and we have. The same with Clemens and Denise. They're fine. Why? Because they're happy too. Don't forget Clemens and I share a background. We've nothing to hide. We've both come a long way to be where we are. Anyone knowing us when we started out ...'

Hendrik sensed her mood changing: '... a long long time ago ...'

'... would say we ought to be pleased with travelling so strongly for so long, and then, finally ...'

She waved her hand; expressively, she hoped. He said, '... arriving where we have! Okay, my love, you're right. No looking back. No secrets from our neighbours because we don't need them. And why not? Because we're scared of nothing ...'

Anita broke in. 'Nothing's going wrong on us. Not now! We've arrived! We're the tiny minority, darling, who get to where they wanted to be!'

The end of a marriage

After almost two decades of marriage, Anita saw that it was ending. Gradual processes, she perceived, are harder to recognise than dramatic ones. High emotion loves big scenes. Crashing doors and shrill voices are meant to accompany decisions. It isn't necessarily so. Often enough we realise, from delicacies only barely observed, that something vital has gone, or that what was once tolerance is now a measure of menace. What we ignored for years won't be left unactioned any longer. The rot set in when Abel's insurance company

promoted him twice in a year. The pay he brought home increased greatly but the man who brought it was scarcely changed. For years he'd grumbled in half-hearted ways about decisions made above him, decisions which he'd sought because he didn't want to make them himself. When he'd been promoted the first time, he'd even, smilingly, been warned that it was his job, now, to resolve the uncertainties of those below him. Get used to filling that out-tray, he'd been told, because there'll be plenty of people to fill the in-tray! And yet, for Anita, listening to him over their evening meals, and while television ads broke into what was loosely termed entertainment, her husband was near enough to unchanged. Disturbing perplexities, he said, arrived unresolved on his desk. His company didn't have policies on this or that. Leadership was lacking. He wondered how long a company could last if it didn't sort itself out. The letterheads he used at work affirmed that his company had been in business for more than a century, but, Anita saw, that gave Abel no consolation. His pessimism, she decided, when the currents in her mind began to flow in a new direction, was more than a simple, and natural, matter of temperament; he was, whether he knew it or not, a destructive force, moving always within reach of assisting the company to be brought down. How come nobody sees it in there, Anita wanted to know, then she turned her question on herself. I've been married to him for years, we've had no children to distract me, no children whose loyalty I have to swing behind him, on his behalf, no, none of these things, yet it's taken years to see the man for what he is.

That was a slap in the face. Years! Was she such a slow learner, then? She was, it seemed. So what to do? She was going to leave him. After twelve months separation she was going to divorce. With half of what they owned, she'd start a new life. What would that be like? She felt unwilling to think. Get there first, she decided. Next question: when to make the move?

This was oddly difficult. Abel hurt his arm, sailing on a friend's yacht, and was disabled for weeks, needing help with buttons, shoe-

laces, any number of things. He could drive the car, but his habit of getting the keys from his left hand coat pocket with his right hand had to be adjusted, and he was forever forgetting, and, Anita couldn't help realising, it was as if, in the midst of these piffling difficulties, he sensed that she was separating him from herself and went out of his way to be apologetic for the troubles he caused. His defences were readying themselves for something his conscious mind hadn't yet perceived. The moment his arm's better he'll do something to show how much he still needs me. I'll be turned into a nurse!

What to do? It was either be swift and brutal, or make up a story about a new love, someone met by chance on an island beach on a holiday with friends she hadn't seen for years, a whirlwind that had caught her in the most unexpected way ...

Rubbish. None of that. Swift surprise would deal the blow. She picked her time, planning weeks in advance. When Abel went to a three day training conference close to some vineyards on the Mornington Peninsula, she drove him to company headquarters to catch the bus, kissed him fondly in front of his peers, and assured him she'd be there for him when they returned. He was no sooner gone than she was booking a fortnight's holiday flying, walking, swimming and sight-seeing in the Kimberleys. It amused her that to be single again she had to pay a fee for the unoccupied bed beside her. She gained a little offhand sympathy from people on the tour by describing her husband's ankle injury which had led to him having to cancel at the last minute. 'He'd love to be here,' Anita told fellow-travellers, 'he'll drool over my pictures, and he'll make another booking for next year.' Was this lying? Anita was amazed at how much she enjoyed saying whatever was required by the social occasions she encountered. People wanted to think well of her, to be helpful, and so on, so why not say whatever seemed appropriate? She found herself imagining a necessity-meter, measuring what needed to be said! Abel had been dis-abled; she'd told stories about his ankle, she rather wished he'd trip on one of the company's vineyard visits

and have to be hauled off in an ambulance to have his ankle put in splints: ankles are far too important to be treated anything less than extravagantly! Anita loved every moment of her Kimberley trip. This is my freedom flight, she realised, from a man I've been with for eighteen years; he's better off for having had me in every way except one, I've never made him aware of what a dependent wretch he was until now. He's got all his learning to face, and I ...

This was a shock. Anita saw that after the wonders of the rivers of the north, the boats and planes, El Questro station and the Bungle Bungles, there would, inevitably, come a moment when a plane put her down at her city's airport and she had to catch a taxi somewhere ...

Where?

To a hotel for a few days, or a friend's, and then another friend's, but eventually, she'd have to start building a new life after years of dodging weaknesses she'd done her best not to acknowledge. Lying in her luxurious tent in the north of her country, she knew that the night was another of the thousands of nights making up her life, and that it was moving along, one night at a time, in other words running out, and she had to get it onto a good piece of track pretty quickly, or else she'd be as lost in fact as she'd pretended not to be for the first forty years.

Where am I going, Anita asked herself. For a minute she wished she had someone to give herself to, then she backed away. No foolish blunders like that. It was good to be alone, just harder. Don't panic, she told herself: what do I want?

This took several days and nights; she didn't rush. People on the tour with her noticed how balanced she was. The tour guides enjoyed having her with them, if that was where she chose to sit. At other times, especially at night, she would wander away, then come back to the others, beside their fire, and join them, sipping wine and staring at the stars, a free-floating soul, reminiscing freely about a childhood far away, mentioning her husband when it was appropri-

ate, talking, only a little, about her work, and the people she met through it, asking questions of the native rangers, interested in anything about the birds, animals and plants. 'It really is another place,' she was inclined to say. 'I suppose we all belong somewhere, but a place like this makes you doubt, doesn't it?'

This was a puzzling, a perplexing, result, for Anita, of walking out on Abel. She wanted a goal. A destination. She would have told you that on one level she was desperate for that new goal, new direction, to reveal itself, yet, at one and the same time, she was revelling in the freedom she'd snatched for herself. It was marvellous to be away. Marvellous and awful. She really did want to be tied down, and she was terrified by the thought. Tied down again? She gave hardly any thought to Abel. He'd whinge himself into someone's affections, and get himself looked after. As usual. No, she had no time to worry about Abel. She wouldn't see him, she'd use lawyers, she'd get half the estate. She expected to remarry, but wasn't sure.

Why try to be sure? Why not see what happened?

She decided that when she got home from the Kimberleys, she'd get a new job. Disaster relief. Something where a cool head was needed. She had the sort of mind that enjoyed being calm at fever pitch. Chaos brought out in her a level-headed love of order. The best thing about a crisis was that it required pinpoint accuracy in those alleging that they were helping. Hosts of people were secretly relieved to be in chaos; it was the natural state of their minds and to have their minds reflected in the state of the world was reassuring. Something in Anita was in contempt of such people. Give them a boat when they're drowning, the bastards, and watch them live! Give them food, and a fire, and tell them to feed themselves! Give them children to look after, and plates and forks and spoons, and then you can shout at them, 'Muck in and help! Nobody's going without!' That'd make the death-wish people wish they'd got what they wanted before the help arrived! Anita realised, lying in that tent at the top of

her country's north-west corner, that she was happy, at last, because she could be frank with herself.

What a discovery! How long it had taken to come across it! She'd had no idea that it would be an outcome of separating from Abel, but it had. He'd tied her down, distracted her from herself for ever so long. That was what she'd thought marriage was meant to do. It was marvellous to be free. She'd never realised she wanted freedom until she had it, and she knew it wasn't the last or greatest of her wants, but she wouldn't be seeking anything else until she knew that it was finally an end-point, and then she could be sure she was right in seeking it.

That was how she teamed up with Hendrik when he came along, and why they fell in love with *Bedford*.

Clemens leaves our story

When Denise got back from the village she called out to Clemens. When he didn't answer, she assumed he'd gone for a walk, and took her shopping to the kitchen. She put the kettle on to make tea when he got back. She glanced at the paper she'd bought, a woman rarely distracted by the world surrounding her. She wiped the bench where she would prepare lunch as soon as Clemens ...

Where was he? She went into the lounge and he was half-in, half-out of his favorite chair. She rushed to him and felt his hand. Not exactly cold but not very warm. 'Clemens!' she said, then no more. There wasn't anything more to say. He was gone. She stepped back a few paces, bumping into a sofa. She sat. This was what it was like, when it came. It never occurred to her that he might be revivable. He'd gone. What she was looking at were the remains. The body was there but the spirit no. How easily one vacates the other. This will happen to me, she thought. One of these days ... but Clemens had got in first. 'It struck you darling, didn't it,' she said. 'You didn't mean to leave me.' This was perhaps a self-pitying thought, but Denise remained objective, studying the body in the chair where Clemens

had loved to sit and read, sit and sip. It was 'his' chair, and he died in it. Death had been kind to her husband, except in the matter of his looks. There was a trace of anxiety, concern, in the features he'd left behind. She took this to mean that he'd realised what was happening, then it had happened and he hadn't been able to get the look off his face, as he would if he'd had time to think about her finding him. Clemens had been so thoughtful. Whoever said we're all fundamentally selfish, she thought, had never known her man. He'd been so good ...

... and his time had run out. There was only this body ...

She rang a doctor, and the undertakers in a nearby town. Would they please hurry? They arrived almost together, an hour later. Doctor Allen studied the dead man, then filled in a form. He signed something for the undertakers, then turned to Denise. 'What will you do with yourself tonight?' She hadn't thought of that; the house hadn't been empty before. The doctor suggested, 'Are there any neighbours friendly enough for you to be with them? Or relatives in the city who could come up and get you?' He was trying to assist, but Denise was beyond the orbit of anyone else. 'No. I think I'll spend the night in this empty house, alone with my thoughts. So long as the body's not here, I'll be all right.' Denise felt she was making good sense but the doctor wasn't satisfied. 'People don't always know how they're going to react to something like this. They do odd things. You need to be with someone you can trust, not to be alone. Who have you got next door to you? Fairly recent arrivals, I think?' He didn't know Anita's and Hendrik's names but he seemed to know of them. 'Unless there's some unfortunate cause of ill-will between you, I'm going to let them know what's happened and ask them to keep you with them. Believe me, this is not some quirky idea I dreamed up, there's plenty of experience behind it. Helmskirk was the name, did you say?'

A minute later, he was gone, and not long after, Hendrik and Anita arrived. They passed, as they drove in, the undertakers going

out. Denise took them inside and sat them on the sofa she'd pushed against when she wanted to study her husband's body. 'That's where he died. That chair there. You see, I'm still getting used to what's happened.' Hendrik and Anita felt they should get her talking to ease her loss. But she wasn't ready. 'Couples get used to each other,' she said. 'They discover each other's habits. It's the easiest way there is of living together. Once you know each other back to front you can start working on each other's quirks ... if you can be bothered. That opportunity's gone missing for me, as of today. I won't be able to humour Clemens any more.' She made a strange little sound. 'Hmhm. I won't be able to do anything for him any more, except, perhaps ... sing.' She looked at them as if they had only just come into existence. 'Sometimes, on a wild, windy night ... a stormy night, perhaps, I'd see him looking at me in a certain way and I'd go outside and sing. I'd walk around the house, or I'd go back into the beech forest, there, and wander like a ghost, singing. I might do it for ages, or only a few minutes, but I always knew when he'd had enough to give him what he wanted, then I'd come quietly inside and sit on the sofa, there, where you're sitting, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that I'd made him happy. I was his Queen of the Night, and the night held no terrors for him because he'd transferred them all to me!'

Anita and Hendrik, hearing this, couldn't fail to realise that though they'd supported each other, strengthened each other, they hadn't done what Denise had done. Had they never admitted to private terrors, or were they unusual in not having any? Singing in the night? 'We've never done that, have we darling?' Anita said. Hendrik smiled wanly. It had never occurred to them. What had they done for each other, down the years? Where, and when, had their love shown itself most tenderly? Suddenly, the first time he'd thought of it in ages, Hendrik remembered a day when he and Anita had rushed, late, onto a ferry at Circular Quay. The crew man on the ferry had been on the verge of pulling up the boarding ramp when he saw them coming, and a stray cat, seizing the opportunity, had rushed

aboard, through the legs of passengers and out of sight. People laughed, the cat was in such a tearing hurry. Later, somewhere out on the harbour, sitting idly and looking overboard at the vessels moving around them, they noticed the cat near a group of children eating fish and chips. 'Quite an opportunist!' Hendrik had said, smiling, happy for some reason that he and Anita had given the cat one of its opportunities for the day. Anita had never forgotten the moment, never wanted to forget it; it made her think that she and her partner, her lover, were not only as they saw each other but were other things to other creatures. In the case of the cat, they'd created the possibility of getting on the boat.

Why did the cat want to get on the boat? When would it get off, and why? Once it got to Manly, Mosman, or wherever it chose, what would it do then? Anita had no idea, she realised, even though she was, herself, highly organised and always acting according to plan. The cat would start and stop for reasons peculiar to itself. There it was, in her mind still, rubbing itself against the legs of the children with their fish and chips. Anita said to Denise, 'Did he have a will? I assume it was made out to you? You've always seemed a highly organised couple, to me.' Denise nodded. 'Yes, he left everything to me. Almost everything's in joint names anyway. Clemens used to say, you'll be able to keep using everything straight away. No hold-ups for probate, that sort of thing. What he didn't put his mind around, because he couldn't imagine it, was what it was like to find yourself on your own when you've been a couple for so long.' He couldn't imagine it because he couldn't think what it would be like to be alone, because ...'

There was no cause, and her observation ran out. Anita said, 'That will be the hardest thing, won't it, in trying to move on. You're used to doing everything together.' She looked at Hendrik. 'Don't you get any ideas about leaving me, Hendrik. You're not going anywhere without me!' She tried to smile at Denise as she said it, but was too desperate to be masked. She was defending her dependency

because she was afraid. You could so easily lose the one you loved. It had happened to Denise, and she'd never be the same again. She'd been part of that larger organism called a couple, and now she was alone, the most vulnerable of life's forms. Individuals could be swallowed up, destroyed, with ease, by one of the swarms of predators filling the universe. Individuality was robbed, ripped away, from us the moment we entered the digestive systems of another creature, and enough of those were willing. The sea was full of sharks, the world of human predators, keen to get their hands on what the fortunate possessed. 'The luckiest people,' Anita said, 'are those whose best things can't be stolen, only imitated. You and Clemens were remarkable, it seemed to me, from just up the road. You had everything you wanted, but it wasn't the things that made you rich.'

It was meant to be a statement of assistance to Denise, but she chose to turn it upside down, such was her mood of loss. 'We were rich,' Denise said, 'in the feelings running between us, but nobody else ever captured them, apart from a photo or two. Love made us rich, and we knew how to love because we knew how to trust. It sounds like a simple formula, and it was, but it can't be recreated now he's gone. It's good of you to keep me company. I need it. But on another level, it's doing no more than sustain me before I go into a long slow decline, from which I may never recover. You'll have to watch that, from just up the road, and I hope you'll pray for me, but whether or not that will do me any good is more than I can say, right now.'

She turned to her visitors, supporting. 'I think you can see, I don't yet know what it is to be alone.'

The death of Clemens deVille is the only death of one our book's characters so far. Our picture of a generation can be regarded as implying that all must die when it's clear that one has. We will leave Clemens to be cremated at a service in the village close to where he lived, and his ashes to be sprinkled by Denise on the property he

loved. We will leave Denise to question people with more musical taste than she possessed, and to employ a string quartet to play in her household on the afternoon when she gave a final party for the husband she'd loved. The last quartet of Beethoven was what they played; those who know it will remember the question and answer it offers: Must it be? It must be. Denise sat near the musicians as their music poured out of the house into the surrounding gardens. She'd chosen Beethoven because people told her it would do the job for her, and she was surprised to find it did. She'd never taken music seriously before and was a little surprised to find that it took her as seriously as she did herself. She had Clemens' ashes in its cask beside her as she said goodbye to her guests, and told anyone who asked that the next day – though she knew she'd do it that night – she'd sprinkle his ashes in his garden, a few for each of the places he'd loved. She didn't say, even to Anita and Hendrik, that she'd sing to her husband, roaming the garden in the night, until she, this time, had found some peace. Anita, sensing that this was what Denise would do, crept outside a few times once the sun had gone down, and eventually heard the widowed voice. What was she singing? Anita couldn't tell. Snatches of lots of things, probably; for Anita, the voice was enough. It was appropriate. It was needed. One woman sang and another listened. The second woman knew it was unlikely that the first would sing again, after that night.

There was no one to sing to now, only the night, and night was lonely. When Anita lay beside Hendrik he could feel her pressing the sheets with her hand, asking them to be restful, peaceful, for them, and their friend, alone in the house next door. We come into the world alone, we partner, then we have to leave on our own: so reflected Anita, her husband beside her, but realising what lay ahead. 'We've got each other,' Anita said to him, 'so we can still move on, but she's already there.' Having said what she needed, she put her head to one side, and slept.

The World in its Chaos

Billy and Lou took their first rest near the saleyards. 'What are we still runnin for?' Billy said, sitting on a pile of pipes the council had left by the track. 'Buggeded if I know,' said Lou, joining him, and then, looking around: 'Where's that go?'

'That's Shaggers' Track,' Billy told him. 'It'll be the street I live on in a couple of years' time.'

'Eh?'

'Don't ya know what I'm talking about?'

'Ya dunno yaself.'

We are back, dear reader, with the run that began this book, and with the language of children. Teachers of language are expected to make available the richness of our civilisation's tongue, but this is not easily achieved. Richness of language sits only with richness of personality, and this isn't easily come by, though some seem favoured from the outset. As with running, you may say, for some a natural activity, for others something else. Why run when you can walk? Why walk, when you can be sitting down? Aggression comes easily enough in all three conditions, for the young. Billy considered the track reaching to the other side of the road. 'Doesn't look much, but it's brought more fellas more roots than you and I could guess.'

'Howdya mean?'

'Some fellas reckon if ya want a root ya need to get down on the river bank, under the willows. Others say the bush. Others say, come up here, starin out at the stars, and ya can't miss out.'

'Wow.'

‘That’s what they say,’ Billy said, ‘and I tellya what, I’m not missin out!’

‘When ya turn comes,’ Lou cautioned.

‘And I’m telling ya what, I reckon it’s not far away!’

One of the reasons it’s hard to discuss anything with clear logic is that the world is chaotic. Words can impose order but are normally the product of one group, and therefore inoperable unless other groups can be persuaded, or forced, to use them. Invaders normally impose new words on things, but old names survive, leaving the extirpated forces a way back. Chinese thoughts about guerrilla leaders allowing their defeated enemies a way out are a recognition that nothing is finally wiped out, merely forced to live for a time in a fresh, and probably disadvantaged, state of balance. The town referred to at the start of this book had a population of about eight thousand. Today’s total would be double that. Is it, or is it not, then, the same town? Nothing is ever the same; the key word is continuity. If a town, a human life, has continuity, then past and present connect. Disparities are obviated by the connections between was and is. Differences exist but are no more obstructive than rocks in a stream, making the water’s flow obvious to anyone observing. The writing of history and the endless telling of stories, then, are important because they impose schematic ideas on what’s taking place, even though there’s probably no scheme inherent in the events themselves. From time to time some parliament, council, or segment thereof decides it will impose. Thus: ‘There shall only be *Grevillea Robusta* trees planted, and that in straight lines, from one end of this street to the other!’ This is done, but the street has two ends, and cross streets have a different species? Or they don’t? Perhaps another policy declaration is made, perhaps the willingness to accept the earlier *fiat* is exhausted, so Rafferty’s Rules return. The urge to make a rule, and then to over-rule, has exhausted itself. It usually does so pretty easily, except in the world of religion ...

... where differences are lasting, because there are fanatical souls with their thoughts on eternity, and they're trying to shape the discussion so it lasts. Oh dear. Let's turn to something easier, like, why did Dick Hart and Arnie Longmire want the boys and girls to run around the town, that Wednesday afternoon back in 19?? This would be easy if we could call them, but they died without anyone, as far as we know, ever putting the question. So why? They may have wanted to start an annual event, they may have thought that distance running could be added to the town's calendar if the school was responsible for something of the sort, they may simply have needed an activity to fill a gap between football season and cricket, who knows? They may, though both were men, have been looking for an event where girls might, at least eventually, compete with boys: again, who knows?

The run was only ever held once, as far as we know, but, as this book suggests, it is always being run, everywhere, all the time. No matter where we begin, how we run, or where we end, we are to some extent competitors whether we know it or not. Let's go back to the runners for a while, and see what we can see.

'Whose idea was this?' This was Billy, a couple of miles closer to exhaustion than the stop at Shaggers' Track. 'Fuckin Dick Hart's': this was Lou, ditto. It was a rotten idea they agreed. They looked around. 'How far to go?' They knew it was a long way. 'Why're we doin this?' They were too far into the run to slip out, as some kids had done, at the start. 'Smart bastards.' Whether they ran, walked or crawled, they had to get back to the school. 'Ya know what?' Billy said. 'They ought to have a bus, driving around pickin up kids as they fall over. By Jeez they could have me any time they like. Right now!' he shouted.

'I'm fucked,' said Lou, 'but we've got to get back. So we've gotta be smart. Let's just walk along, pointing out things we haven't seen before.'

‘Doesn’t sound very smart to me. Let’s see if we can get someone to give us a ride.’ Billy walked onto the road, raising his hand, and, to his surprise, a lady stopped her car. ‘Yes boys? You want a ride?’

Did they? They were in her car so quickly she burst out laughing. ‘The High School? They sent you out on a run, did they? Pretty long run, it seems to me.’ The boys responded gratefully. ‘You got kids at the school, missus?’ She didn’t, but she knew some of their teachers. Lou noticed a little smile on her lips when her passengers mentioned Carl Nelson. ‘You like him?’ their driver wanted to know. The boys said he was all right, but it did occur to them that the woman who’d picked them up was ...

Entering puberty is a time when new awareness is springing up everywhere, but has little backing in knowledge. The boys were aware that the woman driving them was full of confidence about herself, but their sense of sexuality was coupled, thus far, with so much shame, curiosity, sense of dirtiness but also of exultation that their driver’s assurance was a layer for which they had no explanation. Billy said cheekily to their woman driver, ‘You’re a good sort, missus’; Joanna MacMurray said, ‘I’ll get you there, have no fears. But you’ll be a bit early, won’t you? If you turn up ahead of everyone else, people are going to ask questions. Would you like me to drop you somewhere so you can keep watch till the other kids turn up?’

The boys’ feeling that she was somehow different was confirmed. She knew about their need to protect a compromised position. ‘What about this?’ Joanna said. ‘Just here behind the butter factory. Nobody’ll see you. You can keep an eye on the Main Street, and the road along the river. Okay boys, good luck!’

In a moment they were hidden. ‘Funny woman, that,’ Lou said. ‘She knew what we needed to do, as if she was used to doin dodgy things herself.’ Billy was nodding furiously. ‘She’s doin’em with Carl Nelson, Mister Perfect Manners, Mister Get Ya Verbs Right!’ He spat. ‘He’s rootin that woman, I can tell!’ Jealousy saturated his voice. He was thinking of their driver’s body. ‘Imagine getting in the back seat

with her! Wow!' It was too good, too much to imagine, but it set him off like fire with a wind behind it. 'Ya realise,' he said to Lou, his junior but still in a way his mate, 'ya realise that we haven't started yet, but that woman, she's ... swimming in it! Every man she meets'd want to do her, she can have it as often as she likes and that's pretty often, I reckon. She's not the sort that holds back. If she wants ya – have ya thought of this? – it's on!' Despair at being so close to the unattainable, and at having been put out of her car into the miserable yard of the butter factory, overtook the boy. 'This not where I want to be!' Billy said, and something unprotected in his voice shook Lou, his companion. 'So whadda you want? An how in hell ya think you're going to get it? Eh? Tell me that?'

'I don't know what I want,' the boy Billy said. 'Yes I do! I don't want fuckin Carl Nelson doin that woman, I want to do her myself. And I can't. What hope have I got? I'm just a kid. There's only one way to fix that! That's to grow up real quick, and get myself into some of those cars going down Shaggers' Lane. But there's another step after that. Them kids in cars, they're just starting out. The main game's elsewhere. That woman knows where it is. *She's* where it is! I gotta find her again, I gotta find lots more like her, and make myself so they want me. And once I find myself in the middle of the rootin, you won't see me for ...'

He needed something extravagant, but no idea occurred to him. He and Lou snuck into the sheds at the back of the butter factory, to keep watch for other kids, so they could creep out and join them. That, at least, wouldn't be too long?

Joanna, sex, spirituality, Carl

Joanna told Carl Nelson about the boys. 'One of them was prickly about you. Prickly about me, actually. He was what they call *aware*.' This amused her. 'A bit of a waste when you're only that age.' Carl asked her what she'd been like at the same age, and this tickled her. 'I don't know who's more unrealistic at that age, girls or boys. Some of

my fantasies ... if a shrink had got hold of me he'd have classed me as nutty.' She spread herself easily. 'We really do need to be protected from the professionals. Don't you think? What were you like when you were those kids' age, Carl?'

He thought. 'In denial. I was at a church school, and the church puts sex and spirituality as far apart as possible. Opposite poles. It's very bad, I think. It really does damage people to think that way.' He looked at his lover. 'Don't you think?'

She grinned. 'That's what you say when we're talking about sex. Let's have them together, you say. But when you're listening to music, you're a cloud nine boy as much as anyone. You believe in the spirit leaving the body.' What was he going to say to that?

He surprised her. 'Men are awful. Men are furiously keen on having sex, but they're even crazier about avoiding its effects. This shows itself with kids. Men don't want to know about them entering the world, they just want to take them over once they arrive. We have a saying, 'women's business'. It's an aboriginal saying, as far as I know, but we've taken it over. It means anything men don't want to know about.'

Joanna was still smiling. 'You seem to be able to slip through the hedge whenever you want to. You're always pretty willing whenever I come here.'

He tried to look sad, as if he was carrying some burden that she wasn't. 'You come because you're willing, and that has an effect on me. It takes me through the shame barrier. The truth is, I feel hypocritical about love-making until I'm with someone who doesn't feel that way, and then I can throw away my feelings, and ...'

Joanna was laughing: 'And?'

Carl was laughing too. 'And get on with it!' He walked towards his bedroom and she wandered after, smiling. She squeezed him as he unbuckled his trousers. He kissed her and her breast rubbed against his arm. A few moments later they were tunnelling under the sheet, breathing faster, excitement mounting. She was wet and

he was hard. He pulled her on top of him and she slid along his cock, thrusting herself a few times till she had him firmly within. 'I sometimes think that's the best moment of all,' she said, 'until I climax, then that's the best. Until I'm lying dreamily beside the man I had, then that's the best.' She had no qualms, he saw, about talking to one man about other men, which meant he could talk the same way, except he couldn't. Something blocked him. That was the remarkable thing about making love. You talked about it as if it was the greatest thing that had ever happened, and then you talked exactly the same way next time. It was like a long mountain range pretending it had only one peak!

Jo had her mouth near his ear. 'Tell me something wicked about yourself. Carl? Carl? What is there about you that you haven't told me yet!' He said, 'You really want to leave me without a feather to fly with!' Determination to keep her out made him strong. 'I want you bare!' she said, rubbing his arms and kissing his chest. 'Bare as a baby's bottom. Featherless so you can't fly! Then,' she said with astonishing tenderness, 'I can stick all your feathers back on and let you fly again. Fly away for a little while, before you fly back to me.' He could feel her possessing him, it was lovely to be taken over by a woman's tenderness. He said, 'You don't want me as I am, but as you recreate me. You want to remake me all over. That's what women want. No wonder men resist!' He wriggled in her arms though careful not to separate himself; he was protesting her dominance, but enjoying it. She was still smiling, she seemed to have come in her sunniest mood that day: 'I want to enjoy you properly, and all I ever get is a bit of you if I can grab it on the run. Lie still while I fuck you! She swung her back up and her breasts loosened towards him. 'That's right, squeeze me! Suck and see if I've got any milk. Go on, I want to give everything I've got to you. What's wrong with men that they don't want everything, they only want a bit. Now and then!' She emphasized the words with vigorous thrusts, and their lovemaking got away from controlling impulses and became more than they

could manage. Each lurched in response to the desires of the other until they were in that third phase, arms drowsily around each other, aware of each other, inside and out, but de-energised until another spasm ran through them. 'If only I could make you love me all the time the way you do occasionally,' Joanna said, and he agreed. 'We'd be better if we were made that way.'

They couldn't see each other very often. She had a husband, and though that hardly held her back there was the town's notion of respectability to hide from. She knew he visited all sorts of places in the mountains and she wanted him to take her but he said the moment people saw her in his car they'd know what was happening and his position as a respectable teacher – teachers had to be respectable – would be undermined. 'I'd get transferred out of town. They wouldn't say it was because of you, but they'd find something else, and I'd be gone. Down the highway in my little car and my furniture in a van. You'd have to find someone else.'

She wasn't even amused. 'You'd be amazed at the amount of time I spend soothing men's egos to keep them at a distance. I don't think it occurs to them that they're putting something heavy on me. They take it too lightly themselves.' She studied him, a man. 'The main reason I see you is that I can. Also, you're an outsider, so you know the local rules. Which we have to play by. Also, you provide a way out. The local perspective wears me down.'

He was a little surprised. 'Anything else that makes me worthwhile?' and she laughed again, that laugh that made him desire her, because it meant there was good humour in what they did, fallible as she'd made him see himself. 'Pour me a glass of wine,' she said. 'Just one, we'll share it.' He did so. 'Music?' She shook her head. 'You know more about music than I do. You go off in your thoughts and I don't know where you are. I rather like it, but it leaves me out. I don't much like being out in the cold, wondering.' He started to apologise, but she said, suddenly, 'Tell me what you were like as a child.'

He started, but before long she broke in again. 'Boys have it ever so differently from girls. The real difference is in mothers. If you're a girl your mother's supposed to train you in being restricted. Keeping you locked in. Whereas, with their boys, mothers can have a freedom they never had. They can live through their sons. Have you ever noticed how boys get indulged?' He had. 'Yes, well, you know what it is. It's simple. If a boy can do it, a girl can't. For every freedom there's a restriction, and guess where the line is.' She tossed these things off as simplicities that anyone could see. 'You know, I've almost given up being surprised. I've long given up getting annoyed. I simply watch in amazement these days, wondering when people are going to start to wake up. Never, is the answer. It's as if you offered people a forest full of paths, or, you offered them a railway line through an empty paddock. No deviations, nothing to see. Most people will take the straight line. No complications!' She was getting annoyed. 'I keep wondering what these dull people are going to be like when they get to be old? They'll all be the same because they've all got the same deadly dull experiences in their memories. Don't you think?'

It was unusual for her to ask. Usually, she waited for him to volunteer something. He said, 'Most people don't have the confidence with the other sex that you have. They're scared of making fools of themselves, so the safest thing to do is to live a life of clichés. Do what you're supposed to do, say what you're supposed to say ...'

She was turning away, by now.

'I know I'm annoying you, but it's what people do. They're not sure, so they do the expected thing. And it's safe!' She was smiling again. 'Think about it,' Carl went on. 'You ask me something. I come out with a cliché. The onus is on you now to say something, and if you can't think of something bold to say, or you're nervous of committing yourself, you come out with a cliché too! Isn't that what happens?'

The energy went out of her arms, and hands. He was describing a world she hated to be in. Fiercely, passionately, she said, 'What's the good of being alive? Who wants to walk around half dead all the time? Answer me that! Carl! You're supposed to be clever. You're paid to have a head full of ideas. Let's see what you've got! Carl?'

He said, 'You're right about me going into the mountains all the time. I do it to get away. From the very things we're talking about ...'

'Well take me with you, bugger you! When're we going to start doing that?' He opened his mouth to answer but she said it for him. 'Someone'd see us and I'd lose my job. People'd know what was going on. I want people to know. I want them to know what I think of their boring bloody lives. You know what? When I got married, I felt like I'd been handed a bunch of keys to the jail I was in. I could get out, now! Well, I couldn't! They were telling me I had to keep everyone else locked up. I don't want to do it! My mother in law, Trevor's mother, expects me to keep Trevor locked up. She thinks I ought to be asking him questions all the time. How can I do that? I don't want him questioning me. Suppose he has a girlfriend or two? How can I tell him it's not allowed? Me?' This time she laughed aloud, spluttering with her rage. 'But don't think you're getting away with anything, Carl. I want to know about you. You might talk like a bit of a rebel, but you conform, and that means that if I come to see you, we don't go out. We conform too. We can do what we like inside this house but what sort of freedom's that?' She'd have gone on but his face showed he wanted to answer.

'Well,' Joanna said, 'what sort of freedom's that?'

Carl said, 'It can be measured with a tape. It's the size of these rooms. Is it high quality freedom or low quality? That's another question. It can be measured against the use we make of it. Do we use the space by going around banging our heads against the walls, abusing whatever's outside, or do we think thoughts we wouldn't be allowed to think outside? There's an important difference. If all we can do is shout our quarrels with the world around us, we're not

making much use of our freedom, are we? You talk about me getting lost in a cloud of music. Yes, that's exactly what I do. I'm creating a cloud of freedom, where I can roam whenever I like, free as the breeze. And if some neighbour comes along and says, what's that music you're playing, I'll tell them! I'll be happy to! If someone knocks on the door and when I open it, they see you here, I'll tell them you're a friend of mine who likes music too. I suppose that means that this house is where I take my stand. I'm the boss of things inside this house; outside, I can't do much without making a challenge that I know would be risky. But you come here often enough because you know this place is sacred for you. I've actually got a good idea of what you want, Jo, and I know I give you only a very limited amount of it, but what I'm offering is available, it is here, and it's here for you, any time you want it!

Joanna stood up, keeping her eyes on him, she picked up a book he'd offered to lend, and she moved to the door. 'Don't come out. I'll see you Thursday evening if all goes well. An hour or two. The seasons are changing, have you noticed? I'll be wanting you to keep me warm.' She left, closing the door softly. He felt tenderly for her, on his side of the door, then went to the kitchen to wash up.

We've seen Joanna a number of times now, but as readers will be aware, this book is full of characters coming and going. We'll take one last look at Jo before we let her vanish, her run ended, as it were. The run which this book is consciously telling you about was for people younger than Jo, though she cherished the youth and then the maturity which had come her way. Her children grew to university age, as we have seen, and followed her to the city to make lives of their own. Jo wanted to know what they were doing and was supportive, but in her years of retail work she was more interested in herself. When she got to sixty she felt her shop was finding unimportant things for her to do without letting her make decisions any more. Buying, and the travelling that went with it, had been passed to younger people.

She wrote a resignation and handed it in to Personnel. 'What're you going to do now, Jo?' they asked her, nicely enough. 'Travel?'

She was ready for that. 'No. I've had lots of travel, courtesy of this shop. Besides, my kids are busy discovering the world, they don't want their mother as a rival. I'm going to stay at home and work out what it was all about.' People laughed. 'Tell us when you find out!'

Jo knew she was talking nonsense. If you haven't got a reason for your life by sixty you're not going to discover it. This led her into tangles. Life's important, she told herself, therefore you have to feel part of it. Did she? She supposed so but wasn't sure. Then she asked herself if she'd ever felt separate from herself. At once her memories started flooding in, mostly to do with men wanting intercourse when she didn't. Separate every time, she recalled: body backing away, mind peering out of its cave, and talking! Talk, talk, talk, mostly designed to make them feel good, because if that didn't work they might turn dangerous. Nothing more dangerous than the rejected male. Trevor, her much-abused husband, had probably been the kindest man she'd known. She remembered him with surprising affection. The only thing wrong with him was that he wanted her to play a certain role. 'Lousy scriptwriter!' is, after her wedding vows, almost the first thing she could remember saying as a married woman. Another early memory was of a feeling that she'd been in some way reduced by the wedding ceremony. It had made her less rather than more, though Trevor, she knew, had wanted it otherwise. 'I'm being kind to him today,' she thought, looking around her tiny garden, filled with flowers she occasionally remembered to water, and an equally tiny Jack Russell that she knew yapped all day when she was at work; she knew this because it yapped all day when she was home and her neighbours told her that it made no difference whether she was there or not.

So much for me, thought Jo; even the dog, lowliest of commentators, thinks I make no difference. Did I ever? She'd brought two children into the world, two well-balanced adults, now: that, surely,

was success? She felt she could claim so, but then, why are we in the world, except to pass life on. To our kids? Who have to pass it on to their kids. The silliness of it was too apparent. Years ago, she'd caught up with her daughter Nadella in Madrid. They'd arranged, weeks before, that on a certain day Jo would come to Nadella's hotel and they'd meet in the foyer at – the time was fixed in Jo's brain – half past two. Jo remembered saying, of this arrangement, 'So I'm travelling to Madrid, then I'm finding your hotel, so I don't get to have a siesta?' Nadella told her, 'You've never had a siesta in your life, mum, you won't miss it the way the Spanish would.' Huh, Jo thought, what sort of an argument was that?

But on the day she'd found the hotel quite easily and was staring at the plaza in front of it, slowly starting to fill as tourists got off their beds, when she felt her hand taken: it was Nadella, calling 'Mummy!', eyes filled with joy like a girl, except she was little no longer, mature now, the age her mother had been when she'd brought children into the world, and the daughter's grip suddenly, and somehow, seemed to bring Jo to life, as if she'd never quite been fully alive until that moment. 'I'm so pleased you came out for me,' Jo had said to her daughter. 'I didn't think I'd see you until I got inside. I was an emptiness not expecting to be filled for a few moments more.'

'Nicely said, mum,' Nadella had said to her mother. 'That's how I feel most of the time.' They looked at each other, mother and daughter, on a footpath in Madrid, brought unexpectedly into an eloquently truthful awareness of each other. Jo had begun to cry. 'We can't get closer than that, so we won't, I suppose.' Now, with her Jack Russell, which she called Priss, scratching about, she wondered how she'd been reduced from mother of Nadella to owner – minder – of silly little Priss! 'I don't want it, Priss,' Jo said as the dog brought her something. 'Just leave it where it is.' Why should the universe be endlessly disturbed because its creatures had energy to burn? Why couldn't the whole world sit in a canvas chair, as she was, and leave

things as they were? Really, why not? She had no wish to change anything ...

Her heart slumped inside her. If you didn't want to change anything you'd lost your force. Everything active adjusted the world so it suited the restless scratching of the self, and she didn't want to scratch any more. She was barely tolerant of Priss, who wanted to dig and scratch everything. 'I'll take you for a walk in a minute,' she told the dog. 'You can tear the park to pieces. Hey!' she said suddenly to a momentarily attentive dog, 'do you think the park gets restless, Priss? You think the park would like to turn itself into bushland, somewhere far away, where there's no little suburban dogs, bored with living in places that are too small? What do you think, Priss, anything in that?' The dog was taking no notice. It was waiting for something to happen. Its walk! It woofed. 'Yes, yes,' Jo said. 'We all know who's the boss around here. Is it the biggest voice, or the biggest ego, that puts you in charge, eh? Or is it that way of barking down all obstacles till you get your way? The mind of a dog is strong and simple.' Something occurred to her. 'Strong and simple, they're the same thing, really, aren't they. If you want to be strong, you've got to be simple. And if you're simple, then you're vulnerable unless you're strong.' She felt years of recall draining through her, like a vast lake drying to reveal areas of mud, litter, bones, a rock or two. People call it a lake, she told herself, because it's an emptiness that gets filled with water. But we're not like lakes, we're like railway stations, she thought; there's nothing there until a train gets in. It's there for a minute, then it's gone again. It was only ever built so people could step onto it, then off. And there's nothing more to us, either. Nothing at all. 'Come on Priss,' she said. 'Walk!' She opened the gate for the excited dog. 'And when we finish the walk, guess where we'll be.' She pulled the gate behind her. 'Right back where we started.'

Salvation – The Possibilities

At the ambulance station, they got a call from Denis Payne, well known to the ambulance men as a Salvation Army officer. He gave them an address, then, 'He's actually in a shed in the back yard. Don't go to the house, come around the side.'

'What condition's he in?'

'Beyond hope, I think, but I'll let you be the judge of that.'

Tim Kallman drove the ambulance and it didn't take long. He and his partner went around the house and Payne was there to lead them in. 'I hadn't seen him for a while so I decided I'd better call. I couldn't find him, so I came out here.' He pointed to the man, barely breathing. 'Worst I've seen him. Pretty far gone, I think.' The ambulance men had a look, then put their stretcher close. With a few deft movements they got their man onto it, then carried him to their vehicle. Tim asked Denis Payne, the Salvo, if he wanted a ride to the hospital. 'Got my own car, Tim. That's it there. I'll see you at the hospital. I want to hear what they think.'

'Not much doubt about that, but sure, seeya there.'

When they spoke again, it was outside the hospital's emergency section. 'They're going to try and drip feed him,' Tim Kallman said, 'but they don't expect him to last the night.' That, to men of their experience, was that. 'How did you come to know this bloke?' Denis looked out the window of the hospital, down the carefully made entry to the town. 'I wasn't always a Salvo, you know. I had, well ...' - he was a little embarrassed - '... a bit of a mis-spent youth. I suppose you'd have to say.' Tim waited calmly. 'And then it struck me that a lot of people needed help. It was obvious enough. Well, eventually

I joined the Army, as you see. All went well ... and then I started to notice something. The really smashed up people, the ones that were hopeless beyond repair, the wrecks, often started out all fired up with confidence. Often enough they thought they were destined for the top, but they couldn't control themselves. Know the ones I mean?'

Tim: 'Got a fair idea. Keep going.'

'And of course, a lot of these smashed up people were people I'd known myself in my young days. Back when it seemed everything was okay.'

'Doesn't last, does it. Sorry. Your story.'

'This fella we picked up today ... in there ... the one that's going to be in a box this time tomorrow ... he ...'

'You knew him? From way back, then?'

'Not really. But I heard about him ...'

Tim knew he had something to say. 'Tell me about it, Denis?'

Denis was still staring at the window, the world. 'You've probably heard about this. Many years ago there was a famous run, in this town. All the first form kids at the school went on a run ...'

Tim brightened. 'Heard of that. Don't tell me you were on it?'

'I was actually one of the first to finish. I was small, but pretty quick, in those days. But no, it was some other kids that ran into him. They dropped out of the run to go down to the river bank ...'

'Up to no good!'

'Well, when you're that age you think you've got to do some ... investigating ... for yourself because nobody's going to tell you the things you want to know. Anyhow, the kids that had pulled out of the run went down to this shed by the river, meaning to get out of sight for what they were going to do, and there was somebody ...' he pointed into the emergency ward ... 'there before them. A man and a woman.'

'Him?'

'Our man in there. And apparently he and the woman he was with gave them a demonstration. From go to whoa. There on the spot!'

'Good lord.' Tim had never heard this part of the story before. 'And you've been looking after him?'

'Keeping an eye out. There's not much you can do for people who won't look after themselves.'

They left it at that. They'd done what they could, others had care of the man now, his years of demonstration were behind him. He was going nowhere because the exit door of this world had been opened and it wouldn't be long before he passed through. Tim touched Keith on the arm, and they went to the cars that would take them away.

Salvation: what was the good of that? This was something that troubled Denis more than he allowed anybody to know. He was asked, often enough, why he was in an organization with a name suggesting that it was possible for humans to rise above their normal troubled state, and his stock answer was to invite people to look around. People needed help, the purpose of his organization was to make things better when they could. This satisfied many, perhaps most; certainly it was enough to gain the Salvos support, but people also suspected that the word added some other layer to the Army's meaning. Denis himself was never convinced because for him words like salvation and redemption named states of being that existed outside human time. Was time human? Divine? Innate in the universe? Or something else, inexplicable? Denis knew he was no thinker. He obeyed his impulses in working for the Army. It was something he had to do. Well organised and generally benevolent himself, he knew that people existed in shambles they'd made themselves, perhaps deliberately. He'd seen the self-destructive side of too many people to be able to delude himself. People assailed him with obscenities, thinking they could upset his willingness to help them, but they were misguided. He was in no way distracted by things

said to distract him. Had they realised, the vocal provocateurs might have seen that the more noise they made the more determined Denis became. Anything said to him to stir his ferocity might, he well knew, have come from inside his own mind. The world was as meaningless, as vile, as they said it was, and yet ...

Denis had long ago decided that he belonged on the side that said 'and yet' as the answer to anything, everything, the world flung at the faith of Salvos like himself. There are any number of awful things done in this world, and why? Because there are any number of awful people, that was why. And yet ...

And yet? Persistently, against the weight of overwhelming evidence of human failure, rottenness, even, there was the existence of the other side to human beings, their spirituality, their goodness, generosity, kindness, and ...

... all the other virtues, the positives. The truth was that Keith longed for a world where it was clear that the side of virtue was the winning side, but nothing he could see about human life suggested that the contest was anything better than too close to call. Awful things happened every day. And yet ...

He was trapped, actually, by his own awareness of something good in him not allowing him to stand aside. He not only wanted to help where he could, he couldn't stop himself. He knew how much of his work was wasted effort. He knew that people he sobered up today would be drunk tomorrow, or fighting with their neighbours, or taken in charge by the police for possessing stolen goods ... all the rest of it. What was the good of helping? People asked him often enough and he knew that his answers were unconvincing. He helped them because he couldn't do anything else. If he hadn't helped he'd have been admitting that it was all right to go the way the people in trouble were going. He wasn't at all sure that goodness would prevail because God was supposed to be on that side: far from it. You drove along a road, country, city, anywhere, and you wanted to believe that all was well, but the fact was that he'd been called to so

many homes that looked all right from the outside but were unthinkable within, that he took no reassurance from the signals of normality that people posted at their doors. Crap! People said that family life was sacred; that was crap too. He knew better than to take any notice of what people said they'd do. Crap again! The human heart was a battlefield, and unless you were working every minute for the increase of the force of goodness, then you were on the side of bad.

People with sophisticated minds told him that it was simplistic to divide the world into good and bad, and see everything as a struggle between the two. Things were much more complex than that. Perhaps, was all he could say. He knew how he saw things himself, he knew what he thought ought to be done on any given matter, he knew the direction his heart was pushing for in all things, and he had a compulsion to be active. Perhaps his mind was too simple, but it was the mind that had activated Denis for many years ...

He drove home from the hospital. Liz, his wife of many years, was unpegging clothes from the line, and she was curious.

'What's happened?'

'He's in hospital. He was in a bad way. Very bad. I rang the ambulance. Tim Kallman came. They took him away. I stayed at the hospital for a while. It's simply a question of whether he lasts the night, or doesn't. It probably doesn't matter. He's finished.'

Liz said, 'Have you prayed for him?'

It occurred to Denis that he hadn't. 'Not as yet. Too busy, I think. Or maybe I just don't believe in it today.'

She corrected him. 'Believe in anything.'

He nodded. 'It might be one of those days. You look at the sky and you don't see any faith. You look at the grass, the flowers, the dog ...'

Testing him, she put in, 'Your wife?'

'... and you don't see any reason for faith at all.'

What can two people give each other?

What can two people give each other? There are limits, after all. Denis and Liz had married young, and, many years later they were still together, but they had suffered the vagaries of the years they'd lived through. The counter-culture period had been their greatest test. Liz had gone wild, and Denis, shaded by a heavy conscience, had followed some way behind. They partied, together and separately, they entered unknown bedrooms in houses they'd never see again for liaisons lasting from a few minutes to an hour or two. Denis knew that a change, a development, was taking place when a name – Barny – made itself heard in conversation over a period stretching into a fortnight. 'Who's this Barny you keep talking about?' he said to her one night, hoping to get rid of the matter. Sweep it away! Two nights later, Liz got home from a party Denis had left hours before, and when Denis woke, expecting a rave from Liz about what had happened to break up the show, he realised he could hear four feet in the passage, not two. In the passage, meaning that Liz was with another person – it had to be a man – in the doorway of the room they'd dedicated, years before, to the child who'd never arrived. Liz had brought another man home!

Denis went to the door of his room, their room, the *marital* room, and said, 'What's all this about?'

His wife, still in darkness, could be heard to say, 'Go in there, Barny. Get in the bed. I'll handle this.' Then, to her husband, 'Anything you want to say now, rather than in the morning?'

It was then that a moment of realisation struck Denis, one that was to trouble him for the rest of his life. Why hadn't he turned the passage light on, so he could see? He should have done it dramatically, an accusation. A shedding of light on the action of his wife. But he hadn't done it. Somewhere in his being he knew he'd given up the chance. Hadn't seized the opportunity to make a moral claim. He might have challenged Liz for the high ground, something she'd certainly have contested, but he hadn't sprung the light on them, his

wife and this Barny, to make them reveal themselves as they did what they planned to do. He'd avoided the contest at the very moment he should have enjoyed it most. Barny was in the dark, presumably fumbling his way into yet another strange bed, and he, Denis, hadn't had a look at him. Why? Was he afraid of his wife? Had he known this moment was on the way? He wasn't sure. He truly wasn't sure. Was he, perhaps, as many partners were at that period, relieved of hypocrisy and liberated in the presence of sexual frankness because frankness tonight, horrifying as it might be, is yours tomorrow night?

Aha!

Liz was talking to him. 'Just sleep. Don't get in a state. Sleep. If you need something to help you, there's things in the lounge you were helping yourself quite freely to, the night before last. Don't knock on the door early, don't come in, leave us until we emerge. We're leaving all the talking till tomorrow, or maybe the day after. That's my word on the matter, Denis. Nothing from you now, thanks. Good night!'

Man or mouse? What was he? He was a mouse, though whether or not that's preferable is for the reader to say. Denis closed the door on a period, a social movement, that had invaded his life, but he'd not got even as far as his bed before he understood that a closed door, and even a few hours of silence to follow, could lock out nothing. The world had changed. His wife had brought a man home. It was only a logical extension of what the two of them had been doing in recent months, but it was importantly different. Something sacred had been breached. He knew, as he crawled into the bed that had belonged to him and Liz, that when he used that word the following day Liz would demand that he explain himself. Sacred? What did that mean, for Christ's sake? And he, he knew, would say that Christ had always been sacred to the two of them until recent months, and it wasn't too late to get back to where they'd been, and that it happened everywhere in history that events of a period outran the desires, the inner imperatives of individuals with a conscience, and those were

the moments for a reconsideration, withdrawal, perhaps, and then a long, steady rebuilding on the basis of the faith that had been challenged, and had restored itself, restated itself, so that it would again be useful in the time that was on hand.

Denis lay on the bed that had been theirs, and was now only his. Liz was with another man. She'd be purring, wriggling to get her back against him, convulsing with excitement, she'd be shouting if he was any good for her, though perhaps she might control that level of excess for the benefit of the man in the next room who wasn't sharing it ... and perhaps she wouldn't: Denis knew Liz well enough to know how she loved to provoke, and would, if she thought of it, do something to rouse him on the other side of the wall ...

It occurred to Denis that his solitary state conferred an advantage. When he spoke to Liz next, he'd have had thinking time that she hadn't. How could he defeat her when she made her appearance in the morning? It seemed to him that if he tried to seize the moral high ground she'd snatch it back so swiftly that he'd be demoralised. She had a way of delivering a second blow even more powerful than her first, something he'd never encountered with anybody else. There's only one way to win this, he told himself. I put up no resistance. I accept the struggle on her terms, her grounds; I put up an appearance of being unruffled, and I sit them out. The three of us live together until one of us breaks. The two that are standing when the pressure goes off are the two that win. It's as simple, and as fiercely contested, as that. He considered the couple, presumably coupling, in the other room. Liz was well known, Barny was nothing. Which of them would crack? That was easy. Liz was tough. Barny, if he was weak enough to let the pressure be put on him, would crack. Liz would spout all the clichés of the new age – that would be the rhetoric she'd use against Denis – but this Barny man would have to live inside, according to the rhetorical crap of the period that had produced him, and he'd feel a need to slip out of its clothing after a while. 'It's going to be hard,' Denis told himself, 'but I know the rules

of the game. I know her through and through, and the less I know about him the better, because I won't care so much when he cracks. Enjoy yourself, Barney,' Denis told the air of the room that was his: 'this could be as good as it gets!'

The battle was won by Denis. Thinking about it, years later, he wondered that he'd taken Elizabeth's challenge so seriously, and decided that he would certainly have lost her if he hadn't allowed her to put him through the humiliation of sharing with Barney. The further he went, the less Denis could see to recommend Barney. The man was a lost soul with a genius for finding himself – at someone else's expense. He had a tongue that turned the world good for minutes at a time – and no capacity to act in any useful way. Perhaps the key to Denis's win was that inside his mind he called his rival 'Blarney', but never let the word pass his lips; he used, instead, a deep civility towards the intruder, knowing that every nuance of his treatment was under observation by the woman he loved. Or had loved, when they were teenagers; it became clear in the months of contest that their relationship, tested as it was by Liz's nightly choice of one man or the other to sleep with, was being redefined at every turn. Again and again Denis brought out of his memory the words of their wedding ceremony. Occasionally he put it to Liz that their bonds were being broken by the situation she'd created. Her answers were confounding. 'I'm still married to you, Denis. We're not divorced. We're ...' she used the pronoun royally '... putting the marriage to the test!' Sometimes it was obvious by the time of cutting up vegetables which of the men was in Liz's favour. Sometimes, late in the evening, she would have them sit on either side of her, each holding a hand, while she explored the 'vibes' she was receiving. Then she would let one hand go, squeeze the other, and say a name. 'Denis.' 'Barney.' This was her decision. The loser was to take himself away and not be seen till morning. The favoured was to move to Liz's bed – it had once been his, Denis told himself, or rather, thought – to await the arrival of Liz,

and her signal to her chosen. Undress. Denis, on the minority of nights when he was chosen, never knew whether or not he admired Liz's egotism or loathed it. Her sense of her own importance was staggering. She was a force of nature, cyclonic, perhaps. The counter-cultural times must have been giving her an addition to what had always been there, but Denis had never known it, forceful as he knew his wife to be. He was also fortunate enough to realise that Barny, though vain, had no ego to defend, largely because he had no sense of shame. Every night he spent in the household of Liz and Denis was another day he didn't have to worry about himself. There was food in the house, attention, a household! It was what he needed. He needed a place to shelter from a world he had no way of controlling ... except to spout his silly ideas, the ideals, songs and clamours of his time. He picked up causes like soup spoons, used them as clumsily, and forgot them. It could have been said of Barny that he never wore out an idea because he never knew how to use one. He put them on display, then forgot them. He was a big man with a small woman's attention to detail. He was finicky, fussy, dogmatic yet dithery. He worshipped Liz, feeding her sense of power. She chose him much more often than she chose Denis as her partner of the night, possibly as a way of extending the battle with her husband, possibly because she knew that he could deal with rejection better than could Barny, the overgrown child. There was a night – a Denis-night – when Barny disappeared, and wasn't found until the afternoon of the following day. Liz and Denis drove around in separate cars, looking for him, and it was Denis – Denis! – who found his rival, sitting under a tree in a park. Denis stopped his car, tooted, waved, looked again, then tooted some more. To no effect. He had to go to Barney and stand in front of him before he could make himself exist for the man he wanted out of his life. 'Car's over there, Barny,' he'd said that afternoon. 'I've come to take you home. Home, remember?' as if he, Denis, had no part to play in this farcical invitation-scene whereby a dropout was urged to return to a place where beds were warm, meals were

cooked, attention was paid in strange ways to feelings, and so on. A semblance of civilisation, really, Denis told himself, on the nights – the majority of them – when it was he who was on the outer, not the pathetic, dependent Barny whose whole tactic, Denis decided, was to be so helpless that you were a bastard if you treated him the way he deserved to be treated.

What had Barny done for the betterment of the world?

Not a thing, he knew, everybody knew, but there was cunning in his methods because the rhetoric of the day said that everyone had value, nobody was worthless, anybody who claimed that someone else had lower value than themselves was oppressive, authoritarian, and these were anti-values, for the period, and nobody wanting approval – as they all did! – could voice them. So Liz had two men in her house for something like three months, and she had plenty of worshippers who asked her about the nightly choice sessions, and how she decided, and how the men took her decisions, and how she put one out of mind while making love with the other, and how this act of choice before the act of love-making influenced how she felt about the act of love herself ...

Liz never lacked answers. Liz handed down values, as from a hill in Judaea. She treated herself to biblical centrality in the way she lived. 'These are new times,' she would say, prophetically, 'for new people to find new ways. Much wisdom has been handed us,' she would say with amazing gravity, 'but much remains to find. I'm still searching, and I'm fortunate to have two fellow-seekers with me. On my path!' She loved to speak decisively. When she sat her two men beside her, on nights when her choice hadn't been made beforehand, she absorbed herself in her thoughts and Barny and Denis, sitting beside her, could feel her mind playing on them like searchlights, could feel, sometimes, the struggle inside herself as she settled on her partner for the night. Denis found these acts of choice painful. He told himself that it was the involvement in her choice that was the humiliation for him. Once his wife and Barny were in bed, he could

usually sleep, after a while, without too much distress, but it was participation in the choice that gave him pain. He tried to tell this to Elisabeth in moments that seemed neutral enough to bring the matter up. He would start out cautiously. 'What we're involved in, right now, is a departure from what we undertook in our marriage vows.' That would be enough to set Liz off. 'Everyone likes to think they've got their religion all worked out. Bullshit! Nobody has! What they have got is a nice cosy little arrangement of their own and that's the way they want things to stay. No. Won't happen. Never did, but these are changing times, and such things have no way of going as expected. No sir!' When Denis managed to get his voice heard again he was usually defeated on the level of energy in hand. He never seemed to have any. Those nights of poor sleep had weakened him. He envied Barney's simplicity. The man curled up and slept whenever he felt like it. Liz allowed him to be himself, whatever that might turn out to be, whereas Denis had to be responsible for anything and everything he mentioned. If he raised a matter, it was his: internal to him, in a way that never presented itself with Barney. Barney had the untutored privilege of the time's emotions, swirling around like an unrestrained whirlpool of Edgar Allan Poe, with no more responsibility for his effects than a wind. Liz liked winds, Liz, who'd asked the newly married Denis to keep their windows closed because she didn't like changes to the air in the room! Those had been the days, in their early marriage, when they knew nothing and acted as if they knew everything. Once or twice, as he saw Liz leading Barney to the room which had once been his, Denis thought sadly of those early days. They'd been happy enough, so how had these troubles infiltrated their lives? People were changing partners everywhere in the suburbs around them, what was being called sexual freedom was showing itself to be sexual uncertainty, with crowds of ever-changing lovers passing through each others' body-minds at a restless rate of turnover, and nobody seemed to be getting anywhere. People were dropping out of the hurly-burly all the time, it was true, but newer,

younger, people were joining in, and older people, like himself and Liz, who ought not be part of this turbulence at all, were caught up and unable – speaking for himself – to see any release.

Worst, he thought, was that they'd added Barny to their marriage. Liz said they were still married, no matter what holy words he used to remind her of what their marriage had meant when it was contracted. 'Till death do us part!' he would say triumphantly, and Liz would trump him. 'We haven't parted, Denis, we're being tested. Tried in the heat of the fire! To find out what we are as men and women!'

The long term effect of all this on Denis was profound. He came to see that, desperately as he was determined to see Barny off his marital premises, he was also on a long journey away from his own ego, if that was the pushy part at the centre of him. People were mad, people were self-centred – Liz! – and he was going to move the opposite way. He'd look after those in need. In a way he was, therefore, looking after Barny, though he'd rather throw him out. He was responsible for Barny and he was responsible for Liz, because he'd allowed them to act, in their relationship to himself, in the way they had. Both of them had exploited what they'd seen as his weakness. He'd decided that his weakness was his greatest, his most admirable, strength. I have let them do this to me. What will I show the world, as my answer?

Good works, was his Christian response. The words of Christ rang down the centuries. Comfort the sick. Give to the needy. Lose the self in service of others. He thought about these things and he put them into practice. He stopped caring whether Liz chose him or Barny. He became as close as he could to indifferent to Barny's presence. Somehow, obsessed with her own development as she was, Liz became aware that a self-sacrifice was taking place under her own roof. One of her two men was changing. If she didn't follow him soon, he'd be out of sight, lost, forever. She slept with Barny seven nights in a row, yelping, moaning with pleasure as she poured her-

self like a flood washing him downstream in a current that he, Barny, thought was unstoppable and destined, surely, to go on forever, and then she told Barny that he must go. He said he had nowhere to go. She told him to pack the two bags he'd brought to the house, months before and take them to the car. He presented himself at the car without the bags.

'Nothing?' she said. 'So be it. Get in.' He did as he was told. She waved an envelope. 'Bus ticket. It'll be yours when we get to the depot. Say goodbye to the house. You won't be coming back. Okay. You ready? Here we go.'

She drove him to the interstate bus depot, then gave him his ticket. 'Townsville. There's a big military establishment up there. They have jobs for no-hopers. Good luck, Barny. I'll be thinking of you. Of what we did and what we meant to each other. Travel well!'

He saw that 'travel' was the key word and the one encapsulating him. He felt himself crumple, without the support she'd given him, but she hadn't turned the engine off and was certainly ready to be without him, so he supposed he'd have to face the next part of the road alone. He got out of the car and went into the bus depot without looking back.

Liz expected that altering her domestic arrangements – chucking Barny out – would restore the order that had prevailed before, and it was true that Denis was so relieved, grateful, pleased, or what you will that he fell in with her purposes. She noticed quite early, though, how quiet he was. Challenging him, she called it 'subservient'. He smiled patiently and she sensed, without quite admitting it to herself, that things had altered on levels that lay out of sight. It was strange to find that a man wasn't yours when he did everything you wanted. He hadn't changed and yet he had! She thought for a while that perhaps she'd humiliated him – she had, as we know – and that he'd get over it. It was weeks before she realised that his personality had shifted its centre, its point of equilibrium. He had given up wanting

anything very much for himself. His efforts were directed towards sorting out the imbalances in others. He was, she couldn't help but admit, very much kinder than she'd realised. If they walked, or drove, down their street to some other part of town he spotted tiny signals in the gardens and windows of houses she ignored because they were – they had always been – boring! Denis knew, from this, that she was still living inside her head, instead of in response to things pressing on her. Denis knew also that when people wanted social change – and my god, he was living through a period extreme in its wants – they were grabbing at labels, they were pushing aside things that happened to chafe them, but they had almost no idea of what was happening to society as a whole. He started to say, 'Everything's connected', and it annoyed Liz, who couldn't see that it was any sort of insight at all. He said it three times one day and she burst out fiercely: 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his feet! And the bloody fool who thinks that if he says something, it'll be profound!' How she raged at him. She'd put Barny on a bus because he didn't have a brain; maybe she should have put Denis on the bus that followed, so the two of them, equally brainless, could share platitudes in the tropics!

'The Heywoods,' Denis said, 'are going downhill. They don't know what to do with themselves since they lost their boy.' Liz had little idea of what he was talking about. 'The Heywoods? You know nothing about them. What was the boy's name? Haven't they got over that yet?'

Denis took his time about letting his eyes settle. 'Darling, when something like that happens, you don't get over it. You compensate, if you can. You probably can't, but you try. Why? Because you have to. Active people think that reactive people are weak. But most of us are reactive most of the time. Active people are like grasshoppers who know how to make an occasional hop in a direction they want to go. Some deal! Most of the time they crawl about too, reacting.' She looked at him in amazement. Had he always been as petty as

this? It occurred to her that there were ways in which he resembled Barney, without it also occurring to her that since she'd chosen the two of them there must be things in common between them. Suddenly, unless she started to find new ways of seeing, it seemed that she hadn't, perhaps, escaped the Barney/Denis trap by sending Barney north. Where the hell could she send Denis? She had a feeling that he might want her to make some scones for the Heywoods that he could carry down in a basket, an offering from a family – a newly reconstituted marriage – which had had its ups and downs and wanted to share in every way!

My god! She realised, finally, that he'd been changed by what he'd been through and she hadn't. She'd restored her former, earlier self, by banishing not only Barney but also the woman, a hyper-active, totally self-engrossed version of herself – that had created and then run the two-man household. She'd humbled herself to return to the feeble, undemanding, cause-no-trouble suburban household of a woman and a man – in that order - and here she was finding that the ground, the rules, the flatness of the earth, had changed beneath her feet. Balance was no longer to be had, anywhere!

'Speak!' she commanded. 'Explain yourself! Make yourself clear! I've done you a favour, I might say I've done you a great honour, now you've got to come up to scratch. Speak!'

Denis said, humbly, but with considerable force, 'You, my darling, have been living with clouds around your head for a long time. I've been living on a lower level and my eyes are clear. If you could see as I see, you'd be amazed. Humans, you know, can live on very little. A bowl of rice kept men alive in POW camps, if the Japs gave them that much. But we have a taste for self-aggrandisement and we want more. My god, how much more we're capable of wanting! The trouble is, if one gets more, someone else gets less. That's a law of life, or maybe of distribution. Who cares, it's still a law. I had to live by someone else's laws for a while and it made see a few fundamentals. Love has to be kept burning because when it goes out,

we're all, inevitably, dying, and the way to keep love going is to care for each other. It's as simple as that. I can see the clouds are still clearing around your head, but they're still there. Clearing, but only a bit. You're not seeing yet what's obvious to me. You're still living in a world of theory, where everything's as it's supposed to be, whereas down here, where I am, things are as they always have been. Until you know how I see things, you won't know a thing. You'll simply be obsessed with being what you think you are!

All these thoughts had burst from him, a simple, humble man, yet Liz could see there was more. 'Go on,' she said.

'You brought that stupid Barney into our lives. You made me put up with him. It did me good. If I was fair, I'd say I was grateful. You had your obsession, you could boast to your friends that for once in the world woman's desire was central to a household, not man's desire to be a great big chief, but what you didn't know was that the learning was taking place on the humiliated side of the equation. You got what you wanted and I got what I didn't want, and guess what? What I didn't want was better for me. I came out of the experience richer, and you came out not knowing what you'd done. Isn't that true?' He was challenging her more strongly than she'd ever challenged him. 'Can you tell me anything I've said that was wrong?'

She hardly knew what he'd said. The worm had turned before her eyes, though she'd known beforehand that it couldn't. The worm had become ... not a dragon ... it was still only a worm, but it had done something that showed it was not the helpless creature you ground beneath your heel. 'Well, worm,' she said, her anger rising to match the heights of her contempt, and then no more would come. Angry, confused, and contemptuous she might be, but she couldn't think of anything. Seizing the moment, he went on, 'Worms aerate the earth. Things wouldn't grow without worms. Oranges, roses, mountain ash trees. Remember that walk we went on in Western Australia? Up among the treetops? The trees in flower and wisps of cloud drifting among us tourists, peeping at things we wouldn't

ordinarily know about, let alone see ... there were worms underneath the walk we had that day. Humble worms. Out of sight, but they had everything else resting on them.' He paused, gathering the last of the things he wanted to say to her. 'You may call me a worm if you like. I accept the name. Why? Because I accept, I understand, the usefulness of worms. The world can't work without them. It's worth thinking about.' He sensed that he must leave the room, that if he stayed in it she'd talk and useless things would be said when what mattered was that she should start to digest what he'd said. She'd controlled, or pretended to control, their lives for a time, and now another principle was reasserting itself, and he was an agent, and mustn't let the irregularities of his own ego cause the process to be clumsy. So he left. Liz was left on her own, feeling as if she'd been dropped from the treetops on that Western Australian walk they'd shared, and left to crash to the earth below – the earth full of worms – where she could start to recover ... if there was enough humility in her to get the process going.

Magda Encounters a Child

In a media-created age we are never unaware of headline people. They don't so much rule our lives as live above it, demanding attention. We're endlessly distracted for fear we might take our own feelings – our own selves – too seriously. How much is too much? The test of being insufficiently media-wise and over-committed to ourselves is whether or not we can be dissuaded from an action that might disrupt the 'normal' flow of business, something we're not intended to do. Decisions made as part of the functioning of the self are part of the daily cycle, but mustn't be allowed to interrupt it. Since money is made by the normal activities of the cycle, it must go on. As individuals with a certain amount of influence on events, we need to keep our energies contributing, not wandering away on personal hunts. Even in an age of individualism, the socialisation of the mass is a function needing constant attention. People must therefore be made aware of how unimportant they are.

This novel, the reader will have noticed, has concentrated so far on people of no importance, people largely invisible. Even Dick Hart, who began the book by beginning a run, has been ignored, although we will return to him later. The lowliest people mentioned thus far have been Magda and Lou, children who caused a pregnancy when they were very young. Lou, you may recall, moved to Port Lincoln, on the coast of South Australia, where he became a fisherman, with a family attached in due course, whom he looked after in much the same way he looked after his boats and himself, that's to say that when something nagged sufficiently on his attention he did something about it. Lou lived in loose connection with things and

people around him. Things cropped up but he never saw them as cause or effect of anything he did. There were always *things* around you, bothering you, but the only way to stay sane and keep some enjoyment in your life was to ignore the troublesome as long as you could. He had daughters. He warned them about getting pregnant. They handled their sexuality averagely well, he supposed, asking few questions. He was different with his boys but neither sons nor daughters bothered him with demands for consistency; he would have laughed. Consistency? How often did you see that, where he lived out his years? He lived a coastal life and he supposed his kids would do the same, but he raised no objection to them going away. It was what young people did. They had to explore. Search. After all, it was actually a discovery to find that you were much the same as your dad or mum, or both. There was nothing wrong and a good deal right with discovering that the patch that suited you best was the one you'd grown up in. Lou was a surprisingly good parent. Nobody had put any effort into his making and Lou, repeating this cycle, developed a tolerant hands-off approach which suited. He could think of no greater affirmative than to have a few days in Adelaide, then to leave town in a reliable car and head down the peninsula at speed, no cops behind, heading for home! The nearer you got the more good things you had around you.

Lou never thought of the child he'd started in the womb of Magda, all those years ago, any more than he might have thought of a mistake – how many of those there were! – in a maths class at the school where they'd staged the run, all those years ago. Silly run, forgotten now. Silly maths questions, most of which he got wrong. He rarely thought abstractly, he rarely acted systematically, he was a careless, kindly man, unstressed when he could keep himself that way. He had women loosely, carelessly, for a while, then he settled, concentrated, on the one, then he became a father and life radiated from, centred on, home, but home was unlimited because a house was open to the winds that blew along the coastline, and you knew

hundreds of people pretty closely and even more in a half-hearted sort of way so that almost any item of tittle-tattle that blew in from the ocean or up and down the peninsula linked you with the others who happened to be in your part of the world. Lou could hardly have drawn a line to the boundary of his self: self? Where did that begin and end? The ocean was full of fish, the land stretched away to buggery, you could cross the Nullarbor if you had to, you could fly anywhere in the world, the waves never stopped belting on the shore, stocks of this fish got low while another was breeding well, life was like that everywhere.

Lou never thought of Magda, whom he'd made pregnant years before. Never in a month of Sundays, yet Magda, without thinking of Lou, as a separate, identifiable person, carried his effects for the years that followed her loss.

Sent to the capital for the abortion, she'd been told not to talk about it when she got home. This was no problem. What had happened wasn't something to be shared. The child had been ... what was the word? Effaced? ... before it had been born. It had never existed ... except, of course, it had. In later years, whenever Magda heard people – priests, women of all ages – talking about pregnancies and abortions she had confused reactions. Magda wasn't a thoughtful person but she decided, after years of knowing she was muddled, that although life began at conception, it was a different form of life until the child entered the world. Inside the mother's body, the child was something that was *going* to happen, but hadn't yet. In those first months, it was the responsibility of the mother who might, like Magda, be unable to carry the responsibility through to term. Whatever happened to the child had to be carried by the mother alone. Only for its mother was the child alive. Magda hadn't got around to calling her child by a name but she'd felt a quickened connection between it and her. It had been the growing part of her for a while, and then she'd gone to the clinic, and she'd come out emptied.

That emptiness was as persistent as the child, had it lived. It wasn't something you could talk about. There was nothing to talk about, that was the point. Other girls talked about their feelings, their doings with boys, their bodies, their hopes and fears ... and Magda had an emptiness inside her, a space that had once, and briefly, been filled. When, if ever, would it be filled again? It was as if, having made an early false start she couldn't find the starting line again. When people handed her babies to cuddle, or there were children to be played with, she was both tender, and inept. Inept because detached. What she was doing wasn't her. It was part of what she would have been if she'd been allowed to continue the path she'd started to take. If she'd been allowed to continue that first pregnancy, the child would have told her what it needed, and she'd have provided, learning as she did. She'd been thrown off track in surrendering herself to what had been demanded, and she'd never really found the track since. Daily life was one long going through the motions. Where she'd once been spontaneous, she was now a follower. She found it hard to believe that men were really interested in her, and it seemed easier, and simpler, to follow the men whose needs were as quick and peremptory as her own. Sometimes, if they gave her money, she took it. For the most part, she didn't ask. She knew that sex was two-sided, not a woman allowing a man to do what he wanted. She was talkative with men, but when intimacy approached, she needed to be pushed into the final decision: cornered, almost, because she wasn't following a path of her own. That path, the one that was visibly, simply natural for her, had been obscured years before.

Her parents, having insisted on the abortion, watched its aftermath with growing concern. They were in the difficult position that, after 'correcting' their daughter's mistake, they couldn't get her to be what they thought was spontaneous, or 'natural', again. Nature, apparently had to be waited for. Other girls got married, had children, made the cycle revolve, but not Magda, no, she was waiting.

Girlfriends said to her, 'What are you waiting for?' but they never got an answer, which meant that what she wanted wasn't a nameable thing, but a state of mind, a release perhaps, that would come when it pleased, if it ever came at all.

Would Magda, perhaps, never have a child? Was the one aborted in the clinic the only one she was ever to produce? Her parents hoped not, they did all the encouraging things, they asked about people she talked with at work (the town's biggest shop, then the City Council's office, as a stenographer-typist), they encouraged the flow of chatter through the house where Magda lived, happily enough, it seemed with her parents, but they felt they were making no progress. None at all. The surface Magda showed the world was untouched and what was going on beneath they had no idea.

Then they noticed that she was going out with men of a different type. They were less than careful about shaving, they kept more wayward hours than the regular men Magda's parents approved of, their cars were noisier, and they were keen on shooting. Some of them had utilities and one a small truck with spotlights on the cabin. Parents, the world over, are acutely aware of those who haven't made the transition between the primitive, untransmuted forces of personality and the socialised versions of the same feelings that come with parenthood. It was a transition that Magda had never made, never got close to, really. Her parents realised that they had a strangely unformed daughter. Malformed? They felt it was too early to say. They wanted her happy, but that meant complete, and she was incomplete, so what could they do about that?

There are limits to what parents can do. Magda went out with her late-night shooting friends, leaving her parents to wonder if there were any other women in these parties, and if there were, why didn't they ever meet them? On the one occasion Magda's mother raised the matter, Magda said, 'Good heavens, mother, I don't go out to be available to all those men! If they've got ... needs ... of that sort, they needn't expect me to make them happy. I get taken to places I

wouldn't see by myself. It's an adventure for me.' It wasn't much of an answer, but it came readily enough to persuade – *half*-persuade – Magda's mother not to worry to the point of interfering. Yet what else was there to do? Nothing?

Nothing. Then one night – a night when Magda was at home – there was an incident between a group of shooters and a police car sent out to investigate complaints from a farmer claiming there were people shooting on his property. Nobody had been injured but shots had been fired at the police car and the local paper printed photos of the bullet holes, and a sturdy sergeant standing by the damage with quite a bit to say about what might happen to people who put themselves outside the law. 'It mighta made the Kellys famous, but believe me, that's not going to happen here.' Magda's mother felt a tightening inside her; her daughter had some connection with this?

Magda said she didn't have any idea what had happened, she'd been at home, nobody had told her anything, there was plenty of gossip at the office but unless you had real information you treated it as gossip and you were unwise to do anything else – all good, sound cover-up statements, but her mother was aware of something in the background. There had been a couple of phone calls, quietly and quickly dealt with by Magda, and a couple of visits by the spotlighting men she went out with, all very jovial, with the visitors coming inside for a cup of tea, and so on, but Magda's mother knew that visits of this sort were conducted with the full flow of normal sociability so that a few words might be murmured in the appropriate ear, without anybody else aware. Something's going on, and I'm being locked out, her mother knew, but couldn't see a way to look inside whatever it was that was being kept from her. Nothing, probably. The whole town was built on a series of agreements about silence and communicability. If you missed out on something there was nothing you could do, except listen. Wait, and listen, and wait some more ...

Weeks passed, then the unexpected happened. A shooter called about nine o'clock one night and her mother asked Magda not to

go. It was a mild autumn night, Magda said there was no reason why she shouldn't enjoy herself, she hadn't been out for ages ... that sort of thing. She got in the truck with spotlights on the cabin and it powered away.

Night has a different logic from day. The truck, driven by one of Magda's men friends, a man who fancied her but wanted it to be something more than a lustful tick on a list, rushed out of town on the highway, meaning to turn down one of the lesser roads south-west of town, but, as the turn approached, he and Magda saw lights in the trees at the side of the road. They were pointing strangely. Magda's companion, whom we shall call Jack, flicked the switch for a spotlight, and it became clear that a car had run off into the trees, and crashed. A car coming the other way had stopped to investigate, and then another. People from these cars had levered open the doors of the wreck to help those inside. The driver appeared to be dead. There were three front seat passengers, badly injured. The back seat was harder to investigate because that part of the car had been crushed by the tree in the impact. 'They can't have been here very long,' Jack said, and ordered one of the other drivers to stop the next car heading back into town and tell them to get an ambulance on the way; we are speaking of a time before mobile phones. Other cars pulled over; a crowd began to form. Magda found herself in a heightened form of involvement, both a detached state, a separation from the behaviour of those around her, natural to them, and an awareness of being needed in a way she'd not known before. She wanted to help; she wanted to stay apart, and let the others do whatever came naturally. There were enough of them and they were doing the ghastly job well enough ...

An inner voice told her to go to the car. She got out of the truck that had brought her, and the spotlight projected her shadow onto the scene of the wreck. She went to the far side of the smashed car and tried to look in the back. Some fabric from the ceiling hung down, blocking her view. She grabbed it and tore it out, allowing her

to see a woman of her own age sprawled on the seat, and, clinging to her, a child of two or three. Magda gasped, recognising the power of the child's grip on its mother – her mother, for it was a girl – and felt, at the very same moment, a sense of being in the power of an urgent grip. She had been seized by a moment in a way she'd never known. The spotlight, though shining in her eyes, gave her a high-lit, dramatic sense of an event still to be shaped, in which she had a part. Magda slipped her way along the seat – the back seat – in the confined space of the crushed cabin, and whispered to the girl, 'You're all right now. I'm here for you!' The things we say in crises are usually strange, because they are a part of our realisation, or understanding, when that is both instinctively guided, and therefore most true, while at the same time incomplete. The child said nothing, clinging to its mother who, though inert, was still warm. Magda reached an arm across the child's back and began to murmur. She felt that though it could hardly be said to be listening, it was aware. 'Mmmmm,' she murmured in the girl's ear. They had first to become attuned to each other. 'Mmmmm.' The child knew something was wrong and had turned to its mother. Something in the urgency of Magda's commitment to the child told her the mother was dead. She knew this. The child was injured? There seemed something wrong with the way she lay on her mother. What would that be? She had no way of knowing. Murmuring in the girl's ear, keeping her warm and trying to take hold of the girl's attention, her desire for comfort, Magda was aware that, outside the wreck in which she lay, another vehicle, with powerful lights, had pulled up, an authoritative voice was speaking, and another answering, 'Second stretcher, Tim.' An ambulance. That was good, but something else was needed too. It was in her, in Magda, that the other thing would be found, because it had been there for years, waiting. What was it? Human consciousness is strange, because it reserves its deepest awarenesses for moments without expectation. Magda had come out against her mother's wishes, because she'd found them uselessly negative, blocking something

that was taking place inside her, some transition which they didn't want to happen, and she did want to happen because often enough we can't bear the lives we're leading and must urge them to change in any ways we can ... and, in the very act of coming out on a shooting trip that might, later in the evening, become a love-making trip, she had put herself in the way of forces, coming like a wind from an unexpected, almost unheard-of quarter, which was to change the course of her life because allowing her to deal, in some way and to some extent, with the forces that had been latent, but blocked, in her for years.

'Mmmmm,' she said to the child and she knew it was listening to her, on the one side, and on the other, hearing nothing. 'The tide's turned,' she thought, 'for the kid and for me.' She murmured some more and rubbed the girl's back gently. 'Are you hurt? Any pain? Any bits of trouble?' She hardly knew what to say, and then again, she knew well enough. The child shook her head. Magda said, 'There's a man out there with a car. He's going to take you to the doctor people. They'll make sure you're okay.' The child hung onto its mother, but, gently urged by Magda's loving arms, she turned. 'You take me?' Magda murmured again. The child murmured too. Magda said, 'I'm going to lift you out now. It's what mummy would want. Then we'll put you on a bed and let the doctor people look at you. You're going to be all right, darling. Hang onto me hard. I'm going to slide along the seat now, so hang on. Squeeze! Squeeze!' The little girl squeezed. Magda slid along the seat, pushing with her feet when she could get some purchase, then, at the end of the seat, she slipped, then stood.

Tim Kallman, the ambulance driver, was surprised. 'Anyone else in the back?' Magda, clinging to the child which was almost, by now, her own, said, 'This little one's mother.' She tried, with a movement of her hand, to indicate the status of the mother. 'This is the one that matters. I'm going to lie on the bed in the ambulance, and hold her all the way. I'm not sure if she's been hurt or not. We'll have to do a

check. Let's get going, fast!' Tim was not quite clear what she meant but experienced enough to know when time mustn't be wasted. 'Lie down in there,' he said. 'We'll put a strap over you. We'll put a man in with you. Tell him anything you notice, anything you feel. It's important that we know. Okay, let's get that girl to hospital!'

It was weeks before Magda knew everything that had happened at the accident-site that night. Tim Kallman came to the hospital to see the girl she'd rescued, and he sensed that something inner to her had been helped towards recovery by what she'd done for the child. There were bruises, but no breakages. 'She's going to recover,' Tim told Magda, 'but the effects of shock can be very strange. You got her through the first, and worst stage ...' He was curious to know about this strange woman, whom everyone told him was withdrawn, on the fringe of things and never tightly involved; it didn't seem to fit with what she'd done, and what he'd seen of her since. 'It was a case of knowing exactly what to do. And again, in my business, that's rarer than you might think. You might think that when there's a disaster, people would do things right. Often they do, but just as often they get everything wrong. I'm always surprised when things go right, for once, like they did with you.'

He was still curious, though he didn't want to ask. 'I knew what to do,' she said. 'When I was only a girl, I lost a child. This little one had lost her mother. She was me in reverse.' Tim knew what she must intend him to understand about the child she'd lost. 'Then it might have a good effect on you, permanently,' he said. 'With any luck.'

'It was a rare stroke of luck. I don't think that luck like I had that night happens very often.' They discussed the girl, who'd been taken away by her grandmother to live in the city. Magda was going to see her in a fortnight's time. 'She'll never be mine, she'll always be her real mum's, and she'll be granma's girl, but a little bit of her'll be mine.' She looked at the ambulance man. 'Don't you think?'

He knew what to say. 'A little bit of her will always be yours. Hang onto it, hard!'

Magda was sure. 'I thought it was lost forever. I've found it again, I'll be hanging on!'

Magda was twenty six when these events took place. They marked a turning in her life. She visited the little girl – Camilla – in Melbourne, 'to see how it would go', she told her parents, and felt the bond she'd made with the child was still there. Camilla's gran, mother of the mother who'd died in the crash, asked her back, she went, a number of times, and all of them felt that she was in a way a replacement for the missing woman. 'She's the same for me,' Magda said of Camilla, telling the girl's gran that if she ever thought she, Magda, could be useful, or it would help to have her involved in something, she had only to let her know. 'I'll be right down.' She spoke also of the preceding stage in her life. 'I was going out with all these gun-happy men. There's something wrong, isn't there, when they get stuck on guns. Still, they were good to me, and I needed them. I don't need them now. I've moved on. Jack says he'd like to keep seeing me, and I know he's envious whenever I come down here to see you people, so maybe there's hope for him yet. We'll see.'

It took a year, but Jack redeemed himself, in Magda's eyes, by getting rid of the truck with the spotlight, and the guns. He dressed carefully, he shaved. Coarse language dropped away. He surprised her one day by saying he wanted to take her for a drive because he had a special place in mind, and he took her to the site of the crash. To propose that they should marry. 'You mean this, don't you Jack?' was the best that Magda could say. His silence was appealing. 'You're not saying anything,' she said. 'I can't do the same can I. I suppose I have to reply. We've got quite a lot between us now, haven't we. I suppose we should stick together.' She thought she'd answered clearly enough, but Jack said, 'Is that a yes? Or a no? Tell me, Magda, don't leave me dangling.' It made her awkward, she'd

always been clumsy with words. 'It means yes, I'm saying yes, we were both stuck in a bad spot and we're going to get out of it together. That's the way I see it, Jack; is that how you see it too?'

They married, they had children, they thought each other wonderful, ordinary as they were. 'Nothing special about this house,' Magda used to say in later years, when visitors arrived, but she and Jack contradicted this estimate with their lives. Each had found the other and each thought it was the only saving grace of mankind that care, tenderness and love could flow into those who'd been without them.

Neil and Denis

Denis, in his Salvation Army uniform because he was meeting people from state headquarters, was standing near the soldiers' memorial when he noticed a man looking at him with interest, someone he half-recognised but couldn't place. This was something he was ready for.

'Good morning. How's it going today?'

The man nodded as if in possession of his life, his reason, his contentment, but turned full on to face the Army man. 'Not too bad, though everybody's got their problems, I suppose.'

How well Denis knew the next few steps. 'We've all got those. Do you feel like sitting over here and telling me how you see the world?'

Neil was back in the town after long periods away. He'd returned to the farm and was nominally in charge, after his wife had managed everything in his time with Ingrid. Neil could run a farm as easily as falling off a log but he couldn't make himself feel right. He'd betrayed the farm as much as he'd betrayed his family, and he couldn't find a way to repossess it. 'Ellen, my wife, isn't blocking my return,' he told the Salvo he'd been to school with – he'd recognised Denis straight away. 'It's me. I keep tripping over myself.' Denis could see that the farmer lacked ways of talking about himself. He'd taken himself for granted, as a driving force beyond question, for so many years that his habits were wrong for the situation he found himself in. 'What can you do about that?'

Neil was lost. 'I've got to do better than I am. I keep blundering around feeling I don't belong where I am. I was in love for a long time, you see ...'

He raised his eyes, as if watching his vanishing self, but Denis, used to the tricks of deceiving others by deceiving oneself, said nothing. '... but it all came to nothing and I'm back home again ...'

'Except that it doesn't feel like home any more.'

'Too true, I'm afraid.'

'Tell me, what *would* feel like home right now, if you could find it?'

It was exactly what Neil wanted to be asked but it hurt him terribly. 'I can't imagine what my new home, my next home, would be like, but it's way ahead of me. What I do know is that I'm in for years of searching before I can possibly find anything.'

'That may be,' Denis said, 'but sometimes God finds a way to send us mercy we're not expecting.'

'If God's got any mercy to spare, I wish he'd send some down for me.'

'What form would you like that mercy to take?' It was Denis's way of asking what his desperate interlocutor saw as his greatest need.

'I've always thought it the most shameful thing for a man to take his own life, but right now I can't see any reason to live.'

He meant it to sound dramatic, but his voice was flat and hard. Empty, perhaps.

'Most people,' Denis said, 'live for somebody outside themselves. Their wife, their kids, parents, or maybe, if their lives have broadened in some way, the community. There are leaders occasionally who live for the nation. Nelson Mandela, perhaps.'

'I can't live for anybody else,' Neil said, 'because when my family needed me, I went off in pursuit of someone else. I lived for her ... and eventually we came to recognise that we had nothing to give each other but passion. You can't build lives on mad passions, you can only destroy them, and I destroyed mine. Fortunately, I didn't quite manage to destroy Ingrid's. She's got herself going without me. It hurts me to say that, but it pleases me too. I wouldn't want her to be such a low-lying wreck as I am now. After ...'

Denis was pleased the man couldn't continue that sentence. It would have told a story he didn't want to be distracted by. He'd realised, suddenly, who it was he was talking to. Putting aside his pastoral manner, he said, 'We're the same generation. Remember the run around the town?'

Neil remembered. 'I didn't do it. I cleared off with a boy called Sam. He's still around somewhere, I think. I don't know, I'm out of touch.' He looked a little more closely at the Salvo who'd woken up to who he was. Neil had a feeling that a man of his own generation would have no way of guiding him, because he'd have no ideas that wouldn't be obsolescent to someone who knew them already. Rather apologetically he said to Denis, 'Well, maybe we can have a talk another time, if either of us has any ideas?' He knew he was doing no more than identifying himself as a man full of problems, but he couldn't see that their talk had anywhere to go. Would Denis agree, or would he pursue him with the nonsense people with faith printed on tracts? Denis was close enough to Neil's condition himself to need to think. He agreed. 'I'm going to the cattle sale,' Neil said. 'I'll be in again next week.'

They left it at that.

Three weeks later they ran into each other again. Neil knew he'd wanted it to happen and he'd hoped that Denis would be professional enough to keep an eye on the spot. He had. 'I've been thinking about what you told me. You told me you did something silly for a young woman. A few years back my wife went through a silly stage, or that's how I felt about it. I want to tell you about it. We might find some parallels that tell us something.' He looked at the farmer, in town for a cattle sale, allegedly.

Neil looked at the bench they'd sat on the first time. 'I'd like to hear.'

Denis told him about the household with Barny, and the nights when Liz decided which of her two men she'd sleep with.

‘Where did the other one sleep?’

‘In our own room. The house had three bedrooms. The one that used to be mine and Elizabeth’s became hers. Barny and I had a room each.’

Neil was staggered. ‘How did you cope with that? Put aside for the other bloke?’

‘That’s a good question ...’

Neil couldn’t believe it. ‘What on earth was going on between the three of you? I mean ...’ He couldn’t find words. ‘I’m ...’

‘You think I should be embarrassed?’

Neil nodded. ‘I do.’ Denis wasn’t surprised. ‘It comes back to what you think is normal. I’ve got something to tell you. Nothing’s normal. There’s no such thing. Everyone’s got an idea in their heads about how they’d like to live, most of us live in hopes of getting there but we don’t really expect to, so we accept that the way we’re living at the same time, the time we’re not achieving our high ideals, that’s normality. But it isn’t if you look around, as I do in my work. I’m in people’s homes every day. I see what goes on and believe me there are a lot of not very pretty pictures out there. You drive along in a car, you think it looks okay ... but you go into those homes and see what’s going on, that’s another matter!’

Neil could see the point had to be conceded. ‘Three people, three bedrooms, you say she used to choose who she’d sleep with every night?’

Denis nodded, but went on. ‘You’re wondering how I let her get away with it? It’s a good question. If the whole thing was to come up again, I’d handle it differently. Of course I would, because I’ve been through it. But that’s how we get to be in a crisis. Something comes up that we haven’t encountered. Suddenly it’s there and we’re skewed. We don’t know what to do. We dig our way into the problem, making it worse ...’

‘Until ...’

‘Until and unless we’re wise enough to ask for God’s help.’

Denis knew the response that this would bring, and it did. Neil turned away. Denis pursued him. 'You don't believe in God. That doesn't mean you've wiped him out, because humans can't do that, but it means he's out of reach when he's needed most. Even God must have moments when he thinks I won't help this person till he wakes up!'

Neil was suddenly glum. 'I woke up very early on. I knew I was on course for a wreck. But it was so wonderful that I couldn't stop myself. I could've, you know. I could've pulled out, but it was too wonderful. When you're in love ...'

He gestured towards ... the air, as he thought it, but in fact at the earlier of two war memorials, for the district's men who'd gone to fight the Boers in 1899. Realising this, he felt foolish. 'Well ...'

Denis, practised at handling situations, said, 'They loved something too. Their country, the empire.'

Neil shook his head. 'No. They wanted to die. They'd have said they were looking for adventure. They weren't. They were looking for escape. From what? From being alive. From leading ordinary, everyday lives in a town like this was in 1899.'

Denis put it to him. 'If there was a war on now, would you go?'

'If I knew I wouldn't have to come back, I think I might. Yes, I think I would.'

Denis again: 'But there's no war, there's daily life, and you've been outside it, and you're not happy at being back.'

'That's my problem.'

'And you've made it mine, and I haven't given you any answers.'

'I didn't really expect any answers, but I had a few hopes.'

Denis's frame of reference changed. 'When they sent us on that run, years ago, do you think they expected us to come back the same, or different? Changed, in some way?'

It was Neil's turn to provide answers. 'I've often thought of that. Why would you tell a bunch of kids to run around the town? The best answer I can think of is that you don't want them to come back.'

You're hoping they'll disappear. You're hoping they'll run into big problems they can't solve, so they won't come back to bother you with all their little problems. What you're doing really is sending them off to find a problem so big they're stuck with it, and they can't escape.'

Denis, weakening, grinned. 'It worked for you, then?'

Neil had to admit. 'It did.'

The offspring of Neil

They met one more time, before Neil went to yet another cattle sale and Denis to his endless concerns. They spoke in the featureless way of men of their generation: 'How's it going?' Glances exchanged. 'So so.' 'No change?' 'No change.' Each wanted to apologise to the other, each knew the other didn't want apologies. They were men who expected results and hated being unable to deliver. They had, without realising it, thought of themselves as individuals since an early age, as opposed to being lightly-powered parts of networks. 'If anything develops, I'd be interested to hear,' Denis told the farmer, who told him, in return, 'If anything develops, I'll be interested to see it.' He didn't tell Denis, though he may have guessed, that out at the farm he'd told Ellen he didn't feel he should sleep in the old bedroom with her. He thought the bungalow more appropriate. 'You've been good in taking me back,' he told his wife, 'but it's an insult for me to take you up on it. I'm not the true owner any more. You and the kids are. Brad especially. He's going to be as good as I ever was and probably better. The girls, too, are wonderful. The best thing I can do is to keep out of their way, and help to keep the place running. They won't all stay in the district. I put my priorities elsewhere for a long time, it's up to me now I'm home to work for them.'

This he did, though he still lacked imagination in seeing how men affected women, and concentrated his efforts on Brad, his son, approaching his twenties. Brad he saw as the one who would take over, and therefore as the one most in need of training. He developed

a way of talking about the properties impersonally, as things requiring attention, development, investment, repairs, new or different approaches, and then, having shown Brad where to look and how to think about the future, he would say, simply to his son, 'What do you reckon?' The answer, thus, the order, came from the lad's mouth, and Neil and Brad, or Brad and Neil, would implement it. Ellen saw this and wished that something as tactful could operate for the girls, but the difficulties Neil had created for them were less obvious. What they'd seen their father do could hardly be undone, in their minds. He'd downgraded their mother by leaving her for someone younger; might not any man do the same? He'd changed, after building reputation for years; might not any man do the same? He'd made them suspicious of other women, because Ingrid, although she'd had the sense to move on eventually, did it when her direct interests made her see it as the thing she needed to do; Ingrid hadn't sent her lover packing out of loyalty for his wife and daughters. No, she'd hung on like grim death until it was harming her. If you couldn't trust other women, who could you trust? Men?

They laughed about this, sometimes, the three girls, when they were alone with each other. Silly jokes or awkward situations made them laugh riotously and they knew they were laughing at what their father had done to them, trying, in peals of laughter, to get back the trust they'd had in each other and in their relationship to the distribution of fortune. 'We used to have things pretty good, once,' Cynthia might say, 'until ...' Jane, then Sally, would say, 'Until,' and the three of them would say 'Until', round and round, meaninglessly, as if repetition would give the word some meaning when the effect was the opposite. Repetition took them to nonsense in seconds, and they'd laugh, stupidly, at each other, apparently, but really at what their father had done to them. They'd trusted him, until ...

And now they trusted him no more. Could anyone be trusted? Ellen, their mother, yes. She hadn't cracked under her husband's pressure, but neither had she got herself another man, which was

what her daughters were secretly – secretly even from themselves – hoping she would do. If she was out the other side of marriage – and again, her daughters didn't know if she was or not – she didn't show it in the time-honoured way of making a substitution. She'd risen to the challenge of her husband's disloyalty but in a way that couldn't entirely be used as guidance by her daughters, still in the years prior to marriage. She had, in her daughters' estimation, taken him back too easily. What the girls didn't see was that she hadn't given back any part of her feelings. Her loyalty extended to giving him whatever he needed to provide him with a chance. After that, everything was up to him. When he moved to the bungalow a few metres from the main house, Ellen helped him make it livable, then she never entered it again. If she wanted to call him for a meal, or to take a phone call inside the house, she went no further than a couple of steps onto the verandah, then called him in the competent, considerate way she'd called for years: 'Neil?'

It was this way of calling their father that showed the girls what their mother felt about him, in the days of his return: he was to be given every chance, but nothing and nobody would be allowed to depend on him. Trust had been destroyed. He was, now, an ageing man working for a family that knew how to manage without him. Cynthia, the eldest, said to her mother on more than one occasion, 'I'd like to do something for dad,' and her mother would say, each time, 'We've done a lot. We've made ourselves self-reliant. That means, if you think about it, that we've turned ourselves into mirrors. Mirrors are sufficient unto themselves. They don't need the faces they reflect. People think a mirror is useless unless it's reflecting. It's not. A mirror face down is still a mirror.' This talk troubled Cynthia. She still felt she should treat her father in a way that showed him the love he must be lacking. Ellen considered her eldest very tenderly. 'You're trying to get things back to the way they used to be, and make your daddy feel he's loved the way he was. It can't work, darling. He's not the same man and we're not the same family. When he went away,

he changed us, and when he came back he forced us to accept the changes we'd made to ourselves. Rule one; if the scenery changes, a different show has to be staged ...'

'What?' Cynthia couldn't see any relevance in this.

'Everything changed when he took up with Ingrid. Everything including you and I. We may not have known it at the time, but it did.' She could see doubt on her daughter's face. 'What changed for you, Cyn? I think you know, all right, so tell me. What changed for you?'

The girl burst out. 'I can't trust anybody any more! That's what changed! And I don't know what to do about it!'

'Exactly,' said her mother. 'It's the same for all of us, though it'll show up in different ways. We're in a rebuilding process. We've done what we can to isolate the problem, by letting him live in that room off the end of the verandah, but the problem's still there inside us, eating away at us. I'm hoping we'll get over it eventually, or partly, but it's leaving its mark.'

And then there was Jane. She was doing medicine as Ingrid had, and at the same university, though Ingrid had long since moved on. As far as the Whittaker girls knew, she was in London; their father said he didn't know. Jane was only rarely on the farm, even in the long vacation, which was taken up by hospital training, so intimate moments with her mother were rare. This troubled Ellen; since she'd allowed her husband back on the property, she felt responsible for the effects of his presence, and Jane didn't care to be near her father. A couple of weeks over Christmas and New Year were as much as Ellen could expect. Jane wasn't very talkative with her mother at such times. Ellen had to seize any opportunities. 'Where do you want to work when you graduate?' she asked her second daughter, over the dishes, that unavoidable spot for conversation. 'New York, maybe Boston,' said Jane. 'East coast of the US, in a big hospital or research institute dripping with money.'

Her mother was surprised, and a little amused. 'You're going to follow money?'

Her daughter had it worked out. 'I'm going to follow big money until I know what it's doing. The direction it's heading. It's no good going off to the Congo if you don't know what's going on out of sight. You're almost as helpless as the people you're working for, and boy, is that helpless! Put it this way, mum; you can't make a success of anything unless you know what everyone's calling a success. It changes all the time, you know.' Ellen decided to take the plunge. 'Your father made a success of this farm. We carried it on. If we hadn't been able to make a success ourselves, we could bear him some resentment, but the fact is that what he did to us gave us our chance, and we took it.' She was going on, but Jane broke in. 'So according to that line of argument, we owe him something. He gave us our chance! Bull shit, mum! Bull shit! He cleared off and left us ...'

'... and he came home washed up!' Her mother was passionate too. 'He can feel your hostility. You didn't speak to him for two days when you got home this time. Two days! Your father. Couldn't you have ...'

'Couldn't I have done this, couldn't I have done that. Couldn't I have put a match to his bloody bungalow one night when he was in there asleep, and couldn't I have thrown a can of petrol on it? Ask me a realistic question, mum, or don't ask me at all!'

Ellen saw it was impossible, but had to try. 'This is his home, and it's ours. We're all joined. The moment I became pregnant with Cynthia, we were a family. There's no separating families. It can't be done, much as we might wish it. Families are always trying to split up, and they can't do it. You can put oceans between them, but the animosities are still there, because they're in the mind. You'll be hating your father in New York. You'll be hating him in Boston. Wherever! It's the hatred that's the problem, not your father. Have a look in the bungalow. That wreck, that ghost of what he was, is all that's left of the man I married ...'

Jane gathered her energy; as venomously as she was able, she spat the word, 'Father!'

Ellen was ready. 'Exactly. You don't think much of him. Haven't you noticed? He doesn't think much of himself. But he's still part of us. We can't save ourselves without saving him. We've given him a safe haven ...'

Jane: 'And four days after New Year I'm needed back in the hospital. Well, you know I'm not *needed*, mum, you know it's voluntary, but that's what I'm volunteering for, I'm not volunteering to stay down here and be nice to him. If you can stand it, mum, that's great, but I don't want to be in sight of him. He makes me sick. I know you feel you have to do what you're doing, but don't bring me into it. Spare me! I know you think I ought to be tolerant, and forgiving, but I'm not. I'm full of scorn and resentment. I wouldn't give him a bowl of fruit if it would save his life. Sorry, mum, but that's how it is!'

Ellen's conversation with Sally took place in the shed. Sally was doing something to the stirrups on her saddle, which she said were too loose. When she saw her mother in the doorway, she said, 'Something else gone wrong?' Ellen felt her spirits slump. 'No. I just wanted a chance to chat with you ...'

'... without others hearing.' Sally was ready. 'Go ahead, mum.'

This openness, or apparent readiness, made her more impenetrable than her older sisters, or so Ellen found. 'Jane's going back as soon as she can.'

'She told me. It makes me realise how living near him dulls your senses after a while. You get used to him. We ought to buy him another property, mum. Let him show he's as good as he was.'

Her mother said, 'He wouldn't be up to it.'

Sally jumped in. 'He hates himself. That's his problem.'

'*Our* problem is getting him on his feet again.'

Sally wouldn't go that far. 'I think we've done all we can, mum. I really do. You want to do more, but it isn't getting anywhere, is it? I

think you know that. Mum, you believe in unconditional love, and I don't. If you offer someone unconditional love, they can keep drawing on it. They become a succubus, is that the word? They just drain you, to keep themselves alive and healthy, so it's you, the one they're draining, that actually feels the suffering. They do all the crying and groaning, but the one that keeps them alive so they can carry on the way they do, is the one that's supporting them.'

Ellen hadn't expected this. 'Jane's leaving on the fourth. She says she can't stand him.'

Sally wasn't impressed. 'She's got an easy out. She can run around sticking needles in people, and fixing broken legs, and what about us? We've got our father to care for, because you won't throw him out. Well, I wouldn't throw him out either, but it sure does raise problems, having him here. Kevin Brogan was over here the other day, Irish as Paddy's pig. "Lovely property you got here," he says, blarneying away. "It's a credit to your mum and you girls." He knows what to say, so I show him around. He's got his eye on dad's bungalow, so they know that's where he's sleeping. Then he thinks he'd better say something nice about dad. "Course you girls and your mum had a fine property to start with," he says. "It's a great advantage." I know he's dying to tell me about his place, so I ask him how many prizes they won at the show last November. And oh ...' she made Irish noises '... suddenly he became modest. He gave me the shits, mum. The absolute screaming shits! He wanted to tell me what they'd done with their show ribbons, he wanted to find out all about father being in the bungalow, he wanted to get me off for a weekend or two of shagging before he dropped me for someone else, he wanted to know who was making the decisions here these days, you, Brad, dad, me or the other girls, he wanted to get in early if we were selling off any stock, he wanted anything for his benefit, anything that might come his way at all. He couldn't think a single thought except selfish ones. Ones that would benefit him!'

Ellen looked at her with a steady eye. 'That's the Brogans. And there's no need to be too hard, because it's also the human race, or ninety per cent of them. We're carrying a weakness, Sally, remember? We used to be top dog around here and we're not any more. If, for instance, we had a falling out and we sold up, everybody for two hundred miles would be in to buy up whatever we were selling. That's what good fortune is, my dear. An opportunity for misfortune, and that's an opportunity for everyone else. In they dive, pecking and scratching and quarrelling and shouting, and grabbing, first and foremost, snatching anything good they can get their hands on. That's why a weakness has to be hidden, cared for, healed if possible, because if you're smart you never admit to failing strength, because if you do the greedy will gather and their eyes will show you what they're thinking, Like that Kevin Brogan,' she added. 'Ready to grab, but no more than anyone else.' She switched her line. 'Do you want to go to town with Jane for a few days? Look around? Get away? Meet some new people? Give yourself a break?'

Sally loved her mother all over again. 'I might, mum. It might be good for me. Thanks, I'll have a think. Jane upset you, didn't she mum? It's just as hard for her, you know.'

Ellen knew. 'I know, I know. It isn't easy, is it.'

Years passed, Neil grew older and his wife and children with him. Brad, after years of running the property, moved on, and Sally took over. Brad bought a bus line, then a chain of tourist hotels along the east coast, stretching up to Cairns. He toyed with the idea of starting a small airline, but kept away. 'If you've got a good resort and it's not making money, you can give it a make-over. All an airline can do is fly!' Sally felt herself deepening as her grip on the properties firmed. People depended on her – customers, agents, people who sold her things, even the workers who were casual. People deferred to her, and waited for her to indicate her wishes. This was part of the learning she absorbed from her mother. Ellen, never a big

woman, seemed to pack more into her frame as the years went on. She entered rooms quietly, then sat, or stood, in one place. It was as if you couldn't catch her adjusting. Sally acquired this mannerism – this stature – from her mother. People found the two of them in one room somewhat overpowering. For the most part, they kept out of each other's spaces, Ellen as the wise old head, Sally the day to day manager. Though her father's lessons had had Brad as their focus, she'd learned well. Water, soil, life – these were the things she concentrated on. She read, listened, and learned. She walked, and rode, all over the property, noticing everything. She listened, she stopped to talk. Sometimes, when someone's chatter surprised her, she questioned her mother, who could usually advise, or guide. As their knowledge – perhaps, more accurately, their concentration – grew, the importance, the usefulness, of Neil Whittaker, Sally's father, diminished further. He walked, often enough, to the edge of the property and sat in the bush. He found interest – relief, perhaps – in the flowers, birds, insects, surrounding their land. 'Nature's cruel,' he might say when he got home, 'but it doesn't know it's being cruel, it thinks it's being natural, so what we see as harsh is normal, in nature. I wish ...'

He often said these words, and normally they remained unfinished. Whatever it was he wished, it wasn't said. He surprised his second daughter Jane one morning, when she was home on one of her rare visits, by asking an unexpected question: 'Before you went to Boston, Jane, you were in London for a while?'

'I was, father, yes.'

'Did you ever see Ingrid? I'd love to know how she's doing.'

It was years since the name had been spoken in the house, and Jane was shocked, yet surprised to find that the man she was so angry with had created an occasion she felt the need to rise to. 'I did once, father, yes.' Sally was at the table, surprised by the turn, Ellen, too. Cynthia was in New South Wales. Neil, suddenly alert, said, 'At a medical conference, I suppose?'

'It was, father, yes, that's right.'

'Was she speaking?'

'Not on the day that I was there, though I noticed her name on the list for a later day, when I would have gone.'

'What was she going to speak about?'

Jane had to think. 'That I can't recall, father, though the conference as a whole was about classifying blood types, particularly in relation to transfusions. It's a large topic, as you could imagine.' Jane could also imagine that her father, in his intuitive way, would have some understanding of such things from his years with animals. She looked at him, and he was staring at the window, as if it gave him access to years long lost. 'I'd love to know,' he began, and stopped, just as he stopped whenever he said 'I wish ...' Jane, not a very patient woman, said, 'What would you like to know, father? Is there something *definite* in your mind?' The family group had a sudden, strong, feeling of incompleteness. Cynthia, of course, was missing but their feeling came from a wish, an interest in hearing the thoughts moving in his mind. Their father came close enough to say, 'I'd love to know what she's known for inside her own profession. I knew her in one way, but they know her in another, and it would be quite different, wouldn't it?' He sounded at least a little curious to know what they all thought, though he sounded vague as well. Then he said to his second child, 'What did she look like?'

Again, his family was caught unexpected. Jane gathered herself. 'I have to say, begging your pardon, mother ... I never dreamed we'd be talking about Ingrid here today ... I have to say that she looked distinguished. She could hardly have looked better. She was extremely confident of herself. Of course, I was looking at her in a certain way because of our family's perspective on things, but I felt I was looking at a person who'd made her mistakes early enough to recover from them, even to gain some advantage from having made them, perhaps ...'

She might have gone on, but her father was sighing. 'Aaahh ...'

'Father?'

'What we're talking about is a very painful topic around this table, I know, but I'm glad I asked because what you've told me is a relief to me. I *can* bear ... I can only just bear, it's true, but I can bear what I did to myself, but if I thought that I'd damaged Ingrid, then I'd have had to kill myself, years ago.'

Jane was made angry by this but the real fury surged in Sally. 'You still can't see what you've done to us!' He could only look blank. 'I know what I've done. What else do you think I'm thinking about, when I sit on my own every day?' Sally was far from satisfied with this. 'You just go round and round in your guilt. You know the saying, a guilt trip? You're on one, father, and it's endless. It never stops and you never get off. What's the use of that to us? Tell me that!' He said nothing, as she knew he would. 'All you do is look at yourself, and feel sorry for what happened. The things you brought on yourself. I've never heard you ask yourself – and by God, you've never asked us! – what the effects of your disappearance were on us! You've never even thought about that, have you?'

Her father had no strength to withstand this. 'I probably haven't. I suppose you're right. You're right in everything you do in running the place, I suppose you're right about other things too.'

Ellen broke in. 'Think of a group of people. One does something bold, and brings it off. One does something cautious, and just gets by. The third does nothing.' Her youngest broke in. 'Three children! And the third does nothing. That's me. What have I ever done that's been successful?' To her father, withdrawn as he was, and ashamed, it was preposterous. 'You and your mother have been running the place ever since Brad took himself away. Probably before that, if I'd had the sense to know. It couldn't have been run better. You're a credit to the whole district. There's nobody to equal you and your mother, and everybody knows it. The Brogans, who think they're the ants' pants, are envious, as you were telling us before. You're a suc-

cess, my girl, a really high flyer, and still on the way up. Who are you going to marry? Have you got your eye on someone yet?’

This stung. Ellen moved her hands uncomfortably on the table. Sally’s eyes darkened. ‘I’m not free to marry, father. You ought to know that. I am free, only, to patch up what you’ve done wrong. You walked out on mother, you walked out on your property, leaving us to pick up the pieces. Mother stayed, Cynthia and Jane have made careers for themselves, and I was the one who had to pick up the burden and carry it. How else would mother have survived? If I hadn’t stuck it out here with mother, we’d have had to sell up, and leave the district in shame. Where would you be then? You’d have had nothing to come back to. You’d have had to face the full enormity of what you’ve done. Instead, you’ve been sheltered. You can sit on a log in a paddock feeling sorry for yourself because others are keeping everything going. I’ve sacrificed myself for you and I wish I hadn’t! I wish I’d run off when you ran off, and by now I’d be happy, rich person somewhere far away, and I’d be free! Free! You hear me? Free!’

Ellen was appalled. Things like this shouldn’t be brought into the open, they should be sensed, far in advance, from signals carefully sent, so that actions could be taken to avoid extremes. Tact and diplomacy were the supreme virtues. As for self-sacrifice, what other virtue did ‘self’ have? ‘Self’ was like an inheritance; shallow people asked how big it was, while wiser ones asked what would or could be done with it. Money was no more than an ability to do something, in Ellen’s mind, and ‘self’ was the same. She looked sternly at her youngest. ‘You, Sally, have been marvellous to me. It’s given me great pride to have you as my companion in running this place. But you wish to be free. I don’t think I quite realised how strong that need was in you. Your need for freedom must be satisfied, otherwise it’ll become a canker, eating you away inside. As of this minute, you are free. You will remain a one-sixth shareholder in this property and any money we earn here will always be equally divided. You will receive your share, wherever you may be in this world. Your father

– Neil? Are you listening? – will resume as manager, under my direction. Neil? Did you hear? Manager, under my direction. It's easy to be the head person, I find. It's a burden we learn to carry.' She considered her youngest. 'It's only when you've gone away that you learn how to think about the things at home that made you what you were. That's the stage that lies ahead for you, my love.'

Addressing Sally in this way, and then softening for the last word almost brought Ellen undone. The need for them to bond in the face of her husband's intransigence had been great, but now the need for giving Sally her freedom, her independence, had asserted itself. 'People think,' Ellen said, 'that the gift of freedom means a loss of love. It's never seemed so to me. I've never been a hoarder, I've always been a giver. I wouldn't want to be anything else. I couldn't respect myself if I didn't follow the path that feels right for me.' She saw doubts crowding in to her daughter's eyes. 'No, you claimed your freedom and it's granted. We're not reversing anything now. What we decided – what you asked and I granted – those things will happen. There's a big wide world outside this little patch of farm, my love, and it's yours. Go and see what it holds for you, and come back and tell us what you've found, won't you?'

Sally felt upstaged by her mother, and therefore angry; felt also recognised, liberated, and therefore, in a sneaky, secretive way, exultant. She'd been released and she wasn't at all sure that she wanted to be out. It might be better to be secured in a paddock because it gave you the right to complain. People have locked me in here! Look, I'm not free! Well, she was free whether she wanted it or not. What her mother had done was the opposite of what her father had done, and it was just as bad ...

... and it was just as good. Really, she had to face the world and regard it as her reckoning. She knew how strong she was, how capable, but would it be enough? There was only one thing to do and that was to find out. 'I'll need a day or two to plan,' she said. 'My plans for the coming year have been turned upside down.' Looking at her

father she said sarcastically, 'You might see me sitting on a log tomorrow, father, pondering my future. Where will I go and what will I do? That much is easy. I'll go as far away as possible. London, Jane, you can tell me where to stay. At least I can speak the language. I'll need a job ... I've got a lot of thinking to do ...'

Jane was quick and Ellen was quicker. Jane stood up, though what she was going to do, or say, was never known because the girls' mother broke in. 'Go and pack. You go with her, Jane, and tell her what to take. Get somewhere organised for Sally to stay. Stay *with!* She'll need reliable company! Congenial, but reliable. And a job ... but that's tomorrow's conversation!' Sensing that she was sweeping them off their feet, she added, 'Don't hesitate. Don't argue. Decisions have been made. Sally's off to London.' She looked at her daughter with a fierce pride. 'To find her way home again, if she wants to. If she can! Go with God, my love, trust in him, and let us hope he'll bring you home one day!'

And thus it was that Neil Whittaker resumed the outward appearance of managing his property. Sally went to London, Jane returned to Boston, Brad spent most of his time managing his Queensland resorts, Cynthia stayed in Sydney. Control of the property, of the family, as much as that was still capable of being led, remained with Ellen, who continued to sleep in what had long been known as the master bedroom. Neil stayed in the bungalow.

Dick Hart Gets Promotion

A few days after the news broke that Dick Hart would be taking up a principal's position the following year, he visited the clinic complaining of chest pains. John Taylor, a young doctor who'd only recently arrived, couldn't find his records. 'That's because there aren't any,' Dick told him. 'I haven't been sick in my time down here.' He was proud of this, yet concerned; chest pains were something he associated with heart trouble and that wasn't *him*. The doctor listened with a stethoscope. 'Nothing wrong that I can hear. You sure it wasn't something digestive? Anything you've eaten recently that hasn't agreed with you?' Dick said no. He added that he was hoping for good health because he'd just been given a long desired promotion, he'd want all his energy because he had big plans for the rest of his career: 'They don't make many people principals at my age, and ...' He let his body speak for itself.

He told Loretta when he got home that the doctor hadn't been able to find anything wrong, and this, of course, was true, but not quite what he'd wanted. He'd been hoping that some minor ailment, something trivial, would have been diagnosed, so that he could laugh at himself taking some remedy he didn't respect as necessary. Dick's health had been so good for so long that he'd become one of those whose health is something they expect other people to worry about, and the young doctor he'd just seen was too objective, too distant for an inexperienced patient like Dick to be able to read anything into his comments. 'Come back in a fortnight, we'll treat this case as a watching brief, I think that would be wisest at this stage.'

Weeks passed, and then Dick got another unwelcome surprise. Arnie Longmire had applied for a position at the school where Dick would be principal, and had got the job. There were congratulations and merriment in the staff room. Teachers pretended to feel sorry for the western district town where 'it' would all be happening next year. The two appointees were photographed together for the local paper, and the photo, together with other pictures of the school, were sent on to the town where they would soon be starting ... together, as their local paper pointed out.

Together! Dick was appalled. To Loretta, and only when the children weren't around to hear what he had to say, he confessed that he'd spent years keeping onside with the brusque and opinionated maths teacher because he felt it was necessary to have a united staff, and '...well Arnie never had much tact and he had no insight, no imagination. He didn't have the gift of knowing what you thought, so he said, loudly and without much warning, whatever came out of his mouth. He was amazing! He still is. The man's unchanged. I've been watching that school for years, making a list in my mind of all the things I'd like to be different, not saying anything, but just getting myself ready for the day when I could make a fresh start ... and what do they do to me? They appoint Arnie as my offsider! The last man I'd have chosen!'

This between Dick and Loretta. In public, Dick shook Arnie's hand, stood side by side in front of cameras, answered questions about working with the other man, listened without comment to Arnie holding forth on the way 'they' - 'the team' - would tackle any problems the new town threw at them, and so on. On a visit to the city, allegedly, once again, to do with his activities as sportsmaster, he took himself to the appointments tribunal to see if anything could be done about moving Arnie somewhere else. No. The Tribunal had felt it was giving the new school a team with complementary strengths, and therefore a winning team. 'There's absolutely nothing on the record to suggest any discord between the two of you,' Dick was

told. He found a chance to speak to the Chief Inspector of Schools and got the same response. 'I don't think they'd have appointed the two of you if they hadn't known you could work in tandem,' the Chief added. 'None of us are doing what we're doing for ourselves alone. We're doing it for the people we affect in our working lives. Students, colleagues, parents, the community at large. Try not to see it as a personal matter.' Dick Hart left the Chief a disheartened man. He would never be able to run his new school in the way he wanted with Arnie as the next person down. A school's discipline, its whole operation, needed to seem natural to those inside it so that all the energy flows were positive. Arnie, however, dramatised things. He picked up wrongdoings, and made a fuss of them, stopping the flow of whatever was happening. He challenged students in front of other students, making drama public. He forced young people to admit they were wrong. He chided them, redressed them, in front of their peers. Arnie called a roll dramatically, squinting over his glasses at anyone who didn't call back promptly, while Dick would stand outside the school as youngsters who came by bus filed on board to go home, and he would comment on what he saw: 'They're noisy today. Something's put them in a cranky mood. Wonder what it was?' Wind, he perceived, affected the moods of the students, and he had bushes, and trees, planted at various spots to break the pathways of wind through the school. He'd had trees cut and shelters built near the canteen so that the students were comfortable, and shaded, as they sat lunching, and he'd had an old shed removed so that lunch was pacified by views of the river and the farmland beyond, after which, of course, came the mountains the district was famous for. 'We want them to be grateful that they grew up where they did,' Dick would say, intervening as imperceptibly as he could in things that affected the moods of those in the school's care. 'We don't have them long,' he liked to say, 'but we want it to be a positive experience.'

And Arnie, with whom he was at odds, was going with him, to ensure that the new principal's wishes were put into practice! How

could this be? Dick was in despair. If he couldn't get Arnie moved, could he get his own appointment shifted? He rang the Chief Inspector from his phone at home, but the Chief was firm. It couldn't be done. Besides, the new town had been sold the idea that they were getting an harmonious team, two men who'd worked together for years, two men who read each other's minds and found it easy because they were so alike. There was nothing to be done. And surely, the Chief wanted to know, surely Dick wasn't saying that a bad appointment had been made?

Dick was, of course, but he had to cover that. 'I think Arnie Longmire would be an excellent appointment for a different person as principal, but it just so happens my ways of working are very different from his ...' Thus Dick to the Chief but the Chief overrode him. 'When you're the principal of a school, you have a whole range of people under you. You know how different they can be. The whole art of leading is to appear to treat everyone the same, while in fact you're dealing with their differences. Don't forget the range of differences you'll inherit at that school. You won't have the mountains of the east to give you relief, but you'll have the Grampians not far away and once you start to see the region through the prism of that marvellous place, and all its natural heritage, you'll see how it affects huge areas of the west and the difficulties of being in personal accord with your deputy will become a much smaller problem!'

Thus the Chief, who had the job of operating a statewide system. Dick's heart sank as he realised that it was his job too. He'd dreamed of creating his own little perfection, and he'd got himself into a network running from one end of the state to the other. Everywhere was connected to everywhere else and he was to be a little switch, turned on and off by powers above him. Loretta saw that he was depressed before he started. With the love she'd given him for years, she told him to make a list of the differences he was going to have with Arnie, and then, in parallel, what he would want Arnie to do. Keep it in your pocket, when we get up there – naming the town they were going

to – and when he offends, give him an order. His next promotion depends on your approval. You'll change him – over time.'

Dick loved his wife, in fact as well as in duty, and he added her advice to the Chief Inspector's: the first stage in my learning to be a principal, he told himself. How many more?

The next stage came on the day the removalists packed their van with the Harts' possessions, and suddenly their house was empty. 'I feel very humble, darling,' Dick told his wife, 'and when we arrive at another empty house, and it's waiting for us to fill it, I'm going to feel even more so.' Loretta looked at him as one who had known he would pass through these stages. 'Treat it as an omen, darling. No! Treat it as a voice letting you know how to respond. You'll be walking in to someone else's office, and the people up there will be apprehensive about this new man. What's he going to be like? Does he realise the things that could go wrong? Will he have enough sense to see this and that? Humility's a good preparation for those sorts of questions. Humility means people won't be afraid to approach you. Besides, we're doing this together, aren't we?'

It was the strongest thing she could say to him, and he loved her for it. Whatever they had had been made together. They'd understood marriage from the beginning, and they'd lived that way. 'As we drive along today, darlings,' Loretta said to her husband and their children, 'take note of everything we see. We'll stop for photos if you see anything special. This is a trip we're going to remember. We must remember because it's going to change us. When we get to the other end, we'll have dinner tonight, probably at a hotel, because I won't feel like cooking, and we'll tell each other how we feel. All the differences, all the new things, will come out.' She gave them a containing smile, and the children knew that a woman's love is the heart of a family. It needs a man's effort, his strength, his work, and much more besides, but a woman's warmth is the core, and their mother exemplified it. How fortunate they were!

They drove, and before long they passed the van with all their things on board. They tooted, and gave waves to the driver. Half an hour later, they stopped for photos on the outskirts of the next town, and the van passed them again, honking loudly. More laughs and waves. Royce, their eldest, said, 'When we pass him again in a minute, slow down, dad, because I want to take a photo!' But somehow they missed him, because they didn't see their van again until they got to their Wimmera town, perched on the Western Highway, several hours later, when they were tired. The Harts stayed at a hotel that night and didn't see the van people until the next morning, when they went to the house that was to be theirs. Their neighbours came in to welcome them, and offer them cups of tea, but Dick and Loretta said they thought they should keep an eye on the unpacking, and direct the van men where to put things because they didn't know what was in the various boxes, and it would be so much simpler if things finished up in appropriate rooms. The neighbours absented themselves, leaving Dick and Loretta managing, aware of, but unable to quantify, all the differences between any given object – a chair, a wall-mirror, even a towel, a sheet – as it had been, back where they'd come from, and now, where it had recently arrived. Rhyll, the second child and only girl, told her mother, 'These things don't know what they're going to be like for us yet. They want to stay the same, but we're going to change, so they're going to change too.' Tim, the youngest, a little fellow, as befitted his name, heard her and thought, then said to his sister and his mother, 'Maybe they don't want to stay the same.. Maybe they think it's an opportunity for them just like it is for us!' Loretta laughed, delighted to think that her son was able to see things in this transformative way. 'It's a big change, isn't it? I'm sure there are things so precious that we mustn't let them go, and other things where we'll need to fit in to new things in a new town, but we don't know what they are, so we have to wait and see.' Something impulsive took her over from within. 'Let's explore!'

When the van had left the Harts in a house piled with boxes, Loretta, seeing her children's spirits flagging, called for a drive around their new town. 'Let's see what we can see!', to which Rhyll responded, 'Let's see what it's going to tell us.' The girl couldn't get it out of her head that this town was going to be an unhappy one for the family. She didn't realise that she'd picked up on her father's apprehensions about sharing his new school with a man from his old school, this not having been discussed in front of the children. 'When do the Longmires arrive?' Loretta asked her husband, as he backed their car down the drive for the first time. 'Do we know?' He thought he did. 'Last week, I think it was. I don't know exactly but I think that's when they made their move. They're slightly older residents of Stawell than we are.' No more was said on the matter but Rhyll sensed that the people being talked about were a cause of anxiety in her parents' minds. Why? She would have to wait and see.

They drove about, finding early on that the main street, running up and down a slope, had been blocked off. 'Do you want to walk about?' Loretta asked her husband, but he said not. 'Today, I want to take a look without talking to anybody. Besides, I shouldn't let anybody in my ear until I've met with the president of my council. He'll present us to the people we ought to know first, then after that I can be my own man. But not until then.' Loretta expected no less of her husband but for the children it was a sign that their parents were public property, now, and so, therefore, to some extent, were they. They looked apprehensively at the town, aware, at least to some degree, that they existed inside a freedom that they'd brought with them and which was soon to be unwrapped, exposing them to things unseen.

Loretta spotted a bakery. 'Bread!' she called. 'After lunch,' her husband said. 'Not now. We'll do our first shopping in one place. There's a supermarket, I know. Which reminds me. When we have lunch we'll do it at a different pub from the one where we stayed last night. I have to send signals that I belong to everybody, not just one

group.’ Rhyll again felt that life was going to be different. Her place in this new town was going to be linked to her father’s position, an emblematic one, requiring the allegiance of numerous locals, and therefore giving them rights, a hold of some sort over the man and his family. Tim broke in: ‘It looks real dry around here, doesn’t it?’ His mother said, ‘That’s because it *is* dry. I won’t be seeing so many muddy knees, will I?’

The boy noticed the question she’d ended with. It was a direction, but also a plea; the children would have to lift their behavior to the level of their father’s position. Nobody must let him down. Royce, too, sensed how he’d be affected. No fights. No comments made in anger, or self-defence, about anything which might intersect with his father’s occupation. He’d be going to a Catholic school in Ballarat, but reports would get back. Any misdeeds would undermine his dad, and that wasn’t allowed, because dad had great plans to make the local school better than it had been before, and this wasn’t going to be easy. Royce knew, from scraps he’d heard his parents discussing, that the school had not so much become run down as allowed to drift. Policies would have to be firm, in future, and that meant discipline would need to be tight, even though Dick Hart’s philosophy was one of letting study, and heaps of hard work – forces, that is to say, located inside the students – be the controlling influences of his school. This would mean a remoulding of the inner processes of the place, light years from the noisy, quarrelsome, if good-natured, bullying of Arnie Longmire, a man forever attacking people, demanding, challenging, bringing on ructions of each and every sort, a man whose confrontations enforced a bent-knee respect for propriety, manners, and above all, virtue, without which Arnie’s world was out of joint. How different was this new town going to be? How new, how old, how much the same?

They took a road that led them back to the highway. ‘I think there’s another road back just a couple of Ks down here,’ Dick said.

'Let's see. We can always turn round if we need to. Good heavens, what's that?'

He swung off the road, in among small stands of spindly gum trees, to pull up near a huge rock, partly buried, partly uluruing itself in the atmosphere, and painted, for the most part, white, grey, and grey and white. Loretta said, 'This must be what they do when they want to get away from what they should be doing!' 'It certainly looks like it,' her husband said. Royce found himself relieved that he'd be at school in another town. He wouldn't have to pretend he didn't know about the painters' paradise they'd come upon. He knew without even looking that there would be obscenities under the washes of paint, and other obscenities, words and drawings, that he wouldn't be able to acknowledge, in or on this much-visited, much-abused pile of rock. Spindly trees grew against it, like skinny-legged aboriginal children. 'Rotary should clean this up,' Dick said. 'I wonder why they haven't?' His wife thought Rotary might have decided it was too good an outlet for much that couldn't get an expression in any other way. 'But it's on the highway,' Dick aid. 'It's an advertisement for the town!' He was troubled, unsure of whether the painted rocks were within his ambit as principal or not. 'How on earth did I miss seeing this when I came up for the interview? You couldn't go past without noticing.' Loretta suggested that he might have swung into town along another road; this he couldn't remember. Then he thought of something else. 'We should get out of here. I don't want people seeing me here when there's dozens of things I haven't seen that they'd like me to see first.' Royce and Rhyll knew that he meant churches and kindergartens, sporting facilities and costly new improvements the town had given itself, things designed to impress; they knew, also, that the town's youngsters of their own age group would rarely be impressed by what they were supposed to respect, but that their father's new position meant that their own lives would have always to be within skip-jumping distance of that line of respectability that

he, their father, and their mother too, must never be on the wrong side of.

The children knew that something precious had been left in the town they'd recently quit. In childhood, virtue is like a mask, to be kept handy and assumed when necessary, before resuming the ambivalently morality-less life lived as wildly as possible under the eyes of confining authorities; here, in this new town, their father's new position meant that they were, whether they wanted it or not, aligned with the enforcing side of the battle, the virtue-speakers they'd avoided so far. Royce, particularly, but the three of them, really, wanted never to get out of the car.

They had lunch, then Dick and Loretta went to the supermarket, while the children roamed the street. In the supermarket, the inevitable happened; they ran into Arnie and Belle Longmire. The men shook hands while Loretta, with practised ease, asked the other woman, 'How are you settling in?' Belle was a turgid, stormy woman, who'd never felt a need for tact. 'The shopping leaves a lot to be desired. What we're going to do for fish I'm blessed if I know. Go to Melbourne, probably!' Loretta laughed, as she'd learned to do with Belle. 'There must be compensations,' but Belle wouldn't have it. 'I'd never realised how much we took for granted, down there, but the moment I got here I could see we were in for serious privations!' and Loretta saw, all over again, how little Arnie had been able to do to modify his partner; it was one of the less acknowledged aspects of marriage, the wearing down of rough spots, the abrasion of faults, of coarseness and stupidities that most of us brought to marriage but should try to be rid of by the time parenthood came along. Loretta wanted to fight for her husband. Seeing the Longmires in their new town, she saw in dramatic light how intractable they were going to be, as a couple, a bonded influence on the important work entrusted to Dick, her husband. At her most tactful, Loretta said to the other woman, 'I certainly see what you mean about taking things

for granted, but then that's an opportunity that comes with shifting, isn't it? It gives you a chance to look at what you took for granted in the old place, and then to look at the people who are at home in your new place, so you can see what it is they've swallowed a little too easily, and accepted.' She thought a policy ultimatum mightn't be amiss, especially with this largely ungovernable woman who'd attached herself to their lives: 'Dick and Arnie didn't have to run the school, back in the old town, but here they have to set the standard, then enforce it. The town will know, quite early on, if they're up to doing it. The least weakness, the least division in their standards, and people will see the opening and use it in some way.' Having said it, she turned her attention to the men. 'Excuse our attention being on you two and your school, but you're the ones that brought us here.' She meant herself, Belle, and two lots of children. 'Country towns are good at sorting out outsiders. They do it all too easily.' Arnie was brash as ever. 'You're right, Loretta. I was just saying to Dick, if you let people run away with you, you'll never see yourself again.' Dick had a smile on his face at this quaint expression being used a second time when he would never have said it in the first place. 'So,' Arnie went on, 'you've got to be ready for your first brawl, when it comes. If you win the first few brawls you can't avoid, people will be a bit more wary of having a fight. They'll be more likely to take you on your own terms, and that's where we both want to be!'

Not for the first time, he was headed for his home territory, unaware that the Harts had plans to curb him. 'That's how I see it, anyway. Odd, isn't it,' he changed the subject. 'There's plenty of aboriginal kids up here and they seem keen to do well.' Dick nodded amiably at this, then switched to make the first of many attacks on the man whose years he'd shared. 'I'm hoping there'll be no brawls under my leadership. Brawls happen when people lose control of themselves. My idea of a well run school is that everyone's moving in the same direction. I dare say that's not always possible, but it's what everybody has to be working towards. If somebody steps out

of line, we indicate the right direction, and ask to see them heading that way. I know as well as anyone that there are difficult kids, but it's up to us to manage them. I haven't spoken to Andrew yet' – this was the council president – 'but that's what I'll be saying to him, and expecting his support. He was very positive about it in my interview.'

Arnie grinned. He knew that round one had been fought, and he didn't consider himself to have lost, though he knew Dick Hart thought he'd come out on top. He turned his smile to Belle. 'We've got a list of things to get, Belle. Where are we up to?' She produced her scrap of paper. The battle had begun.

Father Joe

The Harts settled in, with the older children, Royce and Rhyll, attending Catholic schools in Ballarat as weekly boarders. On Friday afternoons they caught a bus home and on Sunday evenings Loretta drove them back to their schools. This made Friday evenings their time of reunion, and Dick did his best to avoid any commitments that might keep him out when the young people came home. After dinner they played cards, or Scrabble, because either game could give way to talk if they felt talkative, or to concentration if they felt inward. Sometimes the young people brought homework with them, and this was normally done on Sunday afternoons, Dick and Loretta wanting their children to go out on Saturdays, in order to get to know the youngsters of their town. 'You're only boarders in Ballarat, don't forget. You have to have a home, and this is it.'

There were some proud moments for the Harts in that first year; Royce ran the two hundred metres under fifteen at a sports meeting, and Rhyll led her college debating team to a regional victory. Elation swept through Dick and Loretta, especially the father, as their boy gathered in the field by taking the bend into the straight at speed, then swept down the straight with huge strides, head high, arms driving forward and back, like a locomotive; it was a picture Dick was to cherish for years, as he did, too, the glamour, the rich

awareness on his daughter's face, as she announced, on the Sunday following the win, that she was ready for her mother to drive her back to school. Looking into his daughter's hazel eyes – her mother's, when she was the same age – and the rounded features, full of warmth and awareness, that Rhyll was offering anyone who looked at her, Dick knew that his daughter was proud of her success and it made her proud of her family. She wanted them to know. 'The next thing we're going to do,' Dick said to his smiling daughter, 'is travel. We need to see a bit of the world. My family were never travellers – they were too poor – and your mother's weren't much different. But you've got bigger worlds to conquer than we had, and we'd better start out by taking a look!'

Rhyll did no more than smile at this, because she knew that supporting two children at boarding school was expensive, and there was still Tim to be considered; she knew that her father didn't want the boy to attend the school where he was principal, but three youngsters away at once was going to be hard to pay for ... so no expectations could be built; besides, she had enough of her mother in her to think that boys and their opportunities came first, so maybe, by the time Tim's secondary schooling came along, she might be working in a bank, perhaps, or a local tourist authority, anything that brought some money in. She also had a feeling that she had still to learn significant things about the town they'd settled in; it didn't yet feel hers, and maybe it never would?

She wondered, too, about her brother. She too had seen him win the two hundred metre event, and a relay race on the same day, but had felt an ambivalence about seeing him rushing down the straight, arms flailing, the spikes of his athletic shoes stabbing the track. Was he running towards, or running away? At the winning post were scores of boys from Royce's school, waving flags and caps, banners with the colours of the school, telling Royce that victory, triumph over others, was his, but Rhyll had felt differently. She'd watched the coaches of Royce's team, Catholic brothers many of them, putting

their athletes through their paces, and their starting practices, and she felt that the athletes of Royce's school, stylish and skilfully trained as they were, were expert in running away. The young men of her family's religion were being trained to look away from the feminine, to disregard it, to think of athletics, and football and rowing, cricket too, almost anything rather than follow those urges which might lead them to the arms of women ...

... such as herself. Yet if she looked at her own mother, she saw no evidence of conflict. Mother was as proud of Royce as her father. Mother was as proud of her as her father was. Somehow her parents had solved, for themselves, the problem she could see with Royce, that is, how you could trust an institution to develop a young man, with his own best interests at heart, when so much of its efforts, its disciplines and training, were directed towards making the young men run so stylishly, so fast, *away!*

Strangely, and without Rhyll being aware of it, her father was troubled too. He'd made up his mind well before getting his appointment as principal, that the best way to get everybody focussed on learning was to reduce by as much as possible the amount of drama and personal conflict that surrounded the business of learning. He'd sent his older children to school in Ballarat because – he said – he didn't want them to have to be in the school where he was in charge. So far so good. But their schools in Ballarat were Catholic schools, run in Catholic ways, and not only wouldn't those Catholic ways work well in his own government school, but he himself had closer attraction to the two-sex side by side approach which he was doing all in his power to introduce. As a government school principal, he was a renegade from his faith, and he knew it.

'We're living in a world of change,' Dick told his staff when they gathered for a meeting. 'By the time they're our age, much of what we taught them will be out of date. So our underlying job is to give them the basis for a life of learning. That means we have to teach them to teach themselves. It sounds a pious hope, but I think it can

be done. Here's the way.' In staff meetings, in private conversations, in talks to parents, he developed his theme. The school would set out what its students should be learning. The school would test regularly to see how well it and its students were performing. The school would try a wide variety of ways to bring students and their learning together. 'You don't teach people about eclipses by sticking them in a classroom,' Dick would say: 'You have them look around – not up – when it's happening.' Or he might say, 'I don't want to hear people apologising, and saying we're only a bush school. Being in the bush means there's all sorts of things we can teach by direct observation. There's things we have to get from the city, and things we can give them. I'm talking about mutual dependence, and that means everybody contributing whatever they can.'

His approach became popular, and parents gave generously of their time. Younger teachers quickly swung into line, and he was patient with older staff, and had to be because they were the most experienced. He said to Loretta, one evening when the older children were in Ballarat, 'I keep thinking of that rock on the highway, at the edge of town, with the paint and graffiti all over it, and I ask myself if I could have prevented that happening, if we'd come here ten years earlier.' Loretta thought not. Graffiti was an anti-social tendency, and there were always disgruntled people wanting to express their rage. 'Paint's too easy to get,' Loretta said, 'and there are too many children who are unsupervised by anybody who might restrain them.' Dick accepted this, but was still troubled, this time because as his methods of running the town's secondary college came to be seen as viable, people began to discuss his ideas, and the more they discussed them with him the more he saw that he was diverging from the catholicism of his boyhood, which had been authoritarian, and strict. 'My quarrel with Arnie,' he told his wife, 'was a quarrel with the church, and the funny thing about it is that it was Arnie, who wouldn't go into a church if you dragged him, who was old-

fashioned, and it was me that was talking for the modern world and pushing the methods of the church into the past.'

Loretta couldn't see this at all. 'You're a good Catholic, Dick. When we go to mass on Sunday we're a united family in every way. You have a role of leadership in the town. Everybody thinks you've made the school better. You've given it a direction it didn't have. People are very complimentary, believe you me. The church doesn't have to be authoritarian, Dick; it can guide and mentor quite happily. You only need to lay down the law when there are people who aren't following it. That happens with your method of teaching, at times; you're always telling me that.' The tenderness, the affection, she bestowed on him was meant to show that she saw no discrepancy between his methods and those of the church.

And yet he felt this discrepancy, this division, himself. The trouble was, he couldn't locate it. Place it. He couldn't identify an issue, a recurring problem. A situation, where he felt wrong, or even conflicted, it was just that he knew that he was moving in two directions. He discussed it with Father Joe, his parish priest, who was in no way surprised. 'We all serve God; you serve the community too. There's the potential for conflict, but it doesn't have to occur, so long as we're watchful, as I'm sure you are.' Dick wanted to know where the father saw potential conflict. The priest grew expansive; Dick had a feeling he'd given him a chance to say something he wanted to say. 'The community, if you think about it, is a mass of desires. Wishes, hopes and ambitions, some of them praiseworthy, some of them fairly disgraceful. Some of these feelings can be channelled into good social aims. We should have good hospitals, our drivers should be sober, our police enforce the law with a little understanding. But things happen when it's not so easy to reconcile God's wishes with our own. Let me tell you something that happened to me last year, quite a long way from Stawell.' He smiled inwardly, but Dick felt included.

'I was asked by our bishop to investigate something that had reached the ears of the bishop of another diocese. So I got in my car

and drove to this other place. As I drove in, along the highway, there were plenty of motels, and I chose one by chance. Random selection, as they say. I got myself a room, and I have to say that I was dressed in civilian clothes, because that was my mission. I wasn't representing the church, or not officially. I'd only been in my room five minutes when a car pulled up outside and there was a knock at my door. I opened it, and there were two people standing there. One was a man of about twenty eight or nine, as broad as he was high - those shoulders, they'd have packed a punch - with fair, curly hair and a knowing look about him, and beside him was a young woman of, eighteen or nineteen. Quite attractive, but not much personality, I'd say. She looked nervous, but he didn't. He told me his name, and her name, and then he said, "Well, if you like to fix me up, I can leave you to it!" As he said this, she stepped into my room. She was standing beside me, ready to do her job. I was amazed, and I must have looked a bit puzzled. The man said to me, "You are Barry, aren't you?" Well, I didn't want to tell him who I really was, because I had a job to do that was nobody's business but mine and the bishop's, but I said no, I wasn't Barry, whoever he was. I didn't know any Barries who might be ringing for a call-girl to visit them ... As soon as I said this the girl scuttled out the door, and the man with the big shoulders retreated to his car, and they drove off. I never saw them again, and I'd never seen them before.'

'What did you make of that, Father?' Dick wanted to know.

'That's a very good question and I don't know the answer. Was I being tempted? I don't think so. I didn't feel tempted. I felt sorry for this girl being forced to work in this way. I had a feeling that anything I might have paid her would have gone into the man's pocket, not hers. Then I thought, did somebody set me up for this, but I knew they hadn't, because I'd gone to that motel by chance. I might have gone into any one of half a dozen. If someone had had the idea of tempting me, they wouldn't have known where I was going to be.'

'So how do you explain it to yourself?'

Father Joe looked thoughtful. 'Even priests have doubts,' he said. 'We're told, and we tell our people, that God's managing everything in this world. And yes, of course He is. But sometimes things happen and you can't help thinking God must have taken his eye off the ball, so to speak, for that to happen. In the case of what happened to me, a man called Barry must have rung a number he knew would bring him a call-girl, and they obliged, but somehow they got the address wrong. Or Barry did, who knows? So a man and a woman, driving around in a car, and looking for business of a certain sort, came upon a man on God's business. We encountered each other. They knocked on my door. I didn't wish them any harm, they didn't wish any harm on me ...'

Dick was smiling on the priest. 'Not in the short term anyway, though ...'

Father Joe grinned. 'It might have been all for my good. Who can say? I was out of town, and nobody knew who I was ...' Then he resumed. 'They diverted me, just for a minute, from what I was supposed to be doing. By the same token, and by some mix-up that I don't understand, they got diverted to my door. They were going to make money out of my desires, and they left without a cent. Two purposes encountered each other, and each was confused. What I was doing didn't suit what they were doing, it was all very odd.' Dick realised that he'd heard a confession, of a sort, from the Father, and guessed that he was the only one who'd heard the story. 'Can we link that to what we were talking about before? About my position as principal of a secular institution and my position as a member of your flock? The church of which we're both a part?'

'It's why I told you the story,' Father Joe said, amusing Dick, who felt that the priest needed to get it off his chest. 'God's aims, his plans, are mixed in this world with other aims and purposes, and it's not always as easy as it was in the case I was telling you about, to separate the two, and make sure they're not in conflict. I don't think that what you've put to me is a question with one answer, it's just an

issue that's always going to be popping its head up, and you being in the position you're in, you're going to have to be aware of the issue every time you sit in your office. In a word, I think it's something that comes with the job. Be watchful, pray, and good luck!

The talk with Father Joe had a strange effect on Dick. He wondered how often it was that random events threw up challenges as nicely calculated as the visit of the call girl to the priest's motel. He couldn't remember that he'd ever been challenged in quite the same way, and yet things of the same sort must happen all the time. Surely? He remembered that Carl Nelson, who'd taught beside him at his former school, had a collection of names and occupations that had amused them both. Constable Basham. Doctor Clapp. Doctor Graves. How did people with these names choose these jobs? Was it random, was there a streak of perversity in there, at work in ways people couldn't counter? Dick didn't know. It troubled him. What did make things happen? God was too good, too lofty, remote, to cause things in a direct way; so how far away, how hands-on and how hands-off was he? Wherever God was, were there, perhaps, other causes, other influences, also at work? Dick didn't actually believe in the devil, or any embodiment of evil, but perhaps there was a chaotic force out there, stirring to see what happened? How else could you explain ...

As time passed, Dick observed that thoughts of this sort had entered his mind about the time he'd applied for the job he now held; in other words, as he moved from taking it for granted that other people were running the world until the time of his promotion. He was now one of those responsible, and there were forces at work that he couldn't even see, let alone control. What caused the call girl, and the man who supplied her, to knock on Father Joe's door? Would it have been a sin if the Father had accepted? Yes, it would, but lesser, because nobody would have known. The Father could have had his twenty minutes of pleasure, he could even have had the girl come back, with nobody in his home town, his parish, any the

wiser. Assuming the girl was contracepting, the sin would have had no effects. Dick was realistic enough to think that an invisible sin was less important, by far, than a visible one. People knew about visible ones, they thought that if a priest could do such and such then they were only human and you didn't take any more notice of them than you did of anyone else. God's influence in the world was impugned. Would God have punished Father Joe if he'd taken the girl in? Dick was inclined to doubt. It might be God's way of increasing the priest's humanity, if the girl had said something tender to him, or made him aware of things in himself that he'd repressed ...

'Repressed.' Was it a secular word, or a religious one? It was a Freudian word, certainly, but did that prove anything? Human 'science', from *scientia*, knowledge, had entered the mind, but how new was that? There had always, surely, been knowledge in the mind about itself. There had to be, because without such knowledge humans couldn't reflect upon themselves, and that was an attribute which, humans said, linked them to the divine. Surely, Dick thought, if humans aspired to be like their maker, they should be autonomous, skilled in pursuing well-chosen goals, highly organised, self-directed ... all the things Dick was trying to institutionalise at his school. And they should be free of guilt. Dick began to see that that was where he was dividing from his church. He wanted his girls and boys to be proud of themselves, but what he heard at his church and read in its publications spoke to him of a suppliant humanity, seeking mercy, all too frequently filled with shame, a humanity classifiable as disobedient or obedient. This was not the world he was trying to create and he wondered how long it would take for some conflict, some schism, to appear. He had a feeling that as he walked around his school, inquiring of teachers, chatting to students, or sitting in his office dealing with piles of mail, he was somehow, and also, walking along a cliff-edge, never far from a fall. He was by nature careful to weigh up possibilities, and not many surprises troubled his days, but the feeling that they might, or even would, was there.

He discussed this with Father Joe. 'I run a government school. It's built on different values from a catholic school. People are wary of catholic principals. They think we'll bring religion into things when we shouldn't. I've got a council with eleven members, and there's only one other catholic and he's very wishy-washy, as you know.' Father Joe smiled. 'But beyond the council there's the expectations of the teachers, the parents, the whole town. I have to run the school in the way the town expects. What's the good of me if I don't?' He could see Father Joe wanted to break in. 'One moment longer, Father, if you please. There are plenty of catholic principals besides me. I know a lot of them and they'd all say, keep the two worlds apart. You're running a government school, so you run it the government way. Cling to your faith inside yourself. Privately. The trouble is, their position is defensive of the catholic locked up in a secular world. My position's different. I actually favour my students taking charge of their own lives. I want them to be free and independent. I want them, from the moment when they walk through the passage to their first class of the day, to feel that the school is theirs! That's the way I want them to approach everything they do in the place.'

Father Joe was thoughtful. 'I wonder if perhaps you've got some other thoughts, further back, that are troubling you. What you've said so far doesn't trouble me at all. God doesn't want a world full of slaves. He wants a joyful world where things are going well for everybody. It's easy to say but as you know, it's not easy to make it happen. Why? Because the human race is unsure of its way. So many wrongs attract us from our true and proper path. So to help us, God's placed on earth a church to propagate an understanding of what he requires. It isn't, however, the only expression of his wishes. Lots of things embody what he wants and teach people to do the things he wants. Good schools are examples of what I mean. So are courts of justice, assuming them to be properly run. So are human legislatures, though they're open to error in many matters, which we needn't go into.' Father Joe was thinking of a recent controversy over

people importing drugs which, under the guise of being painkillers, could be used to shorten the life of someone terminally ill. He went on. 'I know you're troubled by this, you've raised it with me before. I wonder if you could note the thoughts you have in connection with it, the thoughts that come before and after, so I've got a context for what's worrying you, because, this far, I don't see the reason you're so concerned.'

So Dick raised it with Loretta, who took a different approach from the priest. 'When Timmy finishes primary school, are we sending him to Ballarat?'

'Yes, we are. It's not fair to a child to have him in a school where his father's in charge. It'd make him feel different from all the others. It's too big a load for a child to carry.'

Loretta smiled. 'I knew you'd say that. So you don't have any concerns about the schools where Royce and Rhyll are studying?'

He shook his head.

'You don't feel divided, and think the schools are too catholic?'

He didn't.

'So what's worrying you is not the children or their schools, or what the teachers there are doing?' It wasn't. 'You're happy for us to go to mass on Sundays as a family? There's nothing intruding there, to cause you to worry?'

He shook his head. 'It's probably the happiest time of the week, for me.'

Loretta rubbed the back of his hand. 'You've told me you never thought about this very much until you knew you were going to become a principal, and then it started to worry you?'

He nodded his agreement.

'Tell me darling, when you're in your office at the school, and everything's running smoothly, do you feel that it's you that's in charge?'

He grinned, knowing how well his wife knew him. 'Far from it. I know very well that I'm the servant of every last person in the place. I'm answerable to them. If they go home without having had

a useful day, I think it's me that's to blame. I can't be in every room, making everything happen, but I feel I'm responsible. If there are problems, and there always are, it's up to me to anticipate them and make something good happen, instead. That's how I judge myself. And I'd think, if I was Arnie Longmire, I'd want problems to come up so I could fight them, because Arnie's a fightable man, but I'm the opposite. I want everything running well on a very high plane, because, if we can get everyone up to a high level we might be able through good organization and good planning to get them higher still. I'm restless. I want continual improvement, and a lot of the time it just isn't possible. We're running a school. A school is by definition a place where people make mistakes ...'

He'd have gone on, but Loretta was looking out the window. 'How many years are we going to stay here, Dick? We've never mentioned a number, have we?'

She was right, and he was surprised. 'Till I retire. Why do I say that? I don't want my achievements, such as they may be, spread over a variety of places. I want them all to be in one place. Visible. Able to be judged. I don't want to do a job and then leave it behind. I've already done that once, when we came up here. No, I'd like to have my life's work in one place, so it can be judged.'

'You realise that people may judge you falsely?'

'Of course I do, but I think that's less likely if people get used to me, and see what I'm on about. The purposes behind what I do.'

'And God?'

He moved his hands softly, meaning that God can do anything.

She spoke intensely. 'Don't you think that God can see into our souls?'

'I feel he's never far away, I feel we go to mass to be with him, but to tell the truth, I feel closest to him when you and I are talking, just like this.' He paused, then said it. 'Now!'

She said calmly, 'We're very lucky, darling. You and I were made for each other.'

Dick smiled. She went on. 'And you, my love, were made for the job you're doing.'

'I think I'm up to it. I'm adequate. I wouldn't say any more than that ...'

'I'd say much more than that. I understand what you're doing, better, I suspect, than you do. You want to give every one of those boys and girls the best start they can possibly have. Some of them are going to go wrong, that's inevitable. Knowing that, someone more negative than you could restrict their options, but you've decided to go the other way. To enlarge. Do you see any similarities?'

He didn't see what she meant.

'You're doing things God's way. God gives us choice. Freedom to make up our own minds, and choose for ourselves. That way, if we come to God, it's because we've done it as people who wanted God, and chose him. It's the glory of our salvation that we chose it for ourselves. Didn't Father Joe explain that to you?'

'He never gets things as right as you do, my love.'

'Well, I'll have to speak to him. He needs some guidance in giving guidance.' This time it was Loretta who might have gone on, and Dick who broke in. 'That reminds me. He told me a wonderful story about something that happened in Bendigo ...'

'Bendigo? What was he doing there?'

'That's another story. Well, he got to Bendigo and quite by accident he chose a particular motel ...'

'A motel?' The word had risky connotations. 'Yes?'

'And a car drove up with two people in it and there was a knock at the door ...'

Another generation

Rhyll's school debated with Royce's school and it was the boys who were the visitors. They found it flattering, of course, to be in the girls' territory, and they were objects of envy from the boys who didn't make the trip. Rhyll, as her school's leading debater, was in demand;

she and her team got the job of showing the visitors around. Her school had leafy gardens and buildings from the nineteenth century, and everything was done to make the girls feel proud. Rhyll told the boys from her brother's school the stories handed down to her generation about successes and prideful moments of earlier years, and they could hardly fail to be impressed at her acceptance of tradition. One of the debaters from the boy's school, a boy called Jamie, was taken by their guide and as she led them to the steps at the front of the school where they would be picked up, he sidled up to her and said, 'Thanks for showing us around. I just want to tell you something you probably weren't expecting. I'm going to marry you one day. Don't even try and think of a way to get out of it. It's settled!' He patted the sleeve of her blazer possessively. 'You're mine.'

Rhyll was poised enough. 'Yours? Well, did you know, I hadn't the faintest idea of that!'

Having made his bold step, Jamie wasn't backing down. 'Do you want to fix a date? I think I mean, do you want to name the year?'

Rhyll wasn't to be rushed. 'I wonder if you're right? I think I'll just let events take their course. That might be wisest, don't you think?'

Jamie was amused. He felt he'd landed a telling blow. 'We'll see. We'll see!'

Back at the boys' school, Royce told Brother Anselm, 'Just because I won the under fifteen last year, everyone's out to beat me this year. They want to knock me off because I'm their target.' The Brother, a man who'd grown up in a man's world, told him the winning times for the under sixteen event in the last three years. 'You need to knock a tenth of a second off the best of those times. Can you do it?' Royce thought he could.

The day before Tim left Stawell for his Ballarat school, he asked his mother, 'Is this a sacrifice for you and dad?' Loretta said she'd be

better off. 'I'm going to work in the accounts section of the hospital. Only part time, but it'll bring in something.' The boy was thoughtful. 'It couldn't be just any job, could it mum?' Loretta agreed. 'Something out of the public eye is best for me, in my position.' She meant her husband's position. Mother and son were respectful of each other. 'Your father's careful not to put a foot wrong with anybody. If anything controversial comes up he handles it diplomatically. He's a past master at doing things. So you and I have to make sure we don't open him up to criticism in some way that he hadn't prepared for.' She considered her youngest. 'And it's best for you, too, to be where you're not known. Everyone makes mistakes and it's best to make them where they won't be held against you.'

He said, 'I'm coming home on Fridays for the weekend, mum, same as Royce and Rhyll! And you drive me back on Sundays!'

His mother guaranteed this. 'Exactly the same as your brother and sister. No more and no less!'

Royce won the under sixteen sprints, and was first picked for the relay team, and then a change came over him. On a school holiday, home in Stawell, his father noticed that he wasn't doing any laps of the oval. 'No training?' Dick observed. The boy shook his head. Dick waited. Days passed before Royce changed into his athletic gear, but he only ran two laps. Dick commented to his wife. Loretta turned on her awareness. She said to Rhyll, who was home at the time, 'Has Royce said anything to you?'

But he hadn't. Dick felt he couldn't let the boy return to school without inquiry, so he asked if anything was wrong. Royce shook his head, saying, 'You don't want to be too predictable.' Dick replied, 'But when you start doing unpredictable things, people worry. They wonder if something's gone wrong out of sight.' The boy put it differently. 'Maybe it's something that's starting to come right, at last!'

This told Dick the change was serious. He rang Brother Anselm the following week, to be told, 'Royce has gone right off his training.'

I can't even drag him on the track. He's always reading. What he's reading I can't tell you. He wraps his books in brown paper, and he does that to fool us, because – I'm going to have to confess this, to his father – I pulled him up one day and insisted on being allowed to see what he was reading – it was a book in brown paper, as usual – and when I got hold of it, it turned out to be King Lear!

'King Lear?' said Royce's father, who'd never read the play.

'King Lear.' And Brother Anselm went on, 'The heath scenes!' Dick, who'd been a sporting rather than a reading man, took the matter to his wife. 'What do you suppose that means?' Loretta surprised him. 'Men are different from women, in almost every way. He's trying to find his way through something. He's going through a change. We'll have to wait. It won't be any good challenging him because he won't know himself, and if we start asking questions he'll get anxious.' She paused, and her husband cut in, 'So it's one of those things people go through in adolescence?'

Loretta nodded. 'It's one of the important ones. By which I mean that once people get out the other side you can't get them back to where they were. Whatever's going on, it'll leave a permanent mark. Years from now he's going to look back and know this was a vital period.' Dick was amazed. 'Then shouldn't we ...' He didn't know what to say. He expected Loretta to finish his sentence, but she was staring at the window, which was her way of horizon-gazing, and when that happened, she was anxious and he was more so because he was used to scanning her moods before deciding what action to take. She spoke again, quietly. 'Nobody's surprised when a young person's body shoots up. They grow taller, all of a sudden. We might laugh, but we know it's natural. Their personalities shoot up too, but it isn't always so obvious. This time though, it is. He's forming himself. That school likes to keep everyone running and jumping, it's their way of managing the young men's minds. But Royce has taken himself off their screen. He doesn't want them to know. He doesn't want to train because he's training in some other way, and he wants

it to be his.' She considered her husband. 'There's nothing we can do except back him.'

This suited Dick. It was easier to back someone, unconditionally, than to predict. He'd back his son, of course. It was so much easier than trying to anticipate, but it was also a powerless position, because reactive. How can I lead the town's young people, he thought, when I can't guide my son? He brought King Lear into the conversation, later that week, with two of the teachers at his own school. They thought he was wrong, because Royce, they knew, was in year 11 and it was year 12 that had the famous play on the list, that year. 'If he was reading it in year 11 he's doing it out of curiosity. Getting himself ready for next year's tragedy.' It was the sort of thing they'd tell their own students to do, but Dick knew something else was happening in his son. 'He'd have heard the year 12 people talking, and then he'd have become curious.' But what about? And how did it connect with his lack of interest in training? 'Tell me about teaching King Lear,' he said. 'Is it easy? Is it hard?'

His teachers were condescending. 'It's probably the hardest of all Shakespeare's plays. Which means that it's next door to impossible for some students, and dead easy for others. Students either get it or they don't. They see in a flash what it's about, after which it's simply – simply! – a roller-coaster of horrors, or they get their minds in a state of blockage and no amount of explanation will ever get them out of it. Reason? They don't want to know. It's a back-handed compliment to Shakespeare that they have to block him out. They're not strong enough to let what he's telling them into their thinking, so they pretend – very successfully, some of them – that they don't know what the thing's about.'

Dick turned the discussion towards the young people in his own school who were reading the play, and the teachers appeared not to notice that he'd diverted from his original curiosity, but perhaps they were guarding themselves. Dick's teachers didn't expect to be taken into the confidence of their principal. They preferred to stay at

a distance. Dick was feeling his age and his position as he left them. He'd been the same at their age, he told himself, but when Loretta questioned him, later in the day, he had to admit he didn't really recall what he'd been like at the same age as Royce. 'I was playing tennis, mostly,' he told his wife. 'And dancing whenever I got the chance. Going out with girls, I wanted ever so much to be with girls. I knew they were different and I wanted to know how. I think I was curious about anything different, and girls were the most different things there were.' She was smiling, still in love after many years, but very powerful. 'Was I any different, when I came along?' The question made him happy because it took him to areas of his life where he gained reassurance. He said, 'You know, I don't even remember where it was, the first time I saw you, but one thing I do remember is that when I got home that night I knew – I *knew* – that I'd met the woman I was going to marry!' It made him confident to say it to her, but she surprised him. 'That reminds me. I wonder if you remember a boy called Jamie. He took part in one of the debates between the two schools in Ballarat. He's got a crush on Rhyll. He told her he's going to marry her. She brushed it off, but she knows he's serious and I think she takes it seriously too.'

Dick hadn't known this. He said, 'One of the things I love about Rhyll is that she's got so much potential. I look at her and I know that what I'm seeing is the future, right there in front of me. This lad wants to marry her? Well, that's not hard to understand, but ... what I want to know is, does that reduce her future, or make it even bigger?' It was more than his brain was equipped for. What would his wife say?

'It's yet another of those things that can't be calibrated. The position you see it from may be a false position. Like Royce. What we know is that his training in athletics has gone off, and he's reading heaps more. Those are the things we know, but maybe we don't know the important things and it's possible those important things haven't even happened yet. That means that nobody knows them,

as of now. Frustrating, isn't it? You look where you have to look, but you have no idea whether or not you're looking in the right places. The big event, the one you want to be there to see, may happen somewhere else entirely.' Dick told Loretta, 'I don't like to be in a position where all I can do is react. If I'm like that, it means I'm always after the event. In my work, my job, I'm supposed to be the leader. I anticipate things and make sure everybody's ready when they happen. But I can't do the same for my kids, though I want to. What sort of father's that make me?'

Loretta was untroubled. 'Pretty average, I'd say. Besides, our children need to be able to keep their parents at bay. Otherwise we'd use our age and experience to control every moment of their lives. They need to keep us out, a fair bit of the time. And then, when they get into trouble, they need to have us there. Silly, isn't it, but it's how things are.' Dick said to his wife, 'Do you think ... do you *really* think this Jamie boy's going to marry Rhyll?'

'Again, it's a matter of what happens from here on in. He might be saying the same thing to some other young woman in a month's time. It might be just what he says, as a way of taking control of them, if they'll let him. But it may not. He may believe what he said to Rhyll, and be forcing himself to act on it. We don't know, because we don't know what sort of boy he is, yet. And we don't know because the future hasn't happened yet!'

'The future. We never know, do we. And yet, I got my present job because I predicted the course of education in years to come and convinced the panel that I was ready for whatever happened. And so far, I haven't been proved wrong ...'

'Except?'

'... except, the nearer I get to home, to this household, the less idea I've got of what to do. I sit calmly in staff meetings, pontificating – funny I should use that word, but it's what I do – and I get very stropky if anybody tries to second-guess me, but I can't predict what's going to happen to my own family. If we were talking about

someone else and somebody suggested they didn't know what their own family was going to do, I'd say that person didn't know his family very well. It seems that I don't either!

Many weeks passed, and nothing appeared to change, and that, Dick saw, *was* the change. His son had lost interest in athletics, though he could still do better than most if he could be bothered, and he was reading as heavily as ever ... without any apparent change. That is, his reading seemed to go into a storehouse of knowledge, but not to affect him visibly. He had no interest in discussing it, but then, he did no more than listen politely when queried about anything. He didn't allow anyone to see his decision-making. He'd put up a wall. So much for the catholic schooling, Dick saw; he'd probably have been better, after all, at his father's school, where nobody felt obliged to follow the principal's direction. For Dick had created a remarkably impersonal school, where young people were praised for a variety of achievements and where being good at things was taken for granted. Dick had been able to organise a small number of overseas students for a term at a time, and their schools, in Japan, Canada, the US and France, had invited boys and girls from Stawell to return the visits. These young people, after a term in another country, were listened to eagerly. 'Tell them about the Stawell Gift,' Dick would say to his exchange people, 'but tell them about everything else!' The connections grew. Parents found themselves taking visitors to the Grampians, a little way to the south, and the mallee areas north-west of their town. To know your own part of Victoria and be able to interest visitors in what was local became taken for granted. Dick felt very proud of this.

And prouder still of his daughter. Everything he loved in his wife was being repeated. The weeks between her last year at school and her first at university were precious to the Harts. Even Tim, established by now at the school which had been his brother's, knew it. 'My sister's studying journalism,' he told any of his friends who'd listen, and you had only to look at Rhyll to see how aware she was,

yet how centred. She had that combination which men find devastating, of beauty and appraisal. She was curious. She, like her mother, was a long-term person; having considered someone, she watched to see if they did as expected. Words came easily to her, as did silence. People felt that she was never without something well-judged to say. She had another combination, of thoughtfulness and polish, so that things ran smoothly if she was managing them. Unlike most people of her age she appeared to have had all her experimenting done for her a couple of generations back. She might have decided to marry young but showed no need for it; she gave a feeling of waiting for others to catch up. Perhaps this was so, because Jamie, the boy who'd said he was going to marry her, was about to study journalism too, and he was in a phase of dramatising himself; Rhyll was keeping her distance. He might be worthy of her attention later, but for the moment he was kept to the sidelines. Rhyll had the capacity to ask young men to partner her at functions without conveying any feeling that they were more than appurtenances, conveniences, which most of the young men seemed happy to be – when asked. She knew how successful her parents' marriage had been and it seemed that she was fitted for nothing less. She had none of the behind-a-wall character of brother Royce. Looking at her, in the home or thoroughly tended garden of her parents, one felt that she was not so much a part of the world as ready for her arrival in it. She created a feeling of waiting where she stood. Circumstances seemed to be weakened, to have less power, as she considered them.

Dick felt proud of Rhyll. Everything he loved in his wife was being repeated. 'This is a happy time,' he told Loretta, again and again. 'When you retire, my love,' his wife told him, 'I shall have to retire too, because if I don't I'll be put in the shade. If I'm not there already!' They laughed together happily, feeling so rich in their children that they almost failed to notice that their years of glory were not so much passing as moving into a phase where the young people had assumed the importance which had once been their parents'.

'We're going to have to make a new home in the city,' Loretta told her husband. 'I'm still thinking about what sort of place it will be. It's got to suit the children, but it'll be ours too, when we go down to see them. It'll need to be a house for the young grown-ups, and we'll be the visitors. Strange, isn't it, but we have to adapt. Things move on and if we don't move with the times we lose our connection. It seems obvious but it's not easy to say.'

The years had been kind to Dick, who still played tennis, and golf, and hadn't seen through the limited aspirations of his town. Their prides were his prides and even the young teachers, with lots of sometimes-wild connections with the city at the centre of their state, knew they were lucky in their boss. He was a man who noticed, and valued, what they did. Even the limiting factor of his thinking, his loyalty to his town, gave a focus for their contribution. They could scoff about the place as they drove to the city but it was a good place to work. Things they suggested were considered. Dick had forced the school to prosper in his early years and now it had matured. 'You don't want too many policies,' he used to say. 'A policy for this and another for that. No. Everyone's got to have chances to find themselves, and they all need to know how things are going for everyone else. That's the key to running a school in a country town. The schooling's something that everyone has in common. So it's got to be spread as evenly as possible, so that everyone knows that they're a part of everything that's going on. That's how I've always wanted things to be.' Even Arnie Longmire acknowledged Dick's success. 'He and I had different ways of doing things when we came here. Fortunately for the town, perhaps, he was senior to me and got the higher appointment. It was Dick that ruled the roost, and I had to fit in. He's done a first class job, and I couldn't have done half as well.' As Dick began to think about his retirement, he wondered about his former rival, who'd fitted, eventually, into the same acceptance as the rest of the staff gave their principal. Was there any lingering resentment in the junior man?

Dick couldn't see any. He took this to be a sign that the town that had accepted him, taking him in and changing him, had done the same for Arnie. 'Country towns,' Dick told himself, 'have this way of dealing with people. Adapt, adjust yourself to us, or go away. If you stay, you must make yourself belong.' Dick had done this. He'd found what he wanted, and it had wanted him, or at least the attributes he brought to his office. Dick was comfortable with being a public man.

He wondered about his son. Royce was unlike his sister in that he'd decided to find a place of his own. He'd seen what his school wanted to make of him, and he'd stepped aside. He'd done it without rebellion, something he'd seen enough of among the wilder catholic boys from families that were only semi-controlled. There was too much good in his heritage to rebel against it, and he had no wish to. When he was home on weekends, he looked on his town with an eye as appraising as his sister's, and almost as tenderly. Yet his parents sensed that he was working out how strong, and supportive, a base it might actually be, a calculation needed by a young man who'd decided to go far before he settled. It was a courtesy that Dick and Loretta felt they owed their son that they never discussed him, even lying in their bed together, while he was actually in the house, but only when he was at school in Ballarat, in earlier years, and after that, when he was at his residential college in Melbourne. Dick might say to his wife, releasing the anxieties in his head, 'I know that what I want is more than I've got a right to ask, because I was difficult for my parents. My father was only a mill worker, and mum had little education, but they always backed me, I have to say that for them. They *backed* me even when they knew very little of what I was doing. I suppose that gave me the safety I needed, because my parents couldn't really judge how well I was doing. If I passed my exams or got a good report, they were pleased, and if I didn't tell them about something, they never knew. It made things easy for me.' He knew Loretta had things to say, but he pushed on. 'Royce is growing up

in a family where his parents – and his sister – know how well he’s playing the games that he has to play. So I can see why he’s gone in on himself. Gone secretive. He needs the space, the silence. And we give it to him, because we must. But it has the effect, on me at least, of making me unsure. I don’t actually know if we’re doing the best we could for him ...’

Loretta broke in. ‘If he wants anything done for him at all. This period he’s in now will be the making of him ...’

‘For better or for worse!’

‘Yes. You know, it’s only just occurred to me that he may have had too good a background. We may have been too supportive ...’

‘I’ve often wondered if we should’ve sent him away because I was in charge here. It might’ve been better to make him fight for a place inside my shadow, as it were.’

‘It might, but we made the decision, so we’ll never know. It may be, you know, that he’s got a capacity for struggle that hasn’t been allowed to show itself. Some people rise to their best in a crisis, and when things settle back to normal, these heroes of the crisis go back to being nobodies. It’s like those soldiers that everybody thought were the mildest, blandest people you could find, and then, in a moment of pressure, they go mad, they stand up and fire bullets everywhere, they survive when they ought to have been killed, and when they settle down to being normal again, they’re the mildest, blandest people that ever were. They only ever needed to go mad once! There are such people, Dick, and it may be that our son’s one of them.’

Dick Hart said, ‘I wish I knew,’ and his wife said, ‘I wish I knew too. In the meantime, he’s at the college, he seems happy enough, he’s got plenty of company, people to talk with ...’

‘He’s even done a few laps of training with the college athletics team!’

She said sharply, ‘If you think that represents normality?’

‘I do.’

She said, 'He's smart, you know. He may have told us that just to make us feel happy. I think it's probably gone as far as that.'

'Sorry, darling, I didn't follow. As far as what?'

'As far as laying a false trail. He comes home and he tells his parents that he's doing some training. Next time he comes home, he's doing more training. His parents – us, darling, if we're gullible – think that things are moving in one direction when they're moving in another.'

'Any evidence for this?'

She moved in their bed. 'None at all. But don't put it beyond him to throw us off the track if he gets a chance. I'm sure it's what he wants.'

'To live in a secret space?'

'Exactly. And the funny thing is ...'

'I know what you're going to say ...'

'... he needs to do it because we've been too successful in making him what he is.'

They lay in their bed, having made, also and as well, a bed for their son to lie in. Hence his need ...

'Does that mean we succeeded or we failed?'

'It's too soon to know, my love. He's at uni now, so we ought to be able to say we've done well, but ...'

'... it's a work in progress. And he's my son.'

'Ours, darling, don't forget.'

'Ours, my love. I didn't forget. Sorry, I put it selfishly, but I don't forget you. Never.'

Next time Royce was home, Dick took him to the golf club for what was, remarkably, his first nine holes. He scored bogeys on the first two holes, then a string of pars, and, for the last hole, a birdie. One over par for the round on his first attempt at the game. 'I'm signing you up for membership, my boy,' Dick told his son. 'This is not a hard course, just a pleasant stroll, really, but that's not to take away from

your effort. It's remarkable.' The club secretary was found, the form filled in, and Royce was a member. He even drank a beer with his father's friends. The secretary showed him a list. 'We've got rights exchange with a number of Melbourne clubs. Our members can play down there and they can play up here. It's a handy arrangement for both sides. They come up this way, go holidaying in the Grampians, they can have a round here. And our members can get a game when they go to town.' He smiled the smile of a simple man achieving a simple thing. It hadn't occurred to Royce at this stage that he should ask how much his membership cost, and the secretary knew by the glance Dick sent him that the boy's father was going to pay, probably for years. Whether or not the secretary knew that the father had been worried about the son we cannot know; it's the sort of thing a tactful secretary knows without being told. When Dick and his son got home, Loretta knew that something had changed, yet she, like the secretary, said simply, 'How did it go?'

Dick was enthusiastic. 'He didn't score his first birdie till the ninth hole, but he's got the makings. So we signed him up!'

'A member of the club?' Loretta looked at her son, who produced the piece of paper. 'It's all a bit sudden. I didn't go there expecting anything.'

His mother felt a sudden, disquieting stab in her mind. Something had happened, and it mightn't turn out to be what they thought. To her son, and her husband too, had she thought about it, she said, 'You didn't rush in too quickly, I don't suppose?' Dick, who was beaming, shook his head and said, 'No, no, he's as ready as anybody I've ever seen,' but Royce, too, was pleased with where he'd placed himself. 'I really found something, this afternoon. I'm as pleased as I've been for ages.'

What had he found? It took months for his parents to realise. He'd found a place where he could hide, publicly and in the open. He became a regular golf player, in Stawell, when he was home, and in one of the Melbourne clubs he had rights to, until he found a way

to get membership of one of the oldest clubs in Melbourne, after which he played regularly. He brought photos home to show his father, who wanted to know how he negotiated the sand and water traps of a course far beyond the country town level where Dick did his rounds. 'You've got to know the lie of the land,' Royce said, and already he was showing, on his chin and in his restrained, measured voice the sort of man he was going to be, 'and you have to read the wind, which means watching the ball when it's in the air. Other players' shots too, you've got to watch. Watch them when they're high, and floating, that's how you read what the wind's doing.' Dick knew that good players did this instinctively and it surprised him that his son could do it and he couldn't. His son had passed him as a golfer from the very first round.

And as a scholar too. He was doing Greek and Roman History, Latin, and Modern Philosophy. When Dick asked what 'modern' meant he got a list of names he'd never heard of, and sensed, correctly, that his son had meant to burn him off. Philosophy was to Royce what faith was to his parents. He was planning, also, to do a nineteenth century unit in European history the following year and his parents suspected that it was at the centre of his planning, though they couldn't have said why. Royce, had he wanted them to know, might have told them that he was curious to understand the political formulations of the period when the church had promulgated the idea of the pope's infallibility. It struck him as an un-cunning thing to do, a mistake that once made could hardly be undone. He discussed it with a young woman called Maeve O'Connor whom he knew through a discussion group run by some Jesuits. 'I'm not going to marry and I'm not going to be a nun,' Maeve had told him. 'What that makes of me is for you to ask yourself and for me to decide.' Royce liked the sound of this. It was close enough to his own identity game with his parents. 'You and I,' he told Maeve, 'will suit each other well because each of us has no intention of letting anybody take us captive.' The words were balm to Maeve's ear, and she knew she'd

found the man she wouldn't marry, but would partner in an asexual way. Weeks went by without them seeing each other, but a note in the mail, a glance in each other's direction at some gathering, or simply the sound of the other's voice in a discussion, were enough. Each felt, and could draw on, the strength of the other. Maeve never met Royce's parents, nor vice versa. They'd known each other for months before she told him her mother had died when she was sixteen and she'd known she wouldn't marry. Her father was kept well out of the way. Maeve worked in mental health and told Royce, freely enough, that the field was full of charlatans or well-intentioned people who rarely did any good for anyone. 'People want drama,' she'd say to Royce, 'but they look in the wrong places and at the wrong time. Most damage is inflicted by the doing of good. Silly, isn't it, because we're told to do good, but few of us know what it is well enough to carry out the policy.' She'd laugh, and talk about blunders she'd seen well-intentioned people make. 'I often think,' she'd say, 'the best way to express love for someone is to leave them alone. The opposite is to try and take possession of them ...' This was such a silly idea, in her mind, that she couldn't finish the sentence. Somehow she knew that Royce liked her leaving things unstated. The policy that refused to declare itself was the best. Each felt, of the other, that the thing left unsaid was the daintiest caress. They loved, in not giving love. Each of them feared, and in knowing the other's fear, they knew their best security.

When Maeve's name appeared in a letter from Royce to his parents, Loretta sensed the presence of someone significant. There were four people in the situation, no longer three. Was the church a factor too? A personality, no, a presence, yes. It was what was being avoided. It claimed too much power, so it had to be rendered into a cloud that could be passed through, with all the appearances of obedience but no more than that. It was going to be kept at a distance by the simple act of withdrawal from the territory it claimed. The church trained men to run; he'd run no more, but he'd replaced the running

with golf, a perfect dodging tactic. He could chat affably with priests, his father, Dick's friends, or other golfers on the safe ground of a fairway or a clubhouse without the slightest danger of intrusion. Golf was as normal as could be. He enjoyed it and was soon extremely good at it. He rarely played without noticing the birds, because golf courses needed trees, and the sight of birds flocking at the edges of the fairways, or the sound of them singing in the trees assured him that earth was heaven after all. Maeve laughed when he asked her to play with him. 'You're too good! I wouldn't know what I was doing, whacking a ball with those funny sticks. Clubs! Clubs and club houses? I wouldn't know what to say to anyone!' Royce told her she wouldn't have to say anything, she could talk the most absolute nonsense and nobody would notice. This moved her to feel contemptuous, but she saw the usefulness of it, and laughed. 'You can have it on your own, Royce, and don't you ever bring any of those awful trophies into my room or I'll scream!'

This was a threat – to scream when she never screamed – that spoke of love. She quickly learned to love a man she didn't love. To love when she had told herself she wouldn't love. To go through the performances when she had forbidden herself the actualities. They didn't touch, and their not touching was the more sensuous. In bed one night, Loretta said to her husband, 'I have a feeling we'll never meet her, though perhaps we will, after years of only hearing about her.' It occurred to Dick as she spoke, as perhaps it should have occurred to him earlier, that Royce's 'problem' was not something that was going to be 'solved' and go away; it was a permanent condition of his life. Devout as he and Loretta were, they were part of the problem; their son had defined it that way and it hadn't changed his love for them; therefore it couldn't change theirs for him. He'd beaten the church at its own game, and it had borrowed the means to do so from the church itself, which insisted on its priests being celibate. Royce had imposed the same rule on himself, and somehow passed through the all-embracing, all-obscuring cloud of the church itself to

a world on the other side. Dick said sadly to his wife, 'He'll pay for this. Don't ask me how, I don't know, but it's too clever. You can't get away with something like this without paying a price. I wish our boy hadn't gone this way.' Loretta felt her husband's grief forcefully inside herself. She was part of him and vice versa. Two as one. 'He'll never know love as we know it,' she said, 'but I have a feeling he'll find a way to love. If age has taught me anything it's that love won't be denied, though it can be turned wrong. It'll find a way somehow, because it needs to. It's the greatest force in the world.'

She lay beside her husband in the warmth of the bed they shared: their agreement, and they suffered for their son, or the conception they had of him as someone who wouldn't know love as they had known it, and was therefore to be pitied. Aware of the intensity radiating from his wife, Dick whispered, 'We're still together. He's still part of us. He hasn't denied us, he's changed himself to remain a part of us. It's a long journey he's started, though, and we won't be there to see how it ends. How's he going to get on when we're not around any more?' Loretta knew the answer. 'That's why he's got Maeve, and, if I think about it, it must be why she's got him. They're safe inside each other's understanding. That's a marvelous thing.' Dick felt her softening, though still not touching him at any point. Their marriage was reaffirmed in the absence of contact. 'Love doesn't die,' he said, 'it only transforms itself.' Suddenly she was against him, his wife, and he was with her, bodies pressed, arms, moving love, and they were drawn to each other, old people, as if they were young, driven, foolish, needing, wanting to push through an extremity of love to reach a calm they believed was beyond: they needed each other as a respite from thought. Dick found himself sobbing with love and knew he was echoing the condition of Loretta, his wife of many years. As they found stillness again, she said, 'Let me sleep now. No more talk. Not a word till morning.'

An ex-student

The town, the district, were awake long before Loretta and Dick. Trucks rumbled on the Western Highway. Birds sang morning songs. Kangaroos and emus came out of the timber to graze in paddocks lit by rays of low-lying sun. Clouds changed shape in the upper air. Farmers moved stock. Those who'd milked took their buckets home and washed them. Newsagents shuffled papers with headlines soon to be dead as yesterday. Early flights headed to and from South Australia, droning overhead. Tourists towed caravans, and bush walkers added sticks to their fires. Breakfast for those needing a cup of tea to wake them! Trucks rolled in and out of supermarkets, delivering. Managers checked the check-out points' cash. Trainers took horses for their morning ride. Council workers oiled mowers before cutting grass. Rubbish trucks rumbled around the town, lifting bins and dropping them. In the Grampians to the south, named for a Scotland most had never seen, wisps of early mist floated through the ranges, making wildflowers look sturdier than they were. Minds that had been full of sex, alcohol, or thoughts of God the night before were emptied by a morning that hadn't brought anything new. The day was no more than a day about to happen. Dick and Loretta Hart began a day according to their habits. Loretta poured her husband's tea, then filled the pot with more boiling water because, for some reason, although he liked his tea to be strong he didn't like it getting stronger as he made his way down the pot. It was a responsibility she accepted. Loretta and Dick were organised individuals, needing little to be done for them but this in no way diminished their care and consideration. Each was a model for the other, and their children, in this regard. Royce and Rhyll saw their father taking cups of tea to their mother's bedside, and saw her, late at night, offering him sips of sherry as he drew near the end of writing letters after, or preparing documents before, a council meeting. They knew how carefully their mother listened to his appraisals of what had been said at meetings. They saw their parents give each other surety. Even the best

understandings, they saw, could be improved by a timely addition. What the older children perceived in the lives of their parents was the way in which the ideas, the products of a positive mind, could be enlarged by watchful comment. Royce and Rhyll had learned this from their parents, though each was still to develop it with a partner of their own.

Dick stopped at the newsagent's on his way to work, to pick up the local paper. He liked to carry it into his office whether he had time to look at it or not. The act of buying it allowed John Dallymore, running the shop, to tell him about anything he should know. Carrying it between the school's front gate and his office was a statement of where his attention was focussed. He still remembered that in his second week as principal a shy, pallid girl had stopped him to say that if he looked on page seven he'd see a photo of her – and he had. He'd made a point, ever since, of noticing the names that filled the paper, on the lookout for families associated with the school. In later years he would say to his staff, 'We must be in touch with what's going on. Much of it isn't educational, some of it's anti-educational, but we're only one of the forces operating in the district, so to be effective we need to know what everyone else is doing. We may have allies we hadn't suspected.' Going back to his car, paper in hand, he beamed at the cars and cyclists, the odd pedestrian on the footpath, and he found himself acknowledged by a young man with apparently nothing to do: 'Good morning Mister Hart.'

Dick had been used to this even in his previous town, but here in Stawell, where he was principal, he made a point of responding with interest. It was his business to know the town. 'Good morning ...' there was the faintest pause ... 'Jim! Am I right? It is Jim, isn't it?' The other smiled as if he'd caught the older by the simplest of tricks. 'Jim Pavlides. Your first year in the town.' Dick smiled, professionally. 'You're taking me back now. Quite a way. I used to be an outsider then. I think I can call myself a local, now. What're you doing these days, Jim?' It was a trick he had to get them talking about themselves.

It stopped them examining him, and it gave him a chance to learn the moves available to the young people in his care. Jim Pavlides, however, was too smart to be caught by chatter. 'Having a look at my old stamping ground. Working out what it gave me and what it didn't.' Suddenly Dick was curious. 'If you have any thoughts you'd like to share, you know where to find me. We're always interested, down at the school, to know what's open to our students and what's not. We're in the business of creating opportunities, so we need to know if people are running into blockages that we don't know are there. Please take me seriously when I say that; it's something we need to know.' A moment later he was in his car, engine purring, paper beside him, ready to resume being who he was, and in the same moment he experienced doubt. Pavlides, Jim: that name was ringing a bell, somewhere far away ...

He mentioned the encounter to Mrs Wilson, who had the office open by 8.15 each morning. Mrs Wilson, he felt, knew something about the man he'd met. 'Pavlides, Jim. Yes, your first year ...' Tactfully she didn't mention what year that was. 'Yes, yes, I know I've heard something about him, but I can't remember what it was ...' Dick wasn't greatly interested. 'Let me know if anything turns up Mrs Wilson. It's a matter of no great import, but he did speak to me and he was nice enough. I do like to know what happened to them, you know.' At once he became more formal, and switched to the present day. 'Now, I'm going to speak to the school this morning about our dietary policy. We've to phase out everything we'd classify as junk food by the end of this year, and I mean to do it. I've got a timeline in here ...'

He went into his office, moving smartly; meanwhile, outside the newsagent's, Jim Pavlides was puffing a cigarette. These were still being smoked with a little of the exaggeration of film actors, lung cancer not yet a fear of the public. Jim had smoked since childhood, displaying such social attitudes as he possessed at the time. Jim was unremittingly in search of money, sex, excitement, anything different.

The settled, organised life was impossible. When he'd left school, shortly before the final exams, he travelled to Darwin, with stops along the way, and got himself a job picking mangoes, and when that ran out, he worked on boats or with a bus company, because he'd always been handy. They offered to train him as a driver when he was old enough, but Jim wouldn't be staying that long. He moved to a job at the prison, doing odd jobs, repairs, mostly after violence from prisoners, and he learned the ways of men, and women, in captivity. Good to keep away from! He learned about the powerlessness of those who got put away. There were normally smart people who paid them small change to do the risky parts of anything. Those who took the lower level jobs got caught, and never had much money; those who kept themselves up a level or two got the benefits, such as they were. By the age of twenty Jim had a good apprenticeship behind him and was ready for his career. Some money, he saw, was quiescent, and some moved about. What did people who had a lot of money do with it? They bought glamorous cars, works of art, they holidayed and dined well. They put jewels on their women. That meant they had two fields to master – that of making money, and the more problematic field of attracting women. Jim decided to make money his aim and women his diversion. He could be hard-headed about the first and fluffy-headed with the second – so long as he kept control of his money. What to do with his life? He went through a quiet time. Finally his mind settled where it had been inclined to rest, a long time ago, on the principle, if it was one, of seven degrees of separation. This theory has it that the lowliest, the humblest of us are only seven steps away from the person of wealth and fame we'd like to emulate. We are, let us say, someone humble called A. We envy the wealth and glamour of the Sultan of Brunei. Faith in the seven stages tells us he's closer than we think. Out of all the people we know we choose one called B. Out of the thousands of people B's encountered in a life of wheeling and dealing, we choose another called C. And after C come D, E, F and ... tara!, G, who is known to

the Sultan. The theory never tells us, at the poor man's end of the scale, how to transfer some of the Sultan's wealth into our pockets. We are simply within distance of the greatness we lack. Faith can be a pathetic thing, and people in need of faith likewise. The younger Jim would expound the seven stages of separation as if they solved some problem; later, a little more cautious, he expounded it as a principle without bothering to explain how it increased good in the world. It simply did – Jim believed. Jim believed ... in himself and, more closely, his own luck. He hadn't run out of it yet, and wouldn't, not before he'd made a pile. It was his fortune to be one of those who did. He knew this because he felt contempt for suckers. Smart people preyed on fools. He'd studied the weaknesses of those in jail. He'd studied the irregularity of people he'd met in bars, and the kindnesses of people who'd driven him long distances, shown him places where he might pick up work, and where he could hide if he got into trouble. It was a period of rising confidence. No harm would come to him. As for women, you only had to be kind, show them you didn't want to dominate, but liked being useful, of service when you could, and they'd share themselves. Men could have women without being bastards. It was a front where you got support instead of having to wage another series of campaigns. That was good! It made things easier, didn't it?

Jim got himself in charge of a rich man's yacht in Darwin, and then he moved to Sydney, the same deal, an Italian with money and mistresses who liked to have a floating hotel for the innermost circle. 'Nuthin gets done on the yacht,' he told Jim. 'You're to make sure it stays that way. They can talk, they can plan their ideas as far as they like, but money never changes hands on board, drugs are only recreational, people come and go without questions being asked, this is where we all want to be all of the time, but we can't. We're busy getting it all together. This is where we come to relax. Got that word fixed in your mind? Re-lax! Everything else stays off the ship, Jim, and that's for you to police.'

The Italian knew his man. 'Never thought you'd be a policeman, didya!'

So Jim learned to be both everywhere and invisible. If something wouldn't work, he got it going. If people swapped partners, that is, they went below with someone different, he knew nothing. He shifted glasses and bottles the moment they were left behind. He knew the people on the boats that went past, he read maps, he studied ropes and sails. He likened himself to someone managing an exclusive club. He watched, or thought about, Carlo, his boss, almost every waking moment. Carlo was restless, suspicious, and had to be kept happy. He wanted his glasses, cups, cutlery and plates to look as they did in advertising pictures. He had the obsession with emptiness, of void-ness, that goes with display. Jim wondered if he ever slept, and if he slept, what he dreamed about? People with brooms, people painting, or polishing? Even relaxation was, for Carlo, a performance of some sort. He was, Jim suspected, a peasant at heart, because something in him opened at a market. He liked to talk about huge black boars he'd seen, dripping blood, shot in the woods of Italy. Civilisation, Carlo told Jim, was built on top of savagery, each was defined by the other, and if you had one of them in your mind you had the other – somewhere. 'The world's an ugly place,' Carlo liked to tell Jim, 'but on this boat, everything's as it should be.' It might have been an impossible ideal, but Jim respected it. He learned to cook by studying chefs Carlo brought aboard. He sipped the wines carefully, studying them. He appraised people's manners, he noticed what they kept out of their conversations as much as what they included. He noticed that those who read a lot - rare among Carlo's friends – spoke in more complex sentences, and had longer memories. Some people lived inside their minds and others followed their bodies' urges. A woman called Lola followed him below one day and opened her cabin door. 'I think my mattress is a bit hard. Try it and tell me if you think the same.' Heart sinking, Jim put his hand on the mattress; this would cost him his job if Carlo found out. Lola read his

mind. 'He'll be ashore for a couple of hours. Now's the time to try each other out.' They did. Lola wanted to drink with him after they'd made love, but Jim told her, 'That's how people give themselves away. Believe me, I see it all the time. People change because they've done it. If you want to keep on doing it, you make sure you don't change.' Lola thought this fascinating. 'Don't change and it stays a secret? What a wonderful idea! There's so many men I'd like to go back to, but once people know you're a couple, it changes things, somehow. Hey!' She was suddenly excited. 'That's something we're going to have to work out!'

She gave him a key to an apartment near a television studio, she told him when he mustn't by any means be seen at her window, and he felt a sickening fear that if he went to her apartment there'd be another man there, or she'd walk in with one and toss him out. But this didn't happen. If she had other men – and he felt sure she did – she must have gone to their places, because he never saw any signs of males at her place. 'Everyone says the same thing,' she told him, 'and that's because I keep it that way. You know why they pay me as much as they do? I'm a creation of their smutty little fantasies, so I can't let a few facts get in the way. The life I let people see is squeaky clean, and it's going to stay that way. That's why I insist on you coming when there's no one around, and leaving when you do. What you're getting's good enough to make things like that worthwhile.'

Jim thought so too. He called her Lola but he thought of her as Woman. She was Everything. She was what he couldn't understand. Men made a simple world, full of rivalry, women added everything else. Lola was Carlo's lover. And Carlo was a jealous male, predictable in every way. 'You're safe in my place,' Lola told Jim. 'When Carlo wants me I go to him. He's been here but it's not grand enough for him. It's just a little bedroom near my work, I tell him. It's not for entertaining. If I want to be entertained, I come to you, and you give me grandeur. You give me class!' She looked pleased with herself, as if this rubbish might take someone in. Perhaps Carlo's mind

fed on rubbish, Jim couldn't be sure. Lola was certainly a keen one for pleasure. She said she didn't want children with such definitive vigour that he couldn't believe it was true. It occurred to Jim that hardly anything she said was true, as he'd understood the word. Her statements were made because they were needed. It was a strange way to think, he thought. He tried to take bearings off things she said. Somewhere, in the sea of floating signals, lamps and symbols, there was a soul flashing messages, and all you had to do was read her properly and you could be happy for life.

There came a time when the TV studio wanted her in Melbourne. She was to fly down and stay for a week. She wanted Jim to be with her; he felt his heart tighten. Surely this was a trap? Wouldn't Carlo come down too, at some unexpected time, breaking in on the love nest? And wouldn't he be aware that Jim wasn't on the yacht, keeping everything loaded and ready for the next party? Lola pressed him, though, and persuaded him that he'd be safe because Carlo would be in Thailand, and that meant a series of seaside resorts with women laid on, and no time for him to be checking on his base ... Jim gave in, and flew south on the plane after Lola's; they didn't travel together. The studio had a car for Lola and she used it to meet him when things were quiet before the cameras. She took him to all the smartest, newest places to dine. She took him dancing, and he thought of her as Endless Youth. In her apartment he was adept at keeping out of her way until she needed him, and then he was whatever she wanted. 'I'm a good chameleon,' he told her when she commented, and they laughed. It was what she wanted; he wondered how much of herself she'd discovered yet, and how much was still to be faced, or found. If she was so interested in men and their dramas she was still creating her womanly self: children would come later, after this period of building, of development, was finished. Jim was curious about the woman she was going to be. Would he still be in her life when the day came?

Would he still be alive?

He asked this because he was scared. He noticed in a Melbourne paper a report about storms in Sydney, and wondered how the boat had fared. He took a flight to Sydney the next day, while Lola was filming, and inspected Carlo's yacht. Other boats had drifted on their moorings but Carlo's hadn't shifted. Half an hour's tidying and it was ready for guests. He flew back to Melbourne, but not before he rang his boss to tell him, 'just in case he picked up reports about the wild weather', that everything was well. Carlo had heard no reports but was pleased to know that his servant had been on the job. 'That's good to hear, Jim,' Carlo had said. 'I'm pleased to know someone sticks to his job!' Jim flew back to Lola – sticking to his job, he told himself. She was in the apartment the studio had given her, wearing a dressing gown with nothing beneath. 'The director and his camera men,' she told Jim, 'expect me to have no lines on my body. I tell them that's okay, but I mustn't be wearing things that give me lines until the moment they're ready to shoot. When I'm in and out of things, I get creases in my skin. They ought to know, they're taking pictures all the time! Are they blind?'

Jim thought they were. Over time he realised that she was a professional at presenting herself, and the camera men were slow to catch on. They were capturing her body but capturing themselves in doing so. In turning onlookers into fools they were turning themselves into onlookers at the same time. Jim realised how rare he was in being willing to wait. He didn't woo, or court, the glamorous Lola, he waited for her to find the need she showed him. He might say to her, 'You're a wonder, darling,' and she would be surprised; he added to her sense of herself every time he spoke, and this took her by surprise. Yet he didn't try to prise her open to be used, he waited until she needed to open herself for somebody, and that somebody was him. 'I always said I wasn't going to get married,' she told him, one afternoon in bed, between studio shootings, 'and I'm not, but if I do ...'

He knew what was coming.

'... it's going to be you!' When he didn't say anything, she shouted, or nearly, 'Tell me how you feel about that?'

He had to take a punt. He couldn't afford to be wrong. 'I think of you as Woman, darling. More than I think of you as Lola. Lola's an individual, and of course you are, like everyone else. But you're also a summation of being a woman, of being part of your generation. You're a symbolic life in which every woman or man can find something of themselves.' She was looking surprised; he went on. 'You're impersonal. I didn't say inhuman. Far from it. People find themselves in you. You're like a mirror, showing the best of what's around you.' Lola was amazed. 'Jim!' She needed to be standing up, moving around, acting, but they were in bed. 'Nobody's ever spoken to me like that.' He knew she was his, entirely, but then so was he hers. Neither had an advantage, and this was new to both of them. They'd given more than they'd realised it was possible to give. It came to her mind first. 'We'd better stay together, now, Jim. Now.' He liked the idea but it made him even more afraid. 'We'd be okay down here, perhaps, but up there ...' He meant Sydney, where people would know, and Carlo ... Jim had heard stories of Carlo's hysterical vengeance for wrongs and alleged wrongs, and didn't fancy being wiped out. He said the word: 'Carlo.'

Lola knew. 'We couldn't stay down here forever, I don't get enough work. We both belong up there.' It meant their lives were impossible. Jim didn't think for one moment that his life belonged in range of Carlo; it might be cut short if that gentleman woke up to what was going on. He said, 'We've got a few more days down here. We'd better grab'em and be grateful.' He knew he was failing her, but she was as tied to Carlo as he was. Suddenly she got out of the bed. 'That bastard!' She began to dress. 'I'm going back to the studio. It's time I talked to them.' He wanted to ask what she was going to say, but didn't; she had no more idea than he did. She'd slip in quietly and they'd notice that she was early, for once. When she left, and he was alone, it came clear. He had to get out now, and not

go back to the yacht, either, because Carlo would notice something eventually. Where could he go? He couldn't think of a single place.

Then he thought of one.

He got a taxi to the city and a train to Ballarat. Then he hitched along the highway – that was easy – until he was home. His mother kissed him, cooked him a meal. His father, coming in at lunchtime, covered his surprise and mentioned a couple of men who might have some work. He said he'd ask, he ate his lunch, and disappeared. Jim kept out of sight for a few days, then started going for the papers in the morning. That was when he saw Dick Hart. Dick became a regular in his days, and vice versa. The principal asked him how long he was back for, and what he was doing; this gave Jim a chance to say he needed a job. No problem for Dick. 'We've got a man going to regrade our oval next week. And a few other jobs as well. He'll need an offsider. Nothing very glamorous but it'd give you a start.' Jim got the work, and made sure he gave satisfaction. Dick saw him at the oval when he went to check on what was being done. They exchanged pleasantries, but the older man sensed that there was something Jim didn't want anyone to know about his return. Dick respected this, having met it before. Town talk operated on two levels; people told you what they wanted you to know, and other people told you what those same people hadn't wanted you to know. If you tapped in to both, you got a reasonably rounded picture; if you only listened to one, you got a picture that was exaggeratedly good or bad, even disastrous! It amused Jim to read the death notices and see how people so memorialised had all been dearly loved, unforgettable, et cetera, while the criminals occupied other parts of the paper with equal bravado. Jim's shady side might never have got to Dick's ear but for Mrs Wilson, who had a son of Jim's age, and told his mother what he'd heard the returnee say about his time away. 'He cleared out of Sydney because this bloke was going to have him wiped out. Pinching his girlfriend, apparently.' That was what Mrs Wilson's son told her and she passed it to Dick.

Dick spoke to Loretta about the young man who'd come back into his life. 'I'm not responsible for him, but I feel as if I am. He ran into trouble while he was away, so he's come back home. He wants to make a fresh start but he hasn't got much to support him except bad habits. Very bad habits. I'd send him off to Father Joe except he's not a catholic. I'm his Father Joe, if it comes to that, whether I want to be or not.' Loretta was intrigued. 'Knowledge is dangerous. It makes us part of things when we don't want to be. If we know about something, we feel a responsibility for what happens. I remember ...'

'Yes darling?'

Loretta would have swept it away. 'It's only something that happened a long time ago.'

Dick said, 'I'd like to know, darling. It might tell me what I can do for Jim Pavlides.'

Loretta said, 'This happened when I don't think we knew how to talk so directly to each other as we do these days. I might have to ask forgiveness here and there ...'

'Go ahead, darling, I'm listening.'

'Do you remember Jennie Marsh?'

The question took him back to the town they'd both grown up in. 'Ah, yes, faintly. Only just.'

'I grew up next to Jennie. And her family, a wild, noisy mob. I doubt if her parents ever knew whether all their kids were home or not. You couldn't tell just by looking around, they were all wearing each other's clothes, and they were all born within a few months of each other ...'

'I do remember that. It was something we used to laugh about.'

'Boys did. One of the first things I learned from Jennie was how different boys were from girls.'

Dick couldn't help a little sarcasm. 'She'd have known that!'

'She did. She used to say, it's us that brings the kids into the world, and we do all the work of looking after'em.' A little of Jennie

sounded in Loretta's way of saying her words. 'She brought three children into the world in the years I knew her, all by different men.'

Another side of Dick came through. 'Do you know where she is now?'

'No. I don't know anyone who might know. We've come a long way since then, Dick.'

They had. He was the principal of a high school, and she was his wife. They had children, now grown up, or growing, of their own. Dick said, 'Sorry, I broke in. She had three children. You were saying ...'

'The first was by a boy who left town, a bit like that Jim Pavlides, except he never came back. He fathered her child and he cleared out.'

'It's a terrible story but it's not uncommon.'

'The second child was when she was working in a shop, and we all said the father was the man who ran the shop. She wouldn't tell us who the father was. She used to say, look at his face, that's the answer to your question, but the trouble was, we never agreed about the baby's face. It could have been any one of half a dozen men she was seeing at that time.'

'Couldn't restrain herself, could she?'

Loretta broadened. 'That was the lesson I learned from Jennie. If she liked you, she was wide open to you. Boys as well as girls. She was a sucker for men. They only had to be nice to her.'

'You were never like that.'

'No, but I might have been. It's easy for a girl to go that way. We have to learn, not only to restrain ourselves but to make it our business to restrain others too. It's a terrible burden when a girl's growing up, trying to steady everyone down without being a killjoy.'

She saw him smiling and knew he wanted to reassure her with a flood of love: she went on, 'I could see that the children she'd have would all be accidents, and I wanted to help her.'

'She had two children, was it? I don't remember the second.' He was vague.

'She had three. A year or two after the child she had with the man who ran the shop, she had another, or she was going to, and she came to me and said she didn't know what to do with the child she was going to have because a woman much older than Jennie had offered to take the child when it came and give it a home.'

Dick sensed that this was where Loretta had fitted in. 'And this happened?'

'It did. The adopting mother wanted the child to be born, and handed over, in Melbourne. So when the time came for Jennie to have her child, she went to Melbourne and I went with her. I was supposed to be her sister.'

'How did you get away from home for that?'

Loretta blushed. 'I won't answer that, if you don't mind Dick. Sometimes you do things because you think they need to be done. Tell little stories that aren't entirely true ...'

Dick was very amused. 'Or aren't anywhere near true at all! Sorry, darling, please go on. Ignore me if you can.'

She was relieved. 'I signed a couple of things after the birth of the child, I met the adopting mother and I agreed that I wouldn't tell anybody in our town where the child had come from, because the father of this third child ...'

'Was an undesirable?'

'Was he ever! That was what Jennie had come to by that stage. And when we got back home again – Jennie didn't come back for a couple of weeks – I had a big talk with her. I told her she had to lead a different life, she couldn't go on having children with this man and that, without any discrimination. Children needed fathers and that meant marrying the father, not just ...'

She meant 'fucking'; the word presented itself as strongly as if it had been said. She went on: 'I was a good catholic in those days,

every bit as much as I am now, but what I couldn't see myself doing was condemning Jennie for what she'd done.'

'I don't think condemning ever does much good. We may think something's wrong, but if we want to correct it we have to be careful. Use judgement, really.' This, she knew, was the man she'd married.

'Jennie's impulses were beautiful. She was full of love. In a way, she was too good because she wasn't careful enough. That was the lesson I learned from knowing Jennie. Be very careful about letting your impulses rule you. They may bring you undone. You may have an impulse that makes you feel good but it finishes up doing you harm, and maybe doing harm to your children too.');

'Do we know anything about Jennie's children now?'

Loretta shook her head. 'Except the third. That worked out pretty well. Better than many adoptions do. All in all, not too bad at all.'

Dick commented: 'A happy ending, of sorts. If there's ever an ending, that is.' She looked at him, and he said, 'People like stories to have beginnings and endings, but often they don't. You don't really know where things start and end. Most of the time they just go on. And on. If you drive in a peg and say that's where something starts, or ends, it's a falsehood, really, because nothing began there and nothing ended there. Events simply flowed past that point.'

Loretta was amused. 'I see you've learned something. It took a while.'

'Mmm?'

She said, 'In the old town you were remembered for having sent the young people off in a race ...'

'The race that wasn't a race!' He smiled.

'And yet you fired the starting pistol to set them all running?'

'Silliest thing I ever did. I don't know what possessed me.'

'You're not blaming Arnie for having the idea?'

'No! It was my idea. I can't blame Arnie. To this day I don't know why I did it.'

'You've never wanted to do it again, up here?'

'No. And I'm not likely to, either. They can all go to hell in their own way! People are pretty good at finding ways to do it, too!'

'Up here?'

He laughed. 'Everywhere. Absolutely everywhere.'

She said, 'We're lucky in our faith, don't you think?'

'We are.' He tried to make it sound as final as he could.

Time running out

As one year ended at his school, Dick was pulled up short by Loretta telling him he should be setting goals for his retirement. 'Set out your goals and get things underway for achieving them before your final year. You want to leave a few things for judgement after you've stepped down.' She knew it made Dick sad to think of retiring, but it was better to plan for it than to be passive, and let it overwhelm him when it came. She asked him if he wanted to go and live in Melbourne. He didn't. 'I want to live my last years here, where our children grew up.' He knew this would reach into his wife's heart. A family, once started, had life in its development at each and every stage, but those years of getting the young established, finding directions, taking the early decisions that led to so many later decisions, were the years when everything was being shaped – including the parents. 'You're so busy you hardly know what you're doing, and what you're doing is the best thing anyone can possibly do – being a mother or a father': that was Loretta's summary of her own richest years. She would say to her husband, when they were in thoughtful mood together, that she didn't know how Jennie, the friend of her childhood, could have got it so wrong. 'She lived for the moment, when she should have been living for the future, to make it become what she wanted. There's nothing more satisfying than seeing the future taking shape in your hands.' It was the way she'd lived, it was the way her husband wanted; they enriched each other.

He talked about his work when he came home. 'I've got young Nigel Gourlay. An amazing teacher. He's got his Form 1 kids

studying the theme of time. Time, if you don't mind, in Form 1! You wouldn't think they'd be able to handle something so abstract, with so many sides to it, but he gets them making time machines, and inventing ways of measuring time. I sat in the library listening the other day, and it was wonderful. This young lad whose name I can never remember was telling the others how you could build a shed and pave the floor with markers for all the things you needed to do during the year, like plant the crops and start your harvest, and so on, and you could put in people's birthdays, or public holidays ... Nigel had been telling the kids about the Shrine of Remembrance and how the light falls on the memorial stone at 11 o'clock on the morning of the 11th of November, and how that was when World War One ended, and how the armistice had been celebrated ever since, at the same time ... I tell you, it had an eerie effect on me, and it certainly affected those kids. Well, one of them took the idea and ran with it. This lad told Nigel and all the others – and he certainly told *me* – that if you set out all the things you wanted to happen, or had to happen, in a line, then you were mapping the future and the past, and once you do that, he said, time travel's a possibility, at least in your imagination, because you can go backwards and forwards with nothing to stop you. There he was, as bold as brass, standing in front of Nigel, and you know what a weedy little fellow Nigel is – and he was telling the other kids, and *me* – that once you made up your mind that you were going to do something on a future day you'd nominated, then you, or part of you, was already in that future time, ear-marking it for the action you intended to perform. Nigel, of course, had them all agog at this, and they were talking time travel as if it was a matter of getting on and off a bus, and I thought what a genius he is, he can open up their minds to possibilities I wouldn't dream about ...'

Loretta said to her husband, 'You gave him the job, Dick. You picked him out of all the people who applied. I remember the day very well, you came home and you said to me, this chap's going to

show us how to do things we've never been able to do before. You must remember that? Do you, darling?'

He did. He was proud of the brilliant young teacher he'd let loose in the school. When he'd started teaching a school got whoever headquarters sent them. It was a statewide service and local wishes had trouble in getting noticed. But that was in the past now ... and so, almost, was he. A couple more years of sunset; his time was running out.

But not so the story that had followed him to Stawell. The staff room wanted to know one day whether Dick would like to fire the starting pistol for a round-the-town run. 'What on earth put that idea in their heads?' he said to Mrs Wilson. 'Tell them no. No no no. I've got better things to do than that.' He wanted the idea pushed out of sight but it refused to go away. It became a joke. Where would youngsters hide if they wanted to get out of the run? Patches of bushland near the highway were seen as tempting. Anyone who knew anything about the earlier Gippsland run, years before, was listened to. People asked, all over again, why there'd been nobody to welcome the kids when they got back from their run. Dick became short tempered. 'If people want to make jokes about something that happened years ago, it's not for me to stop them. But it's going to be a demanding year, I've got my attention fixed elsewhere and I suggest you should too!'

That was that, he thought, but it didn't escape his attention that when people talked to him about his years in the town they rarely asked what he'd achieved. They were more likely to comment on the number and variety of his friends, and whether or not, when the time came for his retirement, he'd be leaving the town. Dick paid close attention to Loretta on this subject because he was desperate for them to stay. 'We've got an apartment in Melbourne,' he liked to boast: 'It's for the kids when they need it, which seems to be more than half the time. It's for us when we go down to see them. We can sell it if we ever decide we don't need it. We've made our home here!'

'Here' meant a lot to him. He wasn't a man of wide horizons, he was essentially local, and the rivalry between Stawell and neighbouring towns fed into the pride he extended to his professional work. The school meant a great deal to him. He believed in community. When the centenary of wheat was being discussed, he made it clear that anyone invited to the town to talk about breeds of wheat used by farmers down the years should also come and talk at the school – or the appropriate classes should be invited to the public gathering. 'I've spent a lot of my time in the principal's chair ensuring that teachers link things to the district where they're teaching. It's all very well to talk about things as abstract principles but I want them linked to the ordinary, everyday lives being lived around them. I don't trust science when it's remote. It's only interesting when it's related to the world you see around you.' Thus Dick on relevance. He was more generous than this might make things seem, however. He assisted teachers who wanted extra qualifications. He was anxious that nobody should feel that they were locked in by working in a country area. Any curiosity that led to further study was to be supported. Country towns had a reputation for deadening minds and this was something he wished to see disproved. In his early years he'd been busy asking wealthy townfolk to think about leaving the school some scholarship money in their wills, and in his later years this attention had borne some fruit. Financial assistance was available for the boys and girls wanting to go on, and they were encouraged to talk to those coming on behind them about their study, and later work, wherever it was they went. Dick had dreams of a well-supported league of young people bringing credit on the town where they'd been nurtured, and a town that was proud of its sons and daughters who'd gone on ... but hadn't broken away.

It suited Dick and Loretta's idea of family; the bonds were extended, but never broken, because ...

... well, how could you break the unbreakable? Family life was strengthened by their catholicism, and vice versa. How else? How

otherwise? Family life was the direct expression of God's love for each and every one of us. Nobody was ever out of care. Tim, their youngest, was the quirkiest by far, but was, in that respect, the beneficiary of being last in a family that made security paramount. He could do what he liked because his family knew his life would stand up to scrutiny. Loretta sometimes wondered if he could manage this. Might he not, like his elder brother, have to devise a path for himself? Loretta was saddened by Royce's dependency on the asexual Mollie for the intimacy he needed, yet she saw no alternative. She and Dick had sent him to the catholic college where his athleticism had been used to divert him from the other characteristics, and needs, of his body. Those boys had been made so stylish, when they ran, yet the running was a prerequisite of the style. They couldn't be stylish without being runners. Loretta sometimes felt a yearning to have him back so she could give him another path, but nothing could be done now, and Royce was polished, thoughtful, considerate; she and her husband had done well, though ...

... Loretta's regret was profound that he wouldn't, it appeared, have children to continue the line ...

... to perfect the man. Somewhere in her, deeply hidden, was a judgement of inadequacy, of incompleteness in relation to the church that it made a little less than it should out of those marriages it celebrated which became as all marriages should be, that is, true combinations of the male and the female. People, all around her and everywhere, brought the two together in this way and that, but only in a marriage of true devotion could humanity be seen at its best. There were wilder peaks and more daring ways to live, no doubt, but the world depended on the humble submitting themselves to the discipline of living in a way that acknowledged that their own purposes were placed second to the interests of those they cared for, and to care more for others than for oneself was to be within distance of a true and holy marriage.

She and Dick had lived on this plane and in this way. Loretta had never thought of the church as the embodiment of a set of rules, so much as of a spiritual presence. The church connected people with god. The church brought god to earth for people to be with him. If one's marital partner was linked to god, that made one's own connection closer. It was a mistake to be afraid of god. How could you be close to him if you feared him? The best thing anyone could do was to seek out god and let him enrich their lives. It was almost inevitable that at any given moment one of a couple would be closer to god than the other; each needed, therefore, to be watchful, and to use the other as a means of being closer to the divine force which floated through the world like wisps of cloud. Marriage was a holy state in more ways than one. It was companionship, yes, but also it was a reminder, each half of a couple having a duty – sometimes forgotten, sometimes ignored – to bring the divinity into the household, the family, even the coupling. Loretta knew there were women who found it hard to 'please' their husbands, or themselves, when or if they had ideas of god in their minds at the time. She saw no difficulty in this. Her friend of childhood and youth, Jennie, had shown her that you could make terrible mistakes by being headstrong in love. Better by far to listen for god's propulsion, and obey it when it came. People might laugh at this, and tell you that your way of acting showed you that when you wanted something, you simply did it and called it god's will – because it suited you to say so. But – and this was obvious to the young Loretta, and even more so as she grew more reflective – anyone who was halfway honest knew when they were simply invoking god in order to do something they wanted to do to please themselves, and knew also, and rather better, when they were striving to catch god's wishes and then to fit in with them. Insofar as god needed anything, it was to be embodied in the human, and that was the greatest gift a human could give her or his lord and master: that of obedience, first, and readiness to be taken over, second.

Loretta was not a doctrinaire woman, nor theoretical. All these things seemed obvious. Her three children absorbed them from her as natural. Rhyll saw, perhaps more clearly than her mother, how the preferred position of a woman depended on having a husband who took her views of god seriously, as Rhyll's father did. Dick was an attentive and respectful man. Rhyll had a circle of men friends who examined her to see what they would get if they made a commitment, but hung well back from making such a commitment. There was always Jamie, of course, who'd claimed her years ago, but saw her only rarely these days, a sort of comet coming in from outer darkness for a brief if intense moment or two of passage, after which he was gone again, to the intense annoyance of Rhyll, who wanted, somewhere in her being, for Jamie's youthful claim to look as if it was at least possible. Verifiable, when it wasn't, it was just a noise made by an impulsive boy a long time ago. Rhyll, though not exactly competitive, knew that her mother was the family, was its centre, its arbiter, definition, and that she, Rhyll, would be the same in the next generation. She needed to get things right, and it wasn't easy when you couldn't practice. Or could you? She could have sexual partners in the city without anyone but her closest friends knowing; Royce, too, would know because he was almost psychic in what he could sense about his sister, but he wouldn't disclose her secrets because he too needed his form of protection from Mollie, 'the Irish flag I'm draped in,' as he amused himself by saying. Statements of this sort would cause Rhyll to say, 'We're Micks, Royce, you realise?' and Royce to go on with blather and blarney as if they had an inheritance they needed to shovel away if they were to stop themselves being buried in it. This caused Rhyll to laugh and she loved her family's legacy, but was wary of it too. It had come to dress her and her brother a little too easily; the Harts had never known what it was to be rebellious about each other. There was a touch of inevitability about them which was next to impossible to escape. 'I sometimes think,' Royce told his sister, 'that if someone said to me, all you have to do is flick a

coin, or press a switch, and you could be anything but what you are, I'd do it. I'd do it regardless of the consequences ...'

'And what do you think the consequences might be?'

'Ninety-nine per cent of them would have to be worse than what we are because we're very lucky people. But the truth is, that being catholic, we're also something very un-catholic, that is, we're predestined!'

'Predestined? How could that be?'

The boy who'd escaped his sexuality but not his family's faith, said, 'Our freedom's very limited. Every step we take, there's a place where our feet should land. And there's a way to put our feet down gently so we don't tread on any insects. Or any humans who are meant to be our brothers. We know we're not supposed to hurt anybody in this world and the truth is that most people neither know nor care. They do what they feel like, regardless. That's been trained out of us, very carefully, by our parents. We're expected to be good. I sometimes wish god would give me a break and stop watching to see if I'm doing everything right. And I'll bet you must feel the same. You can't even get married for fun, or the hell of it, you've got to carry on our genetic line of goodness!'

To his mild surprise, Royce saw that Rhyll was close to crying. 'I see I've upset you. Don't worry, Rhyll, we'll find a way. We will. We'll be trying hard enough, that's for sure, we'll be trying!'

Not long after this conversation with Royce, it occurred to Rhyll that there was a separation between her friendships and her interest in the emotional lives of those she knew, particularly the women. Her friends were representative of what she was and hoped to become. Her interest, however, her curiosity, was aroused by those whose lives weren't lived by her principles. She realised that she wasn't restraining the girls she knew from telling her about weekends away, weekend parties, or the sexuality of relationships. She didn't ask, but neither did she divert what people felt inclined to say. She had a

calm about her which led others to ask, 'What would you have done?' The developing generation always shares, and it's done when people are least certain. First steps are being taken, after all. In a few short years people have settled the shape, and the partnerships, perhaps, of their lives. It took Rhyll quite some time to perceive that she couldn't change, could indeed hardly develop, without it affecting the resemblance she bore to her mother. The family expected her to marry in the way Loretta had. Rhyll had known and accepted this for years, but now that the time was upon her, she found herself going quiet. Was this consideration, or refusal? She began to grow scared of her impulses because they might show her to have turned a corner without having intended it. On the other hand, to remain steady, to be as she had been, was a decision too, a decision not to change. She looked around her, hoping to see role models, but could find none. The girls who were most like her were most guarded. The boys who were most like her father were most dull. This surprised her. Her father wasn't dull, so what was the difference? She told herself that he was neither obedient nor disobedient to his faith, but in a dialogue with it. It was useful to him, its suggestions were always in his ear, but he took care of himself. God had given him responsibility for his soul and expected him to answer for it. This, Rhyll felt sure, was how we were meant to live. It was how she would live.

Jamie? The boy who'd said he was going to marry her one day? Was she going to take this seriously or not? This was harder to deal with than it should have been. It caught her in an area of superstition. Even to think about Jamie made her feel that she was like an actor, with other characters speaking, even entering or leaving the stage, according to a script that nobody had seen but which lay secreted out of sight. She tried to remember what had been said, and what she'd felt, on the day that Jamie had made his claim. Had his voice connected him, on that day years before, with some force encircling the two of them? Did he sound as if he knew? Surely nobody could know a thing like that, but if they didn't, and they made such a

claim, then were they not making themselves seem more foolish than they could ever recover from?

Jamie? She hoped she wouldn't have to see him again, because she didn't want to have to bridge the gap between a life lived in harmony with her family, her faith and her background, and a life that might be shaped by forces beyond control – like Jamie's youthful (childish!) claim. Put it out of your mind, she said, but it wouldn't leave, and this was acid on the metal of her calm. Her calm! It was almost an enemy, because it linked her to her mother, the one she was going to emulate; marriage for her, she saw, was not so much a choice of this or that man to live with as the ultimate act of submission: she would lead the same life that her mother had led, unless something happened to break the cycle ...

Rhyll takes a step ...

Something happened. The Newman Club was having a weekend at Sorrento, in a large old house five minutes walk from the back beach. Diagrams were circulated to show how to get there from the Sorrento Hotel, a piece of 1890s grandeur which it was assumed would be first stop. Rhyll sat on the veranda of the hotel with a coffee rather than go in. She was ambivalent about the girls she'd come with. They spoke too freely, too coarsely, about the men who'd be coming. They took it for granted that everybody, male and female, was on the lookout for opportunities, offending Rhyll who had nonetheless to admit to herself that she was tired of her own circumspection and wanted something free-er, franker, to influence her way of life. Actually, she was sick of her normality. It restricted her, and the talk of her companions – though whether it was only talk, she couldn't say – held the promise of a way out. Of sorts, only, because if you found yourself with a young man after you'd 'done it', what did you have to say to each other then?

Rhyll had no idea.

It was annoying to her that her body was getting in the way of a normal development; she was curious about the theme for the weekend – ‘Holding the dam wall, or going with the flow: living a moral life in the modern age’. Everyone knew the theme was sexual, because everyone did everything else and got over it easily enough. Students needed to talk while they explored, needed to toss around ideas of purity while they released their inhibitions. There was a young man called Brian who was interested in Rhyll, and sat with her while the others were inside. He had the overconfidence of inexperience, and he told her about a walk planned for that evening from the house which was their base to the point where Prime Minister Holt had disappeared. ‘Cheviot Beach,’ Brian said solemnly. ‘Encounters in the dark,’ he added, unnecessarily, because there was no other reason for anybody to be walking the beach by night. Rhyll was still unsure whether she was playing this man’s game or not. Did sexual experience have to be stolen? Was that what the weekend was about? She supposed it was. Faith had rules and they had to be broken carefully, nobody admitting they knew in advance what they were going to do. Rhyll thought of footage she’d seen of riots in disturbed cities; people were calm enough, at first, but the presence of police, followed by the sight of smoke and flame as cocktails were thrown, was enough to tip people in the direction of violence, bomb-throwing and the rest, when a certain level of release had been obtained. People moved instinctively in the direction of the actions they wanted to be part of. ‘I’ve come down here to discuss morality,’ Rhyll told herself, ‘with the intention of doing things I would normally call immoral.’ She wasn’t pleased, but could feel herself moving with the current of the group.

The first Newman members at the hotel were soon replaced, and moved on to the house, where an overnight group had got things ready. There were chairs and benches for discussions, a kitchen window open for handing out tea and coffee, there was limited accommodation inside the house and canvas awnings over parts of the garden – mostly tea-tree: those who preferred could sleep outside.

The house had two toilets, designated HIS and HERS. The bathroom was open slather. The first session of the conference got underway at eleven, with people still arriving and/or finding their way about. Lunch, when it was served, consisted of things people had brought with them; a list was circulating for those who wanted to have dinner at the hotel that night. The first talk after lunch was given by a fat man under the title, 'Popular culture and the sexualization of the young'. This was a lead in to the theme of the afternoon, which was how possible was it for a sub-culture (read catholicism) to maintain its standards, with appropriate rewards, against a wider and very different commercial culture. The guns were being loaded. Brian stayed as close to Rhyll as he could, and she felt his curiosity without having any wish to satisfy it. She knew that he would want physical intimacy with her at some stage, presumably when everyone went for a walk to Cheviot Beach, and that the intimacy – the fucking – would be the night's highly prepared answer to the questioning set up by the day. She felt hemmed in by clichés, carefully created to give people ways out of their falsely defined positions. She wondered how she could escape with her dignity because the way things were working seemed to cheapen everybody. In every way. Why was that? Because the church, the faith, still held the high ground, and everyone wanted to appear to remain on the high ground while moving off as surreptitiously as they could.

It's all so bloody devious, she thought: what am I going to do?

In mid-afternoon Rhyll and others returned to town to buy up quantities of food for a barbecue and salads at the house that evening, for those who weren't eating at the hotel. The discussion following the day's final session didn't end till six, at which time fires were lit in the garden and drinking started. Cars went off to the hotel, amid shouted reminders that the walk would start at ten thirty. Departing cars tooted and the stay-at-homes kept barbecuing and drinking. Rhyll could have told you, could have signalled, the very moment when the night became sexual. Someone ripped

off the background music and put on a version by The Animals of 'The House of the Rising Sun'. A brothel song, marvellously sung. It ended, it was played again, and a third time. The night had a new shape. Bodies and minds adjusted. Night thoughts were predatory. Bodies, already well-appraised, came closer. Brian began to circle Rhyll. Repugnant as he was to her, he was also a necessity. Men were to women, and women to men. Some of the older men picked young girls for their targets. The party began to pair off. Drinkers came back from the Sorrento hotel. At ten thirty the house emptied and the gathering spilled along the beach. People wanted to know how they'd know when they were there. Most felt sure someone would know. Haversacks held grog. It was a warm night, with enough moonlight to give confidence. The sea was quiet; some said the tide was turning. There was nothing to do but walk. There somehow formed an unspoken agreement that the party would stay together until they reached the place where the prime minister had disappeared. There was a lookout point, someone said, and a track to reach it, and once they got that far ... it was everyone for themselves.

They got there. People talked about the disappearance of Harold Holt – an event which seemed ever so unlikely on a night when the sea was quiet – while some drank, and others slipped off the path to the lookout to find spots for lovemaking in the sand. Rhyll stayed close to the water, and she was almost on her own when she heard a voice call her name. It was Brian, at the edge of the bush; something about the way he'd half-hidden himself in foliage telling her he was ready to slip out of the day's restrictions. She went close enough to see him, but still a few paces from the shadowy bushes where he stood. 'There's a good little spot in here,' he said, expecting her to agree.

She felt divided. She was connected to the mood of all the others strung along the beach that night, and she was held by a consciousness of having a path of her own that she must be true to. She hated Brian for calling her, yet she recognised that she was as tempted as

anyone else on the beach. She wanted what they all wanted, the release of letting her body overwhelm her mind. She stepped into the shadows where Brian was, he took her hand and led her a few steps into the clearing he'd found. He'd spread a rug. He sat on it, he drew her down. 'Is there anybody near us?' she said. Brian thought not. 'I was careful about the place I picked. Mind you, if people get excited we might hear a few squeals. But then, they might hear us!' He made it so impersonal, she felt the blockages in her path starting to move. She could do what they were going to do as long as it was an action separate from themselves. They were apart. Night made them anonymous, and the sea was an understanding friend. They kissed, they caressed each other. Brian managed to hang onto his desire with a show of understanding for his partner. She moved hard against him but she wasn't going to undress. How was he to deal with that? He stood up and pulled off his clothes, giving himself to her. She found this immensely attracting. She kissed him all over. Brian kissed her, respectfully, on the clothes. She decided, eventually, to take off her clothing too. One thing after another she took them off and gave them to Brian, who hung them on the tea tree surrounding their hideaway. 'Yours too,' she said, and they picked up Brian's clothes and put them also in the tea tree. Their shoes they put side by side, four feet in a row. Then she drew him down to the rug, feeling she was in some way still at odds with herself, though doing what she desired to do. The caution took the form, not of a word but a sound. 'Uh huh!' she said. 'Safety precautions. Where's the thing?'

He'd been going to enter her without a condom. 'Oh yes,' he mumbled. 'Shouldn't have overlooked that.' He got up and found the pocket of his trousers, dangling from a branch. 'Make sure it's on right,' she said, unsure of whether he knew what he was doing. He fumbled in the darkness of their retreat, and of his loins, and she felt to reassure herself; his penis, hard and direct, had a rubbery skin. 'Not straight away,' she said. 'Slowly. Gently. Only move when it feels right.' Every movement felt right for Brian. Suddenly he was

in her. He put his hands under her and thrust himself hard and often into her yielding body. First timers are too quick. He climaxed before she'd had any time to draw near a climax of her own. He lay on her, breathing hard, wondering what he was meant to do now, until she eased him off. 'Bury that,' she said, as the condom slipped off him. 'We don't want that lying around for evidence.'

He was struck by the word. Evidence? Why had she said that? 'Next time will be better,' he said, as if programmed to make encouraging remarks, as if by believing in a future for what they'd done he could divert attention from the very limited nature of what had happened. 'There has to be a first time,' she said calmly, and he felt sure he was hearing her mother's voice speaking through her; was that what happened when young people did it? Perhaps it was? He said to her, and he really wanted to know, 'Do you feel changed?'

The question surprised her, and she took it inside herself. 'I don't think I know yet.' She thought some more. 'I'm sorry, that's the best answer you're going to get.' He said to Rhyll, with his self-confidence draining away, 'Everybody talks as if everything's changed the moment they do it, but it feels different, to me. I've got a feeling the changes don't happen in a spectacular way, they creep in slowly. In a year's time, we'll both be very different, but we probably won't even notice when the changes started to happen. Or that's how I feel. How do you feel, Rhyll?'

She said, 'Cold. Let's get dressed.' So they stood, picked their clothing off the tea-tree and put it on again, then, at his insistence, they lay together, side by side on the rug, under which he pushed some sand to give them head-rests, for talking. 'I'm grateful,' he said. 'I wanted so much to make love with you, and you let me. I'd better warn you, Rhyll, I'm going to want to do it again and again, now that we've done it. Do you think that's how you're going to feel too?' She didn't, but wasn't going to say so. She said, 'It raises a problem. I've always felt proud of standing alone, but of course I can only do that inside a family. If I was to go on making love with you, we'd have

to form a family, and I don't feel like that. Not yet, certainly ...' It was too soon to be talking, but Brian wanted to talk. 'Young men are supposed to be irresponsible, but I actually feel very responsible for you ...'

She said it again. 'Uh huh! We did it because we wanted to. We both needed to find out. Now we know. No bargaining. No trying to make it fit in with everything else. It's happened. We know it's big. Leave it alone. Just leave it alone!' Her strength was showing sternly. 'Okay okay,' he said. 'I'll hold my peace. You really jumped on me for that. Can we lie here a little longer, or do you want to go back and find the others?'

For Rhyll, the changes came quickly. She was hardly back in Melbourne before she noticed a difference in herself. She was impatient with the past and ready for the new. She was quick to dress and make up. She was decisive over little matters as if impatient for bigger things to present themselves. As the days passed she noticed that she was no longer referring to her mother in her mind. She felt loose, and free. She postponed seeing Brian again, putting him off when he rang. Next week would be soon enough. She started an essay. She noticed the way people did things, from the man who cleaned her college's windows to the organist at Saint Patrick's improvising before he launched into Bach. She noticed, above all, that she had a different appraisal of men. Most of them were opportunists concerning women. Most of them had no idea of things happening on any terms but their own. She thought of her own mother, adored for so long; she too must have had to train her man. Rhyll had always thought her father perfect. Had he always been so? Was he so, in fact? Had there even been a Brian, forgetting to put on his condom, in the man who'd brought her into life? Surely not? But ...

It occurred to her then that she had always expected to inherit – that was the word – a marriage like her parents'. It would simply arrive. It might even be arranged, she'd accept it, and it would move

forward as if nothing else could happen. She felt much smarter now. If things were going to happen someone made them happen, and when this was applied to relationships, it was women who did the making. Things men took for granted were made by women. Nothing existed except for a woman making it as it was, or at least allowing it. Women set the terms. Women's powers were modest but if they seized every chance they got to shape things, they could rule via their apparent – only apparent – lack of definition. Men lived by rules, she decided, and women by steering their perceptions and those of others. Women ruled, when they ruled at all, by causing people, men mostly, to be satisfied with what they had. It was as simple and all-embracing as that, and she'd always known it, but somehow it was different since her hour beside the darkening sea. She agreed to lunch with Brian; they sat in the university grounds with a sandwich or two, chatting affably because Rhyll had realised, by now, that to be affable was more powerful, more decisive, than being difficult. Brian knew, as he went back to his lectures after an hour with Rhyll, that he'd been bested. He couldn't count on anything going on from where he thought the two of them had left off. Not a thing. He hadn't changed the rules of the game, indeed he seemed to have caused them to become tougher. The sexual dependency he was hoping he'd created simply wasn't there. He felt she could hardly wait to see what he looked like from a distance, and was moving him away as graciously as she could, and as quickly. He, on the other hand, wanted to develop that intimacy he'd glimpsed in their encounter in the dunes, but that was a time, an occasion, that wasn't coming back. Nor was she going to let him develop some new approach. He thought he was using her and he'd found, to his surprise, that he'd been used himself. How had that come about? How come he hadn't known? Predicted? Had an opportunity to revert to Plan B?

Brian knew that he had to find a way into Rhyll, or retire defeated. She was waiting, ever so politely, for the latter to happen. It was easy

for her to be attentive, and give thoughtful answers to his queries. It was what women did, and nobody of Rhyll's age could be better at it. Striving to get some sort of control of a situation that was being managed to his exclusion, Brian said to Rhyll, on a bench under a sturdy elm, 'Sometimes men set out to use the women they find attractive. Use them without being used. That's the power game as seen from the man's side. But sometimes women are too clever, and it's the men who get used. That's how I feel today, Rhyll. I have a feeling of having been used. I didn't trick you, I didn't get away with anything, I've been digested and spat out. Or maybe I should say, passed out.'

This was pretty coarse, as something to say to a woman of some refinement, but it was his complaint directed at her mastery. 'You'd like it better,' she said, 'if you were pulling the strings, but, you see, what you wanted to happen is already behind us and it's funny, I'm feeling released. I've started the next stage of my life and although I don't yet have much idea of what it's going to be like, it's underway. We'd do better to meet in a year's time rather than tomorrow, or even next week. I'm quite excited at what I can feel starting to happen inside myself. I know I've got a long way to go and, to be brutally frank, I don't have any time to waste. Can you see there might be some sense in what I'm saying to you now?'

He couldn't see the sense but he could feel the firmness. 'A year? What a strange outcome of doing something most people think is sacred with another person. Banishment for a year. Okay, Rhyll, I accept the terms. A year to the day. This seat, same time of day.' He got up. 'I wonder what we're going to be like, in a year's time?'

... and another ...

A lot was going to happen in that year, Rhyll knew, and it started early, at another party not connected with the Newman Society. She met a young man from an agricultural college not far from her home town. He was introduced as Andrew McAdam but the moment they were alone together he told her to call him Andy. 'Nobody calls

me Andrew, but nobody. Please.' She commented on his surname being Scottish. 'I could always change it if you don't like it,' he said. 'Anything to please.' It was a silly thing to say, because jokey, but it seemed to speak out of a wish to adapt to whatever was required. Rhyll asked about his background but he had more concern for his future. 'People in my family will tell you what happened in a battle three hundred years ago, in all the gory detail. Tell me the use of that, for heaven's sake? Who cares if the O'Donnells played a dirty trick on the McAdams and stole some of their land? There's nothing new about that! I'm concerned with today's world, not some ghastly wrongs a couple of centuries ago.' She saw that he meant it. Family history might tell you how you'd been brought to where you were but he wanted to be free of ideas that predestined him. He had broad shoulders and a certain anxiety making him impatient. 'I don't want to be trapped, re-living past lives. I'm too far away from their country for that!' He smiled fleetingly, as if he expected her to understand, and she did. Andy didn't put up barriers and he pulled you in. He had a sense of humour applied lavishly to himself and if you approached him, or even took an interest, you came within its shadow. You sensed you might be as ridiculous to Andy as he was to himself. You sensed, also, that being ridiculous was compatible with pride. You could be proud of yourself and still regard yourself as a farce. How odd; it might be disconcerting but it was stimulating too. Rhyll categorised Andy as part of the freedom that had come upon her since her experience with Brian, which had been liberating, not in the sense of increased sexual activity but of releasing her from certain schema of belief based on the rejection, refusal, of her body's impulses. She'd acceded to them, they hadn't hurt her, nor had they changed her in any particular way, they'd put her within reach of the life she'd be leading when she found someone to share with, and share properly, not as a negotiated exchange of favours on an unusual evening when everybody was intent on breaking the rules. What society would I have to belong to to take the next step, she

asked herself, and of course it was obvious: the society she needed was all around her, no more than human, fallible as buggery, with not the slightest hope of redemption, and lost, lost, even those who said they were in search of god.

Rhyll realised she wasn't interested in a god who wasn't available in the day to day world. Daily life was what mattered. Breakfast followed by lunch followed by dinner, if you still needed it after two good meals. Enlightenment and higher states of mind? They should be easy enough to obtain: even on the darkest days you could still see things properly. If anything was a mystery it was because of the mind that didn't understand it, not the eye, which could see well enough. What I do is what I am, Rhyll told herself. What I say is what I think – that and what I don't say! She was getting Andy's quiriness in front of her awareness of herself. She was beginning to see herself as he saw things. That was a change!

She saw a lot of him, one way and another, but, she realised, he wasn't courting her. He was interested. He was asking himself what they'd be like as a couple. It struck her that if something big developed and she married him, he'd not be like her father, so she couldn't be like her mother. That felt liberating too. She had no wish to escape the influence of her parents, but it would be good to lead a life without feeling that it had been led before by the people who'd formed you. She wanted something new. Rhyll asked Andy to show her where he came from. He named a tiny settlement between two big towns, or big for the part of the state they were in. He took her there and she knew, when she met his parents, that she was in a house as full of love as her parents' house. No hidden, scarifying origins for Andy! He was as well-based as she was. She had a feeling two people had found each other. He walked her around the farm, a profitless estate. 'Dad said if I wanted to be a farmer I had to put myself in reach of something good. I'm going to do that, but not in the way he had in mind. I'm going to manage properties. There's lots of city people who want to own a place but don't know how to run

it. I'll do the job they can't do. I'll charge'em like a wounded bull and when they visit their properties they won't know them. They'll be able to bring their friends and show off.' He put a hand to his forehead as if to study a Davis Cup point. 'This is our mating paddock. It belongs to the fillies to show them at their best. The mating takes place in the yaaaaarrrrds ...' Suddenly he was waving foolishly at something behind him: '... and entry's by select admission only. It's not for everyone to see.' Rhyll laughed; if he could laugh about sex there was hope in him. It was too important for most people, too serious, which meant that they must all think they were failing. Well, Rhyll thought, I'm not going to fail because I'm not letting it overbalance me. 'Let me see the yards,' she said.

He took her. 'Farm animals lead pretty wretched lives,' he said. 'They're under control every day of their lives. They mate by the farmer's calendar. They want to be together but they're kept apart. They see their young sold off and taken away out of sight. Look at old Whimsy.' He was referring to a mare he rode on the farm, occasionally. 'She's had four foals, they've all been taken away and she doesn't see them any more. I doubt if she'd know them if she bumped into them, poor old girl.' He flung a hand wide. 'What sort of life's that?'

Rhyll challenged him. 'Well what sort of life is it, managing animals' lives so they don't know their own offspring? Doesn't that get into your soul and eat away at it?'

Andy looked her full in the eye. 'It does. If we had to live the way we make our animals live, we'd be screaming for some pills to release us. What we do to our animals is a scandal. So we say we're different, and we live in a different way from the way they live, or so we tell ourselves.'

She thought she had him. 'And are we any different? Eh? Tell me, Andy, what underlies the trouble in your heart?'

He was stony-faced. 'No trouble in my heart. Everything's as it ought to be. It's why I'm always laughing and scoffing at things. Trying to keep everything in balance.' She said, 'Rubbish!' He

laughed. 'Gotta keep our spirits up!' Her eyes made further enquiry of him. He looked back boldly. 'Humans are different. We've got this idea of goodness in us. We think it's the way we ought to be. Trouble is, the whole world's a contradiction of what we think. You've only got to look. Last year I went to the Northern Territory. They took us out on a boat to feed the crocodiles. Quite a sight! Crocs leaping out of the water to snatch a lump of meat off a rope. You know how long you'd last if you fell out of the boat.' He clicked his fingers. 'They told us that the female has to keep her young away from the croc that fathered them, because if she didn't shelter them among some logs at the side of the stream, he'd gobble'em up. Fair dinkum! He'd eat his own offspring. And there's people who're no better ...'

He was ready for a tirade. She tried a diversion. 'So how did good come into the world?'

'I truly don't know. It's here a fair bit of the time, but only intermittently. You can look in plenty of places and it's not there. But even if we find it we can't get smug about it because we're a mixture ourselves. We know what we ought to be like but we can't be the way we want except occasionally. It's a rough world and if we want to survive we need our nastiness. You probably don't agree but that's how it looks, to me.' He looked at her and she saw that he was paying her the compliment of wanting to know what she thought.

He was listening.

'I've got two things to say ...' She paused, not quite knowing how to address him on something so serious.

'Andy!' He laughed. He was telling her something serious about himself, and he was laughing as if she was crazy for not recognising what it was that made him crazy! She stared at him, then she cracked, and she was laughing too!

'And I'm Rhyll, and I won't let anybody use me for a thrill, though I did once, and I'm glad I did because it cleared up all that sort of mess for me, so I don't have to bother myself about it any more. You

know what I mean? I wonder. Anyhow, we've introduced ourselves! Greetings, Sir Andrew, henceforth to be known as Andy!

Still laughing, he said, 'You've got two things to say, I understand?'

She saw that you could be silly and serious at the same time. 'Ah yes, the first is that god is a member of our family. Unlikely as it may seem, he's a permanent resident. A fixture. The second thing is that this is so much a normal part of life that I wonder how people can get on without him. Anything to say about that?'

He took his time about answering. 'I see why people believe in god. Even today, after centuries of science, our understanding's pretty limited. It must've been pathetic a few hundred years ago. And if I look into the emptiness, it doesn't feel empty to me. There are things going on out there. But I have to say the word god doesn't help me understand the things I don't understand. If it helped, I'd say, go for it. It simply doesn't do much for me.' He looked at her. 'How's that going to affect us?'

She knew how important her answer was because it would affect everything, forever. Drawing a deep breath, she said, 'My parents have the same opinions about everything. I don't know if they were always like that, or they've rubbed each other smooth, over the years, like river stones.'

He broke in. 'Is that good?'

It seemed simple. 'Yes,' she said. 'It's very good.' She waited, but he said no more. 'So I'm used to a unified opinion at the top of my household. But I don't see that it has to be that way, so long as there's respect. I'd hate to live with someone who was always carping away, undermining what I believed in.' There! It had been said. What now? She studied Andy and he seemed like a carpenter trying to work out what to do with a piece of wood. To her surprise, he looked into the sky and spoke, as if addressing a cloud. 'I'm not frightened of surprises. In fact, I rather like them. If someone talks to me the same way all the time, I suspect they've got me worked out, or they think they have. If someone's got me worked out, then I've lost my

independence. Whatever I do, they'll think of a way to get me into line. I don't want to be controlled, and I don't want to control anybody. If we have kids ...'

He stopped, amazed at what he'd said. He grinned. 'Changes the discussion somewhat, doesn't it?' He grinned again, feeling foolish, yet also relieved. Rhyll felt the stillness that is said to be at the heart of tropical storms. She began, 'You're right to mention children because we're unmarried so far, and one of these days ...' She paused; he broke in: 'How far away's that?' She wanted to laugh. She was on the verge of great happiness. 'Don't rush me. How did we get ourselves in this position?' He said, 'How indeed? Each of us was moving the conversation to this position to see what the other thought. Well, what do we think? Why don't we tell each other?' She felt the confidence of the man, and also his humility. If she told him to go away, he would. If she asked him to stay, he'd be as happy as she was. She said, 'Why don't we leave it to whatever's inside us to make up our minds for us? You've got a way of backing yourself because you don't think you could make a big mistake. And guess what? I'm as sure of myself as you are. I really am. We were talking about my parents; they've given me absolute certainty in myself. If I do something, it's right. I don't think I've been proved wrong yet. And if we marry each other, you and I, I won't be proved wrong in that either. Let's be patient, Andy, a little longer, and see how we go. We've taken a big step without realising we were going to. Let's not do any more today. Let's leave the decision to what's in the depths of our beings. If we were going to make a mistake, it's a chance to correct it. If it's only a little bit of hesitating, it won't stay in the way for long. Not knowing you and I, and what we're like. How do you feel about that?'

Saying nothing, he picked her up. He was a strong man and he did it easily but, she noticed, he didn't kiss her while he held her, nor did he swirl her around. He seemed content to have done it without making a further statement. Then he put her down, simply, swiftly,

but respectful of her balance. 'That's how I feel. I hope I make myself clear!'

Loretta and Dick were curious about the young man who was causing changes in their daughter. They noticed that she was easily amused and interested in calculating the chances, the odds, of anything succeeding. 'She thought she had everything worked out,' Loretta said to her husband, 'and now she's at the end of the jetty, getting ready to jump!' The principal said to his wife, 'It's as serious as that?' She thought it was; he went on, 'I think I was ready for her to pick a man she could dominate, but ...'

Loretta laughed. 'No chance of that! There must be weaknesses there, but I haven't spotted any.' She went on. 'That's rather wonderful, isn't it.' Together they considered the man who looked likely to join the family and then to set up his own. Dick sat down; his wife knew he wanted to deliver himself of something. 'Yes, my love?' She noticed that he was staring at a window, and it caused her to reflect that Andy had a habit of looking away from you if he wanted to deliver himself of some reflection. Did this mean that Rhyll had chosen a man who had something in common with her father, or was it that she, Loretta, was creating similarities in her mind as a way of pulling people together: Andy into the Hart family. Which he was going to divide? Dick said, 'When you're a parent, you work so hard to get all the ends tied, everything clear for your children, everybody knowing what their duties and responsibilities are ... all that sort of thing. Then something comes along and upsets everything, and there's not a thing you can do about it because it's ...'

He paused.

'... natural! But what isn't natural? The word doesn't explain a thing. Andy was saying how the male crocodile will eat its own offspring. Is that natural? Not in my mind it isn't, but ...'

'He also said how the mother will shelter the young crocodiles so the male can't get at them. I daresay she might fight to defend them,

if she had to. So there's another side of nature coming in to protect them in the way you'd expect.'

Dick wasn't convinced. 'Why should they need to be protected against their own father? What's gone wrong with the world if fathers will eat their young? Things are not meant to be like that!' Absorbed as he was in the issue, he was perhaps unaware that it was what Andy had told them that was hanging over their minds. Loretta said, 'I think he told us about those crocodiles as a way of shifting our thinking onto his grounds. Otherwise, we'd have the ground shaped in a way that made our plans and ideals invincible and he'd hardly get a look in.'

'But?'

Loretta was amused. She and her husband knew each other well. 'But', she emphasised, 'he's made you and I think along his lines. And I'll bet he's got Rhyll doing the same thing ...'

'He has.'

'... so ...'

'So?'

'... so he's not going to let our minds run along the rails we've constructed to suit us. We're going to have to take him as we get him, and we're going to learn to love our daughter in new ways as she changes ...'

'Changes?'

'Yes, Rhyll's changing and it's going to go on as long as they live together. One lifetime. And their children, as they come along, will be a mixture of things we know and things we don't ...'

Her voice ran out and her eyes, too, were fixed on something far away. 'Royce didn't make us change, because he didn't want to get married. That was sad, but it allowed us to go on as we were. Now ...'

Loretta was not a woman of dramatic gestures or enforcements of her will, but the quietness of the word, the scope it implied, were startling for the husband who knew her well. He repeated her word, having nothing better that he could think of.

'Now?'

'Parents think they solidify their lives when they have children. They also create the potential to pull everything apart. It's not a benign process ...'

'Not a benign process?' He was still unsure where she was heading.

'No. Though it can be, as we know. We've had things pretty much as we wanted them. Now ...'

She was more definite this time: closer to articulation.

'... everything's on the move. The vans are packed, the wheels are rolling ...'

For some reason her husband, normally the most cautious of men, felt free to be foolish, or funny! 'There are dust clouds in the air, whips are cracking, horses neighing ...'

Loretta, renowned in the town for restraint, added to his images, '... and dogs are barking, everywhere!'

'Quite an event!' said Dick. 'And our little girl started all this?'

'She did. And it's a long way from ending. In a way, it never ends.' Dick, seeing that his wife wanted to cry, said, 'We'll never lose her, darling. Goodness, after all these years, how could we?'

Loretta was unmoved. 'We'll never lose her, no. But she's changing, and when she becomes a mother, she'll change again ...'

'She'll become more like you!'

The mother, contemplating her daughter becoming a mother, said, 'She'll be a mother with Andy. I was a mother with you.'

'Was? You still are. We've still got Timmy to launch on the world ...'

She was rapid with her addition: 'And when he's launched, which isn't far away, what's left for us to do?' Her husband drew back, hoping that a little old-fashioned dignity might save them. 'I'll go through my annual cycle a couple more times, and then ...' he added meekly, '... gardening and grand-parenting. Isn't that how it goes?'

Energy runs out, after all, and in the end there's not much more you can do.'

'We didn't know, when we started out, that it would come to this.'

Solemnly, Dick said, 'We did not know. But we pick up a little understanding along the way, so that when we get to the end of our run, we know a little bit more than when we set out.'

Loretta said, 'You've been a teacher all your life.'

'So?'

'And now you're still trying to teach me something which isn't right for me.'

'Enlighten me, my love. What are we talking about?'

'That idea of yours that everybody sets off on a great big run, they learn along the way, and they come back wise. Wiser.' She said the words as one who was out of sympathy.

'It's a useful way of looking at things, no more than that.'

'It's a useful way of looking at things because it saves people from feeling any hurt or harm, when there's plenty of both right there, waiting to be suffered.'

'Darling, if you mean that suffering's a part of life, I'm with you all the way. I don't deny ...'

'But Dick, maybe you don't deny, but you don't include, either. You like to keep everything at a distance so you don't feel immediate pain, like most people do.'

He said, 'This all started because we were talking about Rhyll, getting married and changing, perhaps, as she has children of her own ...';

Loretta announced boldly, 'I'm going to be very happy when that gets underway!'

He didn't know where that left him. 'Well, that's what I've been saying, or I think that's what I've been trying to say ...'

She said, sadly, 'And it will happen at our expense. Which leads us to see that when we came of age, and married, Dick, and had our kids, we did it by way of pushing our own parents into the back-

ground. We took over from them and now our own daughter's pushing us into the darkness, while she takes over the stage, and there's nothing we can do about it except submit as gracefully as we can. We have to smile, as we step backwards, out of sight.'

Suddenly he saw what was upsetting her. 'I think I accepted that quite a long time ago.'

She felt he had, so what he was saying was right. She said, 'A few simple thoughts would ease me. The whole world can see what I've been covering my eyes so as not to see. You're often better than I am at seeing things, darling. Often.'

It wasn't true and he didn't claim it. 'No darling. You're always streets ahead of me.' He went quiet, and she knew he was asking himself how well he could prop himself up with his last years in the prestigious job, and finding that although he'd have any number of things to keep him busy, they wouldn't be able to stop him knowing, all day every day, that his time was running out. Loretta reached for him, and he folded himself in her arms. 'There's nothing, nothing whatsoever, that can be done.'

Rhyll married Andy and the first home of their marriage was a much-extended dwelling in the Yarra valley, owned by a barrister whose wife was a merchant banker. Grape vines surrounded the house, the garage had room for six cars, voice recognition devices allowed those who were known to open the front gates and rooms in the guest wing of the home. Andy was amused. 'Some people learn how to spend money before they know how to make it.' His first action was to get a recognised winemaker to look at the vineyard, and his report was favourable. 'We'll do this year's vintage then we'll start to prune them properly. It'll make the crop lighter for a couple of years but you won't be sorry when you taste the wine.' Andy listened and then he started doing sums. He toured the district, asking questions. Then he decided that the property needed a winery, both for itself and as a service to the numerous hobby-vineyards in the area. 'City

people, sold a vineyard, with no knowledge of how to make wines and nowhere to make them. We're rescuing the buggers, or we will if they pay.' This was stage two of his plans, but first he had to get the confidence of his owners, and this was where Rhyll was useful. She kept the spacious home with ease, served meals when the owners and friends arrived, and had rooms clean and well-aired for the owners' friends. 'It's like running a hotel, except nobody pays.' This amused Andy. 'They'll pay in the long run, believe you me.' Sensing his owners' priorities, he had the vines looking better than they'd looked before, and the various items of machinery and storage on the property relocated to the spacious shed behind the garage. 'They're not farmers, these people,' Andy said, 'so we have to make the place look like an office after the cleaners have been through.' Rhyll would have liked children straight away but sensed that the owners would feel their property had been appropriated, and delayed. Loretta sensed this, and it troubled her. Children should come when there was a readiness to love them, and she wondered about Andy's idea of working for those who had money to pay. Poor people often lived in closer contact with their needs and natures than the rich, who were usually selfish, and planning to stay that way. Back in Stawell, Loretta noticed her own heart going out to people given charity by service organizations; the demands of these people called her more desperately than her own daughter's situation. 'It's only a stage,' she would say to her husband, and he recognised that this was her hope, but she wasn't sure. Then her attention would centre on Tim, her youngest, doing year twelve at his college in Ballarat, and turning some of his attention to the course he'd do in the city the following year. 'Medicine,' Tim said, 'even if it's old fashioned. The smartest kids are all doing commerce these days, or commerce and law, because that's how you make a fortune ... if you're not smart enough for IT. I don't want to be smart that way. I'm not, anyway, but I don't want to limit myself by a need to make money. Money doesn't mean all that much to me. I want to be of service.'

Remarks like this also troubled Loretta, almost as much as her daughter delaying the arrival of children. What was she expecting? Her children to live their lives within the confines of her wishes? She needed her husband's kindness more than ever, and it was there for her, because his school ran itself these days, with little more than benign interference from Dick. It ran itself, which meant that his purposes had become the communal purposes of the institution, an achievement indeed. His council and its president were proud of their positions because proud of his creation, with its scholarships, its support from the town, its connections with former students and pastoral management of its students of the day. Above all, Dick had transferred responsibility for the students' learning and behaviour to the students, all of whom had diaries and lists of goals to be achieved, with meetings to review how they were doing. The school's curriculum and the town's activities overlapped at as many points as Dick had been able to make possible: each mattered to the other. Standing outside the newsagency on a sunny morning, Dick remembered how, in his first year, he'd been a sitting duck as he stood in the same place. People wanted to tell him what ought to be done, people complained of teachers who, they said, weren't interested in their students' welfare, when Dick knew this wasn't true. What the town had needed, years before, was a well understood consensus as to what should be taught and how to teach it, and Dick had given the district this. Everybody on his staff knew how their priorities affected everyone else's, and they'd been instructed by Dick on how this must affect what they did in their classrooms and outside. The area's wealthiest families had set up bequests, giving Dick and his council some room to move on what they would build and what they would fund. Dick had become a master of delegation and almost all of the school's functions were in hands other than his, leaving him free to talk to students, teachers and parents, and above all to think. He became a master of timing. The right suggestions mentioned in the right ears were so much more beneficial than giving orders to the unwilling.

And yet he was troubled, however faintly and discreetly, by the quietness of his youngest son. 'He's off to do medicine next year,' Dick would say to those who asked, 'so long as he gets in, of course. Otherwise ... I'm not sure what he's going to put as his second preference.' Dick hadn't been told, and neither had Tim's mother. The parents knew that what they were being told was a matter of public policy, but what his other choices were, what he would do if his stated plan fell down, they didn't know, and they also knew that Tim had no intention of letting anyone know.

Dick and Loretta said he needed his privacy, he'd grown up in the shadow of two parents and two siblings, and their friends accepted this, but they saw, also, that the parents were less certain than they'd been for years. Unusually, there was an air of transition about the Harts. The couple talked about this. They talked about travel when Dick retired. 'There's few things I like more than visiting places I don't know,' Dick might say, 'but I don't want to be somewhere for no better reason than I don't want to be at home. If things get to that point, it'd be better to move altogether.' Loretta didn't want to move but could see that she might change her mind. 'If Rhyll has children it might be better to be closer. I'd certainly be more useful.' They'd always planned things but now the forces that planning dealt with were no longer entirely in their hands. Their children had been the purpose of their lives; this had been natural for Loretta and easy for Dick because his professional responsibilities mirrored his parental ones. 'What'll I teach when I've taught my last lesson?' he said to Mrs Wilson in the passage outside his office one day; she refrained from observing that he'd taught his last lesson quite a few years earlier. Principals, being in charge, can't always be reminded of their shortcomings. Dick, when welcoming new members of staff or farewelling those departing, spoke of experience. 'It's obvious to me, in my position of running this place, how important experience is, but it's just as obvious how a school needs young teachers to bring it to life. A school is a place of exchange. Knowledge is exchanged,

or discovered, and handed on; and experience is achieved, also, replacing the ignorance and enthusiasm that preceded it. A school is so full of energy, with people making mistakes and learning, all the time, that it's easy to forget that the school and those who run it are also learning. They're learning how to teach, and how to guide young learners away from the pitfalls in their path ...' Dick knew that some of his younger colleagues, and some of the older ones too, thought he was a sentimental fool when he talked in this way, and that they only tolerated him, perhaps, because of his administrative skills, but he felt convinced of what he said. He'd done a lot for his school in his years in Stawell, and yet he felt frustrated that vast areas of the statewide system were out of his reach, and he could do nothing for them except talk to his fellow principals over a round of golf. And what was the use of that? They listened politely, they were as interested in the lie of the greens as they were in the capacity of schools to make a difference to the state they served, they bought him beers in the clubhouse, they made him realise that things were mostly froth and bubble when you couldn't control them and he controlled very little beyond the grounds of his school.

When he and Loretta visited the Yarra valley property in the care of Andy and Rhyll, he understood what it meant to be 'kicked upstairs'. Andy listened to his queries and opinions, yet he revealed, whenever he spoke about his owners or those running nearby properties, that he saw himself as above the people he spoke of, in his understanding. Very likely he was, Dick thought, in which case, where did he himself stand with his son-in-law? Andy must find it hard to be patient with him? This had to be so. An odd thing happened one morning, in the vineyard during one of Dick and Loretta's visits. Dick had gone for a walk and was near the front gate when he saw that a man on a tractor and towing a trailer had approached, with the intention of entering. Dick opened the gate to save the man from having to do it himself. When Dick came back from his walk he found the man unloading a pile of mulch at the end of a row of vines.

He chatted with the man, who said to Dick, 'You're the father in law, aren't you?' He agreed that he was, and it appeared to put him in a category of one, for the man with a pitchfork in hand and a mound of mulch at his feet said, 'You'll be keen to get home, I imagine.' Dick was surprised. 'We haven't been here very long. Why do you say that?' The visitor to the property appeared to withdraw inside himself, then, as if pointing out the obvious, said, 'You haven't felt the chill, yet? The lack of welcome that's so obvious around here?' Dick was shaken. Lack of welcome? There'd been no shortfall that he'd noticed. 'We've been made very welcome,' he said. 'No problems there.' He suppressed a rising anger because he felt that perhaps he misunderstood. 'As far as I know, this is a very welcoming property. My daughter certainly keeps the household that way.' He looked at the visitor, wanting to know what else the man was trying to convey, but he'd gone blank. 'Sounds good, then. Make the most of it, while you can.'

Having offered this innuendo, the man turned over mulch with his fork as if there was nothing else to do. 'Better get this done, I suppose,' he said, dismissing Dick, who started to go back to the house, then diverted to walk between the vines. What had the man meant? Keen to get home? The chill? Lack of welcome? These things had not been obvious to Dick. What on earth had the man been talking about? He felt quite shaken. If it was as bad as that, he'd have to rescue Rhyll. Get her out of a marriage turning bad. But it wasn't as bad as that, everything was fine that he could see ...

But were there things he hadn't seen? Something told him to hide the disturbance curdling his feelings. Say nothing to Loretta. Show nothing to Rhyll and Andy, especially Andy, until he knew for sure, one way or the other. Then a warning of another sort entered his mind. When people were troubled, or suspicious, they usually made a mistake. The first thing they did was wrong. The next thing they did altered things for the worse. Then they realised their blunders but couldn't get back. Couldn't fix the damage. The man was

wrong. Keen to get home? Chill? Lack of welcome? There'd been no lack of welcome, quite the reverse. He thought fondly of Rhyll, taking her parents around the big house. She'd shown them how easy it was for her to manage as expected. This was only the first of many homes she'd manage for other people, until she and Andy could afford one of their own. Dick suspected that Andy wanted to have a go at his parents' farm, on the edge of Wimmera country meeting the Mallee. Perhaps he wanted a chain of properties so he could move his animals around to wherever there was feed and water; he was a man who thought outside the square. Dick felt a surge of confidence entering him again. Whatever Andy was planning would eventuate before too long. He was hard to stop. Was that why the mulch-man had told him the story? Trying to bring the bold young man undone in the eyes of his newly acquired family? By the time Dick got back to the house he'd reassured himself, but was still shaken. Disbelief, having crept into one's mind, is not easily driven out. Rhyll was in the kitchen, next to the stove. Warmth filled the room. 'Breakfast's hardly over and lunch is on the way!' Dick announced, happy with the feeling the kitchen gave him. His daughter was happy too. 'I never know when lunch is going to be. Sometimes I do it in a rush when we all get together. Sometimes I get it on the go as early as I can, then I turn everything down, just simmering, so that I can serve up whenever people arrive.' Dick recognised the ways of Loretta coming through their daughter. 'Well, of course,' he said, 'your mother always knew when I'd be home. My routine was extremely regular. I know farming's different from what I do.' It occurred to him that before too long he'd be saying 'what I used to do.' He said, 'I was up at the gate when a chap came along with a load of mulch, which he's spreading around between the vines.'

Rhyll said, 'Adrian', with no indication added to the name.

'I spoke to him for a minute. I wondered if he could be a little ... unhappy for some reason?'

Rhyll was definite on this. 'He wanted Andy's job, but he didn't get it.'

'The owners knew him, I take it.'

'Too well for his own good. He thinks he just missed out. He never had a hope. The Bartletts knew him too well.'

'Andy still lets him on the property, though?'

'Not for much longer if I've got anything to do with it.'

Dick felt relieved. So Rhyll and Andy knew. 'He said one or two things that made me uncomfortable. He was suggesting that your mother and I weren't really welcome here.'

He felt his daughter's eyes on him, he could feel her mind appraising what he'd said. 'Evil man. That's the last straw for him.' Dick, who knew Rhyll's mother inside out, knew his daughter would do what she'd said. 'I wasn't going to say anything about it ...'

'No,' Rhyll said, 'it's best we know. He'll have about two more loads of mulch to spread, and after that he won't get invited back.' She added, 'Here's Andy now.' In the tradition of farm households, her eyes were on the window governing the approaches to her kitchen. Andy came in. 'How's it going, darling? Got time for a cup of tea?' Andy shook his head, then sensed that the offer had something to do with his father in law being in the kitchen. 'Somebody got something to tell me?'

So he sat down, and heard about Adrian's destructive gossip, Adrian's ways of adding tiny drops of poison to the district's social life, his inability to leave reputations unsmirched. 'Nasty piece of work,' Andy summed up. Then Loretta joined them, having hung on the line a few things she'd rinsed. She said she too would have tea. They sat quietly in the huge kitchen, gathering thoughts and energies for the day. Andy found himself smiling. 'Family life!' he announced, and the other three, joined by their own histories, and now joined by him, understood at once what had caused him to say the words. 'I suppose it's humdrum enough,' Loretta said, 'but it's the basis of

everything else. Without it, you can hardly do a thing.' Rhyll, wanting to redirect their thoughts, made the comment, 'Even be a doctor.'

Dick said at once, 'He's wanted that for years. As far as I'm aware, he hasn't ever changed his mind. I don't even know what his second preference is, or later preferences. I've never heard him talking about them, I wouldn't be surprised if he picked them by sticking a pin in the list!' Loretta said, 'I've been thinking about that. First of all, I'm sure he'll get his first preference, but if he doesn't, I think his other preferences will all be the same as one of his friends. If you wanted to know who his really serious friends are, you'd get his list of courses, and you'd find out which of the people he knows have applied for those same courses, and then you'd be aware ...'

She stopped. Rhyll felt a need to help. 'Be aware of what, mother?'

Andy was waiting for the answer because he knew how the family he'd joined helped each other to understand things. It was new to him, and attractive, because more supportive than the ways of his own family. What would Loretta say?

Tim's mother, the older of the two women in the kitchen, ran her tongue thinly over her lip, then said nothing. Dick looked up. 'Darling?'

Loretta said, 'You'd be aware of what I'm not aware of, which is to say, what matters most to Tim. He's a quiet boy and he doesn't like people being demonstrative. He hates arguments. He thinks things should be worked out on the quiet, and then done out of sight, and early, so they're settled before people start to discuss them. He really thinks, and I've no idea where he got this from, because it's not a part of the way we operate as a family, he really thinks that good decisions are made in intense privacy, then revealed at a time and in a way so that nobody can do anything about what's been fixed already. He's been doing it for ages and I'm amazed to say – to have to say – that I've not yet known him to make a mistake. How can anybody be that good? They can't. But Tim seems to be able to do the trick. It's rather

wonderful, and I have to say that I don't know where he got it from, because ...'

She made a simple gesture which told them that he hadn't got this ability from anyone in the room, and they found this both insightful and amusing. Families! They were mysteries to themselves, and they were obvious. Andy broke in on the Harts by laughing. 'He's rather like my father, then. He loves to get everything sorted out in his mind before he tells anybody. And does it do any good? Well, as you know, he's running a dirt-poor farm on the edge of the Mallee, and he's as happy as a broken down old chook! He thinks his way of doing things works! Anybody could tell him they'd only have to point at all the things on the place that don't work ... that his ideas don't work, but he thinks they do. You'd think he was as rich as the Sultan of Brunei if you saw him fixing some old bit of machinery. Give him a bowl of soup and a slice of toast, and he's happy. And does he love mum? He can't do enough for her. Well, he's right about that, and he's wrong about everything else, but do you think he cares? Not in the slightest! I tell you what, you've only got to spend half a day with my dad to wonder if you've got your values right, because he has! He's as sure as the planets in orbit that what he's doing is right. And, you know, because he thinks so, because he believes so, he is. He's as right as it's possible to be!'

Dick and Loretta were happy. This was the man their daughter had married, and she'd picked well!

... and so does Tim ...

They left the Yarra valley happy, but were surprised when they got home to find Tim. He'd left home a day earlier than they had to go with a school friend's family to New South Wales. It was not the Harts' way to have children at home on their own, so what had happened? Tim told them that the Robertsons, the people he'd gone with, had indeed taken him to Deniliquin, but then Mr Robertson had become ill, and had been admitted to hospital when the family

returned to Stawell, so he'd told Mrs Robertson that if she would be good enough to take him to the railway station, he'd join his parents in the Yarra valley. However, when the train reached Ballarat, he found people he knew from school getting on; they were going to Melbourne to check out accommodation for the following year at a place in Carlton where others from their school had lived in varying degrees of squalor and comfort the previous year. Tim thought this sounded attractive, so he'd joined them. 'It was only three days,' he said, as if that excused everything. Dick was as troubled as he was annoyed. 'Please don't think I'm accusing you of anything, but if you'd rung us at Rhyll's and told us about the change of plan, I don't think we'd have been worried. It wasn't a bad idea to go looking at places in Carlton, it's just that we were contactable at Rhyll's, yet you didn't let us know. Put it this way. Things get out eventually, and you have to ask yourself – you should have asked yourself – how will this look when it gets into the open. As it will, for sure.'

Dick himself wasn't sure whether he was rebuking his son or appealing to him. The boy had made a decision for himself: was that good or bad? It was a bad decision, though, in Dick's mind because it was made to please himself, and not to bring him back to his family.

Family. It was a concept, indeed more, a way of life that was very dear, was central, for Dick and Loretta. Families held their members together. Families made their members strong and straight. Lucky people grew up in strong families, and they were lucky because strong families didn't allow many of life's temptations and alluring mistakes to come near their members. 'Members' was a key word; if you were part of a family, you belonged. Those who didn't belong to something strong and virtue-binding were vulnerable

... and Tim had been tempted to have a look at Carlton, and he'd gone. Dick knew he shouldn't make too much of the matter, because in a few more weeks Tim would be starting his university course, such temptations as Carlton possessed would be around him every

day and he'd have to manage, to control, his life for himself. Dick felt sure the boy would do it well enough, but ...

... he'd failed a test. He could've rung the family, told them about the change of plans, made arrangements to come up to the Yarra valley after he'd had a couple of days in Carlton: he could have ...

This and that! Dick knew he wasn't facing what his son had done. It was a matter of broken trust and that shattered Dick so deeply that he knew he wasn't being rational. Tim had scented freedom and it had smelt good. He wanted it more than he wanted reassurance. He needed, however briefly, to put his family aside. Behind him. He hadn't wanted to be with his parents, at Rhyll's. He wanted to be among the risks and temptations of a generation breaking free, getting themselves started ...

Dick went to Loretta. 'Have you spoken to Tim, yet, about his days in Melbourne?'

She shook her head. 'I was waiting for you.'

Dick told her about lecturing Tim, and the details, few enough, that Tim had given him about his days with the Ballarat boys – 'I presume they were all boys, I didn't really ask' – in the suburb around the university. Loretta listened. 'He didn't tell you much. Perhaps you didn't make him.' Dick listened glumly. He hadn't done much beyond making his son feel as wretched as he did. The truth was, he'd made family life into a holy state and his son had been tempted – an ugly word, in Dick's mind – to slip away from family into that pack-condition – that was how Dick saw it – in which people ran as the pack determined. The church, standing behind the family, was against the pack. The two ways of life were so antagonistic that Dick wondered how lost Tim had been. Then he hated himself for exaggerating, for turning Tim into the embodiment of things he might have done, instead of questioning him closely about what he had done in his days on the loose. His wife sat with him quietly. 'I don't think we should question him any further. I doubt if he's done anything very wrong. If he has, we'll become aware of it. Things

come out, or rather, things show themselves, if they're there. If your nature's changed, you can't hide that. It will out, you know. No, we'll proceed as before, getting Tim established at uni, and if anything's changed, we'll deal with it as it shows. That all right with you, Dick?'

It was. Dick yielded his right to worry to her intuitive way of setting things to rights. It had worked well enough in the past, it wouldn't fail this time. Besides, Dick had more faith in his wife than in any human institution, and even the church was at least half human, and only partially god's. Dick knew his limitations as an educator. He needed strong clear rules. He liked consistency. Loretta seemed to be able to make distinctions, true for her, between the most closely comparable cases of anything, it seemed. She had a genius for apparently treating people the same way but in fact treating them differently. Each, attended to by Loretta, felt their treatment was devised for them alone. As a mother she'd been the manager of her family and she would manage Tim now, on the eve of his adulthood, Dick felt sure. He'd lived with Loretta for so many years, he'd come to appreciate her skills and yet he couldn't replicate them. He knew, however, and simply, when they would move into practice, and what their effect would be, and yet he couldn't do the same things himself. Was that his blessing, his shortfall, or both? He hardly knew, he hardly cared. That was his answer, then. Loretta was his blessing, she covered his shortfalls, she made him more than he was in himself by making him her partner. That way, so long as he accepted her intuitive movements – and he did – he could be part of her. He knew his luck! She was more precious to him than he was to himself. Much as his three children needed him now, and had needed him in their years of growing up, they needed her more. She was more to them: she was more in herself. Dick knew he was a lucky man, and was reconciled to Tim's misdemeanour because Loretta saw it as no more than a slip, a stumble, and hadn't taken it to heart, as he had. By imagining a new way forward she'd given the family a way of stepping over a pit that had opened in front of them.

Goodness needed imagination to stop it being clumsy, as he, Dick believed, was clumsy all too often.

He stopped worrying about his son, and began to think of things he'd need, in Melbourne. Bank accounts. Laundries. Adults to talk to when he wasn't studying. Links with Royce and Rhyll, especially Rhyll because he could go and work with Andy for a day or two when he needed exercise and a relief from studying. Andy was a natural man and Tim would need that. Everybody needed a bit of earth to make their knowledge richer. Andy would give that, and Rhyll would spoil the boy as if she was his mother ...

He realised, Dick, with all this planning in his head, that he'd almost written himself out of the script. What was he to do for his son? Perhaps he'd done his job already, in being the example, the role model for the boy's growing up? He was, after all, still paying his fees. He'd determined to keep back and not interfere in his son's growing up any more. Perhaps he should turn his mind back to his last couple of years as principal, and add a few things to all he'd set up for the town already. Perhaps?

What had he set up? He'd made the town aware that the generation that would replace it was already within its ranks. He'd made the town respectful of its young, and vice-versa. He'd made the town aware of places elsewhere on earth, and again vice-versa, by student exchanges. He'd done this and that ...

... and he was losing his last child. The boy was off to the city to study medicine, and he'd learn things Dick had never dreamed of, he'd peer into people's bodies as they lay open on operating tables, he'd have the living details of hundreds of people on his computer and he'd make swift and ruthless decisions about what to do ...

... assuming that he passed everything in his course. What he was about to begin had an end and his father felt his knees go to water at the thought that his son mightn't succeed. Of course he'd succeed; it was what the Harts did!

Dick calmed down. How long to go? Until he and the boy's mother drove Tim to Ballarat and stood on the station, waiting for the train to take him away? A couple of days; these, Dick saw, would be agony, unless they managed to put out of their thinking the fact that they were doing everything, not for the last time, but for the last time before the change.

The change was on them and there was no avoiding it. Condemned men in their cells still had to live, minute by minute, through the hours that separated the present moment from the end. Dick knew he was being ridiculous when he filled the car with petrol two whole days before the trip to Ballarat. He found his mind playing over, re-running, the stretches of highway between Stawell and Ballarat, with its grandiose station. He got Mrs Wilson to check the times of trains going through to Melbourne so nobody at home would know about his calculations. What time would they have to leave to be at the station in time for each of the trains Tim might use? Which one would he use? Dick knew the boy would have decided, but didn't ask. Then he did ask, and put it clumsily, so that the family had to laugh at itself before they could settle on an agreement. Loretta, Dick was surprised to notice, was talking the times of trains passing through Stawell, not Ballarat. Did she mean that they'd farewell him locally, instead of at the provincial capital? She did. 'It's silly to go all that way when we don't have to,' she said. 'Besides, I think there are a couple of other locals going down on the same day to enrol, investigate their courses, and so on. That's right, isn't it Tim?'

Tim said his mother had it right. He could have added, 'as usual'. He was smart enough to know that if breaks have to be made then it's better they be made early. Dick knew he'd been outflanked, but was grateful. He wanted to cry, but managed to laugh when his wife said, 'Perhaps we should put you on the train and leave Tim in charge up here?' Dick shook his head. 'Don't do that. I depend on my habits!' Both his wife and his son knew that he was feeling the impending separation keenly, but simply had to go through the pain in order

to get it behind him. Tim asked, 'What were you like when you left home, dad?' Dick had to think hard. 'I think I was overjoyed to be getting away. It meant I was grown up at last!' Loretta smiled and Tim's face filled with a sourly humorous sparkle.

The day came. Tim's things were packed the night before. Bags and cases sat behind the door of his room until the moment of departure. Dick, sitting in the lounge, and reading his paper, heard luggage being moved into the passage. 'Ready, are we son?' Sounds came back affirming readiness. Loretta, looking smart but less than dressed for an occasion, came to the hallway and opened the door. 'Give him a hand with those things, father.' The things were taken to the car, and loaded. 'Off to the station then,' said Dick, knowing that the town would never be the same again. Loretta sat beside her husband, Tim in the back. They drove modestly through the streets, Dick terrified that he'd crash into somebody on this fateful occasion. They arrived. They unloaded. 'Eight minutes, according to my watch,' Dick said. 'Better get these things onto the platform.' They did this, building a neat heap of possessions on that part of the platform where they expected Tim's carriage to stop. Then the train came. We won't at this point try to uncover the souls of the three involved in this departure. Tim embraced his mother, then his father. He boarded the train and they stood on the platform. The train whistled, then moved away. The parents went back to their car, comforted by the fact that they couldn't comfort each other, but bore the separation alone, side by side. They sat in the car, Dick behind the wheel. 'Do you want to go for a drive, or straight home?' Loretta said to go for a drive. As they cruised through the town, Dick said, 'I'd love to think we've made this a better place, but I don't think I can claim that. It's just another country town.'

And that was what it looked like. They drove past the big rock on the edge of town which they'd discovered on the day they'd arrived, and it looked much the same. Old white paint had gone scummy, but there were new initials and scrawls on its surface. 'You'd love

to scrub that back to whatever it used to look like, wouldn't you?' Loretta said, evidence of her loss presenting itself, for Dick to answer, 'And if you did it'd stay like that for ten minutes and then some hoon would come along with a spray-can and start all over again.' Loretta took in the implications of what he was saying. The rock was a rubbish tip of the human mind. Every protest from the inner life of the town, every whinge, whine and complaint, every scowl, curse and grumble, every emotional equivalent of the body's burps and farts had been recorded on the surface of what was close to the town's most beautiful, mystically expressive, thing. No wonder the town could never get it properly clean for more than a few days; the rock had no more chance of being beautiful, day after day, than the minds of the townsfolk. 'We shouldn't have come here,' Dick said, and Loretta: 'Let's go home. I need a cup of tea.'

Had they thought about it, they'd have seen that a cup of tea, imbibed at a time of grief, of loss, was as lasting a statement of the people they lived among as the statement of the rock which they deplored. The town hall stood on its sloping hill, the records of the city's existence were cherished, held, securely enough, and complete or otherwise as they were. Each of the two people in the car creeping home to the principal's domicile yearned for a statement of achievement, of having done their job well, but the world wouldn't give it. They could have asked friends around but felt too lost, too emptied, to do it. They would have said they needed to be alone when that was the state they were in and wished they weren't. The train was half-way to Ballarat. Young people Tim knew would be boarding it there, would be heading for the city, the future, possibilities. To the parents, conscious of their ageing, of having expended themselves, possibilities were the last thing they could hope to possess. They'd done their job, they had to do it a little longer, they had a feeling of being spent.

It was rather like a doctor's statement of somebody's causes of death: hours ..., days ..., years ... They were in the period immediately after it had happened, but then again, it wasn't like death

because it wasn't death, it was the next stage of life they had to go through. Having little idea of how to manage this moment, they were relieved when there was a knock at the door, and Loretta could go to answer it. Father Joe. He'd heard their boy was off to the city today, he hadn't been sure, until he saw the car in the drive, whether or not they'd be at home, he thought they may have driven Timmy – Tim – to Ballarat, he knew their custom of taking him there ...

They welcomed the Father, they made a fresh pot of tea, they laughed at a his feeblest jokes. They were intensely grateful to be other than on their own. Dick saw all over again how important was his wife's understanding of the congregation to its priest. Joe was a most undocinaire man, full of tenderness, but had little idea of management, and who counted in creating, or stifling, the various ripples that ran through any group of people. His reliance on Loretta for wisdom of these sorts was visible. His gratitude was clear. He praised Tim for choosing a medical career: 'He'll be doin' a lot of good in this world before too long.' Dick described the sadness he and Loretta were going through now that their home was empty, at last, of children. 'We've got to start out, all over again, and it isn't as easy as it was when we were young.' Father Joe nodded. 'What you've got to understand,' he said, 'is that there are no beginnings and endings in the eyes of God. Life's one continuous stream. On earth, we grieve because somebody precious has died, but God doesn't see it that way. They're as present in God's heart as ever they were. It's the same with little ones growing up. To the parents, nothing's ever going to be the same again, but to God, nothing's changed at all. I know this isn't very comforting to you on the day you've seen him off on the train, but I think you'll find there'll be a change in the way you feel about it before too long.' Putting a professional complexion on it, he added, 'The first letter you get, or maybe a phone call tonight, to say he's arrived, and settled in, and you'll cheer up because you'll know you haven't lost him. He's simply gone on to the next stage of his life.'

It had always amused Dick that Father Joe's advice was so tentative, that is, he uttered the words he would like to have put to him if he'd been in the position of recipient. There was a social ritual in his advice, as if people had only to feel that they were doing what everybody else did and they would be all right because the world, however troubled, was never troubled for long before it thought of something to give it a lift – an election, a football result, some trivial little prize or reward that brought relief if you were shallow enough to believe in it – and Father Joe was just that! The priest worked, with extraordinary success, on the cliché that if those being comforted perceived that the comforters were in greater need of comfort than those receiving it, then they could put their own needs aside in favour of the one who was concentrating his efforts on them. It was a roundabout which made nonsense of comforters and comforted: it allowed people to laugh at themselves, and that was when, in Joe's idea of the vexatious world, it was easiest to be comfortable. Then he surprised them. 'Tell me something Timmy did today that you'll remember him by. There must have been some little something, something he said or did you'll never forget because you'll never want to forget. What was that thing he did, tell me, I'm curious and it's something you ought to share with each other.'

Dick, whose position normally made him the one who managed people through difficulties, was surprised at the Father's adroitness, but Loretta, he noticed, was as ready to deal with this suggestion as she was affected by it. 'For me,' Dick said, 'it was a moment when we were getting things from the house – the doorway, there – to the car. Tim stood in the doorway, nearly filling it because he's a big lad now, and it seemed to me that he had his home behind him and the world in front of him, and I thought then and I think now that that's how I'll remember him.'

Joe smiled, pleased, then moved his eyes to Loretta, who was expecting the signal. The priest, and Dick, heard Loretta say, 'I carried one of his bags, a very little one because I knew he didn't want

me to pick up anything heavy, and I put it at the back of the car, with all the rest, because he had the boot open and I knew, knowing my son after all these years, that he would be intending to put them in in a certain order. He'd know, all too clearly, how they'd be intended to fit, so if you messed up his arrangement he'd be displeased. I had no wish to displease my son on the day he went away, so I did things exactly as I knew would fit into his plans. He's a very fussy boy. He knows, always, how he wants things to happen, so if you want him to be happy you never interfere with what he thinks is the natural order of things. It's like Dick was saying. If you want to arrange things so they're in that natural order that means so much to Tim, you have to let him match everything he's doing to the order he creates around himself. I've learned, a thousand times over, that Tim loves things to be put in order for him, which means, every time, if you come to think of it, that you must let him make the final order for himself. That's the boy I brought into the world. My third of three, all unique.'

Dick had long known that his wife thought that about Tim, as she'd felt with the earlier two. Staring across the room, she was thinking of ways to add what he was going to do with what he'd done, and that meant that her judgement was even shrewder than the priest's, because his was constrained by the myriad, institutionalised voices of the church, prescribing, advising and all the rest of it, whereas Loretta, Tim's mother, could be utterly true to herself in searching out a pathway because she knew – as most mothers knew – that god's way was a woman's way; that men's ways, the dramatic ways, rarely applied, and most of the time people's minds, their thinking, were in that state of becoming which Tim was in at that moment. He'd have to achieve his way out but the man that achieved – graduated; of that, Loretta felt she could be sure – would face the endless processes of adjustment to make the achievements of yesterday the beneficial aspects of tomorrow, or even today. Demands crept up on one that little bit more quickly than readiness, but then, once you understood that, you didn't need to do much ducking and weaving. In that sense,

she was happy to accept the picture her husband had drawn, of Tim at the door, about to take his next step, as both temporary and final, because, after all, and if you thought about it, we were, all of us, forever, swinging between demand and readiness. If we made ourselves ready for demand, we were in a state of readiness; if we were faced, when unready, with a new demand, we were already on the way to being fixed, put right, and set for the action we needed. Becoming was the natural state of humans, we were always, both individually and as a society, on the edge of becoming, and all our mental awareness was needed to put us in position so that we could move, when needed, as needed. Readiness, Loretta believed, rested on poise, and poise on understanding. Understanding rested on poise, and poise on readiness to move ourselves into a suitable position, a suitable condition, for whatever needed to be done next. Dick, doing his best to follow his wife's thoughts at this sad but inevitable, unavoidable moment that held them for the moment – and Father Joe would say something else in a minute that they would regard as funny, so he'd relieve them of their pain and confusion before he left them to take comfort somewhere else among the people of his parish – a comfort needed most of all by himself, and received by him in handing out wherever it needed to be doled – Dick observed that almost nothing in her way of handling the situation was religious per se. It was because she was poised that she could so easily make space for her religion, give welcome to it. Readiness was all, truly. He hoped that her thinking on these things had affected the son they'd given the world that afternoon, and decided that if it hadn't then there was nothing that could be done now, and if it had – and he believed it had – then their son was in good shape to deal with the world. 'Off you go, son,' Dick said to his boy, already far distant, and knew that the crisis that had built in him momentarily was on the way to being over.