



# *Swinging Doors*

CHESTER EAGLE



# Swinging Doors

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*Who could love the nightingale?* (novel, 1974)

*Four faces, wobbly mirror* (novel, 1976)

*At the window* (novella, 1984)

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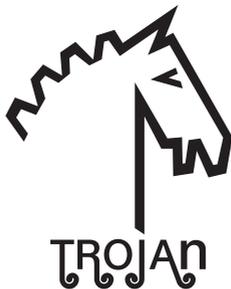
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# Swinging Doors

Chester Eagle



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*World Cities* (a reflection, 2012)

*An Airline Suite* (story, 1989/2013)

*An Opera Suite* (story, 1990/2013)

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## 1. A death and a second start

A stage of her life had ended. Carol was young enough to think there'd be more. Standing at the door of the Gysberts' flat, she thought she'd handled it rather well. What next? She could hear Didgie the cat, meowing to wake the Gysberts: faint hopes of that. The cat would climb on the sleepers, provoking them to lock her in another room, and they'd sleep till the following day.

Where would she be by then? She could foist herself on her late mother's sister Samantha for a few days till she worked out her next move. Samantha lived in Point Piper; Carol knew she ought to ring but decided to be bold. She'd get there by ferry and bus, and simply announce herself. She only had one case, it wasn't as if she was turning up with a trailer load ... Point Piper; Samantha's rooms overlooked the harbour. Not exactly down market!

She walked to the wharf, aware that her days of looking from the windows high above were a thing of the past. She might like to think that humans were unique but she was no more than one of the mob, now. Her husband, Martin, was one boat ahead of her; she hoped it would be years before they ran into each other because the superiority she'd felt as she dismissed him hadn't lasted. She had a feeling that dream, the subject of her thesis, would lie, at her next discovery of herself, in the area of commonality. No special claims to make. The ferry took her across the harbour, a tiny part of everything else. She hoped Samantha would be home because she didn't have much money. She'd been so busy getting rid of Martin that she hadn't thought of making a financial arrangement with him.

Too late now! There might be two hundred dollars in her wallet, and after that?

The future!

Samantha was sixty, a little older than her mother would have been. She was welcoming too, unexpectedly so. 'I've been feeling like

a little lie-down, but I need a few things at the shops. I didn't know which to do first. And then you came.'

She put out her hand to touch Carol's wrist, and in the moment that she did it her niece remembered that it was a gesture, a habit, she'd shared with her sister. Carol's mother had done the same thing as a way of indicating her dependence; it was the way she'd let go her life, years before, relinquishing, and at the same time handing on responsibility. Not a little surprised, Carol looked into her Aunt Samantha's eyes to see if she knew the effect she was having.

'Your mother used to touch me the same way,' she said. 'If she asked me something and she didn't touch me, I knew she didn't really want to hear my answer. And if she hung onto me when she touched me I knew it was urgent.' Carol felt she was standing before a drop, a fall, an emptiness, an asking. It was how she always felt when she thought of the mother she'd lost, and her aunt was affecting her the same way. 'I've been in Sydney a few weeks, not long, and I haven't been in touch. I need to tell you about it.' Samantha interrupted. 'You haven't brought your husband. That tells me something. Let's keep all that for a while. If I can impose ...'

They knew each other well enough to make the arrangement. Carol would take a list to the shops, Samantha would have the sleep she needed, and they'd talk, over tea, when the two of them were ready. It was simple, it was the sort of thing families could fix and it solved the problems each presented the other. 'It's a long way to the shops, as you probably know,' Samantha remarked. 'You can take the car if you feel up to it, or, goodness me, what about my bike? It's got two nice baskets mounted on it.' She looked embarrassed, even ashamed. 'I haven't ridden it in years!'

The car, Carol realised, would be new and dauntingly expensive, so it was the bike. Besides, it would be fun! A minute later, she was riding down New South Head Road, skirt fluttering, helmet high, a proud, because trusted, woman. The shops were much busier than she expected and it was ages before she let herself into Samantha's

apartment with the key she'd been given. All was quiet. She put the things she'd bought on the bench, knowing that her aunt would want to put them away herself, and she went to the window, seeing bridge and opera house from the east, this time, the ocean closer than it had been from the Gysberts' flat, the ferries a little further away. Sydney had a wonderful way of presenting itself, and if she stayed with her aunt, as she knew she could, she'd rapidly gain the feeling that she was part of the place, not an outsider: taking advantage of the outlook, as she was doing, would become a part of her, a habit. She listened. Any sign of Samantha stirring?

She smiled tenderly. Samantha had nursed her mother in the last weeks of her life, and carried the burden of her sister's child – Carol, who'd done little enough to repay the love that had been poured in her direction. Her mother's face crept into her mind, ravaged, as she declined, but appreciative of what was done for her. Samantha had been selfless, the perfection of self. I'm being tested now, Carol thought, and then a darkness, a suspicion, entered her mind. She went to Samantha's door, apprehension settling on her like a cloak.

Samantha was very still, on her side and turned away. Carol knew the whole of what had happened before any part of it could be identified. Her aunt had died while she, Carol, had been shopping. Samantha, who'd said she needed a short rest, had entered the longest of all. Carol strode to the bed, staring, and it seemed she saw her mother. This was something she was reading into her mother's sister's face; the two of them had never looked much alike. It occurred, stupidly, to her that it would be her, Carol, who would put away the shopping now, and she'd follow the habits of her aunt Samantha and her late sister, her own mother, as she did so. There was a job to be done and it was hers to do it. She got Samantha's phone book, and rang. Doctor Gershwin would be there in thirty minutes. 'Don't move her or change her in any way.' 'No, doctor, I won't even touch her.' Saying this made her aunt almost impossible not to touch. She was yearning to touch her, embrace her, pull her back to life ...

No wonder, Carol thought, people think of death as a visitor, entering a room, and leaving with that invisible soul that animates us. It's gone, Carol told herself, looking at her aunt: it was here, but it left shortly after I did. It was so strange. 'I represented her, riding away on her bike!' She wanted groceries, a little heap of household supplies, and I got them, but she slipped away, having sent me out so she could be alone. Was that how it had been done?

Family. Samantha had a brother Stephen, and he'd have to be told. Before or after the doctor?

Same time. Another phone call, the briefest explanation. Stephen said he'd be around the moment he could get away. He ran a legal business, there were people there to look after things; he wouldn't be long. It occurred to Carol that Stephen's office would hold Samantha's will, and that it would have to be executed. Well, at least he'd know what to do ...

She accused herself of indifference. This wouldn't do. She drew up a chair and sat where she could see Samantha's body, the face expressing nothing but absence. It was already starting to resemble humanity rather than belong to it. The living connections were in Carol's mind, linking her aunt to her mother, and to their brother, who was yet to arrive. Stephen had a way of talking as if he was setting an example to other family members, a mobile judgement, giving nobody any chance of relaxing until he'd got what he wanted. It seemed typical, to Carol, that having thought this, her thoughts should be interrupted by a peremptory knock at the door. Uncle Stephen never aligned his actions with the thoughts and feelings of others, anything he did was an assertion ...

It was Doctor Gershwin. He shook hands with Carol, then went to the bedroom, surveying it from just inside the door, before moving to Samantha's body. Carol went back to the lounge. It occurred to her that she was having her first experience of a corpse, and the doctor was used to them. In the moments before he returned, there was another knock, even more peremptory. Stephen. 'Where is she?'

Carol explained that the doctor was inspecting her. Her uncle seemed pleased that he'd coincided with the medical man. 'It's better if I meet him. Make sure nothing's forgotten.' The two men met, addresses were exchanged, Stephen nominated a funeral parlour and the doctor called them to take the body away. Poor Samantha, Carol thought, all her arrangements being made for her. No longer in charge! The doctor left. He was no sooner gone than Stephen said he thought he should warn her; there were a couple of relatives and a charity or two that might want to contest Samantha's will, Carol was lucky it had been made under professional scrutiny ...

Lucky?

Yes, lucky, didn't she know?

He saw she had no idea. 'You, my dear Carol, are on the verge of owning this place. The situation it's got ...' he waved at the view '... makes it worth a couple of million. You can give it to me any time you like if you don't want it.' He chuckled. 'No, I'm not trying to get it off you. As her sister's daughter you were the closest to her, so that's why she wrote her will as she did.' He was amazed she didn't know. 'I used to tell her she couldn't keep a secret. I was wrong. She did!' Her silence seemed to stir him. 'I always tell people to take their time about making decisions. It's best to live in a place for a while before you even do so much as sell any sticks of furniture, any paintings you don't like. Things grow on you after a while, even things you'd always hated. There's also the matter of taste.' Hundreds of well-appointed homes flooded into his mind as he spoke. 'There's what I would call a *cultivated* taste, and there's what I call a natural, unthinking taste. I must say I prefer the latter. People create a wholeness in their home almost despite any ideas they have of good taste, or rarity value. Samantha was one of those, I think.' He nodded at the room they were standing in. 'I never told her how well she was furnishing this place because it would only have got in the way. She was better left to act on her instincts. It really is rather nice.'

'It's mostly French,' Carol said. 'That much I can see.'

Stephen was amused. ‘Provincial. Peasant stuff. Well ... petit bourgeois of a distinctly rural sort. That’s what she’d go for, all the time. And the dealers, knowing the sort of money she had, would try to push her onto a higher level, and occasionally she’d do it. That mirror beside her bed, priceless! A simple version of a very refined taste. Samantha couldn’t have told you that, but it’s what she went for and it’s why she went for it. Everything she bought supported everything else, and I doubt if she ever knew it. That’s why – forgive me lecturing, but I know what I’m talking about – that’s why you mustn’t sell off bits and pieces. You have to decide, and don’t do it quickly! – whether to live with what you got, holus-bolus, or sell the lot. And if you decide – *eventually* – to sell, then sell it as one lot. Don’t let anybody pick and choose, because if they’re cunning they’ll pick the eyes out of it and leave you with bits and pieces that aren’t worth very much at all!’

Something else came to his mind. ‘Where’s your husband?’

She got as far as saying, ‘He...’ and then she broke down in tears. He looked on her with surprisingly little concern. ‘I’ll make tea.’ This stirred a fresh burst of tears. ‘Samantha said we’d drink tea when I got back from shopping, and after she’d had a sleep. The sleep ...’

He broke in: ‘And you never had the tea! Well, we’ll have it now. I think I need it as much as you!’

It was a stilted conversation. Stephen found it hard not to talk down and Carol found it hard to listen, going, as she was, through a crisis of her own. She’d separated from her husband, she’d left the Gysberts flat, her recent accommodation, she’d moved to Samantha’s and her aunt had died before they’d even had time to talk. Now she was being told that she’d acquired an apartment in the richest part of town. She knew she had to find something central in her life to give it direction, and what it would be, or if she could ever find such a thing, she had no idea. She now had so much, in the terms of this world, and she had such a burden in terms of responsibility, that she couldn’t see how she

would cope. What would she do? Her uncle Stephen, with all those partners in his legal office, would be ever so useful once – or *if* – she found a path she wanted to walk, but he was so unaccommodating, when it came to working out what mattered, that she wanted to be on her own, destructive as she feared this would be. And she couldn't be on her own, or not yet, because undertakers had to come and accept the body on the former owner's bed: Stephen wouldn't leave till that had been done, and, even that having been achieved, she wouldn't be ready to be on her own. She wondered if she should go to some backpackers' place, near Central Station, perhaps, and let their chatter fill her mind until she had thoughts of her own. She said so to Stephen and to her amazement he agreed; 'You'd be very welcome to stay at our place but Jeanette's never been good with people younger than herself, and I think you'd find us something of a burden. But you must call in at the office tomorrow and I'll explain all the things we have to do, and once we make a start I think you'll find the pressure starting to ease. Or so I hope?'

A few minutes later, the pair of them watched as the undertakers removed Samantha's body, they chatted about nothing until the vehicle, presumably a hearse, had had time to move away, and then Stephen took his niece, first, home for dinner, and later to the place near Central Station that she suggested to him, promising firmly to call at his office the following day. 'Not too early. I know how busy you are, you'll have ever so many things you've got to do.'

## **2. Palmerston Crescent, Cairns**

A few weeks later, Carol headed north, a city or two at a time, until she felt comfortable about stopping. She got a taxi from the airport to the centre of town, looked in a couple of agents' windows, and saw a place she thought looked good. References? She offered her uncle's

law firm in Sydney and that impressed them. Three hours after getting off the plane she opened the door of her cottage, and yes, she had noticed the name of the street; it was such a nineteenth century name, imperial in a far-flung colony. Then she went back to the agent to ask about jobs. He was married, flirtatious and amused. He said there was a medical clinic two blocks up that was looking for someone, he didn't know what experience they wanted, but since her luck was in, why didn't she give them a try? The doctor who interviewed her, a man called Simon Washbrook, was similarly light-hearted. 'We'll give you a try. If you're going to get anywhere, you'll need qualifications but we'll think about that bridge when we see how you've crossed it.' He stumbled, only slightly embarrassed. 'If you see what I mean.'

Things were going her way. It couldn't last. Some realistic, hard-headed appraisal would come her way before long, but till then, she'd see how far she could go!

She'd never thought much about how people saw her. When she'd married, she'd gone overseas with Martin; they'd lived together in Australia for only a few weeks. It may have been too big a test to be forced into the closeness that travelling demands. She watched her husband cope with a world that wasn't his, and he saw her in the same light. Could they ever be natural? Was there such a thing when two people were shaping each other for their own purposes and each was resisting? There was another factor too, and Carol hardly knew how to think about it, and that was that as a woman she wasn't particularly devoted to pleasing her husband, she was more involved in finding links to that only sometimes visible undercurrent of the world's affairs which was the awareness of women. If you looked in the obvious places, it had been taken over by psychologists, every organised, articulate grouping that could get itself in front of microphones or cameras – and therefore wasn't to be trusted. If you moved away from these people, you were in the land of obedient silence ...

It had been a relief to get out of the plane, into a bath of sunshine and stupidity. Nobody treated you as a mind, but as a cliché: you

had only to appear conventional to be as free as you liked. And why? Because people didn't care what you were thinking so long as you said what they were saying. Carol found this disconcerting. She had complete freedom to be the same as everyone else. Something told her this was only another clichéd construction of something too subtle to be seen by an outsider, and the only means of making a way through the thicket was to live in the place long enough to discover its attributes: when you knew how your mind had been trapped you'd be able to look around for the freedoms you were going to need ...

And how long would that take? People needed their youth in order to get themselves started; you couldn't give it away to the shaping forces of public control because you'd never get it back. I need a goal, Carol told herself, a set of judgements to show me to myself, so I'll know when I need to escape. This disconcerted her too; was life only a journey, with an all-too-obvious end, or was it possible to settle somewhere, and live positively, thoughtfully, as well as usefully and happily? She knew what this meant. She was keeping herself back, restraining herself from the plunge, the commitment, that ordinary mortals made; in the Gysberts' flat she'd had everything both ways. She'd been able to step into the world, or withdraw. She could choose when to act and when to pull back. She longed to have that window again, but she'd put herself outside and had to make the best of it. What stopped a life from being a cliché? The only way out was to be fully alive in what you were doing, no matter how commonplace it might be. Palmerston Crescent! It was a smug place in a rather charming way, neat, lushly shaded, its inhabitants well dressed, moving about in excellent cars without importing obvious statements of privilege. It seemed to Carol as she looked about, in the first hour after getting home from the clinic, and while she was sipping something to soothe her docile yet seething mind, that the young and early-middle aged people she was living among were already old. In accepting the comforts of the place they'd given up the possibilities of development and change. How could this be? And was it happening to her?

She felt troubled. If you did nothing you were doing quite a lot. She was inclined, for experience she would have said, to see out a few months in her present job and then to use the rent from the apartment in Point Piper willed to her by Samantha, to fund her through a nursing degree. Her time as a PhD student in Melbourne and Paris had been an indulgence she wouldn't repeat; she was in the world now, not studying it. The world – she was on uneasy terms with it and this had to change. She hadn't even slept a night in the apartment she now owned, and rented out to people she'd never met. Her contacts with the place were an agent and a bank account. I'll live there one day, she told herself, but only when I deserve it, and have reached the point where I don't think about myself when I say it's mine ...

How long would that be? How long would she have to live, and what would she need to undergo, before the elevated detachment, the security and refinements of her inheritance were truly hers? She groaned. Martin, her husband, had gone, only to be replaced by a problem that was bigger because endless, and universal, as Martin was not. He'd find her one of these days and ask her to get back together, and she knew she wouldn't, but she'd have a moment's temptation to seize the easy solution when what she ought to be able to do was to point him towards the solution to *his* problems which surely weren't hers.

Or were they? When things were equal and opposite they were close to being equal and the same. Was this nonsense? No, it wasn't, it was close to true but its truth lay on a plane unavailable to her, though she was aware of it; sipping her vermouth and dry, her home-from-work drink, she found herself seizing on a gathering set down for the following Saturday as something she could think about, even prepare for. The clinic people, and a few hospital people too, a medical clique, were having a late afternoon beach party; it was supposed to end early, for families to take their children home, but there would be younger people, with neither children nor partners, who'd turn it into something else. She wondered how easy it would be to get herself

involved in the first part of the evening then absent herself from the second. Simon Washbrook would know. She asked him over morning tea, between giving him the results of some pathology tests and setting up times for a new doctor being inducted into the clinic. Doing these things, he made her feel a certain stillness around himself, watching as she approached him. Thinking about it, at home, she enjoyed being wanted – desired – but wary. He was married, like the other doctors at his clinic, but Carol sensed, in the things the women in the office did and didn't say, that his wife existed on the other side of some line of estrangement that they didn't talk about. What was that? She wasn't going to make a fool of herself, or get into sticky situations with someone who kept his knowledge out of sight. She sensed that he was the sort of man who'd developed the skill of turning awkward situations to his advantage. Put him on a spot, embarrass him, and tears would run down those not so innocent cheeks, tears that would call on sympathy, followed by passion and then commitment, from her to him. What a trap! Yet, she saw, that was how he offered the honey of his form of flowering, you let yourself be sucked in, you gave yourself to him, and you felt passionately about it until you realised that you'd been spat out, used, and were both wretched and bedraggled while he was the same as he had always been, and ready for another lover ...

... while his bloody wife, whatever was wrong with her, suffered. Not for me, Carol told herself, but I want to know the way he's got things set up and how he managed to shape it that way. It would take time...

... and that's what I've got plenty of, she told herself. No rush for me around here!

So she went to the beach party, met the other women, and their children, those who had them, got deckchairs out of vehicles, beach balls, beach games, gathered driftwood for the barbecue the men were setting up, and all the other things that people do. Chatter goes on, but anyone can escape by finding something they say they have to do. Simon Washbrook had his daughter with him but his wife,

having dropped them at the beach, drove away. Nobody remarked on this so Carol took it to be normal. The doctor was attentive to his daughter in the way men often are when their marriage has a faulty base. A grievous mistake has been made, and the only way to bear it, to be reconciled, is to give the child what can't be given the wife. Carol murmured to one of the women, 'Mrs Washbrook didn't stay?' and was told, 'She doesn't have a very high opinion of us.' The feeling was clearly mutual and Carol, the newcomer, was being shown a way into the group. Something inside her jibbed. She was difficult too, she'd taken a stand with her own husband, about whom this group knew nothing, and she felt a flicker of interest in what had made Mrs Washbrook into the woman who drove away. So she watched, as she was being watched. Doctor Simon told his daughter to ask the lady in white if she'd like an orange juice, a beer, a brandy and dry, or white wine. When Carol told the girl she'd have orange juice, Simon called, 'Now you've met Diana!' and to his daughter, 'The lady in white is Carol!', somehow making both of them his. Party rules, Carol observed, seeing that hoops would have to be jumped through before anything would be settled, or unsettled, between herself and this man who, as much as anyone was, was her boss. He was the senior doctor of the clinic and the one whose status was otherwise least clear. His wife put him down among his colleagues and drove away? Diana the doctor's daughter told the lady in white she wanted to build a sand castle, so that took twenty minutes and joined her to the girl's father, though he kept out of the way. Carol remembered the way her late mother had never been at ease in company until she'd put them at ease herself, and cursed her woman's inheritance; to be at one with the group that had invited her she had to satisfy a role and if she played it too well she might play it foolishly indeed. She noticed that some of the doctors' wives had swimming costumes under their day clothes so they could transform themselves in the open, and carry their clothes back to their cars still dressed for the water they'd been in. She looked at the water.

It was open, adventurous, a blue to dream of. A headland crowded the horizon but, to the left of it, the ocean stretched forever. Islands dotted the coast, inside the reef, in it, beyond. Cruise vessels idled, going out, coming home. Yachts dotted the waters, their sails conversing with breezes. Time and the afternoon sun clung to each other in a relationship that had long been a habit and wouldn't be changing. Diana, all seven years of her, took Carol's hand and asked her to come to the water and watch her swim. 'I don't want to get my dress wet,' Carol told her. 'I'll come in as far as I can paddle.' She knew Simon was watching her ... she knew so much, she knew so little. She'd never had a child, she wondered if she would, when and with whom. Women who had children changed themselves. They made the world different in the areas they controlled, and, Carol knew, she wasn't privy to this magic, though there were women near her who were. They had children too. 'What's your mother's name?' Carol asked the child and Diana offered, 'Mathilde. She's French.'

Carol was startled. 'Your mother's French?'

The child pulled her lips, said 'Wee', and giggled. Carol giggled too for a moment, then a hearty burst of laughter broke out of her, people looked at her, children too, and Diana, a smile all over her face, said, 'What's funny?' Carol laughed again. 'Everything's funny! But it's funny peculiar that your mother's French because so am I, well, almost. The last place I spent any time was Paris. You know where that is?'

'I've been there,' the girl said. 'I know where Paris is.'

What else was the child to say? But how was Carol going to reply? The words had a strange effect. Carol remembered Paris so strongly that her surroundings diminished in their presence. The headland held nothing. The long coast of Queensland, so voluptuous to those who gave themselves to it, was no more than an absence of what mattered more – the contents of the educated, cultured mind. Paris was the world's centre, to those who had succumbed to it, as Carol

had, not so long before. Other cities, other places, were offshoots, inferior places that couldn't compete ...

'Have you been to Paris?' Diana asked, curious to know what the lady in white was thinking. 'It seems only the other day,' Carol murmured, hardly there to answer.

'Did you like it?'

'Did I like Paris?' They were standing in the water, wavelets rippling across their toes; Diana was waiting for a chance to show off her swimming, and the lady who was to be her audience had gone strange. She bent down, before she answered, and touched the water: why, the child she was speaking to had no idea. 'Cos I loved it,' Diana said. 'Mum took me everywhere, and so did dad, when he got there.' Carol said it again: 'Did I like Paris?', causing Diana to look at this unusual woman who couldn't give straight answers and seemed in some way to be only half-there.

'Do you wish you were there now?' the girl ventured, having a need to say something. Her father, catching an uncertainty in his daughter's voice, called, 'Where would Carol like to be?' The woman in white, the nurse at Simon's clinic, gathered herself, yet strangely, feeling some possibility vanish as she spoke about it, and said, 'Yes, I would like to be in Paris, but that's not possible now. I've had my chance. It served me well. I have to do something new, I have to find another place to do new things ...'

She still sounded vague, half of her where she stood, the rest in a place of dreams. Simon, wanting to soothe this unsettled mind, said, 'I hope you realise you're appreciated where you are.' A gesture of his hand reminded her and perhaps himself of the group they were with. She looked at them, the doctors, partners, children and friends, and saw how detached she was. She was curious about Mathilde, the girl's mother, but the rest of them, not at all. It had all happened in a moment, and in the very moment of realising that she'd be moving on before long she knew, also, that she'd been accepted and could stay with the clinic for years. They were ready for her to be one of them.

She had only to eat and drink with them, find a partner to add to them, and the wide waters would enclose her as they did the group she was with. She had only to give up the enchanting, puzzling world of possibilities presented by her mind and settle, that was the word, and how easy it was. How huge, how difficult, how impossible! Back in Sydney there was Samantha's apartment, getting transferred to her name, and she'd be leasing it, she wouldn't be living there because she wasn't ready for it yet, she couldn't embrace it and use it with all her soul, she'd gone journeying instead and no – she looked at the party, the girl who wanted to show her swimming, the father who'd attracted her, the horizon which was as much as the ocean could show her of itself and she knew she wasn't ready to be here either. She hadn't made the gift of herself that one needed, one day, somewhere, to make, in order to go on. The right soil had to be found before one could grow, and flower.

The moment she was in was not the moment for this to happen. 'Diana,' she said, 'show me how you can swim!'

Over the next few days, she felt bottled up. Caged. Something had to happen. She noticed that the new doctor at the clinic depended on her to show him where things were kept, their systems of filing and recording. He had a wife and two children, the other women told her, but they were still in the south and they'd move when the school term ended. Terry Duke was the doctor's name and he wanted to know how Carol had found herself a place to live; he was in the market for a house, he told her, and asked if she would recommend the area where she was living. 'That depends on whether you want your house to place you,' she said, 'or do you use it to withdraw?' He thought this an unusual way of looking at the matter. 'Marcia and the kids,' he told her, 'have an open house policy. Open doors, open windows, open lives, if it comes to that. They have no shame and no embarrassment about being on display!' She sensed that he was telling her that he was different and hoped she would be too. Or was there more to it than that?

There was. He came around at nine o'clock one night saying that he wanted to look at houses in the area but neither was in any doubt that it was a sexual visit. They sat on a sofa for a couple of minutes before she said to him, 'Let's get started', and they went to bed. Their lovemaking was intense but impersonal. He said to her when they were lying back, looking at the ceiling, 'I knew you had that in you. I didn't know if you had anyone else on the receiving end.' Carol murmured, 'Not for ages.' He asked, more or less for something to say, 'When you separated from your husband, was it easy? Or were there bonds to break?'

That made her think. 'I don't think the bond had properly formed. I think we both thought that getting married was what you did. We were married in law and in appearance but what we had between us wasn't anything like what a true marriage should be.' This made him groan. 'I'm caught. It's not that there's anything wrong with Marcia, I'm actually very fond of her, but when she had the kids that was where her mind went. She followed them and I don't think she even knew it was happening. She changed without knowing she was changing. When she gets here she'll march into whatever we buy and treat it like it's been hers since day one.' His hands moved in a gesture of helplessness. 'Whenever that was!'

Carol laughed. 'There never was a day one. There's only ever been now.'

'What do you mean?'

She thought. 'I don't know what I mean. It probably sounds silly, but we are our own meanings. Meaning isn't normally outside oneself, it's inside, that's why it's so hard to find.'

He was even more puzzled. 'We'll only get a few weeks, then the family will arrive. I might as well tell you now, I'll sneak away shamefully. Don't expect to respect me. I'll be a gutless coward. I won't put up any sort of fight. So if I'm going to understand you, it's got to be now, in the time we've got!'

He said it dramatically, but she wasn't impressed. Carol said, 'If

we don't try to make a meaning, there won't be a meaning. If people don't bond, they can separate quite easily. Meanings come out of the mirrors. The mirrors are the people around us, mostly the ones that know. If nobody knows, we can control the meaning of what we're doing, and going to do.' He half-understood this. 'We'll keep it quiet then. Lock'em out. Is it okay for me to come here? Will anybody know what's going on if this is where we meet?' She shook her head. 'Not that I can think of. This should be all right.'

They were lovers for six weeks. They knew they were lucky to be able to explore themselves with someone they didn't care about. Their unconcern for each other made them honest. They were male and female without personal need. Carol told Derek that when his wife arrived he'd find he'd gained strength because he'd gained knowledge of what he was like without her.

'And you?'

'I'll be less of a mystery to myself.'

A thought occurred to him. 'That sounds good to me. Women have it worse than men. Women are mysterious to men ...'

'Sometimes that gives us an advantage, sometimes it drives me mad.'

'Careful! Mad's a word you don't want to be labelled with!'

'It's only harmful if you believe it about yourself. If you know people are wrong when they say you're mad, it's you that's gained the advantage, because their mind's in error.'

'A funny idea – *being in error*.' He sat up and looked at her. 'It's really peculiar. I've never met anyone like you, much less been in bed with them. What is it? You seem to think about yourself all the time. I don't mean you're selfish ... I don't know what I mean. You're strange. You've got something nobody else has got.' He lay back again. 'I wish this was happening on a screen. If we were in an old movie I'd pull out a packet of cigarettes and start puffing, and you'd have long black hair ... Why don't you, by the way?'

She laughed. 'It's getting quite long again. When I got angry

with Martin – my husband; this was in Paris – I cut off all my hair. I needed to express my rage, and that’s what I did.’

‘Directed at yourself.’

She corrected him. ‘Inflicted on myself, yes. But directed at him, really.’ She paused, examining herself. ‘No, directed at the world. None of us can be much better than the people we’re surrounded by, even if we try. We’re simply the same as the people we’re with.’

He thought about the women he knew ... as much as he knew anything. ‘You stand out from the others you work with. You’re different.’

‘Then I’m in the wrong place. I shouldn’t stand out, if I do. It’s not decent to be different. It’s time I moved on.’

This relieved him, because his family would be with him soon and he didn’t want Marcia working out what had happened while he’d been on his own ... or *not* on his own ... ‘Where will you go?’

She hardly knew, and didn’t see why he should be told: he’d be getting what he wanted if she moved away.

‘Further. And what direction, I couldn’t say. Let’s just say there’ll be distance between us. You’ll be safe.’

Safe? She’d surprised him again. He’d never been in anything he couldn’t get out of with a bit of smoothing over, or pleading, a few minor but useful lies ... What was it about her?

‘What is it about you?’

‘You tell me.’

That stopped him. He’d met more than his match. He didn’t want to be disrespectful, he felt he ought to try. ‘You seem to want to take responsibility for the whole world. I can feel it at work. Where I used to work, I didn’t feel responsible for what I did, so long as I didn’t make any stupid mistakes. But here, even though you’re the junior person at the clinic, you make everyone feel you’re watching them, and holding them responsible. How can you be like that when you’re not even a doctor ...?’

‘I am, actually. Of philosophy, in case you haven’t noticed.’

‘What?’ Then he half-saw what she meant. ‘Oh.’

‘Yes, oh! It does mean something, you know, or it ought to.’ He had no idea of where this was all going, so it made him natural. He said, ‘You’re equal to us, but in a different way.’ This seemed to satisfy him, and he lay back again, flat on the bed beside her. It amused her, and even made her tender. ‘You’re right. I’ve chosen a silly position. I want the whole world to be right, and that’s impossible.’

He felt sure of himself again. ‘We can’t control much, you know. Most of the time, we’re just doing our best to make things sensible when we’re surrounded by a whole big bunch of nuts!’ This amused him, he felt sure it was not only true, but adequate, and twenty minutes later he’d gone ... not home, he didn’t have a home, but to wherever he was staying.

### **3. The land of the Captain**

Carol had written her resignation but hadn’t told anyone about it, not even Terry, when, one sunny morning a young woman came into the clinic. Carol was going to make an appointment, if that was what the arrival wanted, but something restrained her. The two of them looked at each other, the newcomer rather nervous. ‘I’ve just arrived,’ she said, ‘and I was wondering...’ She was looking for a job. She was qualified as a nurse and could have gone to the hospital but felt that the clinic might be a good springboard for getting to know the city. ‘There isn’t a vacancy at the moment,’ Carol told her, ‘but if you drop in at my place tonight, I might have something to suggest. I’ll give you my address.’

They clicked at once. Andrea took a shine to Carol, and vice versa. ‘Why are you leaving?’

‘I’m having an affair with one of the doctors and I didn’t come up here for that, so I’m going somewhere else.’

‘Where?’

‘Don’t know yet.’

‘Where did you come from?’

‘Melbourne, originally, and I’m not going back. Not for a while anyway.’

Andrea cast her mind over the world, little as she knew it. ‘You’ll find somewhere. Tell me about the doctor.’

Carol laughed. ‘He’s all right, I suppose. He doesn’t sulk and he doesn’t even think he’s very important.’

Andrea: ‘He’s scoring well so far. What’s making you move?’

Simple questions can make us face ourselves. She took a sip of her wine and looked at her questioner. ‘I can’t settle anywhere unless I’m at peace with myself.’

‘This place looks pretty peaceful.’ Andrea laughed. ‘Even if it’s full of tourists! So peaceful it looks like it’s forgotten how to wake up!’

‘So why do you want to be here?’

‘I want to get away from a few things. Family things,’ she added. ‘They’re the hardest to fix.’ Somewhat vaguely she went on. ‘If I put myself up here for a year or two, they can’t get at me. I’ll listen if it suits me, answer if I want to. Otherwise I’ll just close down. They can’t pressure me. It might be a bit dull but it looks good to me.’

Carol thought. She had a lot in common with Andrea but she was going in another direction. Why was she moving? She said, ‘I want to live on my terms. I’m not exactly at war with the world but I’m not at peace with it either.’

‘What are you looking for? Nice big home with a nice big family? Wardrobe full of clothes and a garage full of cars?’

Carol laughed. ‘Spare me! It’s not really things I’m after, it’s a state of mind, I think.’

Andrea looked shrewdly at her. ‘That’s going to be hard, then.’ The two of them went quiet, and then, separately but in unison, they repeated the words, ‘A state of mind.’ Andrea added, ‘That could mean anything ...’

‘It could, and it does!’ Carol could tell she was going to get heated if she didn’t watch out. ‘Let me tell you how I came to be here and why I’m not going to stay! I separated from my husband. I said goodbye and I watched him go away. On Sydney Harbour, on a ferry. I saw him leave my life. Problem solved, you might say. A new life was going to start. But it didn’t. I was standing there feeling ever so decisive, and you know what, the world around me wasn’t any different. No change that I could see. Who else cared but me?’

Andrea laughed. ‘Social Change 101! You change everything but guess what? Nothing’s changed at all!’ She was almost rollicking and Carol felt Andrea would never be any different from the laughing, somehow wiser for being able to laugh, young woman that she was. Carol asked herself what she could say, and there was nothing.

‘Let’s change the subject. I’m resigning. You can have the job. I’ll talk to Simon, if he thinks you can do my job, and that’s what I’ll tell him, you’ll be in ...’

Andrea was ready, having had a feeling the evening might have been headed for this point. ‘... like Flynn?’ They both roared, ashamed of themselves, but happy. ‘And before I leave, we’re making a trip together. We’ll go to Cooktown. I haven’t seen it and I don’t suppose you have, and from what I hear, I shouldn’t leave this part of the world without ...’

Andrea broke in. ‘We’ll talk all the way and we’ll shut up. And then we’ll talk some more! Sounds great to me!’

They hired a car. Driving north, they passed an enormous statue facing south, of a man in white trousers, middling blue jacket, and tricorne hat. Andrea yelled, ‘What’s he doing there?’ Carol, who’d been waiting, laughed. ‘He’s saluting you!’ The Captain had his right arm extended horizontally, like Jesus on Saint Peter’s, or Hitler facing stormtroopers, ready to rant. Andrea looked at her driver. ‘They really do think we’re ready to listen, don’t they! They really ...’ She couldn’t go on. ‘What can we say?’

Carol: 'The place we're going to's named after him.'

Andrea: 'I don't really mind that, he did discover it after all. But ...' She pointed a finger over her shoulder. 'But ...' She might have been disgusted but she was forced to laugh. 'Who put that monstrosity there?'

'The story goes that someone in the Council made a mistake. He didn't see that it was going to be ten metres high, he thought it said ten feet, so he passed it.' Andrea swung around to get a final look. 'This trip's not going to recover. You want to go somewhere else?' Carol shook her head. 'It's the trip we're on. So long as we're laughing it's all right.'

They passed the airport, they curved through roundabouts, they climbed through rain forest, through tablelands, Mareeba, they passed a lake with waterbirds in droves. Flocks. The sun poured down. There was only an occasional car on the road, the clouds, though high, seemed to be enjoying their company. Andrea looked at her friend. 'You really enjoy driving, don't you.'

'I do. I suppose it's only control, being in charge, but I like to think it's also openness.' 'You can't get much more open than this!'

They drove for ages, they stopped at a roadside pub. They sipped a lemon squash while their fish was cooking. On the verandah where they were sitting there was a Brisbane paper, two days old. Andrea pushed it away. 'What's this place called?'

'No idea!'

Andrea felt a wince crossing her face; it was what she felt herself but hadn't been willing to say. Carol took it up to her. 'Nobody up here cares what they print. Why should they?'

Andrea searched her thoughts. 'It ought to matter what people say, what they think.'

'Up here it doesn't. That's why I'm getting out.'

'You won't find another Paris in this country.'

It was true; Carol nodded, giving nothing away, then she headed off in another direction. 'We haven't built very much in this country,

have we.' She indicated the empty road passing the pub where they sat.

Andrea: 'That's why I'm here, I think. I don't like other people's meanings clambering all over me.' Carol thought. 'I rather like it. It gives me something to fight.'

'Is that what you need?'

It was, and they knew it. Having it in the open calmed them down. After they resumed their journey they were very relaxed. They stopped at times to look at the trees, the grass beside the road, the occasional lake or pond. 'It's not empty,' Carol said, 'but it feels like it is. When we were in Europe, my husband Martin used to say to me, we don't have a history the way these people do. In Australia, it's just not there. And I'd say to him, it is, but we don't understand it, because we don't connect with the way the black people lived. It was an easy thing to say, in France. A bit cheap, really.'

They were standing at the front of their car, nobody in sight, unsure whether they were halfway from one town to the next or not, not caring, really. It felt good to be together, still curious about each other. Andrea said, 'So is it empty or not? If it's not, what's it full of?' Carol laughed.

'Air, light, space. How's that for a trinity?'

'Holy?'

'Why not?'

They got back in the car. The road crossed a saddle in a range and showed them a valley stretching north. 'I'm glad that fascist bastard's behind us!'

'The captain?'

'Him!'

The captain was a joke they shared by now. So, in a way, was everything that had happened since he'd found the country they were traversing, courtesy of a road that traced the line they wanted to travel. 'Are you going to marry again?'

'I suppose I will. But I'm in no hurry.'

Cars rolling down a highway are good for conversation. Silences

aren't noticed, it's easier to talk to the air in front than it is when looking in another's eyes. Conversation is not so much an interaction as a shared meditation. Carol and Andrea spoke freely. Andrea said, 'I haven't met anyone yet I want to marry, but my parents were good together. *Are* good together, so I suppose I will.'

'Up here? In the north?'

'Maybe. I wouldn't hold that against a man, if I liked him.'

'It's the biggest *if* there is, isn't it.'

A mile turned into one point six kilometres. A sign invited them to fill up with petrol at a roadhouse further on. 'I suppose you have to pay to put up a sign like that.'

'God knows why they bother. If you're running a roadhouse, it's the road that brings you business, not a silly sign.' Andrea swung around again, but the sign had gone out of sight. 'Do you think your husband thinks you failed him?'

'No. It's what he'd say if he was with the blokes, but he knows better than that. I didn't load any heavy stuff on him. He got a clean start.'

'What about you? Did you get a fresh start, or...'

'... was it impossible? Mmm. Let me think.' They stared at the road ahead. Birds did this and that. Grass grew and trees treed. Carol's mind found something to grip. 'Martin left me with a few bad memories but they went away. I'm clean on that front, I think. But if I ask myself, can I do anything in the whole wide world now, or am I blocked, then I have to say I'm blocked in all sorts of ways that I hardly understand ...'

'And the barriers, the blockages, are inside yourself. You!' Andrea looked at Carol, driving, who touched herself near the top button of her dress. 'Inside me. Here.'

'That's the problem, isn't it. Always is. We can blame someone else, but once the problem's taken up residence ...'

This was what Carol had been waiting to hear another woman say. 'When I left Martin and moved up to Sydney I knew pretty early

on that I was taking the problem with me. Inside me, right inside my guts ...’

‘Kids? Going to have any?’

She had to deal with it. ‘I suppose. Right now, I’d feel I’d been subverted, or got around in some tricky way, but eventually, one of these days ...’

Andrea broke in again. ‘That’s what I feel too. It’s got to be done. But it’s got to be good. I’m not having kids unless I feel, when I’ve had them, that I’ve come out on top. This is the right thing to do and anybody who hasn’t done it will have to envy me because I’m the top ...’ She couldn’t find the word, even *a* word. ‘What do I want to say, Carol? What sort of man do I mean?’

‘Jockey?’

They laughed. ‘Who knows?’ This triggered something in Andrea. ‘Who knows what? Look at what we’re doing, Carol. We’re driving to Cooktown, we’re getting there okay. Even though we don’t know the road, we can’t get lost. If we took a wrong turn we’d know straight away. So it’s easy – but it’s not. There might be someone staying at the place where we’re going to stay who’ll change our lives ...’

‘We’re staying with the Captain, actually.’

‘What?’

‘It’s called The Captain’s Motel. They quoted a good price. Good meals, I heard.’

Andrea wanted to laugh but felt suspicious of the way events were moving. ‘So we didn’t leave him behind after all.’

‘We did, but he’s popping up in front of us.’

Andrea looked ahead as if to reassure herself. ‘If he was bloody here I’d tell you to drive into his legs. Knock the bastard over!’

‘We’d have him on top of us!’ They were laughing but something had got out of their control. ‘Who put him where he is? On the highway?’

Carol: ‘Someone told me there used to be a motel there, and they knocked it down, but they left the statue. Someone must have wanted

it for some reason.' Andrea, without knowing why she was steamed up, said, 'And he haunts the place!' The car moved on, birds flew across the road, trees came and went, signs, posts, someone passed them going the other way. They were silent. Carol: 'We're going to a place named after him.' The fact was bald; what could they make of it?

Andrea: 'Let's hope he serves up a bloody good dinner!'

He did. He was a Frenchman called Antoine, with an Australian wife, Rose. He'd been down to the jetty that morning when the fishermen got back, and he had some coral trout. This made him enthusiastic. 'I cook one for you. Big one. You share. There is no better fish!' He was a good, if showy, chef. He'd roasted vegetables separately, then placed them to hold the fish upright. 'Swimming!' he said, as he planted it on their table, while Rose smiled a blessing from her side of the room. As cutting slices from the fish became less frequent, Rose came over and they asked her to join them. Her guests wanted to know all about her. Where had she met Antoine. What was he like? Did he want to take her back to France? Did he want to be in Cooktown or was she making him stay there? Rose smiled at their barrage. They sensed that she merely smiled when Antoine got difficult. That in some way she ruled him by not answering anything she didn't want to answer. Carol told her that her separation from her husband had started in Paris: she described the place where they'd been staying. 'I woke up in the middle of the night. There were people in the street below, singing. I wanted music to pour out of me the way it was for them, and of course it never happened and the way things were with Martin, it never would.'

Rose asked her, 'If you're separated, is it any better now?'

'That's a good question. Not really. It's much easier to bear because I'm not reminded of the problem all the time, like I used to be. I haven't got what I wanted yet, but I've got hopes, now, that I didn't have before.'

'What is it you're hoping for?'

Carol drew a big breath. She knew Andrea was listening hard. ‘There’s a famous saying, that all the arts aspire to the condition of music. Well, so do I.’ The other two were waiting. ‘I want my normal everyday existence to be like a song, pouring out of me as if it could never stop. When I do stop, I want to start again, going straight on from where I left off. In endless melody, that’s where I want to be!’ They were still attending closely and she didn’t know if she’d shown them how stupid she was, or done something triumphant by making such a claim. ‘I know it’s impossible,’ she blurted out, ‘but it’s what I want!’ Rose took her by the arm and Andrea said fiercely, ‘That’s marvellous. You’ve said it for all of us, Carol!’

#### **4. The Haven, Albany**

It was a very beautiful place, welcoming ships and giving them shelter, sheltering too those farming families who’d bought a home near the coast for their last years. Some of them needed to be looked after, hence ‘The Haven’, a sprawling place with well kept gardens overlooking the inner waters of Albany’s bay. Carol was driven to the coastal town by Natasha, a friend from uni days she’d run into on a visit to Perth. They spent a week in Albany, Carol telling her friend that she felt a dimension opening in her that she hadn’t known about, and she wanted to stay. She half-admitted that she’d grown afraid of her own intellectualism and wanted to be somewhere where people judged you in other ways: your usefulness, the breadth of your humanity. Someone told her that The Haven was looking for nurses so she went there, the inmates loved her, the well-inclined but largely undisciplined staff sensed her way of setting standards from her own behaviour rather than by assertion, and when the matron resigned, a couple of months after Carol’s arrival, the The Haven’s community was pleased when a notice appeared on their board, signed by Igor

Dubcek, owner and chairman of its committee of governance, appointing the young woman they scarcely knew to be the next matron.

This meant assuming control of more than the retirement home's people and facilities; Matron was expected, also, to give a lead in the reputation of the place in the way she furnished and decorated her quarters, which overlooked the gardens and the bay and which had become, under Matron Einfeld, something of a style-setter for a town filled with people who'd had to make do in the settlements where they'd come from and now, in their later years and with a little money in hand, were looking for leadership in the purchase or even creation of good taste. Carol found this amusing, but once it became known that she'd lived for a time, greatly extended by local gossip, in the city of Paris, she realised that a good deal was expected of her beyond keeping The Haven's inmates content!

Igor Dubcek, her nominal boss, was rarely around, spending most of his time in Perth or overseas attending to business interests about which Albany knew nothing, so that if Carol wanted to be apprised of why The Haven did things in certain ways, or dealt with these suppliers rather than those, she turned to the most available of the committee, the unexpected figure of Detective-Sergeant Miller, generally known as Alby. Carol, for all her efficiency and willingness to work at every detail of her position, was not quite worldly enough to be suspicious of a policeman who liked to be known by his first name, nor, for that matter, why a policeman should be so involved with what was surely one of his district's most peaceable activities. Alby's knowledge of the town and surrounding districts was useful to Carol as she grew into her job; a matron, she saw, might rule autocratically but could do so with much less stress if she was aware of the backgrounds of the people she dealt with. Alby was full of hints, warnings and discreet re-tellings of stories about long-standing difficulties between families or rivalrous members of the same family. He wanted her to succeed, Carol could see, and it puzzled her, though

it was as welcome as it was useful. He was twice her age and he knew nothing of the things that interested her; why was she of interest to him? For that matter, why was he on The Haven's committee? Didn't his job as the town's senior policeman keep him busy enough? He had a ready answer to this. The best way to keep the peace of a town, he liked to say, was to make sure that trouble didn't arise. That meant keeping an eye on the blackfellas, and the disaffected whitefellas who could make all sorts of trouble when they got drunk; there was also the business of promoting harmonious relationships between the long-established families of the area. If they were made to feel they were respected, honoured, for their part in building the town and felt pride in what they saw going on around them they could be a force for the harmony of the place he was appointed to look after.

Or so he said, and it made sense to Carol, who was, she knew, something of a fish out of water in running The Haven. Matron, when she wasn't even a mother! How could anyone who wasn't anything to do with the town's history look after its elderlies? 'That's your advantage,' Alby would say. 'They haven't got any old scores against you, they see you as likely to be fair, and so long as they don't see you taking sides on anything that divides them, they'll welcome you because, actually, they want to be ruled, or maybe it's over-ruled, by an outsider.' It struck Carol that the same could be said of him, chief of the local police. 'Exactly! So long as they think I'm not ganging up on anybody, they're happy to let me run the show!' He beamed when he said things like this to Carol, but his effect on her was still uncertain because there were things about him she couldn't put together. He was married, yet his wife lived in Perth. He had a son, presumably in Perth also, but never spoke about him. There was also something she couldn't put a finger on in his connection with Igor Dubcek, owner of The Haven and therefore Carol's boss. Alby spoke of the absentee owner with loyalty most of the time, admiration frequently enough, but allowed a note of scorn to creep into his voice at times: Carol sensed a psychological dominance of Igor over the

policeman which puzzled her. It shouldn't be there. It didn't belong in the casual atmosphere most of the townspeople cultivated, at least for the benefit of outsiders, but something told her not to ask, because if people sensed that she was aware of something they preferred to keep hidden then exclusion would be the centrepiece of the way they'd treat her, and that, for a woman on her own, would make her situation impossible. This meant that the need for conformity, which she'd sensed in Cairns, and rejected, had settled as a permanent cloud.

Far more pressing, though, was her work at The Haven, where the inmates' imaginations, limited as they might be, ran riot at times. There was jealousy over rooms, charges of favouritism hurled against the most even-handed, with scatter-brained people who left things lying around their rooms in disarray complaining about the theft of something they'd mislaid five minutes before ... Carol's sense of humour was her salvation. The person making the complaint needed to be put to work. 'Janice!' Carol would call one of her staff: 'Mrs Welsford is missing an important letter. She thinks it was stolen.' She suspects ...' and would go through the motions of whispering in the ear of Janice, who understood that she was to appear surprised. 'Go and check what that person's been up to.' Post the disappearance of Janice, Carol would say to Mrs Welsford, 'She may not have taken it at all. She may have hidden it in your room. Let's do a little search.' Carol would begin the search with the aggrieved party, then move back to let it continue. 'I'll be just down the passage in my office. The moment you find something, let me know!' The missing envelope would turn up within a few minutes and Carol, with an elaborate closing and reopening of her office door, would welcome Mrs Welsford back to the appearance of normality. Occasionally, in letters to Andrea, back in Cairns, Carol would say, 'How strange it is to deal with their frailties as if they're functional people when they're not! We need to achieve things before this curtain of confusion descends on us. For some reason, my PhD isn't enough. There's something more I've got to achieve, I don't know what it is, and I don't know

where I'll have to go before I enter this next stage. Meanwhile ... it's a beautiful area, people take me around, I guess I'll stay a bit longer.'

As time passed, Carol noticed two things happening – an ever-increasing isolation from those around her, and a developing appreciation of the character of the place where she'd chosen to live. Could the two be merged or did they indicate a separation happening inside herself?

There was nobody to ask. Her situation was problematical and made more so because the person she relied on most, Alby, was somehow more than he seemed to be, and less. He was popular and, Carol sensed, he protected her. If he took her anywhere, as he liked to do, he normally took other people as well; he was getting to know her, Carol saw, without giving the appearance of courting. He told her about people she needed to be careful of, places that were worth a visit. If she told him about a successful drive she'd made, he'd say, 'If you liked that, I must take you ...' and would name a coastal feature, or a property where they'd be welcome. He asked her very little about The Haven's workings, but listened if she raised a problem. Carol had a feeling that he was protecting something, hiding it from her view, perhaps, was, in some way, supervising her performance, or guiding it, so she couldn't fail. This last feature of his attentions was deeply pleasing to a lonely young woman. He'd added age, and authority, to her matron-ship, people offering her respect because of her association with him. On a personal level, he was balanced and attentive, of much better humour than most men, listened to anything she had to say, and frequently told her, if she brought up any problems with her work, to let things drift and see if they didn't have some aspect, some feature, that she hadn't thought of before.

She did everything he suggested but began also to find her way into the files and accounts of The Haven, and to listen attentively but also secretly, to anything she could overhear about its staff, ordinary local people, most of them. Its procedures and systems of accounting

had been laid down years before by Igor Dubcek, at the time of his acquisition, and had been scrupulously followed by Matron Einfeld, her predecessor. There were no irregularities, but certain areas of cost were allocated rather arbitrarily, and it seemed to Carol that Matron Einfeld had been following a system she didn't entirely understand. Why hadn't she changed things? Either she simply hadn't been troubled, or Igor Dubcek, the out-of-sight owner, had insisted on the system he'd created. If so, why? Sitting among the books when she didn't expect to be interrupted, a feeling came over her that she'd never experienced before, that there was something that she wasn't supposed to know, that The Haven, an expensively well-maintained home for the elderly, was a front for something else.

What was that?

She sat, considering herself. Through her mind ran some of the insights of her PhD work – Dream, Traum, Rêve, an area where, again and again, she'd had to trust her instinct when there was no scholarly consensus. She noticed tension in her body. There was something inside her that her mind hadn't told her yet, she knew.

What was that?

How could she know?

She studied the room she was sitting in. The door was not quite closed, in case someone called. Everything in it was cheap and forgettable, even a photo of the staff and residents from a couple of years before, the whole bunch smiling when happiness in an old people's home rarely reached fifty per cent. But they were smiling, so the picture, inside its unsuitable frame, was misleading. It was a cover-up for something else. This, she decided, applied to her as well. She was too young to be put in charge, so 'they', whoever they were, wanted her to give an impression of a certain sort, reassuring no doubt, that not only were the people in The Haven well looked after, they were under the management of someone who was beyond mistrust or uncertainty. With myself in charge, thought Carol, standing to look at the photo again, with myself in charge – this

charming, attentive young woman, she flattered herself, knowing she had to think her way into the minds of those who were thinking about her – with myself in charge, or Matron Einfeld before her, everything was well.

Whose minds thought about her in this way?

Only two. The rest went along with what they were given. The two that mattered were Igor Dubcek, whom she rarely saw, and Alby, the community's pillar. Why was he on the committee of management?

To make it look respectable. But, Carol thought, the Alby she knew was clever enough to prevent people from using his position and prestige if he wanted to, so why was he on the committee, why was he watching her with a sympathetic attention that bordered on an older man's love for a younger woman? Why was he apart from his wife and son, and ambivalent about Dubcek, the absentee owner? It seemed to Carol that the policeman was somehow in the control of the other man, and this could only have come about through the fear of exposure of some wrong in Alby's past; his wife had separated herself from her husband to keep this wrong at arm's length, so what about the son? Did he know how his father was connected with Dubcek, and what Dubcek was doing that needed protective silence?

What was Dubcek doing?

Carol had no idea. She couldn't guess because she couldn't imagine, but she knew there was something hidden and that in some way she couldn't see, The Haven, which she was keeping respectable, was the front for that other, unknown and doubtlessly illicit activity which The Haven had been acquired to hide. In a flash of imagination she saw how Alby must be torn, how he wanted her – *the younger woman* – to love him while he thought of himself as unlovable because a disgrace. She rang him at the station. 'I've got the afternoon off. Vera Wilson takes over at one o'clock. I'd love to go for a drive. Any chance you could join me?'

'What are you planning on doing?'

‘A drive along the coast. Anywhere there’s rocks and waves. I know you’ll have a good place in mind.’

When he picked her up, they drove west of town, at one point winding up the side of a hill overlooking the inner bay where ships could shelter. ‘It’s funny,’ she said, ‘but when I lived in Sydney I had the whole harbour as my front yard and I never thought about it as a place of shelter.’ He looked at her. ‘I thought about it as a place of display. It was as if the whole city showed itself off by going out on the harbour.’

‘Did you ever go out the heads, into the ocean?’

‘No. I didn’t know anybody who could take me.’ She thought to explain. ‘I was only there a short time. I finished my doctorate, I left my husband ...’

‘Two big steps!’

‘I suppose they were.’

‘What brought you here?’

‘Chance, really. I went to Cairns...’

‘And loved it!’

‘Not really.’ They were on different paths, she sensed: he wanted her to sing the praise of ordinary life, ordinary people, and she didn’t know how to do it, had in fact no desire to do it, or not on the terms he was offering. ‘They were nice enough at the clinic where I worked, but they were boring and they made me boring too.’

‘I don’t find you boring. There’s no need to say that about yourself.’

There was plenty of need to say exactly that. She wanted to get their discussion onto some acceptable terms, but there were none. ‘Drive on.’ The coast grew grander as he drove, and eventually pulled in to a spot where the ocean contested dramatically with steep, severe, rock faces, dramatically erupting with spouts of water splashing anyone who came near. Alby was jubilant. ‘It’s in fine form today. Look at that! Whoosh!’ He rushed to the edge and looked down, dangerously close, to Carol’s way of thinking, to falling. If his shoes slipped on the rocks where they were wet ...

‘Alby! Come back!’

The policeman smiled. ‘You come here. To me!’

She obeyed him, though afraid. It wasn’t safe to be where he was. She put her arm around him as she drew near, and he responded, first by embracing her, then by bringing his mouth to hers. The first time. They kissed. It had been such a long time ... She felt unsteady.

‘Hold me!’

‘You’re safe. I won’t let you fall.’

It occurred to her that she was safe, but only in mutual trust: if you wanted to get rid of someone this would be the place to do it. The water at the bottom of the fall was swirling, surging, and a body, thrown in there, would be whisked out to sea in moments.

‘I’d never be seen again.’

‘What?’

She attempted to explain. ‘If I fell in there ...’

He was in high good humour. ‘You’re not going to fall in. I wouldn’t let you. And I’m certainly not going to throw you in!’

This was dangerous talk because she was only safe while his humour was good. ‘How far does this bit of the coastline stretch?’

Still laughing he said, ‘Couple of kilometres, this part around here, but of course, further east, it runs into the Bight.’ His voice and his hands told her that he was talking about something tremendous.

‘You’ll have to take me there!’

‘I will!’ He was suddenly happy and she knew that it was not so much from love for her, or any feeling she might have given him by kissing him, but because he was in some way released. He’d transferred responsibility for himself to her, though it might have seemed to be the other way around. This was amazing. She drew back slightly to look at him, and then she laughed. It was the word ‘bight’. He wasn’t a man of words, she knew he thought it was the same word as ‘bite’, in fact in his mind there’d be no qualms, no hesitation, in using it because to a man who didn’t think about words there were no difficulties in them. When you had a thought, a few words came along to say the

thought. Words were all the same to everybody because they meant the same to everybody. She wondered how long it would have been since he was troubled by a word. It made her laugh, gleefully, and she forgot her fears about falling into the ocean ...

... or being pushed. Suddenly she was serious. 'Let's get away from here.' She moved briskly, swiftly, with determination. Something in her had changed, as Alby could see. 'Gets to you after a while. Okay, let's go back to the car.'

'Away from here.'

She said no more until they were three or four kilometres away and the road was back from the ocean.

'Something came over you, Carol.'

She said nothing.

'It was fear. Yet a moment before, you were trusting me.'

'Don't question me, Alby. I haven't had time to work it out yet.'

'Work it out with me.'

She didn't want to but knew that it would be unsafe to refuse. Why? She'd stopped trusting him at the very moment of greatest trust – holding her safe from the water, a fall: their kiss. She'd put herself in his sexual realm without any fear, and the step she'd taken had opened her up to fear. She didn't trust him. If she became his lover she'd become his captive, and then she'd be complicit in whatever it was Igor Dubcek had over him. He was afraid, he wanted to give her his fear, share it with her, make her responsible for it, share his damnation, if that was what it was. His wife and son were in Perth because they'd pulled back from accepting what he'd nearly got her to take on board. Now she had to deceive him. He mustn't be allowed to know what had happened in her mind. He was going on in the way she expected:

'We're going to be lovers.'

She was quick. 'And very soon. But it's not going to be today, Alby, because I'm all shaken up. Calm me down, Alby. Drive quietly. Show me your favourite spots. They'll be part of you when we close in on each other, like we're going to do.'

She wasn't sure if he trusted her or not because he was such a practised deceiver that he could probably deceive himself as well as anybody else. They drove. She felt limp. After a few minutes, he turned to her. 'I'll take you back to town now. You want to be by yourself.' She was grateful and felt tenderly for him, though still distrustful. 'Thanks Alby. I'll do the rounds of the place, to make myself feel normal, then I'll have a deep sleep. I'll ring you tomorrow.'

## 5. Introspection – *if, if, if*

'How did you get out of that?'

'In a state of panic, mainly.' Carol was staring at her friend Gabrielle, my French connection, as she liked to call her. 'I was pretty desperate.'

'Was he threatening you?'

'We didn't get that far. He never knew that I'd found him out ... well, after I'd gone he'd have woken up in a flash. I had to be out of his reach by then. That was when he was most dangerous. I got myself flown to Perth. I told them my mother was dying.'

'She died years ago, didn't she?'

'They didn't know that. I flew here because I'd been telling him I'd never come back to Melbourne.'

'What are you going to do now you're back?'

'Leave no traces. That's the main thing.'

'You are afraid of him, aren't you.'

'I'm afraid of him because he's afraid of the other man I was telling you about.'

'The owner?'

'Dubcek. He had a hold on Alby.' Carol looked at Gabrielle, yearning for an assurance she couldn't give – that she was safe. Gabrielle, sensing this, said, 'It's a big country. You're on the other

side.’ Carol looked at her friend, neither of them convinced. ‘If you can feel a threat, you’re under threat. Distance doesn’t matter, especially with someone like Dubcek. He’s got money, he can kill at a distance.’

Carol wanted to bring her friend under control: ‘Don’t say that word!’ Gabrielle looked confused, also angry. ‘We’re trying to be realistic. You think he wants to get rid of you. It’s because you know about him. You must lie low for a year, until he’s forgotten you. You have lulled him into feeling he is beyond danger. Then you can go to the police, if you want to, or you can forget him and do something positive with your life.’

It was what Carol wanted to hear. She looked at the other woman, ready to thank her, but Gabrielle had an idea. ‘Why not go back to France? You have the language. We can find you something to do. That man from The Haven would never find you!’

She looked triumphant, if surprised that Carol didn’t respond as expected. She looked sullenly introspective. ‘What I really feel bad about is that my second life’s started so badly. I suppose I’ll avoid getting wiped out by Dubcek, much as he frightens me. But look at me, Gabrielle. I’m divorced from my husband, I couldn’t make a go of it in Cairns, I got involved with a doctor who wanted a distraction until his family caught up with him, so I travel to the other side of the country and I finish up snatching myself out of a really nasty mess. Which leads me to come back where I said I’d never live again. Not much going for me, is there?’

Gabrielle said it again. ‘Go to France. Make a new life. You will find something.’

‘No. The problem’s not *where*, it’s me. Inside me. How is it that some people make the right choices, carve out a good life, and keep rising? And others can’t help making a mess of everything they do?’

She was desperate, but Gabrielle wasn’t yielding. ‘We’ve all got the same ingredients. Men and women are different, but women all have the same things to do in life, and men are the same, though they talk as if they’ve got a freedom they haven’t got at all.’

The word freedom caused them to look at each other, wondering how it had come into their thoughts, and where, if anywhere, it would lead them. Who was free? For how long? If a moment of freedom came, what could you do with it? If you used the moment to make a choice, that turned the freedom into the responsibilities springing out of your decision. Freedom had gone in the moment it had been yours. Your only choice was the way in which you gave it up. Carol said, 'I'm only free to do the things that are in me to do, and so far they haven't brought me any success.' Heaviness was taking her over. 'I'll be a mute,' she said. 'Locked inside myself.' Tears were close: she looked at Gabrielle with an appeal, a yearning, filling her eyes.

'I'll take you home with me,' Gabrielle said. 'I'll borrow my mother's car and we'll drive all over my country. Spain and maybe Italy. Who knows? When you are full of spirit, you can ask yourself these questions again. You will be strong and you will decide. Then. What do you think of that?'

Hitting rock bottom gave Carol a little strength. 'You are beautiful, Gabrielle. I want to know you all my life. I want to know what you're doing, how well the world's treating you ...' She paused. 'But no. I was in your country not very long ago. I loved it, but it didn't change me. That's something I have to do for myself. It's going to take an awful lot of hard work. You know, it's strange, people get paid for all the wrong things. Company directors, bank executives ... they all get paid for bullshit.' Her eyes were dry by now, and a determination Gabrielle hadn't seen in her friend before was forming itself before her eyes. 'The hardest work in the world is introspection, looking into yourself and finding out what's going on. If – *if, if, if* – you can find out that, you have a fair idea of what's going to happen, or is likely to happen, and then you can make a few plans about how you want your life to go.'

'So?' Gabrielle was curious, as well as relieved.

'So that's what I'm going to do. I'm changed already, though you haven't seen it yet.'

Gabrielle kissed her friend, then sat back, fingering Carol's hair, her cheeks. 'We have made some sort of decision. It will last a lifetime. It *will!* Of that I am sure. We must never lose touch. We must tell each other what's happening ...' The importance of the moment was almost stifling, if liberating in another way. Carol said to her friend, 'Take me for a drive, Gabrielle. In that funny little car of yours. I want to see the world one more time in the old way, before everything starts to change!'

## 6. The road to Deniliquin

There was a long weekend soon after, Carol stayed with Gabrielle on the Friday night and they set off early the next morning, Gabrielle announcing that although she was the driver Carol was the navigator: 'We are exploring your country, you know its ways, you must guide me so I don't make any mistakes.'

Carol was amused. 'What sort of mistake do you think you might make?'

'If I took you somewhere boring, that would be terrible.'

They were already on the outskirts of the city and the land was sprawling under the eye of a sun that seemed to care for nothing so long as it could rule. 'We wouldn't go anywhere in this country, on that basis.'

'I'm depending on you my friend. I don't know the history of these places.'

'Then turn down here.'

Pushing over the trees some way on they saw the tip of a tower. 'The Clarke family built that. You'll get a better look in a minute. It's the grandest thing for miles. They used to own all this land that we can see, and further, way out of sight.'

Gabrielle accepted this, though she wasn't very impressed.

‘You’re thinking of the chateaux of your country, and of course they’re grander. The fortunes were bigger, and much older. Your aristocrats had their peasants under control ...’

‘Until!’

‘Until?’ Carol said. ‘Until what? I wish I could get my thoughts under control.’

‘What is going on in your head?’

‘I know I ought to be ashamed of myself but I sometimes think the best life a woman could ever lead would be to be married to an enormously rich old bastard who had no problem spending huge sums on good causes which his wife chose, and the rest on her and the life they shared.’

Gabrielle pointed to the towered mansion they could by now partially see. ‘Is that what happened here?’

‘Not exactly. I don’t know, really. But when I see a mansion like that, that’s what I think.’

Gabrielle looked prim, and then she laughed. ‘You are supposed to be guiding me, but you are giving me bad advice!’

‘What about all those chateaux in your country? You can’t visit them without imagining yourself living the way they did.’

‘No! We had a revolution! The women of France were the poorest of the poor! Even their children did not belong to them because they were the servants of the nobility! Life was a system of bondage!’ She had so quickly reached seething point that Carol was surprised. ‘Sorry Gabrielle, I didn’t mean to offend. I was simply looking for a time or a place where women, even if it was only a few of them, could say their position was acceptable.’

‘There has never been such a time. Not in the whole of human history!’

‘What about Cleopatra?’

‘She was defeated in the end. Women always are, even queens. But I am not talking about noble ladies, I am talking about women as a class, a group, the half of the human race that keeps the race

going. They have been enslaved, sometimes brutally, sometimes by men's adoration of them. They have always been made to live under a different rule from men ...'

She would have gone on but Carol challenged her outburst by giving it new direction. She wanted to know if Gabrielle had a plan for her life, or whether she was simply existing in a hostile state, ready to reject anything opposed to her ideology, but without goals or markers by which she'd know how well she was doing, both personally and as an exemplar for other women. Gabrielle lifted her hands off the wheel for a moment, turned to look at her friend, and cried, 'Mon Dieu!'

'Bit sudden, was I? Bit too much all at once?'

They talked all the way to Heathcote, where Carol insisted they stop. 'This car's a hothouse! Another five minutes and I'd suffocate!' They laughed at this, and pulled up outside a café. 'Hot chocolate for me,' Carol called. 'No need to lock the car. We'll be able to keep an eye on it from where we sit.' Gabrielle was surprised at this, but, looking up and down the vast, empty street, she could see there were no threats, unless prodigious blankness was your enemy, as perhaps it was for the French woman. 'Not an idea in sight.' But Carol thought differently. 'There are a few, actually, but because they're not ones we acknowledge, we don't see them. That's one of my problems ...'

'No more problems. I need coffee. *Noir!*' She looked around for someone to take their order and, of course, for a minute or two there was no one, and when the woman came she greeted them casually, 'Had a good drive this morning? Where are you heading?' Carol told her they were going to lunch at Echuca, go on to Deniliquin, then make up their minds about what they'd do next, and when the proprietress, for so she seemed, left them, saying, 'Won't be long,' Carol realised how much she'd acclimatised to her homeland because she found herself amused by her partner's scorn. 'When they set up their business, doesn't anybody teach them how to run it?'

'You think the council should ...?'

Gabrielle was aghast. 'I don't know who should teach them, but they should not be left in an abyss!' She was seething again, demanding that her rage be soothed, and Carol was indisposed to do it. 'She's got a right to be as she is ...'

'No! When people claim that something is their right, that is when they are at their most silly.' She had a moment of self-consciousness. 'Silliest. What do you say?'

'I say that what we call rights aren't rights at all, they're claims, and we've no hope of having our claims satisfied unless we're cunning in the way we go about it!' She went on. 'I think you're too hard on the world, Gabrielle. It won't always fit in with your ideas as to what's got to happen. Will it? You know it won't!'

Suddenly Gabrielle was weak. 'Pardon, my friend, pardon. If I am not angry, I am unprotected. Anger is all we have. Men have taken everything else. Have you ever watched them? They pick up things that belong to other people and put them down somewhere else. They are no respecters of anybody or anything. They get away with it because women have grown used to them. We have given up too soon too often. You know this is true.'

She looked at her friend, knowing she wouldn't be let down. The proprietor, coming back with their cups, asked Gabrielle where she came from and how long she'd been in the country, before she moved away. Gabrielle said, 'I see what you mean. She was hospitable this time. She was accepting me. That is something, after all.' Carol said, 'It is. But neither of us thinks it's enough. The question is, how do we make a real change? Not just here and there, with one or two polite or considerate people, but the whole society? Sometimes I think everyone's against us, sometimes I think the goodwill might be there but nobody seems to know how to make it happen ...'

'And,' her friend said, 'sometimes I think all we can do is dream.' They looked into each other's eyes, uncertain as to whether they were pausing, or stuck.

By lunchtime they were looking at the river in Echuca. People in the street, or on the lofty wharf, showed by their dress that informality had become the current formality. A paddle steamer lurked on the New South Wales side, another on the Victorian, while a third, loaded with tourists, churned the water it floated on. ‘Good heavens,’ Gabrielle announced, ‘the water is so muddy and the boat is so noisy ... you would need to wear oilskins to travel on that.’ She caught an appraising look from Carol. ‘It moves so slowly. It would take a week to get anywhere.’

Carol decided to get a few things clear for the visitor. ‘These boats we’re looking at, they’re all reconstructions. They’re useless today, apart from taking tourists on little trips. Once the railway lines were built into the inland, moving things up and down the rivers practically stopped. If you look at the boats, they’re built with a shallow draught, but even so, when there wasn’t much water in the river, and that’s something that happens quite often, well, the boats got stuck. Or maybe they could move up and down a couple of miles in a big pond, but there’d be a shallow stretch that they couldn’t get through, so they were stuck.’

The word amused Gabrielle. ‘Like a fly on the sticky paper you were telling me about! Life in this country was very crude unless you could live in something grand. Like that mansion you were showing me this morning ...’

‘The Clarkes at Sunbury,’ Carol said. ‘They were social leaders of their time.’ She paused. The Clarkes at Sunbury were part of her history, which meant much the same as them being part of herself. The Clarkes? They’d never have noticed her if she’d lived in their period. For that matter, she had never had the slightest interest in this wealthy, land-holding family with all its connections to England. They’d hosted English cricketers when they visited Australia, they’d gifted money to establish university colleges, they were a breed apart, yet they helped to create – found? – the society that had shaped her.

It hit her that she couldn't separate herself from her past, and that meant owning, or owning up to, much that she wouldn't care to acknowledge. Her only way of escaping this relationship with her past was to take up moralistic positions antagonistic to whatever had happened which she wanted to change. She saw also, and how it pulled her down when she connected it with her condemnation of and separation from Martin, her husband of not so long ago, that morality was, for many people, perhaps most, a prudishly built defence against reality, whereas it was possible for one's morality to be a guiding principle, noble, hopefully, by which one led a useful life.

A happy one?

She decided, once again in this flash of understanding and decision that had overtaken her on their road to Deniliquin, a place about which she knew next to nothing, that her life so far had been a dodging of life, her understanding a powerless – she hoped it had been powerless! – *misunderstanding*, and that she must find a new way, for if she couldn't, how could she pretend to be showing her country to her friend, let alone making the courageous readjustment which her thoughts had told her she needed.

Gabrielle was looking at her, amazed, concerned. 'You were talking about the Clarkes. Something has happened? Tell me your thoughts, my friend. I have caused something to happen inside you and I don't know what it is, therefore I cannot know what I have done. This makes me most uncomfortable. What is it, my friend? Carol?'

The name rang in her ears. It was how she was known. If she wanted to know what she was, in the minds of those who knew her, she had only to gather all the Carol-meanings from wherever they existed – in the minds of those who knew her, as already stated – and try to boil them down, put them together, treat herself as a cake to be made, a stew that was everyone's to eat, a pie of the most dubious contents. What was she? Who was she? The Clarkes were easy because they had a record they'd created for themselves, or, to put it more historically, they'd made the moves which caused other

people, in their own time and later, to create them, describe them, as having been such and such. So and so.

She was nothing. She'd married, and split. Marriage was the identity of most people because it was their social form, and she'd declared herself outside it. Did she want to get back in? Or was she the wolf that couldn't live in the pack? She looked at her friend. 'I'm feeling shaken. Things have happened here ...' she tapped her head '... which I wasn't expecting. Can we go somewhere and have something to eat, anything really, just so long as we sit down and I don't have to think. I'm sorry to be bad company. I'll explain myself in a minute. I'm sorry I'm spoiling our trip. Excuse me, Gabrielle, if you can.' Gabrielle took her hand. 'I am standing by you. Yes, we will sit down. There is a place over there. We can have some lunch. You will tell me how you feel and I will choose for you. We are in no hurry. We can stay here, or move on, as we please. Whatever it is that is troubling you, it is a thought! That means it is an opportunity! We can make something good from this, and we will!'

By the time they reached Deniliquin, Gabrielle said she was beginning to see how the land worked. It was so flat that the rivers didn't know how to find their way, so they wandered in search of somewhere they could go ...

'Meandered,' Carol suggested.

... and every time they made a mistake they broke away in a new direction, and all these paths, these ...

'Creeks': Carol.

... moved in the same direction, sometimes side by side, sometimes miles apart, but all emptying the land after letting it revitalise itself. From the air, she thought, it should be simple. This amused Carol. It should, she thought, but they were on the ground, and firmly fixed. Gabrielle told her that humans were not made to be subservient to land. It was there for them to use. 'We rule.' More amusement for Carol, but also trepidation. 'We delude ourselves.' They walked down an

almost empty street, the town looking prosperous in an unambitious, old-fashioned way. The people who lived in, or beyond, this plethora of waterways had allowed themselves next to no display. There was a park, and although well-tended, it offered no tenderness, no humour, no opening for the closed personalities living in the town. Some of them, a memorial told Carol and Gabrielle, had gone to distant wars: men. What had their women been doing? Posting parcels, knitting socks, cooking? The travellers gained a feeling from the places they inspected that those women had been desperately needed, but only to fill an emptiness. The process of turning life into meaning had been performed by men. This, of course, was rubbish, because women's exclusion was a manifest tribute to their capacity, possibly superior, to do the things that men liked to claim as theirs alone. 'There is a certain purity to this place,' Carol said, 'much as I might want to tear it down.' This time it was Gabrielle's turn to be the observer, the one who considered her friend. 'Whatever it was that upset you, in the last town, I see you are fighting back. The inland of your country is good for seeing clearly. I see this. Perhaps you could come and live here, a prophet in a desert, and write a book setting out your thoughts. What do you think? I would visit to read what you had written. We would argue, discuss and think. I would return to the city, wondering what you would do next, and you would live on, here in the nothingness, clarifying your mind.'

The two of them considered this. Carol indicated a seat and the two of them sat in the park of a town where neither belonged, to investigate the virtues of an idea. 'It would only work,' Carol said, 'if one of the universities created a philosophy department and located a branch out here.' Gabrielle, enjoying the waves of emptiness which brushed the town, smiled at the thought being offered. 'No! It would have to be a department of cooking and philosophy. If it handed out wonderful meals for next to nothing, the native people – I mean, the white natives – would entertain its ideas occasionally in order to keep the kitchen busy!' She laughed. She'd made the place look ridiculous

and suddenly she felt at home. ‘Now! We must decide. Are we going on to that place with the funny name, or are we staying the night?’ She looked at Carol with eyes of deep compassion, waiting for her to say, but, and to her surprise, Carol stood and walked a few paces into the lightest of breezes. She murmured something which might have been, ‘What place was that?’ but her thoughts were elsewhere. Indeed Gabrielle had a feeling that she’d been brought to this place called ... it started with a D ... and then abandoned, in the peculiar sense that the person she had started out with was not the person she was now with. A stranger, someone strange to her European ways, had taken over the mind she’d thought she knew quite well. They’d talked of things they’d do in Paris if, or when, they got there together, but now, the emptiness, the endless air of plains too wide to be drawn into her consciousness, had settled on top of, had gained inside knowledge of, everything, past and present. There was no future, therefore no point in talking. The imagination had lost its grip, with the effect that nothing could be maintained with any effect. Carol turned and spoke firmly to her friend, but distantly too, as if her voice had been deputed to remake a connection recently lost.

‘You see?’

Gabrielle, feeling lost, said to the figure she’d brought to this point, ‘We’ll go to a motel. We’ll get a room and sleep for a while. The journey has tired you. It has left me ...’

She didn’t know how to finish. Carol spoke with a curiosity which suggested that some part of her was returning to herself. ‘Yes, how are you? You’ve done all the driving and all I’ve done is sit beside you and talk.’ She became vague again, as if being reclaimed. ‘And think ...’

They decided to return via a different route. As much as anything else, it was the huge redgums crowning the Edwardes River that turned them in that direction. The trees were such a perfect expression of place that it was hard not to stop in their shade. ‘Coming home,’

Carol said, to the trees as much as to Gabrielle, 'is more difficult than going away.'

'I suppose it is, but what is making you say so?'

Carol, aware of how she envied the trees their certainty, said, 'Going away, you are leaving something behind. If you are in difficulties, as most of us are, that is good. You are looking forward to discoveries and developments. You are hoping for something new.'

'And?'

'Coming home, you are getting ready to face the music.'

'Music,' Gabrielle repeated, holding the word as one could not hold what it represented. 'Music is so many things. Mahler for instance is hysterical. He shrieks and screams to put anybody else's music out of mind.' She wondered if she was saying this to provoke her friend, but Carol's thoughts were on another path.

'Music's what we create when we can't bear silence. And silence is the everlasting condition of the human race.'

'No,' Gabrielle said. 'Humans are so noisy. We are a chattering, talkative lot ...' She would have gone on but Carol broke in again.

'When we are alive. Before and after, we inhabit the silence of the universe.' She grew agitated. 'It may be that the universe is as noisy and talkative as we are, but we can't hear it!' She was weeping now, bitterly. 'So we talk like crazy monkeys while we're alive and when we're not ...'

Gabrielle knew it was up to her to rescue her friend, rescue their trip. 'You think I was secure in France. You think I had no problems because I was living in Paris, the city of dreams. *Your* dreams. *Everybody's* dreams. *The world's* dreams. But I had to live there in the greatest concentration of doubts in all the world ...'

Carol considered what her friend was saying. Their car took them into sunlight suddenly, the mighty trees behind them, clinging to the deep grooves where water lay. 'They're behind us now,' Carol said, swinging in her seat. Gabrielle flicked an eye on the mirror. 'Perfection,' she said: 'why is it always behind us?' This thought acted

as an irritant on Carol, who waved her hands restlessly at the road ahead. 'Think of it this way. This car is the present moment. We are speeding into the future, we are leaving the past behind. The car is more than a car, it's the place of mental digestion where our understandings change what was in front of us to what's behind us.' Gabrielle wanted to soothe her, calm her; they had so far to go before they would be home and she couldn't possibly maintain this intensity without breaking down, and this was what Gabrielle wanted to avoid, yet Carol wouldn't be calmed. 'Our minds say something is perfect, and then they discard the perfect thing. It's not wanted any more. It's no use to us. What can you do with perfection? You can't live it. You can only find it, and what use is it to you then?' Suddenly she was quiet. 'It's a trap, looking for perfection. It's an excuse for not living normally. It's a way of fooling yourself, and what a beauty it is!' She laughed, doing her best to keep control, afraid of the hysteria hovering about her, inside her, ready to break her down. Yet, and to Gabrielle's relief, she managed. 'I've got to get a job. When we get back. Anything will do, to begin with.' She was looking at the countryside now, rolling past at their moderate speed. 'Beautiful country. Hard as hell. Impatient with us because we're fools, we city dwellers, we haven't got the patience to be farmers. God! Imagine it!'

They drove in silence till they reached the outskirts of a town. They saw a little bell tower outside a church, and a school with a brick residence next door. Gabrielle said to her companion, 'Nuns, do you think?' Carol nodded. 'Teaching school. Doing without a life because they're serving god.' The car moved on. 'Witnessing god knows what abuses by priests who pop in for a visit.' The horrors of celibacy moved Gabrielle. 'We've got to get married, my friend. Both of us. Have families. The alternative's too awful.'

'I'd rather be a sheep.'

Gabrielle laughed. 'No you wouldn't. Sheep get their throats cut and end up on a plate. I'd rather eat than be eaten, and so would you. Hmmm?' They were not far from laughing. The school and nuns'

home moved back, unchosen, scorned. Carol said, 'I wouldn't mind a coffee, but it's too early to stop, and besides the coffee would be shithouse in a place like this.' Her driver agreed. 'We'll keep going. Maybe we'll see somewhere in the next town. We've got all day ...'

## 7. Enter Tim

There was a man at her gate when Carol got home. He'd picked up a couple of newspapers and a letter or two and put them behind a flower pot where they couldn't be seen. 'Sorry to be intruding,' he said, 'but I noticed the postie here this morning and I had an idea you'd gone away, then I saw the papers.' He pointed to what he'd done. 'Once people wake up you're away they're not slow about breaking in

Carol realised she'd been stupid. 'Thanks, I didn't think about that. I went away with a friend. We took longer than we planned.'

'No worries,' the young man said. 'I think you got home in time, but have a look around when you get inside.'

Carol didn't feel comfortable about entering the house on her own and asked the stranger in for a cup of tea. She told him her name and he said he was Tim. That was how people addressed each other in that part of the city. They seemed to think that if they needed family names to identify themselves they must be boring, and that was a crime. While she found cups and put tea in the pot, he looked around.

'What's this?'

On a string crossing the room, was a series of squares of cloth, flag-like, but carrying writing in a language he'd never seen. 'They're prayer-flags,' she said. 'I got them in a shop in Sydney. They're the only thing that's travelled with me ever since.' He liked that; it made them valuable, in Tim's mind. 'Where are they from?'

Tibet, of course. He looked at them, appreciatively at first, then found them gripping him. 'They're having an effect on me.'

This pleased her. 'I like to have them about me.'

'Can you say why?' She could tell he was more than curious; something was happening.

'I saw a photo once. It had quite an effect on me.'

'Of?'

'A little flag, on a tiny pole. It was stuck in the crevice of a rock, and there was snow all around. Everywhere.'

'In Tibet?'

She nodded. 'I can't remember if there was anything written on it. What I remember is the colours of the flag, yellow and red. It stood out more clearly, against the snow, than anything I could imagine ...'

'And these?'

'Reminded me of what the first flag was probably meant to be doing.'

'Which was?'

'Speaking in a void where you or I would freeze. It'd be so cold we wouldn't be able to think of anything to say, so the person who put up the flag did the almost impossible ...'

Tim was quick. 'He put a thought in a place where a thought wouldn't be expected.' The import of what he was saying struck him hard. 'He made a sound in utter silence!'

Carol laughed. 'He *uttered* a sound in silence!'

Tim was amused too, but his thoughts ran ahead. 'What did he want to say?'

Carol looked at the Tibetan flags, made for rooms, or gathering places, but eloquent also in the ice surrounding human life. 'I've never asked. I could take them to a shop and ask, I suppose, but I've never really wanted to know.'

He was a kindred spirit. 'As long as you don't know, you can let your imagination translate, and it can say something different every day!' She made the tea, and he felt the boiling water pouring on the leaves was a holy action, not necessarily joining them, but happening

inside a shared awareness. He went quiet, giving her his silence, and they shared that too. In silence, they waited for the tea to draw. She looked at him, he nodded, and she poured. Weak black tea filled two glasses. She pointed, and he looked down, at the rug under the table, basically deep blue, but with trailing arms of green and areas of red. He didn't see it at first, but then he realised that the rug featured a swastika, not the Nazi symbol but a cosmic turning, endlessly revolving. It pleased him deeply. Raising the glass into which she'd poured his tea, he tapped her glass, then put his down again: it was hot! She was amused and spoke the one word: 'Tim'. He said, as if compelled to reply: 'Carol'.

At once she wanted to know how he knew her name, and then she realised. 'Oh, the letters, of course.' A few minutes before, that was all that joined them. Now...

The very next day, a letter came from Martin. They had a few items of furniture and he'd been paying the storage; could they decide what to do with the stuff? And they had a joint bank account with nearly a thousand dollars in it. They should close the account and split the cash between them. It was nothing, but the timing of it, so soon after her meeting with Tim, caused Carol to think there were forces in her life that she hadn't understood. She went two doors down, knocked, and told Tim, when he came to the door, that she'd had a letter from her husband: 'my ex', she called him.

Tim invited her in. He made tea in a white Wedgwood pot more refined than his kitchen. She said nothing but he interpreted her silence. 'Gift of my mother when I moved out of home. Don't be squalid, she told me. If you're going to entertain, do it in style.' He smiled. 'It takes more than a teapot, unfortunately.' He underlined with a heavy, if humorous groan: 'A lot more, actually.' He too let the tea settle, and the simple business of sitting, waiting, put them together as they'd been the first time they met.

'Did you have a job, when you left home?'

He nodded. 'Airline steward. Qantas, at first, then Malaysian. Both were good.'

'Malaysian. I thought all their people would be Malay. Well, Asian at least.'

'They are, mostly. But they like a bit of a mixture, like their passengers. People get rattled sometimes, when they're out of their comfort zones. If they're worried about something they like to tell someone of their own nationality. It makes them less scared.'

Carol said, 'I don't think I get scared when I travel. Why do people get scared?'

Tim: 'They're scared all the time, but they cover it up with habit. So long as they're doing everyday things, it doesn't surface. Put them somewhere unusual, and up it comes, out of control!'

Carol asked, 'Have you ever had to hold someone down? To the floor of the plane?'

'No. Though there's been a couple of times when I've thought it might get to that. But lucky me, it didn't.'

Carol noticed the word. Was he lucky? For that matter, was she? It implied that the stars in their courses, the birds in the air, or maybe the dice at the casino rolling, were somehow on your side. This was impossible, yet people had lucky streaks and times when everything went against them. She'd no sooner separated from Martin than she'd inherited an apartment worth a fortune. She was renting it out for more than she had to pay in Melbourne; things were on her side. She was lucky: or was she?

'What are you thinking about?'

She told him. He was impressed by the Point Piper address. 'Millionaires' row.' Without being dismissive, she kept her distance. 'It's an income, that's the good thing about it. Having it means I can be choosy about where I live and what I do. I couldn't possibly live there right now. I'd feel I wasn't up to the place. It's my ambition – no, my hope – that I'll be able to live there one day, maybe when I'm a lot older. After I've had a family, perhaps.'

Tim saw that he was looking at someone who was going to change. If she didn't, she'd be locked out of the position, the worldview perhaps, which she hoped to reach, and enjoy, one day. She'd committed herself to grow, so she could step into something she already owned. It was, he thought, a good way to consider the world, and he wondered how and if it applied to himself. He poured their tea as a way of postponing the thinking this required. As they touched their cups – cups, in his house, and neither of them worthy of the pot that had filled them – both were smiling, and both knew it was from connection with the other.

It was minutes before they spoke. Tim said, 'I'd like to see this place in Sydney. Do any ferries go past?'

'If you look out the windows on the western side, you can see people on the Manly ferries, so they must be able to see you, looking out at them.'

Tim thought about it. 'Looking at each other, never knowing about each other.' With a sudden burst of confidence which came from he had no idea where, he added, 'We're going to do better than that!'

She was amazed. He'd read her mind; no, they'd made up their minds at the same moment and the words had come from him. For a moment she could only look at the teapot, as if the magic had poured through its shapely spout, but then she had to raise her eyes and look into him. He'd do! They'd decided by now and all that had to happen was for one shared, life-long carpet to unroll. He said, 'I'm glad it happened this way,' and she said, 'It's good!'

She wanted to know where he wanted to live and he said they should throw it open to chance. 'Let's wait and see what comes up. If I get a job in Alice Springs, you're stuck with it. If you get something you like before I do, I'm following you!' It was a measure of their confidence that nothing could go wrong. They started applying for jobs of the widest variety. They got copies of interstate papers. It amused them to sit in his kitchen finding outlandish jobs for each other. After a

couple of weeks she got an interview in Alice Springs with a dealer in aboriginal art. Tim travelled to the inland with her, marvelling at its harshness and its beauty from the air. As the plane lowered to land, he told her, 'I'm in love with this place.' Carol felt a blessing had attached itself to them, a couple who could do no wrong as long as they clung to each other. She said to her partner, for that was what he was now, 'I think it's called making your own luck!' and he smiled, certain that this was within their powers. They had a hire car greet them at the airport, went to the depot to fill in papers, then cruised about, looking for a niche in the town's life where they could live.

Both the road and the river of sand that ran alongside the town found a way through a rocky gap to the south; it felt as if the town had built defences and then decided not to bother. The heat couldn't be blocked out and as for the surrounding country, known as desert, it was so alluring, so awesome, that nobody in their right mind would want to block it out. 'Those black people in the middle of town,' Carol said, 'they know these places. It's their *country*. The trouble is, how would we know, outsiders that we are, which people belonged to which parts of the country? It'd be awful to be living here and not be able to find a way in!'

Tim thought the only thing they could do was let her have her interview and see what sort of offer the dealer was making. 'He must have contacts. Places he visits to see what they've been doing. If he's an art dealer he doesn't just sit in town waiting for great works to be wheeled in. He'd be out and about looking!'

Carol was troubled. 'But if I get the job, what about you?'

He had an answer that surprised her. 'If you get the job then I bring up the kids.'

She was taken aback. 'Out here?'

He said, 'It's not a long term job. We'd just do it for a while. Years later, back in the city, we'd amaze people when we told them.'

Carol didn't get the job. The dealer didn't want an assistant with attachments, as he put it. He wanted someone glamorous to

pull tourists into his showroom, he wanted a young woman to win over the black communities where the painting happened, to hand out brushes, paint and canvas, he wanted this camp companion to be the other half of a personality that reminded Carol a little of Igor Dubcek, a little more of Detective-Sergeant Andy. ‘The trouble is,’ Carol told her partner, ‘I’d really love to do the job, but he’d stop me. I couldn’t be myself. I’d like to learn about the people out here and what their paintings mean. They’re fascinating. You can see there’s whole systems of thought in what they do but if I asked them to tell me then I’d have to tell him because he’d know that I knew more than he did ...’

‘... and that wouldn’t be allowed.’ Tim saw it clearly. ‘Looks like that plane takes us home again.’

They gave themselves a few days to look at the life they weren’t going to lead. This was exciting, with every hour bringing decisions about where to go, what to take with them, and where they’d stop, for they quickly discovered that the loveliest discoveries demanded no more than stopping the car and walking a few paces from the road. Wildflowers whispered secrets to each other wherever they put their feet. Famous rocks put on colours to suit the time of day. The country had a beauty which didn’t match the ideas they’d brought up from the south. Sitting on a stony hillside, looking across a plain, they discussed the idea that time made itself felt differently in the centre of the land. At considerable distance, and a little lower than they were, could be seen a crater; aeons before their thoughts had gone looking for words to dress themselves in, a meteor had hit the earth, raising a bowl behind it as it pushed its way down. Black people, they felt sure, would have taken it into their thoughts, camping there if it was suitable, avoiding it if it frightened them. Carol said to her recently acquired partner, ‘It makes me think of an expression the Elizabethans used – “time out of mind”, except it’s the opposite. It puts an awareness of time into your mind. The time it’s been there, that crater, is obvious. It’s part of the thing. It makes me think it continues to exist because

it's solidified time. Time hasn't washed it away or worn it down. It's got time beaten somehow, so that time slips away and the thing that beat it stays there, looking just a little eroded as a way to show what it's beaten. Like a fight in a boxing ring! One man's on the floor, covered in blood, and a little bit of the blood's on the body of the man that's still standing!

She looked at him with some embarrassment for having used something from the crudest realms of masculinity to express her perceptions. Tim was laughing. 'A minute ago I wanted binoculars to get a closer look! Now I'm glad I haven't got them. Who wants a landscape smeared with blood!'

Trying to get a grip on her thoughts, and the way they were affecting the two of them, Carol said, 'I'm trying really hard to say what I think about what we're seeing, and the best I can come out with is gibberish. I know it won't do but it's all I can produce. Help me Tim. Tell me what we're looking at!'

He gathered himself. 'We're looking at the opposite of Paris. You're with me, not with Martin. There's nobody around, instead of the most cultivated city in the world. There isn't a building in sight, and no galleries, either, unless a few blackfellas have been painting on the rocks behind us ...'

She broke in. 'There'd be paintings on the rocks out there, somewhere in that crater. Out of sight. Under a rock ledge so the rain couldn't get at them. They knew what they were doing.' She stopped. She knew it had been on her lips to go on: 'unlike us; how come they knew what they were doing and we haven't got a clue?'

Tim saw where she'd been going. 'That's why we've got to catch that plane and go home ...'

She broke in. 'It isn't home! It's just the place we happened to be living when we met. Two places, how silly is that, now we're together.' A doubt flashed into her mind. 'We are together, aren't we Tim? You're never going to split up with me, are you, Tim? Never? Tell me you're not, that's what I want to hear.'

He took her hand. 'Never.'

Solemn as the moment was, his voice, her anxiety, she couldn't help picking at the word. 'Never. Not ever. As long as time shall last. How awesome's that?' He answered quietly. 'As awesome as what's around us.' He glanced at the distances, the spaces surrounding them. 'We'll be defeated by time, my love, we'll grow old and die. One day. Human beings don't go on forever.' He smiled, accepting what was surfacing in his mind. 'Forever, never, ever. Ever, never, forever. We love to swear impossible things. Let's not try for the impossible. Let's just give tomorrow our best shot. That okay with you?'

She got up. Imperiously as Cleopatra or the Roman emperor who'd tried to conquer her, she indicated the car, which he'd been driving at the moment when they'd pulled up. 'Drive on. I want to see what's around the corner. Next!'

They flew home, a little more turbulent, perhaps displaced, in mind than when they set out. They caught a bus from the airport to the city, then a tram to get them home. They were moving quickly, each with a suitcase on its roller wheels, when Tim stopped. 'I think I've got an idea. I think I know what I'm going to do with myself.'

She studied him, curious, a little jealous that he should be first. 'What is it?'

'I'll start a travel agency. Specialising in all sorts of things.'

'Isn't that a contradiction?'

He smiled. 'Yes. But that's the attraction. If people want a highly organised conference, I'll organise it for them. If they want to see tribesmen in the Congo slaughtering each other, I'll get them there.' He grinned. 'I won't hang around for photos!'

She felt a weight on her soul. 'I should have something to say in reply, but I haven't.' He was quick. 'We're nearly home. Let's have tea.'

The Wedgewood pot came out, shapely, ever so sure. They felt it welcomed them, had been wanting them home to serve. Tim was still in the air. 'Breakfast tea at half past four! I love the stuff!' but

Carol felt she'd failed in her expectations of herself. 'It looks like it's me that looks after the kids.' Tim was thoughtful. 'Once we get the business started there'll be plenty for both of us to do. I like the idea of a partnership. We'll train people so that there's always at least two that can do any one thing. That way, you and I can opt in or out according to how we feel, or how busy we are on the home front. The kids will see both of us working, they'll see that either of us can finish something the other one started ...'

The future filled his kitchen, their kitchen, surrounding them. Carol said, 'I should keep my mind open. I might do something else.' He agreed, or was it consented? 'If we set things up properly, either of us could take time away. Do something else. Permanently, or just for a while. A change. People need time out. If we've got good people under us, both of us could take time off at the same time, and do something else.' He smiled. 'Don't know what. I haven't got any plans for a change. It's taken me long enough to think of the main game, let alone the offshoots.' Even so, he had a feeling they were still doing the preliminary talking, not getting started. 'I think we need a plan. Where we want to be in three years time. Steps from here to there. Years four to seven, seven to ten. We'll build in breaks for me, breaks for you.' He looked at her, wondering how she'd take the next bit. 'It was me that started in this direction. I think the next step belongs to you.'

She knew he was going to say it, and how did she feel? She wasn't sure. That made him right; she'd only know by working on the idea, making it hers, even if it was only for a while. 'I'll think about it. I'll start working on it tomorrow, when my mind's fresh.'

Tim was confident. 'You'll know in the first five minutes whether you've got any ideas or not!'

A few years later, after the birth of Jessye, and with Franz on the way, Carol decided it was time to make their home her centre. 'I'm not pulling out forever, Tim,' she told her husband, 'but I've got to make

an alternative for the children. No, I've got to give them a start that isn't ours. I don't want them growing up to be slaves of our business. They need a starting point that belongs to them.'

Tim agreed with this. He had a feeling that their home, as experienced by anyone who wasn't a traveller, might seem off-putting because impersonal. The pictures on their walls all related to the business of travel, of great destinations, of places people might long to go. The Taj Mahal, Macchu Picchu. Manhattan, the ruins of the Berlin Wall. The antarctic base at Mawson, date palms and Saharan dunes. Boats of one sort or another, the tube of a Boeing 777. They were professional, sleek, alluring, and they all invited your mind to go where they directed. Carol, wanting the opposite, reverted to the Tibetan flags that had come to their new quarters in the bottom of her case, and the photo, only one, that illustrated a place existing in her mind, Tibetan too, of a flag jagged into a rock amid the wastes of ice and snow. Having put them up, she realised she had no more, in fact they looked rather crumpled and had somehow lost their interest in the time when they'd been out of sight. What could she add? Nothing at all, nothing, she told herself, though she managed to find some pictures of the just-born Jessye, and put them on a mantelpiece, along with the pictures – same day, same time – of Jessye's mother, still overwhelmed, and father, none too sure of what had happened.

Into Carol's mind, as she put the photos where they wouldn't fall over, came her reason for giving the child the name. She wanted her to sing like Jessye Norman. Well, she was certainly capable of noise, and she, Carol, was the first to distinguish the qualities, the intent, of these sounds. The child was hungry, frustrated, bored, confused, unsure, or whatever it was, and she, Carol, the mother, was being called on to make the situation better. The heights of the Four Last Songs or Berlioz's Summer Nights were far, far away. Would little Jessye ever get there? Who could say? The world always had a few singers of Norman's quality, perhaps, and millions of failures, wretched blacks, whites and brindles whose normality was squalor and utter failure,

and hundreds of other millions, maybe billions, whose lives were decent enough but were never mentioned, never brought to mind, because there was nothing special about them. When Carol gave her first-born the name with special connotations she was making a plea for the child, a plea, not a promise, because she, Carol, the mother, couldn't deliver what she hoped for. It wasn't within her power to attract the fame, adulation, honours, she wanted for her daughter. That had to come, if it came at all, from others that she, Carol, would never know. Had she burdened her baby with an impossible load? Probably, but then every child carried some slice of the world's history, its hopes and failures, in its name and the associations reverberating from that name. If you had a great name and you couldn't match up to it, then you could laugh at yourself, scornfully, even bitterly: you would have to make peace with yourself in some way, somewhere, some day.

Never, ever, forever; John Donne's bells were ringing for you as they rang for everyone. You had to learn to live with their sounding, or learn not to hear. Carol strung up the Tibetan flags, starting in Jessye's bedroom, and then she moved them to the hall, so as to include in their meaning everyone who came through the door as it opened and closed, and she told herself to keep an eye out for other things to mark the walls of their family dwelling; she wasn't ready to pull down Macchu Picchu, the Sphinx, the pyramids and the rest of them, but neither did she admit that these were, any more, the destinations she wanted her children to want. They would work that out for themselves if they had the strength she was determined to give them!

## **8. A sprawling cottage**

Somewhere in her second pregnancy, Carol noticed a change in Tim. He became interested in houses, auctions, types of people living in any suburb. When she saw this, she realised that the same change had

begun to take place in her; they started appraising houses for sale or auction, and made excursions into areas they didn't know. Then they moved into the phase where each new place inspected confuses because you don't know what you want. It was an area of Northcote that drew them in the end, not very far from the terrace they were living in, but a sprawling, verandahed Victorian cottage, much altered over the years: a bit of a mess. 'It's a funny direction you want to take,' Carol told her partner. 'When I'm old and the kids are grown up, I'm going to claim the place I own in Point Piper. Right now, we haven't got the money to live there. Nor do the kids deserve it, and neither do I.'

Tim was amused. 'And me?'

'You belong with us.'

Amused again. 'A little bundle of destinies. Three, and soon to be four.' Carol, as was her wont, picked him up on the word. 'What does destiny mean to you?'

'It means something you can't avoid. It means the things that are going to happen, whether you want them to or not.'

She needed to fight the idea. 'Who manages our destinies? Who's in control?'

He spread his hands. 'It's a tautologous idea ...'

'What's that?'

'The man who lectured us in Philosophy said it meant a statement that referred to itself. A cat is a cat. Well nobody ever says anything as silly as that, but, unconsciously, and all the time, we do.'

'Do what?'

'We say a cat is a cat.' He laughed. 'Don't look at me like that. We do. Truly. A good example of a tautology is when two definitions send you off to go around in circles ...'

'Such as?'

He had to think. 'Let's suppose I go to the dictionary, and I look up the word A. It says, by way of telling me what I don't know, B. But I'm dumb. I don't know what B means, so I look it up in the dictionary ...'

She was doing her best to follow.

'...and when I get to B, it tells me that the meaning is A. I haven't got anywhere. To explain A, they tell me B, but when I ask them to explain B, simple as I am, all they can say is A!' It didn't make any sense to her. She wanted to shout it at him, but he knew about the problem and found it funny: she could see that. He had a way of finding most things funny, that is, ridiculous, that is, deserving to be laughed at, and it was probably the main reason why she loved him as simply, as whole-heartedly, as she did.

In her confusion, she managed to remember: 'And destinies?'

'Ah!' He had such a maddening look in his eye.

She said it again. 'Destinies?'

He said quietly, this man who was the father of her Jessye, and Franz who-was-to-be, 'Most words refer to something tangible, something that we know or think we know. Destiny is different.' He paused, trying not to make it dramatic. 'The idea of destiny, like the idea of god, is something we reach out for, thinking it ought to be there.'

'You mean it's not?'

He said it again: 'Ah!' This time she laughed. 'Do you know anything about it, or not?'

'That's the problem. We don't know if there's anything to know.' She felt like hitting him with something; that, or hitting herself for being so foolish as to want more, better, closer, something meaningful. Tim went on. 'Do events come from outside ourselves, or inside? Answer, both. If they come from outside us, can we get out of the way, and stop them affecting us?' He had his answer ready. 'Sometimes yes, sometimes no. If the cause of something happening lies inside us, does that help us prevent it, or dodge the consequences, yes or no? Answer ...'

They said it together: 'Sometimes yes, sometimes no.' Even Jessye tried to join in, but Tim was swirling ahead. 'Think about it another way. If something's *destined* to happen, it's therefore predictable.

You can say such and such is going to happen. But what are we like at predicting? Pretty hopeless, generally. So bad, so prone to wild guessing, that you have to say that destiny is a word we use to make ourselves sound wise *after* something's happened. It was inevitable, we say; so how come we couldn't get out of the way, and let it happen to someone else?

He wasn't laughing this time, but he looked benignly amused; Carol considered the man she'd taken into her life, the combination-force, she might have said. He'd never do her any harm. There wasn't any evil in him, even foolishness. Could he lift her spirits as high as she'd hoped, or was she destined – that word! – to be earthbound, a plane that never got into the air above the clouds, a bird that never got so high that you couldn't see it? Was that what she wanted? Yes, it was, but maybe the price you paid for it was too great; she didn't know yet, she wasn't even sure if she'd ever find out. It dawned on both of them at the same moment that this discussion was a prelude to, an overture, perhaps, to taking possession of the house they were borrowing money to buy, borrowing against the business they'd set up in the last four years. Travel? You had to offer people trips they wanted to make, get them bookings for aeroplanes, ships, hotels, trains, experiences that might satisfy their hopes, not unrelated to their dreams, and who could ever make them come true? 'When do we get possession?' Carol asked, though she knew well enough. 'Wednesday week,' Tim told her. 'That's when the legal people and the agents get together.' She looked at him as if he hadn't quite said it all. 'A pile of money for a block of dirt, with a funny old building sitting on top.'

'Our future, my love, or the place where it will happen.'

They took possession of the house, and a little later Franz was born, then brought to the first home of his life. Carol had realised for some time that she was no longer the centre of existence, considered as an abstract that worked upon her, nor was she, whenever the little boy

cried, anywhere near as primal. My life, she saw, is no longer anything more important than a way of seeing his, a viewpoint, a locus for responsibility, a load, a burden, to be carried with joy because she loved her children but having the second had completed her. She was a woman. Had she then inherited womanhood or had it taken her over? She tried to force herself to answer this question but found she didn't care. Womanhood had led to motherhood and it was only when she reached the point a second time that it overwhelmed her. She found it releasing. In her youth she'd struggled for identity, then had followed the time when she was embroiled in her dissatisfaction with her state as wife, she'd separated from her husband, she'd found the lover she wanted and had his child ...

Why did people say it was *his*? If it meant that the little box called 'Father' on a form could be filled in with a name, then let it be his, certainly, but not if it took attention from the centrality of a mother's position, which was paradoxical: mothers stepped back, conceding centrality to their child, yet as they did so they somehow took their importance with them, and increased it many-fold. In becoming second, in accepting attendance, they were somehow, and miraculously, becoming more than first! They were breaking through the bonds which meaning imposed, they were more than meanings because they had become their source! As she approached her little Franz, whose name she had conferred, she felt every part of her, body and mind, quivering with life. She was a goddess compelling the earth ... not to worship, though they could do that if they thought it satisfied her, but simply to acknowledge that they, the otherwise onlookers, could do nothing but admire. She tingled, she smiled like a Buddha on a day full of humour, she hardly felt the separation or approach of another. Central was her situation and it was like no other. A sexual radiance compelled morality to retreat. If she desired, when she desired, whatever she desired should follow.

It was a dangerous, because entirely holy time. Tim, her lover, father of her first child, and then her second, Franz, who'd brought

about the change, wasn't expecting, wasn't prepared, and misread the unusual state of the woman managing his household as some form of incapacity, benign no doubt, pleasantly releasing, perhaps, for the woman, but increasing the burden on the man who had to look after her.

Or so he saw it, a mistreatment of the situation which might have proved fatal. That it wasn't, that Tim and Carol – the new, altered Carol – continued together, raised their children, and fostered their business, adding people to their lives every day for years, until the end of Tim's life, which we will record in due time, was more a matter of luck than management. Or was it that destiny, so inclined, normally, to overrule, had, in their case, softened a little, and allowed a variation on what is normally a fatal plan? Here is what happened, dear reader, and remember there is nobody, absolutely none at all, in charge. The events themselves are the characters, not the people they happened to, with the effect that being impervious to judgement, they happen simply, contending with nothing but their own whims. We pause to set the scene.

Tantangara Travel was the name of Tim and Carol's business. They quickly built a reputation. Adventurous individuals found them because they saw nothing strange in strangeness. If it interested you, it was worth going to see. People who needed comfort and five stars could get their circumstances in foreign cities tailored to suit them. People who wanted to drop out, and disappear, were helped. Companies, even universities organising conferences, handed their travel arrangements to Tim and Carol. Tantangara recommended nothing unless they'd seen it from the inside, or trusted someone who had. When people got back from unusual places they found themselves questioned by those who'd made the arrangements: could it have been better? Any suggestions, any tips or hints?

Smart people heard about Tantangara in city gossip. Recommendations passed around. Having Jessye bonded her parents

to people with children of their own. When they were asked for tour guides they found people like themselves, paid them handsomely but listened to what was said after the parties got back. People came to expect quality at fair prices. TT visited embassies and consulates to enquire about incoming visitors. Hotels in their own city, hire-car companies and the like, made a point of staying in contact and of course, they knew hundreds of people, whole lists of them, in interdependent occupations. That was how Carol met Loge.

It wasn't his real name, of course. That was Wilhelm, but he'd got the nickname in his native Bavaria, and somehow managed, in the time he knew Tim and Carol, to avoid telling them how it had affixed itself to him. He loved it, of course, but not quite as much as he loved a shroud of mystery; when clouds cleared, he told Carol at the height of their passion, holy castles came into view. He was like Tim, in that he'd worked for an airline, Lufthansa, before he'd dropped back to ground, and something in him was ever ready, and searching, for flight. He was working as Development Manager for a chain of hotels, the name of his job meaning no more and no less than that he was chasing business and anyone who could divert it in his company's direction was an ally. Carol was surprised that he had so few friends, and put it down to him living in a country not his own. If he met more people then all would surely be well?

Carol was suspicious about men, and she had a husband who soothed her doubts, yet in the period after the birth of Franz she was vulnerable because she'd moved into the spotlight of perfection. She saw the treatment she got from nurses, family, friends, as natural, what she expected, her due. Franz, her baby, was a miracle, and he'd been produced inside his mother, so ... Nothing reveals our dependence on good advice more than the vulnerability that happiness brings us. Loge was villainous enough to see that with skilful management he might make Carol available. He sought her out. When Tim was inspecting places on the south coast of New South Wales he showed her two of the hotels in the chain he worked for then drove her to

her Northcote home because it was time to to relieve her baby-sitter. Jessye was at the door to meet her mother, and Loge was invited in to see the sleeping Franz. 'A German name?' he said, inquiring, and Carol told him a little about her time in France. 'Most enviable' was what Loge had to say, and left her, asking for a time when he might hear more about her doctorate, and all that she'd done since. 'I took a new direction entirely,' she told him. 'I don't think there was any planning in it, little enough forethought, for that matter. I put myself in the hands of the gods, and hoped they'd look after me. And speaking of gods ...'

He laughed. 'You call it a nickname, and you call the devil Old Nick, so don't take any notice of the name!' They were on the front verandah by then, he was leaving and there was no further arrangement to bring them together, when she said, 'No, this is a continuation of something I'd put aside, but never quite dismissed. Come in to the office some time when we're not too busy, and we can talk some more. Ring me on a Tuesday, that's when we're quietest, and we'll see if we can organise something.'

She didn't know that he had a friend in her office, a man called Drago, who could tell him when Tim was away, and so it was that her husband was organising a conference in Cairns when Loge/Wilhelm rang. They went for coffee at a place around the corner and he showed her a clutch of photos of his family, including a couple of himself as a child. Carol wanted to know about his mother, his brother and two sisters, and his father too. The Bavarian childhood with its winter blasts of snow was opened up for her, the rituals of having visitors, singing, always singing, he told her tenderly, and the way his mother had made her children aware of manners as something they must cultivate if they were to be acceptable children. Carol wanted to know about Wilhelm's father, explaining that she'd lost her father when she was quite young and didn't altogether understand what fathers did in shaping family life, it wasn't something she'd absorbed in her growing up. He asked about Tim and she told him he'd been an excellent

father for Jessye but she wasn't sure if he'd adjusted yet to having Franz; he'd been so busy with work that he hadn't done much more than rely on habit up to this point. That was when Wilhelm – Loge – played his first trick. He told Carol that she needed to insert herself in the line of cash flow approvals in their business so that she knew who, exactly, was earning how much for them, and what rewards they were achieving. Carol was surprised. She'd been inclined, from her own experience of travelling, to concentrate on ideas, quality of experience, effects of various places on people's characters, that is, what they hoped to become. 'Don't give up any of that,' he told her, 'but know what every dollar is doing, who gets it, what they do with it, who benefits for every dollar spent.' Carol was a little taken aback. 'That'd turn me into a manager instead of a leader, wouldn't it? Don't you think?'

He flattered her. Having her second child had altered her more than she'd realised. She'd become another sort of person. Her superiority was evident to anyone looking in from outside. Then he switched. He wanted to know why she'd chosen 'Jessye' as her daughter's name. That was easy. Carol relaxed, ready to laugh at herself a little. She'd been thinking of Jessye Norman the great soprano, the way she sang the Marseillaise, the closing scene of *Capriccio*, the amplitude of her voice, the way she soared in Richard Strauss, was fiery in Berlioz, or loving, the tenderness she infused into drama, the drama she wound, twisted, into the very soul of singing. 'It's what I wished I was like,' Carol admitted, 'but the truth is, I'm not, so ...'

'You wish it on your daughter.' He was watching and he knew he'd found his mark. 'And what about the little boy, the new one?' It was probably ridiculous but she didn't care. 'I want him to be a singer too!' He touched her fingers for a moment. 'There are theatres and concert halls, waiting to be filled. There are singers not yet born ... and maybe there's one that's just come into the world?' With a magic that made his nickname apt he was reminding her of humanity's aspirations to greatness, the unforgettable, the imagination that gives

birth to dreams and then – a second, furious, blazing magic – causes them to happen. ‘Think what you’ve done!’ he said, ‘and what you’re going to do, no, going to create!’ It was the word he needed to tip her over, and it did. The richness swirling inside her was a match for the happiness she’d felt lifting her for weeks; Franz would be a great singer, and if he wasn’t a singer he’d be great in some other way, though it was hard to know how anything could be as much an achievement as music, because it came from one person, supremely gifted, and flooded across mankind, lifting them, turning them from people into song, from squalid beings into pure emotion ...

It was so tempting. Loge, the magical god, was willing her to cause these things to happen, to *be* the cause, all causes ...

She was in love as she’d never been in love before. She’d been happy, but something strange had overtaken her, and she’d been moved onto a plane where cautions and restraints didn’t exist. Ordinary people had their affections but this was something else. She took his hand, the man who’d made her what she was ... now! ‘We’ve got a long way to go,’ she said. ‘I wonder how much higher we can soar!’

Nothing stays hidden. We’re more like blowflies than the gods we compare ourselves with. Gods are free of death, or said to be (who knows?), but mortals have an uncontrollable urge to possess. If we love someone we do it on our terms, unable to bear the thought of them finding love for themselves. Everyone at Tantangara Travel knew before Tim that Carol was in love with the German, and none of them knew why. He was a slippery man, and if you couldn’t trust him when he was in your sight what was he like when invisible? The travel people wondered about their jobs; would the place hold together once their boss found out? Wilhelm had the gift of getting by with short snatches of sleep in the protracted times when he was waiting for his lover to come to him, or call him to where she was. Jessye, her little girl, knew that there were voices and footsteps, the opening and closing of doors that weren’t to do with her daddy’s arrivals and departures, but their

house had always been like that – people coming and going, talking as soon as they came. There was nothing new about this; it wasn't even disturbing. She sat on Wilhelm's knees when he asked her to and she knew that he loved it when she told him things they did in her house, the house where he was a visitor of special status which she couldn't understand. 'Why are you here?' she'd ask him, and he'd tell her how lucky she was to have the mother she had, and this was puzzling, somehow displeasing, to Jessye. What it disguised, what it intended to conceal, she couldn't imagine ... but then, although her imagination was very active at the age of three, it hadn't learned to travel very far. She knew her mother changed when the visitor was about, and became even more loving, and attentive to her little ones, so she supposed that whatever was going on must be all right.

Was she right, the child, in her judgement of the love enacted around her? We have to say she was because sexual passion is the most subjective force in the human armoury of storms. Jessye was right because what she felt dealt adequately with what she knew. While her mother's love was flowing, her child was a beneficiary. Carol could have told her that her husband would have hated to see his child on the knee of the lover, but he didn't know ...

The Tantangara staff waited, calculating, watching. It was only a matter of time. Carol's standing protected her, but not against the jealous ambition of a young woman who took care of the firm's legal problems, Meriel Kahn, who chose to let her hair, long and black, cover her face as frequently as possible. An infrequent visitor to the offices, she was among the first to realise. Her moment came when an agitated Tim made an appointment to see her in her firm's offices, not his. He was afraid of losing Tantangara; Carol, he told her, could do anything, she was ... he was lost for words ... she was *silly*! He went on as long as the lawyer would listen. She'd lost control of herself, she wasn't the woman she'd been, their children, he told Meriel, hardly knew their mother when they saw her. She was making mistakes at work, she'd always been reliable, now he had to check everything and

when she saw him inspecting her work they quarrelled, first, then she started countermanding things he'd done as if she had the right to interfere when he understood them much better ...

Meriel asked him what outcome he wanted. 'Do you need me to put alternatives, or are you clear in your mind about what to do next?' Something about the question, or the way she put it, surprised him. He looked at her as he'd never looked at anyone before. Meriel, knowing that the blow had landed, lowered her head, turning it a little, so that almost none of her face was visible. Her left eye watched him through the hair as he stumbled. 'I'm clear! I'm clear all right! I'm perfectly clear!' She moved her head slightly, acknowledging. His words poured out. He and his wife would split the business. They couldn't go on working together. They'd have to sell the house, and then there'd be the responsibility for the children. 'I suppose she'll have to have Franz for a while because he'll need his mother more than he needs me ...' he was starting to cry '... but Jessye's mine! Mine! She needs a role model, Carol's not fit to model anybody, the way she is now!'

By the time it ended Meriel had control of him. Those eyes, shown to him occasionally, so intense, demanding, then almost hidden as if she was refusing elements of herself, and then - ah! - withdrawn, complete refusal to a man whose need was extreme. Tim asked himself what he would do - if there was *anything* he would be able to do - if he went to Meriel's office and she wouldn't see him? Another refusal would end him, surely? He dreaded the advice she gave him but he dreaded its absence more. 'The first thing we'll have to do is see if there's anything we can't deny her. I want to keep everything in your hands ...' - she nearly said 'our' - '... but we may have to split the business somewhere to get rid of her. I'll look at that. What have you got on paper? When we make a move, it won't be indecisive. She won't know what's hit her. You may not be able to see it at this stage but these things get worse the longer they drag on. Short sharp and brutal is best. Let me think. You're renting the

premises, that's good. No arguments there. You can transfer the rental to your name, or find yourself somewhere else, that won't be hard. Property market's healthy.' Tim was in no position to understand himself. Following Meriel's directions was the only thought in his mind, the only escape from the horror of what Carol was doing to him. When he saw the lustre in her dark eyes he felt, for perhaps the only moment in the day, that he was safe. When she withdrew his opportunity to see into her, he was lost, and afraid. The rage he felt for Carol turned into confusion that could only be overcome by obedience to this other, powerful will, this woman who revealed herself, or didn't, as she pleased. It was a simple transfer that he was making without understanding; the extent of his involvement made itself apparent to him when, referring to some letters she wanted him to hand her for inspection, she said, both eyes turned on him, fixed, 'Where would you like to meet me for that?'

Meet her? Doors opened, barriers crumbled. Fulfilment offered itself, after failure. Meet her? Where? His mind grabbed quickly, risking itself as it did so. 'I've got to visit some places along the south coast of New South Wales. Developments proposed. Aimed at our sort of clientele. They want our advice ...'

She was entertained: 'Our?'

He couldn't suppress a laugh, though he was stumbling. 'I'll always do what you say!'

It was the declaration she'd been bringing him to make. 'How many days? Away?'

'Four. They say three but we can stretch it.' He was looking at her. He hadn't done anything like this in years, possibly never. She took hold of the arrangement; arranged it, we might say. 'Let's say three days. Three days then back home on the plane. As to the fourth day, we'll make up our minds about that later.'

Affairs have a way of starting with a rush. Rebounding is quick, and usually thoughtless. Vengeance is easily seized, rarely regretted until

much later. Passions need to be trained before they're allowed their head. Fools, and that means all of us, are sure they're right. Tim, for instance, was quick to see that Wilhelm the German, the mischievous Loge, was his enemy not only in being Carol's lover, but in having an eye on displacing her husband from the travel agency the two had built. He'd take over if he got half a chance. It was much, much later before he saw that the same was true of Meriel. He didn't think of her that way because possession, the burning strand of thought running through all he did with her, meant sexual possession for him and it never entered his thoughts that possession might mean something else for Meriel. She had a way of spreading herself on the beds they shared and turning away so that, inspecting her, he saw nothing of her thoughts but hair.

Hair! Parts of the body are covered with it and parts are bare. Where her skin was available, he caressed, but it was the covering that he yearned to penetrate. He wanted her revealed and she wanted herself hidden; it was as simple as that. Her yielding was effected by letting him see her eyes, her inner feelings. In his hot rushes of passion he never perceived that she, in her turn, was looking into him, and that he was open to her management. He offered himself with no thought of the value, if kept in reserve, of what he was yielding. He had no idea that possession took many forms, and that he was, perhaps, the loser to a much more subtle player.

It didn't occur to Tim, who thought himself master of the sexual concurrences he had with Meriel, that she was inviting him, not only into her body, but into her mind as well. He loved the openness, the frankness, which arrived when she opened her eyes so that they dealt with the probing, and also the surrender, of his. His confidence made him careless with what he allowed her to see. He was excitable, he looked out for new experiences, he was confident anywhere and with anyone, and he liked to be in charge. None of these threatened her, indeed they hardly challenged. What made him worthwhile in Meriel's eyes was that he could create and he'd done it, in the case of

his business, by giving opportunities to others rather than grasping for himself. Insofar as he was selfish, he was unselfishly so, and this made him valuable to her, and easy to direct. She saw, as he could not, that what had happened with his partner, Carol, was that she'd attained, unexpectedly, for Meriel was sure that Carol hadn't known it was coming, that state, that blessed moment, of feeling central to anything and all. This, Carol had thought, gave her the right to anything because whatever she attracted would be turned outwards again, given back, transformed by that central mothering state. There was no wrong in it, in Carol's eyes, no wrong at all, therefore Tim, her partner, had no right to the rage he'd flung himself into: his anger, his state of withdrawal, simply left room for her to better explore the desire, the adoration she saw, or believed she saw, in Wilhelm's eyes. Even he, trickster that he was, could hardly deceive her because her love for him was a brilliantly formed piece of self-deception putting her almost beyond the scope of the god's deceiving.

If Carol was vulnerable, it was through her daughter. Jessye had grasped that something was going on but had no framework of understanding, no pattern to fit events into. Her mother's love flowed through Jessye's hours as freely as before, but her father, the child observed, was different. Instead of tossing her about, squeezing huge squeezes and making silly noises, he watched her now, affectionate but not spontaneous because he was looking for signs of being usurped by the god of deception known as Loge. Tim knew, from things his child said, that this usurper sometimes had the girl on his knee, that her mother wanted Jessye to like having him in the house, though what the child did when they were love-making he didn't know. Perhaps they had rules ... It seemed strange to think of lovers curbing their satisfactions for the sake of a child, but he supposed they might. The potential for having another child hung over his every encounter with Meriel; she was a combative woman who turned her body, open towards him except for the hair hiding her eyes. These she showed to him only when their lovemaking left them exhausted.

These were times of emptiness, it seemed to Tim, who felt proud when his recovery was quick; readiness for more loving was the mark of a man! Meriel was unlike Carol in being able to estimate how close to perfection her love-partner's efforts had been. She was waiting for the moment when Tim's anxieties would be as great as his joy and his need for her. What would that need be, when it reached its peak? She wrapped herself about him knowing that he thought of himself as taking possession, of forcing her to demand that she be fertilised. Lying beside him she put his hand where their child would form, if this were to happen. She never said she wanted it, nor that she didn't. It seemed to him that she left it to chance, and he was therefore its willing agent. This was something he loved – that he was more than himself, he was destiny, he was what made things happen, he...

Occasionally, though not often, it struck him that his daughter was a woman too, or if she wasn't now she would become one. When did things begin? How early in pregnancy did the mother's body decide to make the child male or female, and how did it decide? Or didn't it decide because it couldn't? Tim realised he'd never known when nature's decision was set 'in stone', as people said, when the better term would have been 'in the flesh': flesh was the reality that mattered. You could make a building, even a mighty barrier, out of stone, but flesh gave you humans, in all their weakness and uncertainty ...

Flesh. Trees had flesh, and so did birds, fish, insects, butterflies and worms. Well, flesh of a sort, an interchangeable substance which linked the living creatures for all their differences. Flesh was tautologically linked to life. If you had the one you had the other, and vice versa. Flesh, he thought, was not quite tautologically linked to destiny, though it was easily, obviously, certainly clear that if you possessed the first you had the second hovering. In a sudden moment of return to what had for long been realities of greatest importance, he recalled his conversation about tautology with Carol, and realised he was still linked to her. Their lives were bound, now, in a newer, thoroughly impossible way, with the extra complication of two other

people, Wilhem (Loge) and Meriel, whose movements couldn't be predicted as easily as those of the couple who'd been a couple before everything now on the table – in the bed – had started. He wondered if he'd ever talk with Carol about tautologies again, and he didn't know. He didn't know which direction you looked if you wanted to see the future, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

They'd made an awful, impossible situation, and nobody knew where it would take them, or even what they wanted to be the outcome(s) of their disturbance.

Carol took Wilhelm to bed, thinking of him, though she didn't say his name, as the god of mischief. Somehow he knew this. Whatever she wanted on this occasion had to be given her by fire's magic-man: he was ready! He loved her as perfectly as only an imperfect man can do. The major block to humanity's progress is not so much the quality, the grandeur, of the peaks we attain, but our inability to sustain them. Wilhelm knew he could never sustain the perfection Carol enjoyed, both in herself and in her taking from him. No, he'd fail, he'd stagger away one day in a cloak of hypocrisy and shame, leaving her amazed that she'd shared so much with someone who'd never been anything but a skunk ...

Somewhere in himself he was amused that it was always the creatures mankind despised who were attributed the deepest failings of mankind itself. When humanity was at its most loathsome, it called those causing its displeasure by such names as rat, pig, swine, resorting only when these failed, to words belonging to itself such as cunt, bastard, shitface ...

... and so on. The words humanity found in its times of self-hatred couldn't be uncoupled from the thoughts that came in its moments of radiance, and he was in full possession, was indeed the cause, of such radiance. He knew that his times would never bring him a higher peak than this, and it was her peak he was using, dwelt on for the hours of glory, because he was essentially bound to her in

worship, and the moment she saw in his eyes anything less than the worship she knew she inspired, then he would be cast off and she'd be left trying to reconstruct her life from whatever was left.

For perhaps the first time in his life, and certainly since his childhood had slipped away, Loge, Wilhelm – they were coupled for a moment – felt responsible. If we had been able to break between him and Carol when she was in her ecstasies and he was most excited, if we had been able to force him to speak, he would have told us that he wanted to give her a good time, that she deserved it because she was capable of so much more than he was and so much more than her husband could give her too.

Loge excused himself for not being any better than he was by saying that nobody else was any better. The peak where Carol stood – no, lay! – was hers alone! For himself, he was a shit, a turd, a heap of alligator excrement, no better, useful only if you wanted something for your garden.

What would he be good for when she was no longer part of his life?

She's making me better than I really am, he told himself. Could he turn the deception, Carol's self-deception, into something lifelong? No hope of that. She was a partner in a valuable business; could he somehow make it his? He couldn't see any way he could push her husband out of the business, but something might fall his way ...

What kept him going was his joy in deception. It amused him to be loved. He knew the people at the travel office were sceptical of him, but had to be polite as long as Carol glowed when he came near: the people at Tantangara couldn't fail to see that; as for the people at his workplace, they hardly came into it except to enjoy his good humour. He was walking tall, he was hearing the thoughts that made themselves into words and, psychically, many that didn't. His awareness was electric; this is often the way with love, improving us in all sorts of ways. One of the reasons for enjoying love when it was there for the picking was that there'd come a season when he was

without, again. Therefore enjoy what was offering, juicy as an orange, luscious as a peach. Carol knew how beautiful her body was, and so did he. As he ran his fingers tenderly across her, she deepened in delight, her eyes blazed, her mind became the reverberating space for all the sensations rushing through her, currents in the systems created by life to recreate itself. She humbled him, over and over, as she humbled herself, mother before her children, especially the youngest child. 'What will he be?' she would ask. 'What will he become?' Wilhelm, unable to answer, would turn the question onto the future: 'One of these days you'll know', he would say: 'the realisation will come', and he'd turn those deceptive eyes on hers and ask her to promise that she'd tell him what she'd learned the moment it had come clear to her. So Wilhelm was no blockage in the path of tiny Franz's development. He saw that while the child prospered, so would the mother, and it was her power, her magical condition he wanted to sustain. He was in benefit, every minute, day and night, from her exalted state, and so was the whole world except, perhaps, for Tim, the wonderwoman's partner. Wilhelm listened to anything Carol said about her partner because he knew that Tim's pain, distancing, confusion, separation, anger were all part of their situation and if Tim changed then the situation of all of them changed. The best thing that could happen, Wilhelm-Loge decided, would be if Tim's other partner, the lawyer Meriel, became gravid with his child.

This was what Meriel wanted. Hair was not her only disguise. Her job, her work, her impatience, her dance with fashion, the ferocity of her management of her customers' businesses, the methods she used to enforce the opinions that suited her and her clientele, these were all parts of her way of telling the world how organised she was, how socially decisive she was, when in fact she was doing little more than waiting for the opportunity to continue herself. There was a generation to come, and she hadn't yet put a child there as her monument, her offering, her sign of willingness to be judged by what she'd done.

For most of us, our children are the truest test of what we've been, of what we were. Our children, if we have them, see us from within. No test is sterner. Some women welcome it, others dread. Meriel wanted to be put to the test but bridled at any suggestion that there was any shortcoming attached to her state of being without a child. She aggressively defended herself as she was, while yearning to be altered. Her need was too great to be admitted. A ring of scorn surrounded her, or else contempt. Something in her needed that shake, that tumbling of her head when she was about to make love; she wanted to see without being seen. This was impossible, but it was what she wanted. She quickly trained Tim to love her with obedience, that is, to lie beneath her, allowing the torrent within her to flow out. His obedience contained its opposite, a wish to dominate himself, and so it was that their lovemaking was not so much mutual in its expression as an alternation of who was on top. Sometimes, however, they were in accord. Sometimes she would kneel on the bed, back curving and bottom out, arms forward, clutching their pillows, and looking, yes looking at him, directing him with a movement of the eyes, now visible. She wanted him to enter from behind.

This was a command. He obeyed, accepting the mastery she offered, he entered and thrust himself in, drew back and then thrust again, and again, clutching the tips of her fingers with the delicacy of someone profoundly, respectfully accepting the love he was being given, until his semen spurted into her quivering body. When their bodies had expressed themselves in this way she wriggled around to face him, legs extended, arms clinging to his waist, out the other side of her problem, ready to bear his child, their child together, happily, if their union had been successful.

So far it hadn't. This was partly their own doing, partly their fortune or misfortune. He contracepted frequently, though he knew she wanted him free of prevention; sometimes she came to him contrary to her own wishes, blocking what might occur. They neither talked about this, nor planned it. Both knew what she wanted, each

feared it, though wanting it also with, in his case, some part of himself, in her case, totally. ‘Someone who knew what we were doing would say we were silly,’ he said to her once, as they lay pressed together, exhausted yet ready to go again, ‘yet it’s the truth that we’re enacting. Is that how it is for you?’ She nodded her head, staring into his eyes. ‘The truth?’ she said, as if the idea was impossible and to mention it was ridiculous. ‘Yes. It’s too much for most people to face, so they’re scared. But us?’

All she needed to do was lift her hand, and he knew he’d been included. Uplifted states can’t last but even fallible humans know how important it is to know when they occur.

Carol could see that her husband had been happy while he was away. She could tell he’d had *her* with him. Carol was quiet. She made sure that nothing she said, or did, would rub against him. She told him things the children had done, so that he was happy to be home. Noticing this, he was appreciative. She was trying, he saw, so he was happy to do the same. For the first day back, this might be an effort, then he settled into respectful behaviour. Jessye noticed that whatever had been shading their house for weeks had vanished, and she became noisy herself, provoking her parents to nothing more than cheerful exasperation; each was too aware of the removal of tension to want it back. Jessye asked her mother about Wilhelm – the funny German man, she called him – and Carol was non-committal: ‘I haven’t seen him for a few days. Have you?’ This was so silly that Jessye laughed. How would she have seen Wilhelm when he only came for mum? Teasing her mother, she said, ‘I’m going to send him a message!’ and this in turn amused Carol. ‘How are you going to do that?’ It occurred to the child that her mother must have ways of sending messages to the German man, because no sooner was Jessye’s father away than the other appeared at their door, a casual visitor, except he wasn’t. There was nothing casual about his visits, Jessye could tell! And when he was there?

Her mother was different. It was as if, on a normal day, she was part of the house, a consistent part, like the curtains or the dining room table, but when *he* was there, she separated from everything else, and there was no automatic, natural way to reach her, she was only available if she chose to notice you, and Jessye didn't like that, although she had no idea what she could do to make things different. It wasn't as if Carol, her mother, didn't love her, but she seemed to have a choice about things, everything ... She did different things, and she did them differently. She was waiting, expectantly, and, although Jessye couldn't have said this in these words, she sensed that she was *inside* a decision. They normally took only a moment – Carol was naturally decisive, as was Tim – but this one seemed to last forever. 'What are you gonna do mum?' the child said one day, and the detached, marmoreal Carol said, 'Live one day at a time. Just like you, my love,' which showed Jessye that her mother hadn't realised that she, Jessye, was afloat in a continuity that emanated from whatever was going on between her parents, but came, mostly, from that sense of removal that invested her mother and had done for weeks. Wanting to please her mother, to get inside whatever it was that cloaked her, Jessye ran to her and clutched her legs. Carol lifted her daughter lovingly, kissed her, then drew back a fraction to see what could be seen of the thoughts inside. Jessye said – and knew, as she said it, that it wasn't true – 'I'm not living a day at a time, mummy, I'm living a minute at a time.' The mother, like the child, felt the falsehood. 'Then,' she said, 'this is a good minute we're having.' What could she say after that? There was nothing. She put her daughter down and Jessye saw her open the cupboards under the sink where pots and pans were housed. 'What're you gonna do, mummy?' Carol said, in a way that showed she'd got control again, 'Make bikkies. I'm wondering what sort?' She was offering Jessye excitement, and sharing in the making, and the waiting while they cooked, and then, of course, when they came out of the oven, filling the kitchen with delicious smells ...

‘I’m gonna help, mum, mummy, what can I do?’ Carol wasn’t ready, she was opening the door of the old-fashioned pantry their house held dear. ‘Let’s see what we’ve got. It’s a while since I looked in here ...’ Jessye rushed to take anything her mother handed down, but Carol was listening. ‘What was that? I thought I heard little Franzy waking up.’ She was listening closely but her daughter was scornful. ‘No, mum, he won’t wake up for ages, and when he does he can suck on a bikkie. It’ll help him grow his teeth!’ It pleased Carol to have her speak in this way, no, to take control, really, because, although she felt no less detached, serene, almost angel-on-earth-like she knew, now, how much her daughter needed relief from the situation she was responsible for. So they made biscuits, and cooked them, and for an hour the house was as it had always been.

Then there was a mix-up. It happened like this. Some developers had been considering a multi-million dollar investment on a series of islands off the Queensland coast. They wanted Tantangara to advise them on the feasibility of getting people to pay for what would essentially be an ecological tour rather than a luxury stay at one venue. Tourists would fly to Townsville and travel via various places in the coastal mountains to Cairns, then return via a series of island-hops in the vicinity of Mission Beach. Would people come? What sort of facilities would they expect along the way? Tim told Carol that since she’d lived in the area, she should be the one to advise. She accused him of wanting her out of the way. He wanted to bring Meriel to their house, he wanted their children to get used to another woman – ‘an alternative mother’ as she put it – he wanted to reduce her influence over her children by making them dependent on himself and Meriel, who wasn’t to be trusted because ...

‘Last time one of us went away, it was me,’ he told her. ‘It’s simple. It’s your turn. And yes, I’ll have Meriel come and visit me. But I’ll get her to leave early in the morning so the children don’t know she’s been here all night. They’re used to her. She’s no threat.’ Carol was

scornful. ‘Of course she’s a threat. We’ve built a business. She’d like to edge me out and become the other half. If that’s not a threat, what is?’ And so it went on for days, but in the end it was Carol who flew to Townsville to do the appraisal, but, to the considerable surprise of Tim and Meriel, they were interrupted on their first evening together by a series of knocks on the door, and a loud, cheery call from a voice they didn’t know. Tim opened the door and found himself looking at Wilhelm.

‘William,’ he said. ‘You know of course she’s not here?’

Wilhelm quickly found the Loge in himself. ‘What have you done with her?’

Tim was going to punch the unwelcome visitor but Meriel intervened. ‘Oh don’t be ridiculous you two.’ And then to Wilhelm: ‘Why are you here?’

‘I’m expected. I’m invited. Why are *you* here?’

It took a long time because Tim and Wilhelm didn’t want it worked out, they wanted to quarrel. To fight. Each to end the other’s existence. Meriel found herself talking the talk of conflict resolution until each had heard enough of the other for some peace to be restored. Wilhelm had got it wrong. Either that or he’d stopped listening before the dispute between Tim and Carol as to who would go on the appraisal mission had been resolved. Wilhelm, who normally stopped listening to anybody once he’d heard what he wanted, wasn’t conceding any fault, so he and his lover’s husband fought each other under the guise of polite inquiry into a mysterious mistake. Eventually Meriel told them they were spoiling what might have been a good evening so they’d have to stop. They couldn’t. They quarrelled on, hatred hardly disguised. She left. Tim did everything he could to stop her but she said her position was impossible, there was no way she could enjoy the evening, the visit – she was searching for words to cut him, but couldn’t find them – so she was going.

She went. The two men heard her car start up, they heard it turn out of the street, and they were left with each other, two storming,

fuming, men, and, asleep in other rooms, two children whose mother was somewhere in Queensland, on sea or on land, depending on the developers' arrangements. Tim wanted to be rid of Wilhelm, but saw that he'd have to ease him out of the house because Wilhelm, in his Loge mood, would love to stay and needle him.

'Carol's promised to ring me when she gets to Cairns. I'll tell her what's happened. I'll let her know you called.'

'We don't know what's happened, yet. We never do, not quickly. Things take time to be understood.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Loge had the upper hand. 'This confusion, this mistake, as you call it, will have results.'

'Such as?'

'We're not yet in a position even to guess.'

'Oh Jesus. How you give me the shits. You've spoiled my night, you've spoiled my time with Meriel, I've got a lot to thank you for ...'

And so on. Meanwhile, alone in a hotel room, Carol was studying herself in a full length mirror. Twenty-eight, body not much changed by having children, pads of flesh near her hips, tummy not quite as flat as it used to be, bottom not as tight, but fair condition nevertheless. She moved closer to look into her own eyes. Eyes were strange. They looked into everything but when you looked at them looking, there wasn't much to see. Eyes in a mirror imitated eyes in a head. She, Carol, was behind the eyes in her head but who was behind the eyes in the mirror? Her understanding of herself. Her feelings about herself. Was her future there, observable? It *must* be there, there must be a way to see it. Most of the things that happened to her, to anybody, were fairly predictable, therefore the future, or a knowledgeable guess at it, was somewhere not far away – at hand, as people said – waiting to happen. What was going to happen to her?

She felt she understood her position by now. Somehow she'd outdistanced Tim, her partner, she'd left him behind for a while. Could he ever catch up? Was there a male equivalent for what she'd

become as a woman, and could he reach it? Did he want to? Was he trying? He had a woman who wanted to have a child with him, and then take her, Carol's, position. The business, the house, probably. Tim's vanity came into her mind. The face in the mirror changed not at all. Tim had to have his pride. He'd fallen behind his wife, he was ahead again with Meriel, smart as she was, because she wasn't yet a mother. Carol noticed the eye in the mirror distracted by a sound; a truck was passing by. The sound went away, the eye settled. It was as if, she thought, her husband Tim in mind, he had one powerful card left in his hand, and only one. When he played it, he would have no more cards of significance. The card was his announcement of his answer to the question, what would he do? Return to the mother of his children and continue the old life, taking it forward as best he could, asking forgiveness of her and giving his forgiveness for what she'd done to him, all the while levelling himself, aligning himself with her status as a mother by becoming the father his children wanted him to be, or would he ...

The person in the mirror was agitated. No, she was signalling, that other woman Carol was looking at. Don't say it! Don't even think the thought!

Carol knew in a moment what she wanted. Wilhelm had to go. He'd carry on like Loge at the rim of the stage, dancing about, singing magic songs, and she'd be tempted to rush away from her audience to whatever room offstage was his ...

But no. She wouldn't be tempted. She wouldn't allow it. He was a fraud, pretending love that wasn't in him. He knew how to seem, he didn't know how to *be*. She didn't want him, even though the moment she saw him moving away she was filled with a yearning full of pain. No! Don't go away! Entrance me again and again, over and over ...

He was gone, though. The mirror was empty. What? Where was she? She was lying on the bed, sobbing. She was alone, and she didn't want to be. She wanted her children, her feeling of fullness. Would that ever come back? Perhaps – that was the best answer she could

hear, listening to the silence. The truck, or another one, passed down the street outside. She remembered her talk with Tim about destiny. It had caught her, alone in Townsville, she'd heard what it had to say, and she'd accepted. To appease it, to get rid of it, she was paying a price, *the* price of her exalted sense of self. She couldn't have that any more. She had to be an ordinary person, indistinguishable from the others in a milling street of people rushing, dawdling or whatever they were doing, here and there, these and those, none of them outranking the rest. She had a job to do, something to do with organising a new sort of trip. Townsville, where she was, would be the start. Mount Bartle Frere, Mount Bellenden Ker. Cairns, where she'd ...

... this and that ...

... and then a boat trip back again, down the coast, visiting those magic isles, yes, she'd recommend it, she felt sure, because it had all been a part of her, was a part of her still, and had repossessed her. The islands had made her their own. How had she ever imagined she was a free agent? Her children belonged to her, and she to them. Her husband was their father, she couldn't put him out. But where was he now, what was he doing ...

She got into bed and slept.

In Melbourne, after a shower, Meriel studied herself, as best she could, in an apartment, wretchedly furnished, that didn't have a decent mirror. Few of those who knew her had been inside the place. Meriel wasn't normally into intimacy; presentation mattered more. She would in fact probably only make one home in the remainder of her life, but was this still going to happen, as she'd hoped, or ...

She looked. She could see herself well enough. What was the verdict?

It depended on Tim, married to another woman. He'd given this woman her two children. She spoke to the mirror. 'What about mine?' The mirror didn't answer. Meriel knew she was looking at her self, and that other self, the helpless rendition there in the glass,

didn't know. What was the use of it? She looked around. The limited, tasteless furnishings of her apartment knew even less.

She looked back at the mirror, examining her self. Self? What did that mean? She would have said, wrongly, that she didn't care about herself. What happened was more important than any of the selves in the world. They all wanted the same thing, to be loved. She was, though, heavily dependent not so much on getting love as on its aftermath. Love was a stage, a step from here to there, part of a development process that every woman had to go through to become a mother. She looked at herself, eyes blazing, both of them, both, that is to say, the person in the mirror and the other, free to walk around. The walking around one, the one on this side of the glass, controlled the other because whatever A did, B had to imitate.

At once!

If it was a Hitlerian world the mirror woman lived in, then so, by definition, by inescapable imitation, was the world of the 'free' woman reflected in the glass. She was no more free than the other woman who moved her; she, needing a transition in her life if she was to undergo the change she had to pass through, couldn't get it by looking at a mirror! She sat down, noticing, in the moment she moved away, that her hair was beautiful and her eyes intense. How immensely, how totally, she wanted! What she wanted, though, was too abstract to grasp. She wanted a transition, a passing from this to that. Once it was underway, once the beginning was definitely behind so that the process, and ultimately the end, were the only things to think about, she'd be secure. It was, what she wanted, in its way a second birth. Born a girl, she wanted to be a woman. This was the power of men – self-centred, vain, self-obsessed as they were – that they were needed for a girl to become a woman. They were the way, the initiation, the obstacle in the path. One had to wheedle, negotiate, or give! Yes, give to them in order to make the passage from one state to the other. She thought of Tim. He'd be back, needing reassurance because his wife was somewhere headed for the stars, but when he

came back he'd be needing her attention, her caring, thoughtful, imaginative looking after. Wanting, in a word, to be rebuilt after his loss. She knew, without looking in the mirror, that she could do that well enough, but did she want to? Where would it take her?

It had brought her where she was going. Her rooms were a beach laden with washed up detritus. Trash, there was nothing better in her abode. What did the word mean? She looked around. All it meant to her was emptiness. It had no life of its own, it couldn't make a sound for itself. If a child had ever spoken in its spaces, the memory had died. She didn't want to talk in these rooms because they held nothing but that wretched mirror, half-length at that! She thought of throwing it out then realised she should do the leaving herself, and let the mirror stay behind.

Yes. A decision had been made. What about her job? Change? No, one step at a time. She'd get somewhere else to live, furnish it well, put pictures on the walls, make curtains ... She'd spend some of the money she'd been hoarding to make a home for herself instead of a cell clanging behind when she pushed her way through its door. 'I will pretend', she said, and this time she stood, glancing at the mirror that had caused these changes in her, 'I will start again. Have another try. But I'll be doing it from somewhere else. This place, this base, has brought me nothing.'

## **9. Shielding an inner exhaustion**

Tim brought builders to the house. They opened up an enclosed verandah, but re-enclosed one end as an office. Tim told Carol it was for both of them but he sat there so often, when he was home, that she felt it was a place of detachment that he needed to make himself part of the family again. She often sat in the room when he was away, and she felt it had an atmosphere of withdrawal, a helpless, abject

feeling, a weakness, an inability, that he wanted to keep hidden. She never worked in the new office, telling him, lightly enough, that she did home things at home and work things at work. He accepted this. It was his retreat he'd built, not hers. Women were supposed to be weaker than men but he knew it wasn't so. He needed the protection the room gave him. It introduced to the home a little of the superiority, the seniority, which was his at Tantangara.

Carol didn't mind him making a room for himself. She knew as soon as the builders arrived that Tim was putting himself back in their marriage, though it might take years before they settled on the terms. She felt sorry for her husband, as she sat in the new room. He didn't do much work there. There were lists, notes, a few brochures he was drawing up to be printed. None of it was in any way more important than the stuff he kept at Tantangara, as he liked to call the real office. He had a way of speaking humorously of it, though some of the people working there were brilliant. Tim was a confident boss, letting the people who worked for him do things in whatever way suited them. He told them he was interested in results, not methods, and he was as good as his word. Most of the people in the office who knew about his marital upheaval thought he'd settled back into his family role deeply and thoroughly, not seeing, as Carol could, that he was ashamed of himself. Carol told him, on an occasion when he'd come home unexpectedly in the middle of the day and found her in the new office, that he needed to see Meriel, and help her through the next stage of her recovery, if, indeed, she was recovering. 'You need to get her on her feet again,' she said. 'I won't mind if you take time out to do that.'

It only depressed him, she could see. He said it was kind of her ... but gave the impression that maybe it was he who needed help, more than Meriel, and she, Carol couldn't give it to him because she, and her ... whatever it was that had led to the rift between them, had been, and still was, the source of the problem. It reminded her that when she'd been a young woman, in Paris and in Sydney, all those

years ago, she'd felt scorn for men because they were the problem. She'd located it in them. Now it was everywhere, like the germs of a disease, and might strike anybody. She looked at herself.

What had she done? She'd had her moment of glory, and it was over. Worse, she'd had it with someone of no special quality, whom she never wanted to see again. A deceptive man, she thought, was Wilhelm/Loge, and his worst feature was that he'd deceived himself as a way of deceiving her. But it can't be stripped from him, she thought, that he gave me – told me, showed me to myself reflected in his eyes – it can't be stripped from him that when I told myself that he loved me I moved to a plane I'll never reach again. The peak of her life had been passed. Was life, then, all downhill from where she stood? She thought it was, yet that was intolerable.

So what to do? She had her children, there was no end to their demands and therefore no end to the minor fulfilments of making them happy, or sorting out their troubles. But how trivial it all was. The only challenges were to her patience, her ability to outlast the children one exhausting day after another. Tim took much of the burden from her yet he too, she saw, was shielding an inner exhaustion. He too had over-committed with Meriel and was nursing himself back to health, no matter how much he did for his kids. He was like a ship that had been through a storm and wanted nothing, now, but to be spared any sort of blast or challenge. He wanted everything quiet and ordinary; Carol saw, watching him with customers at their travel agency, that he was no longer as anxious to get away to exotic places as their customers, but was reflecting, almost mimicking, their enthusiasms as they were shown to him, while, deep down, he didn't want to go anywhere but into his heart, and soothe it. Recovery was all he wanted, and, Carol could see, that meant that somebody had to bring in help from the outside, and no matter how attentive she might be, how tender or concerned, it wouldn't be Tim's wife who brought him his recovery, no matter how far away, or close, it happened to be.

Tim, for his part, could see the efforts his wife was making for their children, their household, and their business. He was grateful. In occasional optimistic moments he dared to dream that they might recover their intimacy, their trust. At other times he felt there was no hope. Common sense, something he trusted deeply, told him that some new factor, a personality, a change in the nature of their business, or maybe a change in the sort of demands coming in from their customers, would bring about a change that couldn't be foreseen: the thing to do, then, was to work away quietly, not trying to change anything, in their business or themselves, but to wait for the redeeming moment. They would know what to do when it came, surely?

The worst of it, for Carol, was sharing the bed she'd always shared with Tim. She didn't want him, or anyone, close to her while she found a way forward. Yet when he got in with her at night, she felt that unconsciously he was accepting a pain, a punishment, and that it was part of his way back to her – whether she wanted it or not. That meant that he'd not been as far from the marriage, as remote, as she had, and had less distance to travel as he made his return. She wasn't even sure that coming back was what she wanted to do.

There was also their business. It held them together. It was a habit for them, a custom, that they couldn't avoid without forcing themselves, one, the other, or both, into a new direction. No such direction was apparent. Stricken as they were, they still owned, shared, a successful business. More correctly, both of them could see, it owned them. So the life of their business was the state of their marriage. They were fortunate in the availability of passivity. They only needed a decision or two, a bright idea occasionally, to keep it going because it was going well already and was in the hands, in its day to day running, of people younger than themselves, more sharply, perhaps greedily, focussed, who wanted it to prosper.

As it did. The marriage then, though neither partner entirely understood this, was in the hands of the travelling public, and the clever young people they'd taken on to serve their interests. Carol's

hours at the office depended on her children. She got in for a while on most days, and that was enough because she and Tim had divided the functions of the agency so that he managed things like group tours that had to be negotiated while she took charge of conventional bookings, and to help her she had two very bright young people called Chris and Kris. These names gave rise to endless jokes, the cleaner ones being of the crossword puzzle variety – Malay dagger, in four letters, third letter I – while Chris the young man had been credited with having, though none of them had seen it, a lengthy penis. So another line of humour had Kris known as the short one while Chris was taken to be lengthy. Very little of this got to the ears of customers but in the room where they had coffee or a lunch break word play of this sort went on almost every day. It was impersonal and it seemed to free up their minds for work if they babbled this cheeky sexual chit-chat at each other. They talked about sex all the time so they didn't have to think about it. Carol found herself envying those who could do this. It reminded her that her own sexual being was in a state of near-coma and so, as far as she could tell, was that of Tim. She knew he was ashamed, for some reason, of what had happened with Meriel but didn't know why. Yet she should, and it was a failing of imagination which kept from her that the difference between the recent sexual experience of herself and her husband was that she'd been utterly fulfilled by what had happened and he'd had only half her opportunity to grow. His powers of lust had been satisfied with Meriel but it hadn't been an experience of the imagination. Meriel, on her side, in wanting a child, had been expecting, hoping for, an expansion of her personality, her whole life, until she changed the nature of her being. For this to happen, she had to be filled with a child, but this hadn't happened, and Tim had only half-realised, perhaps never realised at all, the necessity for him to do more than take sexual possession. He'd lusted after her but hadn't offered the totality of himself in return. In coming back to Carol, mother of his children, he realised, despite the distance and the indifference now

separating them, what it was that Meriel had wanted to become, and realised too the limits of the half-love he'd given her.

Hence his shame. Carol had had the better of him in every way. Now he was running Tantangara Travel while Carol, her time taken up by their children, was only partially absorbed in the business, and could grow in the way of looking after two developing minds. Tim thought about this, sitting in the office he'd created at home. It was said that men were the achievers while women deprived themselves in order to get their children started. Women's life was self-sacrifice? So people said. Yet it didn't seem so to Tim. How did people grow, or develop? It happened in two main ways; people created themselves, concentrating hard, setting goals, then finding ways to reach the heights, the advances, they'd set themselves to achieve. This was the active way. They also advanced, or grew, by absorbing, and that included accepting pain or failure, so long as it was taken inside, analysed, understood, and used as a basis for later development. You could be suffering yet making something out of the pain. It was natural, especially for a man built as he was, to stay on the path of high-level achievement, but necessary to realise that people off the path could be advancing too. They had only to accept what was happening to learn from it, and once you'd learned, you could do something you hadn't been able to do before. Women instinctively knew this, Tim saw, and built on it in their own quiet, sometimes secretive way. He found himself envying his partner, and looking at the other women in Tantangara Travel, wondering what they had hidden which he hadn't been able to see. Plenty. What about the men? They were younger than he was so he supposed they'd accepted the changes of their time: there were no Martins among them, he felt sure, reflecting for a moment on how his partner had got rid of her first husband and perhaps a few others in her time.

What about me, Tim put it to himself. He wished that Wilhelm and Meriel had never come into their lives, but they had, so what came next? He couldn't answer, but he was stubborn. In his room

at home, he played patience with a pack of cards. Every game was different because you shuffled the cards. The cards never changed, they were always the same, that is, the amount of good luck and bad luck in the pack was constant. What changed was the particular hand you had been dealt to play. In his case, what was that?

He put the cards away. They weren't going to tell him anything. He left the room to see how the children were. Little Franz had got his leg caught in some vines in the garden. A cord intended to train a tomato plant had been lying in a loop on the ground and he'd got his leg in the loop. At the same time he'd got a grip on a ripe tomato, and had squashed it with his grasp. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry until he saw his daddy, and at that he gave a yell. 'Franzy!' his father called. 'What's up mate?' The child looked stupidly at him. Was his daddy a pest? He was in a way because Franzy was enjoying his situation. If it was good to be in it then he didn't need to get out of it, did he? Tim bent down. Before Franzy knew what was happening, his leg was out of the loop in the cord. 'You're free now, mate,' his father said, and then, for some reason the child failed to see, his father was laughing. What a roar! 'Free!' said his daddy, as if it was the silliest thing anyone could be, 'until the next time, that is!' Then off went daddy, laughing still.

## **10. Flags imperial, and freedoms to be desired**

Without either of them quite realising it, the pain and sense of loss associated with Carol and Tim's involvement with outside lovers began to diminish, because replaced by more pressing matters: Jessye and Franz. The arrival of a second child finally tips the balance. The processes of gestation and birth produce a new woman as well as a new person. Children, being self-centred as well as having no sense of scale, or relative unimportance, are no less agitated by trivia as

by things that will one day be seen as important. They scream, cry or sulk if their wishes are not attended to. Besides, their parents are curious: what will they turn out to be? Jessye was only a few months old when her mother had music flooding through the house, Jessye Norman singing Ravel, Erik Satie, Berlioz, Schubert, the composers she'd come to love before she went to France, and learned to worship while she was there. The tiny girl was not displeased, perhaps made a little happier. But as time wore on and the recitals meant to influence her plainly had no effect, causing her rather to react against what she was being subjected to, Carol had to admit that her Jessye was not going to resemble that other Jessye of the soaring voice. That splendid, exultant Jessye had sung Richard Strauss to her own generation, and possibly the one after, but to her little namesake in faraway Australia, no. She was noise. Tim and Carol's Jessye wanted a cat, was strangely quick in calculation, though her parents were slow to realise. She sensed the messages passing from adult to adult in any room she was in. She slept shallowly for long periods before plunging into deep dreams, or exhaustion, about the time her mother thought she should be waking. She was much slower than was normal with the business of talking and walking, but was clearly observing from within her seated, and silent, positions so her parents didn't worry, though they noticed the difference when Franz moved quickly through those early stages. He was a boy in a hurry, they would have said, expecting a block that didn't reveal itself. If everything's going so well, they said to each other, is something going wrong out of sight?

Not that they could see. His mother loved him a little more cautiously than she loved her first, because she was aware of loving as a dimension of life as she had not been before her passion with the now-scorned Wilhelm. Yet the dimension of magic, discovered within herself and made conscious by the attentions of Loge, was permanent in her thinking. It was there, everywhere, ready to show itself when least expected. Tim, in his speedy, ever-persisting consciousness, usually applied to the doings of Tantangara, was quite

likely to let it in by blurting out something that had popped into the front of his mind, as on the evening he told Carol, 'I want to wake up to see the sun rise and the sea flooding in!' She thought he was mad, but within an hour he'd rung a hotel, and had them in their car, speeding, the children asleep, to Sorrento. Carol tried to sleep, tried also to stay awake because she wasn't sure if his driving was safe, but eventually she sensed, as they got to their room about midnight, that perhaps he had known what he was doing.

The morning made sure of this. Tim had them up early, in the car and out again to watch the sea, quiet as the tide began to turn. 'It rages and thrashes this bit of the coast,' Tim told his family, 'but we've come while it's changing its mind!' He looked to the east, along the dunes piled up by a surging ocean over more years than they could imagine. He cried 'Ah!' with a satisfaction that caused Carol to admire him for the first time ... in how long? Was he bringing her back to him, using the sun? She felt he was, whether he knew it or not. The sun, low down, cast shadows everywhere, light creating its opposite, giving the darkness it was banishing its last toe-holds of resistance before the day was absolute. The children, to their mother's surprise, didn't clamour to be fed, but followed their father's impulsive acceptance of the sun. 'Where's home, mum?' Jessye asked, turning away from the sea. 'I'll show you in a minute,' Tim said, breaking in without thinking, 'Hop in the car and we'll go to the bay-side of the water. It's usually quite different from this but today it'll be much the same.' His children didn't query this, and in a couple of minutes they were looking up Port Philip Bay to where their city lay, over the horizon. 'Why can't we see it?' Their father had ready answers. 'Because it's too far away. The earth's curved. Curved like a ball. You think of a tennis ball, or a beach ball. Well ...'

It was cosmic. There was an ocean behind them, normally howling to get in, but now, at the turning of the tide, quiescent. 'The most dangerous time for boats,' Tim told his children, 'because they have to go through The Rip.' This had to be explained. Carol felt it

was senseless trying to explain to the children how the great quiet bay in front of them was like a huge jug, tilting slightly to let its contents run past them to the sea which would soon be lively again, wanting to get back in.

Over breakfast at the hotel, Tim was genial, but quiet. He felt he'd not only put himself in touch with something lasting, but showed it to his children. What about Carol? Had she been joined to him again, in the previous hour? She wanted to tell him something had been achieved, but there was plenty more. His dash to Sorrento the previous evening had been a good idea, it had given rise to something special, yes, but they were far from resurrected yet. 'What are you going to be when you grow up, Jess?' she asked; the child gave her a knowing stare. 'A fisherman,' she said, 'but daddy says they don't make enough money for the risks they take, so I'm going to be something smart.' Clearly the child thought her answer showed she was well on the way, but her mother said bluntly, 'Doing what?'

'Dunno yet,' said the child. 'Wait and see.'

Franz surprised them on the way home through the endless, mostly dreary, suburbs stretching around the bay, when he said, with no apparent reason, 'When are we gonna see my house?'

'Your house, darling?'

'Yes, I gotta have a house when I grow up. I gotta have a house for my family.'

His father was amused. 'You're going to have a family, Franzy!'

'Everyone's got to have a house.'

The logic of it was staggering. How much had he seen, this child of theirs? Both his parents started to explain, and he seemed to listen, but then he burst out, 'How'm I gonna know which house I gotta live in?' making his parents, and his sister too, look upon the dwellings, block after block of them, rushing past. 'It's an aesthetic nightmare,' Carol said to Tim, knowing he agreed. 'It sure is,' he said, and the

two of them were silent as they considered: were they raising their children to live in this? This ...

... aesthetic squalor?

‘Mum? Dad?’ This was Franzy, in the back seat.

‘Yes, son, just a minute. Your father and I are thinking.’

‘What about?’ This was Jessye, also in the back seat, and before either parent could answer, or even think of an answer, she went on, again to their surprise, ‘How many houses have we got, mum? Dad?’ The adults looked at each other. Carol turned.

It took her some effort to say. ‘Two. I’ve got a house in Sydney.’ She could feel doors opening everywhere, in her mind and Tim’s, and the children seizing on everything she might say or try to hold back.

‘Can we go and live in it?’

‘There are people living in it already. They pay me money to live there.’

‘How much?’

‘Quite enough. It helped your father and I to buy the house we’re living in now.’

‘Helped.’ This was Tim, amused, perhaps even a little rueful, as if it was one of the things that had held him back when he might have left, but hadn’t. Carol looked at him appraisingly. ‘Yes, we needed the bank. But it helped.’

‘True,’ he said. ‘It did.’ The conversation could go anywhere. Houses swept past them, houses, houses, houses. And cars, cars, cars. Bloody cars and bloody houses, bloody humans, the whole bloody world. Did they want to be in it or not, there weren’t so many choices. Tim: ‘How did we get onto this? We were driving home from The Heads ...’

‘And it happened. It has to happen somewhere!’ This was Carol.

‘And what was it that happened?’ Tim.

They were stuck, caught, forced to admit who and what they were, and where. The houses kept going past, and cars in every direction, everywhere.

Carol remembered how she and Tim hadn't been slowed down by the birth of Jessye. They put her in her basket, jumped in the car and went out as much as ever. Or nearly. Once she slept the whole night through, and she did it quite early, it seemed that the drama of birth had ended and they were back in their old routine. Friends said so, commenting. When they showed off their child she was an addition, an enrichment. People envied them. They were marvellously young. Others around them were having children too and it was exciting. Carol sometimes stopped to wonder what had happened to people she didn't see any more – Mathilde, of Cairns, Andrea, whom she'd taken to Cooktown, Gabrielle who'd gone driving with her too. Her mind touched on Doctor Terry, also of Cairns, and Alby, police sergeant in the west, then pulled back. She was happy to have left those two behind. The others? Well, they might catch up one day ... She was occupied by the people she worked with at Tantangara, once she got away from the children for an hour or two, though there were times when she took one or both to work. Jessye was good at amusing herself and Franzy could sleep at the back of the office almost as well as he did at home. The people working for them loved the children and were always asking after them. Tim and Carol were proud of the fact that their staff rarely left and any vacancy that arose had half a dozen people wanting to fill it. The place had a reputation, it was famously efficient, and imaginative, indeed exciting, when it came to special arrangements, group study tours, add-ons to conferences or anything else that needed special devising.

This was Tim's field, and he thrived on getting to know people of adventurous mind. He became known as Tiki, after the famous balsawood boat that had tested the ocean currents from Peru into the Pacific, not because he specialised in ocean or islands but because he had the same way of approaching the world. What you don't know, or haven't seen, is waiting for you. When he sat someone down on the opposite side of a table, he would start with, 'What would you like to do?' It got people going, they told him their dreams. When

he showed them ways to save, they spent all the more. People trusted him because he was as keen on travel as they were, and he knew more about it. Carol sometimes saw this as one-dimensional, approaching people by their dreams, their fantasies; he had his answer ready: 'You wrote your thesis on people's dreams!'

It was true, she had, in years behind her now. She had wanted to take on the world so it couldn't cheat her, push her aside, win ideological victories over her inexperience. What was she now? A mother. She looked at her daughter's body, and her son's, when they were in the bath. Getting dressed. Inside their clothes. She was looking at a fate they were carrying around inside themselves, not only since they were born, but from soon after their conception. Conceive, a powerful word, to do with not only the body but the mind. Women conceived, but so did men, when they used their minds. Yet only women could conceive a life in the sense of bringing it to birth. And yet – again – women were as helpless as men once the birth was done because the child had a mind, circumstances, a destiny, if there was such a thing, of its own and the mother, like the father, had no more control of what was going to happen than the child itself, and what did the child know?

Carol wanted to say 'Nothing' to that question, but couldn't bring herself to be so sure. Had she never been in control of her life? She certainly felt she had. She'd stepped out of an earlier marriage by exercising will-power; wasn't that available to her still?

Clearly it was, and just as clearly it couldn't be so effective now that she was a mother. A mother's power was indirect, it was an influence, it had to shape the will-power of other people if it was to achieve anything at all. She thought of her travels in France, all those gothic cathedrals telling mankind where it stood in the universe, how it was placed, how it should behave if it was going to enter the heaven brought near by wondrous glass ... and malodorous, poverty-stricken mankind went on being as cruel, brutal and fallible as ever. Mankind! She'd brought two of them into the world and they were ever so

beautiful to her, but then she was partial. She had to be because they might easily have the whole world against them, oppressing them, trying to enslave them so somebody else could be rich. She looked around at Tantangara, with people in and out the door, tickets in hand, arrangements made, and bookings, people getting what they wanted, and she wasn't quite sure if she, her husband and their joyful team mightn't be deceiving themselves and their customers in some way. They were giving them what they wanted and who was there to say that wasn't deception of a sort?

Eh?

When these moods crept on her Carol found excuses, usually to do with the children, to get herself home with them because at home she could restore the sense of personal purity she'd once had all the time. By the time Tim got home she'd usually strengthened that sense of virtue resident in her and could extend it to him when he told her what he'd done since she left the office. She could listen with amusement and approval because she'd pulled herself away from what made her doubt, and that was her responsibility for, her membership of, the world around her. She realised, too, that the change was permanent, that it had come with becoming a mother and that was something that couldn't be undone. She was a mother for the rest of her life, and this condition would develop – how soon, and how quickly she didn't know – until she felt her responsibilities as a woman had extended to needing to 'mother' – manage, control as far as she could, and judge – the whole wide world.

The whole catastrophe!

She felt weak, she felt strong, she had heaps of determination but that was hardly enough to cover the vulnerability that came with the condition: mothers could influence, but that mightn't be enough to make things happen, or stop them happening. Mothers had to be ready for the great vase of grief to fill them. They felt for everybody and sometimes they even felt before those they were considering had felt for themselves. They felt as onlookers, as participants, they felt as

those felt who couldn't undo the ties that bound them to everyone else. They were like a digestive system that had only imperfection to consume, and then to purify so that the rest of mankind could use it, perhaps unconsciously, to do whatever seemed well.

That was what it meant to be a mother. It changed the way a woman saw a man, or men. Were they useful once their procreative job had been achieved, or, if they couldn't go on after that point, couldn't develop and be useful to their children, were they not monsters of vanity, proud of their limitations as virtues, like flags imperial bringing restrictions under the guise of offering freedoms to be desired?

## 11. At rest

The years of school arrived, and the years of travel. The present, the actual, the daily, is always in transition. The sun rises every morning on a slightly different day. In the travel business there are the old faithfuls – Rome, Paris, New York – and today's hot spots, which we won't name for fear of being out of date. It was the era of the Boeing 747, the *jumbo*! Enormous planes, they went from airport to airport, crowded, full. Countless meals were served on board, dreams were dreamed. They droned through the night, carting people from continent to continent, they blundered occasionally into volcanic cloud almost bringing them down, they opened up the wonders of the world to people of all ages and all lands, squeezing them into mini-shapes in order to do so. The long centuries of fear, suspicion, hatred, resentment and jealousy for people beyond the borders of the known turned into something like appreciation. Those who hadn't been to look were felt to be ignorant, limited, to stay at home was to live inside a closed mind, when opening was the go.

Only shallowly curious they may have been, but they went to have a look!

Tantangara Travel flourished. New offices opened in Sydney, Cairns and Perth. Carol was pleased that TT would open in the north, but had no wish to manage the Cairns office, or even to go there when it was being staffed. ‘Send people we know we can rely on,’ she said. ‘They can recruit locally over time. The secret is to start with the right mind-set, and everything else will follow.’ It did. Carol’s country had always looked out, thinking that more important events happened elsewhere. Home was all right, but it didn’t matter, at least in the eyes of outsiders, and that was what counted. So when the appointments were made for the new branches, it was Tim who made them. Carol would have said, not that she had lost interest, but that her mind was divided. She remembered how passionately she’d looked at everything when she was in Paris, most specially in the weeks when she’d been on her own. Her mind was divided now because large parts of it attached to her children. Jessye was at school, with friends of her own. Carol had to collect her from other children’s homes, and make arrangements with people she’d never have bothered with, in other years, for their children to be together. Carol found herself thinking about the word ‘play’; Jessye would say, ‘I want to play with ...’ and Carol would ask herself how you translated that word, or dug out its implications. If children were playing, what on earth were adults doing? Adults said they were *playing* golf, tennis, or games with a large dash of brutalisation, such as football or wrestling in which the element of play, if there was one, was almost invisible. Perhaps the children meant, Carol thought, that they were using their imaginations, something that little ones didn’t credit their parents with doing.

So what did it mean, that word ‘to play’? It must have something to do with that transition – that word again! – from being, as a child, wide open to your imagination, to being an adult, and living under a discipline which stripped half the fun out of life. Adults decided what they’d lost when they wouldn’t allow it for themselves, and then they negotiated with their children who were allowed, some of the time, to be *sensible*, and some of the time to *play*. Jessye liked to play

with a girl called Rosie who lived over the back fence and Carol had to admit that this affection of Jessye for Rosie was because Rosie led a life free of the cultural considerations Carol needed. 'Who's free?' Carol the mother asked herself, and then she turned her attention to Franzy, showing a different temperament from his sister, or was it simply the difference between a first child and a second, or the difference between a Carol and a Tim?

Tim was thriving as Tantangara prospered. They paid off their house, then they looked around; what to do with their money? Buy resorts and develop them? Tim said it was better to let others take the risks, better to put your money into banks where, in professional hands, it wouldn't be lost. Carol conceded the argument but had a feeling that they were betraying themselves in some way by doing what they did. Tim told her that money wasn't a form of enjoyment but of security, so it was best to divide your thinking. You prospered because you used your imagination, he said, and then you protected what you'd earned so that it was still there, increased and ready, when you saw a further step to take. He was good at it and it wasn't long before he was asking if they should buy a better house in a better suburb and she was saying that their children were starting to know the area where they lived, and they shouldn't interfere with the development the youngsters were achieving. 'Northcote!' he used to say, looking at what surrounded them, and she knew that he was as scornful as he was accepting. She had nonetheless a feeling that it pleased some inner vanity for him to know that they were growing wealthier than those around them, or if this wasn't so then it could only be because the whole suburb was on the rise. On the up!

Tim was lively, even when he came home tired. These were his years of success. He was a loving father, and scaled himself down for the conversations, and the play, he had with Jessye and Franz. If he brought home brochures, he showed them to the children, talking freely about where he'd been, where he was going to go, and where he would be able to take them. As they grew older and brought friends

home Jessye and Franz could see that their friends were impressed, envious too, about the places where they, the lucky kids, were going to be taken. 'You must take pictures! You must write your travel notes!' Tim would say to the children, even when they were going no further than Surfers' Paradise. 'What's to see?' he would call out to his children, disembarking from planes, yet he was respectful of their mother reading to them, or insisting on a quiet hour when they got back from somewhere. Tim's most typical skill was to link his enthusiasms to his planning. He was good at making things happen. 'Just a dreamer!' he would say of someone without the dimension that he inhabited, and yet he knew that Carol added another dimension altogether, which he could neither describe nor analyse: she made him feel that he was like a swimmer dashing into cold water, shouting to persuade himself that he was warm, while Carol made her children comfortable on the beach, sitting up or lying down, reading or gazing at the water, playing with them, or ...

... still. It was when she was most natural, most herself, her thoughts most active. It was something that drew the children to her. They didn't always want to dash about as he did, they had her extra dimension of quietness, and he was pleased, even if he was doubtful whether he himself possessed it. 'I'll retire one of these days,' he would say, 'when I'm fifty. Yes, it may be early, but we'll have enough money by then to go anywhere we like, to roam or settle, we don't have to make up our minds yet.' If Jessye said, 'Will Franzy and me settle with you daddy, or will we still be roaming around?', he would smile. 'You two have got minds of your own. Who knows? We'll have to wait and see what's right for you.'

This openness made him accepting of their developing steps, their orientation to the future. He wasn't afraid of losing because he was so busy creating, organising, getting people where they wanted to go. The schooling of his children was something he was happy to leave to someone else. They were the experts, or supposed to be. Carol was more ambivalent. Each teacher was a field of force that might or might

not be desirable. She made a point of listening carefully to things the children said about others in their class or the people who supervised them. Among these people who had come into her children's lives more or less at random would be those she'd want to counteract, and others she'd want to encourage. It also struck her that she didn't possess godlike wisdom about what would be good for Jessye and Franz; it was part of growing up to make mistakes, follow bad examples, and the rest of it, that is, to learn from things that went wrong as much as from precept. The child taught itself. How were her two doing?

She felt more confident of Jessye than of Franz. Jessye was so sure that she made jokes about herself, whereas Franz was vague under questioning, and simply not there a lot of the time when Carol was watching from afar. Much of his life seemed inconsequential, as if he was waiting for something that came only rarely. As a small child he'd built things out of blocks and not bothered to knock them down, as most children did. As he grew older he took no notice of anything she put on his walls. When she told him to close a door or put something away, he did it without argument, as if he'd seen very young that it took only seconds to do something and minutes to resist. He couldn't have worked that out so young? When the family went somewhere she watched to see who he'd follow, or what he'd do first. She decided he was unadventurous, and needed challenging, but when she put something in his hands, like a puzzle, or a little spade if they were in the garden, he did whatever was required. He dug with the spade or he worked out the puzzle. He did most things fairly well because they seemed not to be part of him, simply an external that wasn't hard to work out. Carol called him Mr Can-do. Tim laughed at her puzzling over the boy. 'He's competent,' he said. 'Leave him alone. He's lucky. Most kids run up against things they can't do and they get frustrated. He's sailing smoothly. Don't send out a rescue boat when he isn't wrecked!'

Statements of this sort were like a vigorous bump to Carol. Tim was happy to leave the boy alone, but Carol wanted to interfere

because she wanted to know. What was he going to become? What obstacles would his character put in his way? Nobody got away with development as easily as he seemed to do. She watched him with girls. He hardly recognised any difference. He murmured to them quietly like he did for anyone else. The age of his parents, or his grandparents (Tim's people) didn't separate them in his observation. It was more than taking their age and abilities for granted, he seemed to understand why they were as they were. Odd! was all Carol could say to herself, unable to wrap him up in any other explanation. Children were meant to be bumpy, uneven, highly strung, flying from excitement to misery, laughter to tears. What was it about her son? She could do no more than wait, and that put her in the position of the servant who waits until it pleases the master or mistress to beckon, and then rush forward, showing she was anxious to serve, when she wasn't; she was anxious for him to reveal himself, that is, to show evidence of his problem because everyone had at least one central problem ...

What was hers?

This question stopped Carol in her tracks. What was problematical for her? In her? Could she refine the question by looking for those things that were easy to do, and those that were hard? Or did she need to put the question to herself some other way? Needles couldn't be found if you were burrowing in the wrong haystack!

This caused her to smile. She had, perhaps, prevented herself from wasting time on a foolish path, but this was a negative virtue. What did she need to know? About herself, and her perplexing son? She decided that the simplest way to know what she'd become was to study the mothers who, like her, gathered outside the local school to collect their children. These people represented something of a transfer on her part, from what she'd been as a student in Paris and then as a founding partner of Tantangara to what she was today: a mother with two at school. This meant, in a paradoxical way, that she had broadened and deepened, and yet she'd narrowed too, there was no escaping it. The other mothers were sometimes too smartly

dressed for the job of picking up their kids, and sometimes too untidy, scornful of fashion, so that one felt that they felt degraded by their position. A few of them, certainly, were forever picking at their children as if the little ones were carrying the burden of a mother who'd in some way given up. Some of them insisted on being Mrs Something while others used first names freely. Some of them seemed to have burrowed into a society where once they'd run about; rabbits, Carol thought. And there was one man, Daniel, who was there every day for his boy and his girl, whom he greeted lovingly; he was a man with womanly qualities, and Carol was pleased when he spoke to her, as he often did. He told her he ran a nursery, and she made a point of driving past it, to be impressed by its size, its customers and its awareness of display. He's got a good business, Carol saw, and wondered why it was always Daniel, and never the children's mother, who was there at the close of school.

She asked.

'Let us just say,' he told her, 'that the children's mother is interstate, and draw a veil over why she's there.' Carol respected the barrier he put around his knowledge, and asked him what the children were interested in. He had a lot to say. He explained how his mother got the nursery open in the morning so he could get the children up and fed, and then to school, and how she took over again for the time it took for him to pick them up. 'I get them to the nursery and she takes them home. She's offered to pick them up for me and leave me running the nursery but I want to be the first to hear what sort of day they've had and if there's any problems.' When he saw that Carol was curious, he added, 'That's the least I can do.'

She liked this, stubborn as it might be. His idea of parenting was formed by what the children needed, as was hers. She talked with him about the changes that children make to people's lives, and they agreed that parenting was essentially about being replaced. 'We owe it to them to bring them up well,' he said, 'and we owe it to the world.' He had no need to go on. Carol was already at the same point.

She'd recently been re-reading her thesis, most of which had been written in Paris, if formed earlier, and she'd been surprised to see how individualistic were the assumptions underlying what she'd written; it forced her to see the changes that becoming a mother had brought into her life. Men could, she saw, thinking of Tim, quite easily be loving fathers inside the family while retaining the right to practise their individualism elsewhere. In that sense, they contributed to the natural inclination of the child to see him/herself as the centre of the universe. This caused her to ask herself what it was that mothers did? They too, she had to admit, indulged the child's ranking of itself as first, but – *but* – it was done as an indulgence, and in the knowledge that the mother – both parents, with any luck – were managing a transition. The child would not be central forever.

Neither would the mother. Her job would one day be done. And then? She wondered what this devoted father Daniel would say to that? Several days passed before she got a chance to put this question. He smiled, as if he'd been expecting. 'I love my children. I'm happy to pass everything on to them when the time comes. I don't even need support in what I'm doing. I get plenty of that from my mother. She's right behind me and the children love her. I would like a bit of companionship, though.' So it was as she'd suspected. The companionship would come from her – he hoped. How did she feel about that?

The possibility was there, no more than that. She noticed that, considering whether or not to take up a new relationship, she was ... the word was motionless. It was a thought she was considering, not a drive. A pleasing thought, but in no sense a compulsion. She wasn't going to do it. A great deal had changed inside. Something in her had fixed. She'd had her children. She *could* have more but she didn't think she would. That could only happen if some state of turbulence came upon her, sweeping through her life, and there was no sign of that. So she was pleasant to Daniel, when the two of them came together at the gates of the school, or she saw him bundling his two into his car to take

them to the nursery where his mother would welcome them, then take them home, she spoke to his children if they spoke to her, and she told Jessye and Franz the names of the other two and told them to be their friends during the days they shared with each other ...

... but she went no further. Daniel saw that some door had closed. He managed it well enough. He invited her to visit the nursery if ever she needed any plants, there'd be a discount because – she hadn't known this – he was offering a discount to all the parents of his children's school. She said she'd visit the next time she needed anything, she'd love to look around ... but she never did. She was, in her way, at rest.

## **12. This is all there is**

Tim came home in a bad mood, poured himself a drink and took it to the little office they'd built when they reopened the verandah. He came in a couple of times to fill his glass without saying anything. Carol found something for the children to watch on TV, something she normally didn't do, then went to him.

'Got things on our mind, have we?'

A weary grin admitted that he felt silly.

'Sorry. I know I'm being a beast.'

'Beasts go wild when they're hungry. I've got pork ribs in the oven.'

Pork ribs were a favourite. He wanted to tell her he loved her. Some of it percolated through his silence. Carol asked, 'What is it?'

'Those stupid people in California. I have told them and told them that when they're sending a party to Chile or Mexico they must have native speakers to accompany them. How many times have I told them? Twenty thousand and two?'

She laughed. 'And the last couple didn't get through!'

‘Sweet fuck-all got through as far as I can see. Sorry love, what was that about pork ribs?’

She told him she’d be serving up in twenty minutes. He followed her into the house, to stand where he could see the television or, if he swivelled around, watch her in the kitchen. She was setting out plates at the table when he told her, ‘Floods on the Queensland coast. Rivers over their banks. The train’s held up.’

‘Did they say where?’

‘I think they did, but I missed it.’ He sipped his glass of red. ‘Why does anyone want to be anywhere but home?’

She didn’t laugh. ‘People get restless. They paid off this house for us.’ He put his glass down and rubbed his eyes. ‘I’m tired. I’m going to sleep like a log tonight.’

She pulled out a large knife. ‘Better keep your eyes on the job while you’re carving.’ Suddenly she flung open the door of the oven. The pork was sizzling. She lifted it to sit on a large block of wood, their carving point, then went for the beans on top of the stove. ‘Jessye! Franzy! Dinner’s ready, darlings!’ They came, Tim carved, after helping Franzy onto his chair. The children chattered. Carol put the beans in a bowl, then rushed into the next room to turn the TV off. ‘I can’t eat with that gabble in the background!’ Jessye, who knew she should have turned it off, asked her father for not too much crackly, as she called it. ‘It’s the best part,’ he said, but did what she wanted. Franzy poked at the beans. Carol waited for Tim to sit down before tasting, then looked up expectantly because she knew it was delicious. ‘Just right, mummy’ – Jessye. ‘Yummy’ – Franz. Tim smiled at his wife. ‘A few of them at the office were going to Baker’s tonight, wanted to know if I could come along. I didn’t feel up to it. I’m glad I said so.’ Contentment ran around their table. Jessye wanted to know why there was apple with the pork. ‘Because I’m old-fashioned,’ her mother told her. ‘You’re supposed to have dark sauce with ribs, Hoi Sin or something like that. Apple’s for roasts, or so they say, but ...’

Tim broke in: ‘... rules are for people without imagination.’ He enlarged. ‘Without security, so they think they have to do what someone else tells them. Pity about that!’ He picked up a piece of rib with his fingers, his dark mood gone by now. ‘What are we going to do tonight?’ Play a game of something?’ The children were full of ideas. ‘Let’s get dinner eaten first,’ Carol said, and Jessye: ‘When we go to bed tonight, I want daddy to tell us about when he was little!’ Tim was vastly amused, and just as pleased. There was nothing he liked more than lying on his daughter’s bed, or his son’s, staring at the dark and revisiting his childhood. Rejoicing in his early years made him rejoice in his parenthood, Carol knew it, his children knew it too. The very house they lived in seemed to relax, and become intensely alive as, in imagination, it turned into the walks, the seaside shacks, the fascinating objects washed up and the broken down boats, or bits thereof, that drifted onto the beaches of southern New South Wales. ‘I want to go there,’ the children would say, as he conjured up his past, and it seemed as if the walls, the windows, the old raincoat hooks near the front door and everything else in their much-adjusted dwelling was gaining lustre from his stories. Houses love stories, and the house they lived in knew that it was already in the stories of children long grown up and would, eventually, figure in the tales of Jessye and Franzy, whatever they might turn out to be.

So dinner was eaten, they talked, Carol cleaned up, Tim did the dishes with the help, if that was what it was, of the children, then games came out for an hour before Carol ran water for their bath. She chattered happily with the children, then left them for a while ‘to play on our own’, as Jessye put it, then Tim took over. Carol sat herself down in the lounge with the book she was reading, a history of the French Revolution, while Tim went through the motions of drying the children with their towels. They were so lively and warm that they almost dried themselves but he made a practice, perhaps a performance, of his motions, and the children squealed, grumbled and laughed as the moment of putting on pajamas came nearer.

This was when they presented themselves to their mother, deep in her chair, the tenderest moment of their nights, perhaps their lives. A day had been deeply ordered, done well. It was a moment their house approved of because the day was ending as it should. Carol put the revolution aside to give her children love. Tim stood ready to see them to bed, and then to empty his heart to them; Carol filled with the feeling that they were hers, they were bonded, each was a part of the others and this would never change. What happened in families where this went wrong? She couldn't know because all was well in her case. She drew them to her, Franzy in his contentment, Jessye in her curiosity. 'What are you reading, mummy?' Carol put a hand down to touch the book. 'It's a book I should have read years ago, but I was too lazy.' Tim observed that she'd never been lazy in the years he'd known her, to which she replied, 'Well, if it wasn't laziness maybe it was just me being wilful. Everyone said this was the classic on the revolution and I stepped around it. I read any number of other things, but not Thompson ...'

'Who's Thompson?' Franzy wanted to know, prompting his father to say, 'Bed time now. We'll all get in my bed, mummy's bed, and I'll move you later. Big kiss now!' The children hugged and kissed their mother, then let their father lead them away. Carol's dangling fingers trailed across the book, so full of wildness and horror, of attempts to make France *better*, with beheadings a-plenty. When she picked it up, however, it opened at the place where Marie-Antoinette and Louis were captured, not far from making their escape from the country they had ruled. The writer was an Englishman and Carol was never quite sure where his sympathies – and his scorn – lay among the events he retailed. He had a long passage, once he'd recounted the seizure of the fleeing royals, where he listed the numerous moments when fortune had disfavoured them. 'If only ...' was its theme. So many things had gone wrong when they were within a whisker of going right. Thompson didn't really raise the question in his pages, but he was clearly thinking how the revolution might have become a

different event in the world's history, with different outcomes giving rise to different memories, if only – *if only* – this or that had happened or not happened, meaning, if the King and his unpopular Queen had escaped to provide a figurehead for monarchist, anti-revolutionary feeling, in England, Germany, Austria or Spain ...

This was why Carol was reading the book and, was probably why she hadn't read it years ago. What if the King ... What if? What if she, Carol, had not had the strength to push Martin away from her when he, her first husband, had tried to impose an *ancien régime* on her? What would her life be like today? What if her children had been Martin's children, not those of Tim, who would, by now, be well into his stories of a coastal childhood, those stories which Jessye and Franzy loved to tell her when their daddy wasn't around. What would they, one day, pass on to their children about the years when they were growing up? The walls of the house were close to her now, pressing, and the ceiling or was it the roof was whispering, 'This is all there is. Don't look over your shoulder. The moment is all.' Carol agreed with her whispering house. How much it knew! She remembered the Laidlaws, who sold the place to Tim and her, telling them that the house, a very early, simple structure, had been added to at the turn of a century and a strip of decoration, presumably cast-iron, had been relegated to the shed – which was still there, if ramshackle – and Ian Laidlaw had said, 'I knew I might be making a mistake when I took it off, so I put the iron in the shed in case someone coming after me wanted to undo what I'd done.' Tim had been quick to say that he liked the house exactly as they were receiving it, but he'd started to have doubts lately, Carol knew: he didn't touch, rub, or polish things as frequently as he'd done in the early months of possession, and she suspected that his marriage was being re-moulded in much the same way. She wanted to complain about this but couldn't. The marriage was central now, even if it hadn't been in the days when Wilhelm and Meriel came by night.

She read on with Thompson, taking him to the end of the chapter, then she went to her bedroom and changed into pajamas. It

was a warm night but it was going to cool down later, so she might as well be ready. Three bodies lay on the bed, akimbo and apart. She picked up Franzy, first, and a minute later, Jessye, and she put them in their own beds without waking Tim. Then she crawled beside her husband, who, dimly aware for a moment, murmured something in his sleep, or his half-waking. Carol touched the hand beside her, but only for a moment, before giving herself to forgetfulness, and the protective walls of the house they'd bought, together, as the shelter for the family they'd been going to make, and had.

### **13. Understanding was strength**

When they woke, the world was as new as it could be, that is, the same as it had always been. Progress almost certainly happens, but no sooner takes place than it's taken for granted, and besides, when people turn their faces towards improvement they ignore the many things getting worse. Progress has a family resemblance to those devices which force us to stride quickly if we're not to go backwards, or get our feet tangled up in the machine. Tim, despite his weariness of the day before, had got up early and gone to the office to pick up the infuriating matters of yesterday. But he'd brought the paper in and left it on a bench near the stove. A headline stated 'Halfway Towards Our Goals – PM'. A bold claim, Carol thought, knowing the columns beneath it would neither support nor contradict the first minister – still a man, of course. When will they let a woman get that far, she wondered, before noticing that it was the term 'halfway' that had captured her attention. It applied to herself, surely? She'd be thirty-five next year, half the biblical three score and ten. What had she achieved, beyond security and her children? For that matter, why did she think she had to achieve more? Life was neither an exam nor a qualification, though surrounded by benchmarks of success and

failure, so many that people could tell themselves they were getting along until a hurdle tripped them up.

She thought of herself when Martin had left her in Paris, the point of greatest intensity in her life. She'd come home from France, gone to Sydney, and through the throes of separation, a liberating time, such was her determination. She'd waved goodbye to Martin and she hadn't seen him since. It had seemed simple at the time. Now, though moving forward with strength and confidence, she was nearing the top of life's hill ...

... which meant she'd soon be over it.

'Half way towards our goals – PM.' The kitchen felt like a trap, a jail, the sort of confinement that people built around themselves while they told themselves they were doing something else. Like what? Like ...

Like what?

She felt the ageing process gripping, making her weak, vulnerable, useless. The things surrounding her, the carefully created structures of her life, gave no support, no meaning. Standing, she felt it would be dangerous to sit. Who would get her on her feet? She looked around. Things were normal; a photo of Jessye holding her baby brother was looking at her. She smiled, the phone rang. It was Tim. He'd left a letter from the Californian agent at home, probably in the office, could she bring it when she came in? He started to tell her where it might be, but she assured him she'd find it if it was there. 'I know you want to give those people a blast.' They weren't the only ones, he said, and she told him she was amused. 'I know you're laughing,' he said. 'And I know I was stupid to bring the wretched letter home with me, it only prolonged my bad temper. Which you, my darling, managed to swish away with some magic broom!' He was cheerful by now and she, Carol realised, was back in her routine, supporting her man, putting backbone in her kids when they needed it, offering huge amounts of support to the Tantangara people but being slightly scary with those that needed it, the brash

ones. She was, she could see, well and truly tied down. Or was she? Responsibility added stature. You carried a burden, but who didn't? Did she really want to get to the end of her life with no sort of load? When death carried you away, it left your burdens for others to pick up, and if nobody did so, they were left as a disgrace for those that didn't lift them. When you were young you had years to consider which part of the load you would carry, but if you took up nothing, what was the good of you? It occurred to Carol that the business she and her husband were in was all about escaping the old responsibilities and then discovering, once you were away, that you had new responsibilities. You owed it to the people you were moving among to be discreetly curious, patient because they had to put up with you, and in dedicated learning mode because it was indecent to come back with nothing gained. Once youth was left behind, you had to find a new way of judging yourself.

How was she going to do that?

She sat, showing that her concerns of a moment ago were behind her. She was moving again, and she wouldn't stop, this side of the grave. 'This has got to be good!' she said, still weak, giving way to concern. 'How do I know ...'

Then it struck her. She wouldn't *know*. She would increase in her being, there would be more of her for others, even those she loved, to deal with. Understanding was strength, was an increased capacity: if someone asked you a question, you gave them a better, richer, answer than others could give. Or perhaps you simply saw more in their question than you would once have done. What a test this was; you could never get away from it. It seemed to her that time, the clock, timetables, everything that couldn't be avoided, or put off, was testing her. For every second of consciousness, some test was being applied to her and in the alternate seconds she gave account of herself, and there was no escaping. You were therefore subject to the scrutiny of the world, or you reversed the sightlines and made everything subject to you.

Well, you could try, and she was going to. She took Franzy to kinder in great good spirits, and Jessye to school, holding her hand as they crossed the road from the car, then feeling her daughter's excitement as she saw children she knew. Suddenly her daughter, her continuation, was letting her hand go, squalling 'Bye mummy!' and hurling herself into the arms of her friends, a couple of whom nodded politely in the direction of Jessye's mum, then followed the newly-arisen star inside the school to rooms and purposes her mother would never know.

Carol went back to the car, to sit, stunned, because deprived. Her importance, centrality, as mum could be taken away so easily. No doubt it would return when Jessye, wanting something, needed her, but she could be deprived of it any number of times according to the moods and fluctuating interests of a child. My value, Carol saw, resides in her valuation of me and that has to change all the time, even on a good day. Whew! The mother, suddenly wretched, lifted herself off the seat to look in the mirror; vision to the rear was blocked by a troubled face. Hers. Mine. Me. Carol slumped back in the seat, started the engine and drove away, aware that taking her face out of the mirror hadn't changed it. The only improvement in her situation was that she couldn't see how she looked, but what did that matter when she knew how she felt?

Arriving at Tantangara she did her best to manage her mood, but the first person she met was Louise, who handled a good deal of their South American business; Louise was in her flightiest and funniest mood because she'd been trying to calm down her angry boss and she felt that if she could get Carol even halfway on her side she'd alter Tim's exuberant rage. He was, Louise told Tim's wife, enjoying himself by now, striking at arrangements that were perfectly all right, wanting to change things that couldn't possibly go wrong. He was in fact being a pest, though she wasn't going to say that to Carol, so she drew on the comedy of the situation to extinguish the anger that had walked in the door with Tim. 'He was standing where you're standing

now,' Louise told her, 'and I wondered what I would do, and I decided I wouldn't do any more work on it until you came in to calm things down a little.'

'Oh shit and bugger,' thought Carol, 'I came in determined to keep out of this and she wants me to fight on her side.' How had this developed? Tim must have made it plain that he blamed her for what had arisen. Louise had decided to attack Tim where he was strongest, his business partnership being also his marriage. Nobody did anything like that and thought they could get away with it. The sheer cheek of Louise gave her a certain chance of winning. Carol was also aware, and it enraged her, that she'd been caught when she still felt very weak; Jessye's dash to join the other children wasn't easily forgotten. Something prompted her to challenge Louise in an under-cutting way. She walked to the other end of the office, casually enough, as if idly curious to see what everyone had been doing, then she turned and called.

'What did you say?'

Louise knew at once that her intended victim wasn't going to go down. Oh no. Oh dear. She submitted. 'I see you don't want to talk about it. Let's leave it.' She picked up a file and took it to a computer. Carol was divided; itching for a fight, a scene, yet still unnerved, weakened, by what Jessye had done a few minutes earlier. This was when Tim came into the room. Sensing the atmosphere, he studied everyone in sight. Louise, her back presented, was the only one not to meet his eye. 'Feels like a storm brewing in here,' he said. 'It's not the way I like business to be done.' Then he was gone, leaving no doubt that Louise would have to, as they say, reconsider her position. She did. She stood up, in tears, yelled, 'That's a lousy way to finish me off!' and rushed to the door. Carol yelled too. 'No no, don't do that. If you leave you won't want to get back in.' That was exactly what Louise intended. 'Oh we don't mind a little storm, do we, so long as the lightning strikes someone else! That's how things get done around here!'

A moment later, she was gone.

Tim felt shaken. He waited until the children were asleep before he mentioned Louise. 'I rang her at home in the afternoon.'

'What did she have to say for herself?'

'Nothing to her credit. I said I expected we'd see her tomorrow, we'd sort things out one way or another.'

Carol waited.

'All I got was abuse. The pair of us had set her up. Et cetera. It was nonsense. I did go this far, I did say we were close, we shared a way of working, but that's not a matter of the ownership of the place, because there are two other couples working in the place, people who got together through working together ...'

'She'd know that all right.' Carol could feel hostility rising: towards Louise, certainly, but to Tim also? Had it gone that far?

'I had to give her a chance, darling. If she'd done something silly and wanted to find a way out, a way back, I had to give her the chance. Well, I did, and she didn't take it.'

Relief flushed through his wife. 'I'm immensely pleased.' He looked at her, unsure how to take this. 'I mean ... we've always had high standards, but very human ones. She did something that I hated. She tried to step in between us. Why, I have no idea. Even so, she deserves a second chance, like everybody does, because we can all make mistakes, do silly things at times ... that's when we need that second chance. Much as I hate what she did. If she wasn't smart enough to take it, to ...' She didn't really know what to say because she was hanging onto the principle of forgiveness rather than willingly offering it. Tim said, 'I think maybe I'm to blame, at least in part.'

Carol wasn't about to change her mind. 'Yes, she was keen on you. That made me a rock in the road. I needed to be pushed aside.' Amused, because triumphant, she added, 'Rolled back out of the way so her bloody royal chariot could proceed!'

Tim laughed. 'I probably encouraged her. I never said a word, I promise you, but ...' he thought '... there are ways of making a silence ... receptive ...'

He waited.

Carol laughed. ‘And there are ways of making a fool of yourself, thousands of them, and she found a particularly obnoxious one! She saw a mess on the road, *me*, and she gave the order, get that pile of dung out of the way ...’

They were both laughing by now. Carol moved them forward a step. ‘You were good to give her a chance, darling.’

Tim knew he was forgiven, and he knew, also, that it was because he’d left his wife where she wanted to be. In triumph. Carol said, ‘We’ve got years ahead of us yet, Tim. Jessye and Franz. We’ve got to make good people of them. That’s a parent’s job, make your children as good as you are. At the very least! If the human race can’t do that, how can it ever improve?’ He was more cautious, though accepting willingly enough. ‘They’ll be fine people. Will they be better than us? Who knows? They might.’

Carol looked at her husband, and he her. They’d got out the other side of that storm, they were going to go on and they were ready for it. Something lay ahead, known as the future, but it wouldn’t have anything worse than they’d dealt with already, Carol felt sure of it and as long as she was sure, she knew, she had a way of making things happen as they should.

## **14. Was anything more demanding ever said?**

Two letters addressed to Carol reached Tantangara on the same day. Lola, the secretary, gave them to her unopened. ‘They had a personal look about them.’ Carol was touched. ‘Thanks Lola, I appreciate that. You really trust your instincts, don’t you.’ One was from a man, the writing on the other was a woman’s. Carol felt it was the one that would affect her most, so she went for the man’s writing first.

It was Uncle Stephen. He’d been talking to some estate agents,

he'd been amazed by the valuations they put on what had once been Samantha's apartment, now Carol's. Did she want to cash in? As far as he knew, there were no complaints against the tenants, but shouldn't she come up and inspect occasionally? Check the pictures, the antiques? If she was too busy to make the flight – Carol smiled at this: flights to Sydney were visiting the backyard to her and Tim – he, Stephen, could have a look at the place if she cared to nominate him as the owner's agent, all she had to do was ring the agent on ...

She'd talk it over with Tim that night. She looked long and hard at the writing on the other envelope, wondering why a mystery was more attractive than the simple solution of ripping the envelope open. Who was writing to her in a hand she didn't know? Gabrielle ...

Ma chère amie, I have wondered so often how you are and what you are doing, but I did not know how to find you. You are like a comet that has gone back into space. But bright for a while, my god!

Listen, you must hear what has happened to me, then you must write back and tell me your tale. You always kept your troubles under control, this was something I could never do. It shows itself in the men we entertain.

Men! Why am I such an eternal fool?

It was not a long letter, but it managed to get through Ian, Peter and Darcy in quick time, Ian dead in a Sydney shootout, Peter in jail and Darcy having fled the country, destination unknown. For a time Carol didn't know whether to laugh or cry, then she noticed a cold sensation gripping her heart; Gabrielle had been through the years known as formative without making anything worthwhile for herself. What could she do now? She would surely harden? She wasn't a woman of strong ambition, she wouldn't pour herself into a career.

She'd shown no sign, thus far, of wanting children; was she locked, then, into a failed self? Gabrielle, a woman of moods rather than of imagination, must find a new path, a new way of operating, or else repeat her failures.

Suddenly Carol found herself being examined by a mind of steel: her own. She remembered her own vulnerability at the time when she took on Wilhelm, the most excited time, perhaps the peak, of her life thus far, and she had taken Wilhelm's admiration as the true, natural and perhaps exclusive response to what she'd been at that time, and she'd been wrong. He'd done her no good. He'd used her because that was what he was, a user rather than a giver, and her apprehension of this had been slow in arriving. She'd blazed with joy, sucking in the energy that Wilhelm/Loge had offered, and justly or unjustly – probably the former – she'd sent him away depleted. So virtue had triumphed despite its mistakes; what had caused it to win so clearly? Virtue protected itself, she decided. As long as you were sure of your rightness, it was hard to pull you down. She looked at Gabrielle's letter again, this time at the part dealing with Ian, a nippy little man who'd believed in his own luck too much and too long. Ian had believed he could make a winning run last indefinitely, the fool! Gabrielle had made the mistake of putting herself in his hands, which meant she'd abdicated responsibility for herself. Two fools had entwined each other. How could you manage a life if you trusted someone like that?

But how could you manage a life if you didn't trust somebody else as deeply as you trusted yourself?

This was the thought that brought her house of cards tumbling down because how could you know how deeply (and wisely!) you trusted yourself? Only by looking into yourself, an inaccurate, subjective process giving no surety, no certainty, at all.

What you needed was luck, first and foremost, with boldness (foolishness?) adding a touch of help.

She put the letter down, and turned again to Uncle Stephen. Yes, she'd give him authority to inspect her apartment, basking in the

afternoon light reflected from the loveliest harbour in the world, but she wouldn't go back herself until she wanted to, until she was ready to make peace with herself and the world at the end of her journey through it. She'd looked out a window onto water when she needed to rescue herself from a marriage that would have strangled her. It had been a bold assertion, and now she had to make it good. That meant she'd committed herself to a life of struggle until a final plateau of peace was reached.

Stephen could inspect the place. She'd avoid it.

Carol felt troubled every time she thought of Gabrielle. How had she got into such a mess – three times? What was it in her that had sought out those men, alike in being worthless? The sheer difference from Carol's own life forced comparisons; at least Gabrielle had taken some chances! She found herself wondering if Tim mightn't be a bit dull, ordinary, conventional ... forgettable? She also realised that he was aware of her scrutiny. He knew she was judging. He was decent enough, she realised, to let her do it without challenging; she had to give him marks for that. The investigation she was undertaking, the judgements involved, were taking her close to the danger zones of self-loathing, of tearing down without constructing. She tried to be positive, she spent a little more time each day at the office so as not to lose touch. Tim insisted on her taking responsibility for a certain section of the business: what was it to be? She chose charter flights, an area where plenty could go wrong and blunders would be costly: that would keep her up to the mark! People came in with ideas of personalised tours when conventional flights and standard tours were much less risky, so that talking people out of their foolishness was built into her job. 'We can fiddle money out of fools,' Tim said to her when she took up this position, 'but we're in this business for the long haul. When the whole city, or three or four cities, turn to us when they've got something to organise, and it's the most natural thing in the world to do, that's when we know we've made it!'

Carol agreed. It showed her a difference between herself and her husband, perhaps between women and men. Tim was happy to be formed by what he did: the world was his to shape, and if you wanted to know him, you had only to watch, listen, use a little intuition, while Carol's thoughts were questions about herself and the very modest effects she might have on those around her. The children were her test of her qualities, such as they were, and imperfections. In this she was different from Tim. He loved Jessye and Franz, set a standard for them, and expected them to meet it. There would be pain, for him, if they failed, but it would be their failure.

Their mother was not like this. Tim's way was too simple. It was like the office that he ruled. He'd set it up to resemble his idea of how things worked. If you created an organisation to function in a certain way then that was how it functioned, and you might even believe, if you kept your brain quiet, that the way the office worked represented some part of reality. But if you moved back, and further again until the picture was huge, and the detail blurred, you became aware of how many of humanity's facets were involved in even the simplest actions. Indeed there probably weren't any simple actions, only complexities under-conceived. Consider the ways people considered themselves: they talked about their hearts, souls, spirits, minds, bodies, guts as if these things determined what people were going to do, or had done. People said, 'She's riding high today!' or 'She's in a bad mood!' to describe someone classified as 'in a shitty' or 'a stinker'! The words that attempted seriously to classify or at least refer to fundamental characteristics were likely to be Greek-derived; all the rest were colloquial, crude, or vulgar in the sense of common. Indeed, the bonding between vulgar and common was so close in ordinary people's thinking that it seemed that there was something innately derogatory in collective or communal consideration. That is to say, if a thing was looked at in a way that was both collective and responsible then it was going to be downgraded by the very act of consideration.

That was something humans did with their minds. There was plenty more! People made a distinction between those who were intelligent and those who were not. But they were less inclined, Carol saw, to distinguish between intelligence used well and used poorly, as often happened. To pass that test you had to be in the position where all the possible paths of action were good ones, useful, leading somewhere desirable. An organisation, even a travel agency, or her children's schools, might be staffed by clever people whose total efforts didn't amount to much because they were not harmoniously conceived. People could put an almighty effort into their pulling but if they pulled in different directions, what good could they do?

Only harm, mostly. Carol considered her husband's leadership. Almost entirely positive. She felt tenderly for him because he certainly passed that test. Everyone on the payroll had first to know what everyone else was doing, and then to respect it. Occasional meetings made certain of that. Also, he had a way, a trick, really, of being around at the very moment when people realised things. He asked people what they were thinking when something gave them pause. He listened. He let people find their own answers. How many times had she heard him say to a customer, 'if you're not getting what you expect, tell us,' something he meant, as customers could surely see. The business was growing in the best way, steadily, never spectacular, something Tim scarcely allowed with his careful habits ...

What about the children? Tim liked to say that both of them had lots of Carol in them but she saw this as a form of accusation; how could two young people so utterly different be alike? Both parents encouraged Jessye's personality to blossom, to display itself, so that when she revealed herself as stage-grabbing, why, she would ask, was that a legacy of her, Carol, and not of Tim? And when he tried to affix certain of their daughter's characteristics on her, Carol would try to break down this ... viewpoint, it was certainly no sort of analysis ... whereby the girl's doings could be separated, split into parts, to

allow a judgement that one of the parents, but not the other, thought was suitable. 'People are too complex for judgements of that sort to work,' Carol would tell him. 'Analysis doesn't work. It's only done to win an argument, or make one party – but not the others – happy, because released from blame or irresponsibility. Just think about it, Tim. People are all the time trying to work things out. They don't say what will I do next, they say why did it happen? Well, most of the time you can't know why something happened the way it did. You're faced with a problem, so, instead of working out what you're going to do, you dodge it by asking how it came about. Imagine doing that in the face of a bushfire?'

Tim was amused. 'I dare say you're right. But it's natural to do what I was doing. And I'm sorry if I was annoying. And yes, we do have to focus on what the kids are going to be, especially you and me. We can't leave it to anyone else!'

This cleared the air. Both threw themselves all over again into sharing life with their children. They'd always had the policy that the children went where they went, and now they recommitted to it, except that Carol wouldn't let them be taken out of school, and Tim agreed. 'It'll work against them in the long run if we do that. Other kids will grow jealous and it'll show up in nasty ways.' So Tim became the major traveller, the long-distance man, and Carol – and Tim too, if he was free – took the children around the state. They made catalogues of their travels, with pictures the children had taken, or asked to be taken, and signs, posters, views and cards they acquired. 'This'll need pruning one of these days,' Carol said, as they looked at the pile they brought home from Mildura, 'but that's what we have to teach them, to be selective, and you can't be that until you've first got yourself a mess!'

Life, she told herself, was a lesson: who was teaching whom? They found, as they made their way about, that the children were quick in seeing how towns were laid out, separating the early parts with older buildings from truck depots on the rim. They were pleased

with themselves, all four, on being able to pick up historic names and listened to their mother when she remembered, or had recently re-read, something of the town's history. 'Where did you go when you were a little girl, mum?' Franzy wanted to know, and she had to say that she'd not been a traveller in those days because once her father had died her mother was 'concentrating', as she put it euphemistically for her mother had been obsessive, on her success at school, something she felt she had repaid her mother, even if after her death, by getting her PhD. 'Gee mum, that must have been awful,' Jessye said when her mother recounted her own mother's last illness. 'It was,' Carol told her, 'and it makes me appreciative of having you, I can tell you now!' This caused her daughter to wonder. 'Do I have to get a ... what you just said?' This anxiety was swept away. 'If it's what you want to do when you're twenty, sure! But if you take another path, like most young people do, that's fine too.' Jessye was thoughtful now. 'Mum? Because you've got a ...' she couldn't remember the letters '... does that make you something special?'

'Yes!' Tim roared. 'My word it does! Only a very small number of people get a PhD and it means they've got brains!' Carol felt an urgent need to modify this. 'Everybody's got brains. It means you've learned to use your brains in a rather special way. Which doesn't appeal to everybody.' She looked at her family, equating them with her. Tim didn't want to let it rest. 'It *is* special, and you did do it. We mustn't steer Jess and Franzy away from it.' Carol thought back to her Sydney days, when she was separating from an unwanted husband. 'I made a decision very early on about how I'd see myself. It seemed to me that I could think of it as a flag, something I held aloft and showed to everyone as my identity. Or, I could think of it as a foundation stone, something under me, back behind me now, that I could use as a base.' She looked at him, not needing to say how she'd settled. Tim, knowing she wanted the matter ended, murmured simply, 'It's a pretty big base, then, because it's got four of us on it now!'

As far as we know, children can't choose which family they'll join; they arrive, and look around. Is that why they yell? Powerless, they are loved, and thus empowered, because they may offer love in return, or withhold it: what's more powerful than that? It may be said that they learn, perhaps already understand, life's principal lesson at the outset; things learned later are mere additions. Mothers, confronted by recalcitrant children, have to dig deep in their own childhoods to find means to cope. The simplest, strongest forces are the hardest to understand. Men, caught up in such exchanges, may try to dominate or, better, to wait for a secondary role to offer itself. When this happens, they must accept. Tim understood Carol's motherhood as well as she did herself, but from a safe position on the outside; what he couldn't know was what it was like to be a mother when you hadn't always been one. She must, he was sure, have been a powerful child, she must therefore know, from deep in her own experience, what it was like to encounter an equal force. She had been the one and was now the other.

Jessye liked to be provocative. Carol recalled that she too had been the same way, and that it was this aspect of her which had developed into the feminism that had directed her for a handful of years. If her children were in transit, and she was too, where was she now? What was coming next, if she wanted to prepare? Again, she got two letters on the same day, and again they were addressed to Tantangara, as if the thing she had helped her husband create had somehow become, not an outpost, but her central establishment. Didn't anybody know where she lived?

Her home?

Gabrielle had written back and there was desperation in what she'd written. Darcy was back in the country. If he had any money it would soon be spent and he'd be looking for her. Could she come and stay with Carol? She wasn't sure how long. Till the coast was clear, whatever that meant. Carol wasn't sure that she wanted Gabrielle's influence near her children but knew she couldn't say no. She raised it

with Tim that night, in the hour after the children had fallen asleep, an open-ended, available time which had become precious because it was perhaps the only part of their days not spoken for. Tim saw his wife put down whatever she was reading with heaviness in her hands and he knew there was a difficulty. He looked at her, offering readiness, attention, and a willingness to share her load.

‘What is it, love?’

Carol told him about Gabrielle’s wish to move in with them. ‘She needs support, she’s asking for help ...’

‘Then we give her what she needs. Tell her yes, of course, we’ll be pleased to see her.’

Carol smiled weakly: he was a good man. ‘I don’t want any big dramas played out in front of the kids.’

Tim wasn’t worried. ‘We’ve got any number of friends we can hand her on to if we need to keep her out of sight. No problem there. How soon can she get down?’

And so it came to pass. Gabrielle got a ride with someone to Albury, and he knew a truck driver ... Suddenly there was a new person in the house and everybody saw themselves in a new way. Carol found herself, not exactly trapped in, but responsive to, the things which had shaped her past; Jessye and Franz, she could see, were fascinated. Gabrielle’s face had coarsened a little, and her eyes darted about in a new way, searching for danger as if its presence was inevitable. Tim, Carol noticed, always sat close to Gabrielle as if he felt his presence would be calming, and it was; this was not a man on the make, but something sustaining. His children sat on his knees as if they were fixtures, and he had a way, Gabrielle saw, of moving softly, of touching gently anything in the house – switches, pots and pans, the backs of chairs. He has no need to rule, she thought, he’s content to be a part. Carol was more intense. She wanted to analyse, to diagnose; Gabrielle told her about the men in her life, every one a wild horse, she said. She wanted to capture them, train them, turn them into racing champions, cup winners, glamorous creatures,

adored and proudly owned. Carol was appalled. What rubbish! Wild horses were no good at all, she told her former friend. They interbred, any horse with any horse, they had good for nothing progeny. Horses were like humans, she told Gabrielle, if you wanted quality, you had to work hard to bring it about ...

At once she felt uncertain. Her own marriage, her husband and her children as well as herself, were all covered by what she'd been saying: what, when considered sternly from the outside, would they reveal about her life and what she'd made of it? Gabrielle, Carol saw, was on the verge of rage, or tears, or both. Would she shout at her host, abusing her? Carol put her arms around her friend. 'Sorry about that, darling. You copped a blast from the lecturer I never was!' Gabrielle wanted to know: 'Did you ever think you were going to run a travel business? Back then, when we knew each other?'

They were close again now. 'No. I didn't think that. It's still a little strange, when I step back. Which isn't often, now I've got kids. Don't be in any doubt, I love my two, but they drive me crazy sometimes. If there's someone at home here, looking after them, I'm not above making up reasons to stay at the office another half an hour while I build up the strength to come home.' She would have gone on, but by now Gabrielle was crying. 'What is it, darling? What did I say?'

Gabrielle felt brave enough to say it. 'While I am here, you will be able to stay at the office that extra half an hour because I will mind the children. I will play with them. They will be happy with me. I promise. You need have no fears ...' She would have gone on but Carol saw not only what she meant, but a little more. Gabrielle wanted children of her own but felt she'd gone too far in another direction, a wrong one, one that de-trained a woman from doing what was natural. She wiped her eyes with a tiny handkerchief and crushed it into a ball. 'Not one of them was any good for me. Not one! They stole, they lied, they hid things so I couldn't see! I was a fool, Carol, a fool, an ever so foolish fool!' Carol kissed those eyes which

she'd thought she'd never see again, and assured her, 'It's marvellous that you've found us. We're your family now. We won't let you go till you're strong again, and sharing your life with someone who's not going to fail you.' She ran her fingers along Gabrielle's arms, and back. 'You're strong, darling, strong! You gave as good as you got, didn't you?' Gabrielle saw at least a little of the funny side of herself. 'When I hit them, I said, you are going to pay for this. Darcy might be chasing me now, but he's run away a couple of times because I was hitting him hard. He's a coward, my friend, a coward and a fool. But dangerous. That's why I've run away this time, and come to stay with you.' Her eyes, tear-filled as they might be, were fixed on Carol, inquiring, and Carol, standing, said firmly, 'Nobody's ever elbowed me away from anything I held dear, and that's you, my love. That's you. You're part of this place as long as you need it. Do you know how tough I am these days?' The two children, Jessye and Franz, coming back to the room where they'd left their mother and this stranger, were amazed; mum looked younger by years, and Gabrielle was almost helpless but for the grip she had on their mother's ever so dependable arms.

The second letter on the same day was from Andrea. The letterhead said Coral Sea Apartments, Cairns, though it had been posted in Port Douglas. 'I manage this place,' Andrea said, presumably meaning the Coral Sea Apartments, 'while Matty gets about in his yacht.' Matty was unexplained and undescribed, an appendage to his yacht if the letter was to be believed. But Andrea was no writer. She said she'd been curious about Carol, had questioned a few of those who'd known her, and she'd managed to get the Tantangara address. 'Come up and stay with us,' she wrote. 'Kids are fine if you've got them. We're used to pretty well anything and anybody, here!' Carol was pleased that the letter had come but wasn't sure that she and Tim would do anything about it. Franzy had just started school and Carol was watching carefully. People she knew, mostly of grandparental age, said it was a pity the way mixing with others at school changed children's attitudes,

their pronunciation, their outlook. He (or she) they would say, was such a beautiful child and then they became like all the rest. Carol had seen this herself, but took it as a stage that children had to go through. To stand apart was to refuse the challenge and she didn't want her two to do this. She wanted new influences on Franzy anyway; he was such an amiable, equable child, needing, she thought, some resistance, some element of refusal, as evidence of his need to protect an inner self which Carol hoped was there inside him, but wasn't sure.

The problem didn't arise with Jessye, who might not have a singer's personality but was aware of what people expected of her and adept at managing to be elsewhere when it counted. Carol remembered the night when Jessye had come to her, in her underpants, and pajamas in hand, to say, 'I won't have a bath tonight, mum, I'll have a wash. But I'll be very sure about between my legs and under my arms!' Carol hadn't known whether to laugh or give an order, but contented herself with acquiescing; she supposed it must be good if her daughter took charge of herself from time to time. Franzy was different in not needing to assert himself. Crises appeared not to come near him. Carol was unsure whether she wanted him like this or not: it was apparently an enviable way of moving through the world, but, as she couldn't help realising, and admitting, she wanted him to be more like herself, a being in endless definition, though, she would have said, much good it does me!

One thing that pleased Carol about her son was that she didn't have to correct his formation in any feminist way, though Tim said the danger period would come later, when he'd physically matured. 'Men change then, boys change, they're full of testosterone and they can't stop themselves.' When she demurred, he went on, 'We got him into the world, darling, and we won't see him out, or I certainly hope we won't, so he's responsible for himself. We can help, and of course we will, but we can't make him what we want him to be. We can put in all the right influences but we can't be sure what he'll make of them. He's another being, apart from ourselves ...'

Carol could not have this. ‘He’s *a* part, not apart!’ Tim didn’t argue. He knew that Carol lived with misgivings about the business they’d put together. Tim would have said that travel was ideologically neutral while Carol, or at least the younger Carol, now buried in motherhood and business, would have said that travellers were the most uncritical accepters of the world as it was and – even worse – as it had been. Tim rarely argued with her about this, partly because she kept her disputatious nature under control these days, partly because if you provoked an argument with someone, your challenge forced them back to the position under dispute, even if they were moving away and would have abandoned the position before too long. Besides, Tim was not a disputatious man. Once you satisfied yourself that something was a reasonable goal, you needed all your energy to achieve it. Talking about it was a waste. Carol saw this and silently, in practice, she conceded it. So where were the goals of her young womanhood? She scarcely knew. Then one evening, after Jessye’s bath, a real bath this time, the girl asked her mother why she was sometimes bossy and sometimes cuddly: that was the duality troubling the daughter. ‘Bossy? I’m not bossy!’ Carol told her, but Jessye wasn’t yielding. ‘Sometimes when you’re reading me a story I can tell you don’t approve.’ Her mother saw the truth of this at once. ‘Well, sometimes the people in the story do things I think you shouldn’t, that’s why.’ Jessye wriggled around to get her face in her mother’s. ‘Pimpernel the Piggy? She’s one of the ones you don’t approve of!’

Carol felt undercut. She couldn’t remember what Piggy the Pimpernel, no, Pimpernel the Piggy had done that displeased her but Jessye’s perception wouldn’t be wrong. ‘What did I say, darling?’

Jessye couldn’t remember, but the look on her face stayed the same. ‘You said something nasty.’

What? Jessye couldn’t remember, but whatever it had been, the effect was permanent. ‘Tell me what you’d like me to do?’

Jessye thought a long time, then she put her arms around her

mother. 'Just love me, mummy.'

Was anything more powerful, more demanding, ever said? Carol helped her daughter put on her pajamas, then lay with her till she was asleep. When finally she emerged, returning to the brightly lit lounge, she felt detached. Tim, Gabrielle. Without speaking she picked up a book and tried to read. The others, conscious of her mood, stayed silent, trying, or pretending, also to read. Finally she spoke. 'It's wonderful, but it's so demanding.' Tim & Gabrielle waited. Carol realised they wanted something from her. 'I'm feeling drained,' she said. 'It isn't always this way. Sometimes the children put energy into me, sometimes they take it out. I never know which way it's going to go.' They were still waiting, though attentively. 'Jessye said I'm sometimes bossy?'

She was asking them if they thought she was, but they sensed this as a diversion. What was going on inside her? Where was she, in her mind? Although her daughter's criticism had hurt, it had also come as a relief; the critical, embattled person she'd been was not entirely dead. Jessye sensed that lingering influence of the warrior-woman, and was made uncomfortable by it. A part of Carol was pleased to know that there was still resistance inside her, and another part thought it shameful that her transition to being a mother had never been completed. Why shameful? Couldn't she sting, and provoke, and push her daughter into realising the defects of the world? Wasn't that part of a mother's work as well? Carol looked at her husband, and her friend from years before: Gabrielle. Being a mother was something that pressed on Tim's life as well as her own, but no such connection joined her to the French woman. They were friends, or rather, they had been, and were now going through the motions of maintaining the friendship when in fact it wasn't a living thing any more, it was a pretence, a duty, hardly more than bondage for the two of them. Gabrielle stood. 'I will leave. You don't want me any more.' It was true, but Carol was appalled, and so was Tim. 'What! Gabrielle! Whatever put that in your mind?' Tim sat her down with

some vigour and dragged his chair in front of her. He flicked his eyes to his wife, urgent, commanding. She knelt by Gabrielle's chair to say, 'No. No! Something Jessye said to me made me think about myself. There's a lot of the old me still in me and I don't know if I want it or not! Being a mother's hard enough without bits from long ago popping up! Gabrielle, you're welcome here. You're wanted. We're not letting you turn yourself out! You're staying here with us till you're feeling so strong in yourself that ...'

She couldn't think of a way to go on. She took Gabrielle by the hands, and the tenderness of her touch made her troubled friend cry. Tim put his arm around the weeping woman, and they waited for her to settle. Finally some calm took over. They knew she wanted to speak but couldn't find words. 'Say it in French, darling,' Carol told her. 'We'll work it out. Or you can tell us later.' When Gabrielle straightened so that they could see her face they were relieved at what they saw – forgiveness, love, confusion, relief. Then she spoke. 'When we take a step, it is not easy to know. Are we going forward, or back? Plenty of mistakes are being made.' Carol smiled at the way she put it, and this softened Gabrielle. 'You can be a mother to me. I think that is what I want. And you, Tim ...' she let her eyes settle on him '...you can't be my father, you must be my friend.' She paused to see what else would come. 'I don't have to be anything. I can look after your children, I can be one of them so you can look after me. You know who you are. I'm still finding out. I do not like what I see, but there is time to change. I think I will be able to find my way out. Be patient with me please. I think you know I'm lost, but there must be a way to go.' She spoke strongly for the first time. 'We will look around, we will search, and that will be fine.' This was the sweeter side of Gabrielle; there was more to be revealed.

## 15. Family of five

They were a family of five, now, and organised appropriately. Carol had more time for the office because Gabrielle took the children to school and picked them up. The school was quite close and she enjoyed walking with the mothers and their children, among them, not entirely of them. The mothers appraised her while they chatted, noticing, without comment, any details she revealed about her connection with Jessye and Franzy's parents. She mentioned that she'd driven to New South Wales with Carol, years before, and they'd got to know each other on the drive. Now she was back, visiting for a while. The mothers, catching her accent, accepted this, if warily; she had a pigeon-hole, if not for very long.

One of the things that was obvious was that the children were attached to Gabrielle; one might have said they had high hopes of her, though in what way they couldn't have said. She altered the walk to school, with her foreignness, and their arrival home. She cooked little cakes when their mother didn't have time to do it, and she had flights of fancy that delighted the children. They had a feeling that she could overhear what was going on in their minds because in some way she lived in a world of fancy as they did whenever control could be escaped. They wanted to know about it, and her for knowing about it. It seemed to the children that their mother was generous, or perhaps merely unobservant, in giving them so much time in the care of Gabrielle. Jessye said to her mother, one night as they were lying on her bed, in the last phase of the day, 'Can Gabby take us somewhere, mummy? On a plane, or a bus? A long way away?'

Carol was alert. 'If we're going somewhere, she can come with us, of course. We wouldn't want to leave her behind.' Jessye didn't mean that. 'On her own? While you and daddy mind the house?'

It had got this far. Had anything else been said? Carol said cautiously, 'We weren't planning anything. I'd feel funny letting you go away when I wasn't there. I know you love Gabby. So do I.'

A trip away with her ... your father and I hadn't planned anything like that.' There was firmness in the words, so Jessye would know what they meant. She seemed to be accepting but Carol had a feeling that there was a rift, or the first opening of one, in her family's life. She mentioned it to Tim as they lay together that night. He was cautious.

'It's something to watch, but it'll only become something to worry about if we show the children that it's worrying us. Best to give no sign that we're troubled in any way.' Carol was uncertain. 'Children *know* things. They're inside our minds, most of the time. Or they're connected with us without us realising.' Anxiety insinuated itself into their bed. Tim, who'd been expecting that they'd make love that night, knew that they wouldn't, not with this between them, and yet it might be better if they did. Asserting themselves as a couple might be the way to deal with the outsider who was now an insider, if not an intruder. 'How far do you think it's got?'

'As far as I understand Jessye,' Carol said, 'and I have a feeling that's not very far.'

This troubled Tim, causing him to start a new line of thought. 'We need to get something different happening. Have you got anything new coming up? At the office?'

'Not really. Just routine, mostly. Why?'

'We'll swing Gabby into something at the office. Something simple. She'll be good with the public. You take on the home front for a while. It won't take the kids long to know who's in charge.'

They did this. Gabrielle went to the office with Tim in his car. Carol came along later, and left the office in time for the end of school. She left the car at home and walked to get Franz and Jess. She called them by those abbreviations in a way that told them that anyone who didn't was not in the inner circle of the family's regard. Resuming command of the children, and her dominant place in the household, was achieved with the ease that Carol had expected, but the results of this replacement were swift. Gabrielle's resentment took an unexpected form.

Gabrielle, as carer for Jessye and Franz, had placed herself somewhere between minder of the children, a younger guardian than their mother, and a rivalrous outsider, a temptation. It was this latter role which shaped the next phase of what had been a complete, if enclosed, family. The Northcote household became a *ménage à cinq*. Four of the five had fixed roles, while Gabrielle could create herself according to her whims. The easiest, and most provocative presentation of herself was as the unmarried, almost-aunt, almost maid-servant; her sexuality, displayed easily and honestly at home, was a force loose in the rooms which needed to be captured. Tim was easily caught by this approach which was apparently without harm because, unlike those of Wilhelm or Meriel, it came from within. Gabrielle's trickery slipped past his observation because she appeared to be adding to the family rather than challenging. In later years Carol came to feel that she'd been the cause of what happened because after resuming parental possession of her children, she relaxed her guard. A day after Tim she became Gabrielle's lover too.

Tim was easy because Carol was out of the house at a children's birthday party with Jessye and Franz. It was a hot day and Gabrielle took a shower. This 'required' walking through the house in a dressing gown. When he heard the shower running Tim gave her half a minute, stripped, and went in. Hiding her smile, Gabrielle fondled him as if they'd been lovers for years. Standing up, they started, then, still dripping, they went to her bed for more. Once they were dry, they dressed, saying next to nothing; each could feel the other's intention that what had been started would be kept going. When Carol came home she noticed nothing but Jessye remarked on the floor being wet in the passage. Gabrielle explained that she'd been carrying a glass of water and it had spilled. A minute later, moving down the passage, Carol noticed that the water had 'spilled' in some other places too. This was odd, but ... plenty of things are odd. Unexplained. Who bothers?

That night, in bed, Tim apologised for keeping away from her. 'Hot night. I'm sweaty.' It was warm, but not very hot, and Carol

wasn't sweaty. Again, she let it go. But the following afternoon, when Tim said he'd take the children to the beach, Carol stayed home, inquiring of Gabrielle if she mightn't enjoy a swim. Their visitor said, 'No, I want to be with you.' Carol heard in it some unexpected strand of intention, and waited till they were alone. Gabrielle was with her almost at once, intimate, secretive, revelatory. She was close, and her presence filled Carol's eyes, and mind, imploring, perhaps directing, her to take hold, or at the very least, touch. Carol put her fingers tenderly on the other woman's hips, disappointed that they didn't move, yet certain that they would, soon enough. 'Do you want me?' she said, and the younger woman smiled a little, and faintly, as she murmured, 'Do you want *me*?'

They did. Carol had never had another woman as a lover, and she sensed that in this she was junior to her guest. Gabrielle's eyes looked through Carol's eyes to explore anywhere she found resistance, then soothed Carol's recalcitrance until there was no holding back. As the intensity of their loving stepped up, Carol pleaded with Gabrielle never to leave her. At once she got the terms. 'I'm not leaving. I'm having you both. If that makes problems for you, then you can set the terms. There's my bargain. Okay?'

It had to be okay. Such things are said at moments when they won't be worked through. In accepting, Carol released her mind to thread through the differences between making love with a man, and with a woman. Men had a strangeness about them. They were other. They knew very little about women and they wanted to explore, often to capture, and then to own. With Gabrielle, the tenderness of bodies was intertwined with sameness; where did one end and the other begin? Carol felt that mingling with Gabrielle was like a meeting of clouds; each knew that the meeting, the togetherness, was a mixing without opposites, a recognition of two recognitions. Suddenly Carol, who'd never done such a thing before, saw how women, as a couple or perhaps even a group, might step out of their psychic skins to create a surprising awareness in a way they couldn't with men: she had it

with Gabrielle, all the more intensely because there were only two. It was a feature of this way of loving that there were no differences, only like-additions. To fondle the younger woman was in some way to fondle herself, pushed on by the cries of joy that came from those parts of themselves that they shared. There was a moment when Carol wondered what Gabrielle had been like with Tim – under the shower, if those wet footprints meant anything – but she pushed the thought away by supposing that Gabrielle would be the same with Tim as she was: he was the common factor after all. She might even ask him, one day.

This was her last thought before she lost herself. ‘I never want anything to be different,’ she whispered in Gabrielle’s ear, then felt herself seized by the shoulder, pushed back a little, and penetrated by fierce eyes: ‘You can’t get away now! I’ve got you in an unbreakable grip! Say you’re mine.’ And again, whispering fiercely. ‘Say you’re mine!’

She did. Whispering, murmuring, laughing, she said it fifty-five times, or five hundred and fifty, she had no idea. Gabrielle laughed. ‘Sssssshhh. Don’t go on. That’s enough.’ She laughed again, and Carol laughed too, because if she’d given herself to the other woman, she had also captured the captor. Paradox is the final ruler of the world, and certainly that part of it called love.

When people exist in the land of love, they are capable of changing all the time; there are few steady, sturdy *citoyens*. Nobody votes. Power is a swirling force, unblockable, mysteriously astray, unfindable. It took Carol days to find an answer to the question in her mind: what am I doing? What on earth has come over me? She had a husband. He provided no answers, being as infatuated as she was, or worse. She had a daughter and a son. She did her best to keep them unaware of what was happening. Gabrielle had changed the nature of the household. It was easy enough to see how Tim had been seduced, but what about her? How had her management of herself and her family been upset? This took some days. It hadn’t. She was not Gabrielle’s sister in love,

as she'd imagined in their first sexual encounter, Gabrielle was using her to achieve the mothering she'd lacked, and at the same time she was being overcome and had to be because Gabrielle needed to alter the power balance of her life. Men had damaged her. Men had used her. A woman had to give her control of herself to let her see what had been done by the lovers her hosts knew had been awful.

Men.

Seeing this gave Carol a way back to herself. She didn't need to refuse Gabrielle, even withdraw. It was enough to know what she needed. Tim was another matter. He was in a state of confusion, ashamed of himself because he felt he was repeating his experience with Meriel, when he wasn't, though Carol couldn't see how to move him to a position where better analysis was possible. He was so ashamed of his passion for Gabrielle that he couldn't bear having Carol point out even the most obvious aspects of it, such as, primarily, the fact that Gabrielle was not all-powerful because her purposes were not broad. She wanted power over him because it was what she hadn't had with Ian, Peter or Darcy, the shadows she was escaping. At the Tantangara office she was obedient to the point of parody, at home, she ruled him with no more than a glance. He tried not to let this obedience be seen by Carol and this suited her; she didn't want it seen by the children, for whom, in Carol's intention, their parents were the same as they'd been before Gabrielle moved in. Her presence in the house was *fun*, an extra that added variety to situations in the way of humour's habit of changing the way things had been. People exist in the land of love, people who've never seen it long to live in it, those who've known it and been expelled try, laden with yearning, to get back when it can't be made to happen: love is the most arbitrary of gods and hates to give what people want when they want it. Love prefers to arrive as a shock, dangling impossibilities out of reach of those who are bound by ...

... everything that binds the human race. Carol was wise enough to see the tricks in her situation, fortunate woman. There would

come a time when Gabrielle was gone, testing her remade self against the old impossibilities, and Carol was hard-hearted and self-hating enough to want that departure to be soon, at the same time as she did her level best to keep Gabrielle, and – *a rule not to be broken* – to maintain the fiction of normality in the lives of her children.

Jessye, her mother suspected, was such a tricky spirit that a realisation of the reality of the household would encourage her to be more of what she was already; Franzy was the more exposed to danger, in Carol's thinking, because his thoughts, like his observations, were cast like a very wide net indeed, and he managed a separation between what he saw and what he did. Carol felt, even though he was only in his starting year at school, that she ought to know what triggered him, what would make him act when he became the man he had it in him to be, but she couldn't pull the veil aside, pull the trick she needed to perform. Perhaps he was drifting and would continue to drift until some trigger, some power-switch, presented itself in his early manhood, and he would reveal at last what he'd always been. When this moment revealed itself Carol wanted the full power of her motherhood to exert itself on anything that needed to be blocked, changed, or simply diverted. She didn't want him knowing her secret with Gabrielle, namely that she was every bit as happy, complete and insightful in being a woman enveloped in womanly love as she was in her conventional, one woman with one man-genus of love which the world bought and sold as normal.

Normality was only a convention and she found herself ashamed of deferring to it, just as she would have been ashamed to admit to her children – her son, mainly – that privately, with Gabrielle, she was at her most exultant. Angels were said to come clothed, and with feathered wings, but it was when she was with Gabrielle, and they'd removed the world's coverings, that she was purest, cleanest, finest. She would have said that Gabrielle was beautiful, and her love-partner would have said the same for her, but beauty was only a word, a concept, no more than the husk a creature discards before moving

on to its next stage. Carol, like Gabrielle, knew that what they were going through was what people would say was *only* a stage, but what would they become after the throes of getting rid of the old husk, the sloughed-off skin? Carol couldn't go back and didn't want to go forward, whereas, she sensed, Gabrielle was readying herself for a later, more vital and more lasting encounter, which would happen far away, somewhere else, after she was gone.

When would she go? What would take her away? That was easy: a man. What sort of man? He would have to be ghastly enough to make her think that in conquering him she was conquering the earlier three as well; and fine enough, at least in promise, to make her think that under her influence he would make – *they* would make – a transition to the sort of future some part of Gabrielle still believed was possible.

When would he come? Carol prayed that he would come quickly, to get her and Tim out of what they were in, while another part of her longed for things to stay as they were.

Gabrielle stayed three more months. She left when she formed a relationship with a French airline pilot working for Air China, and he was often in Sydney and rarely in Melbourne, so ...

When Gabrielle went back to Sydney, to take up with her Frenchman, Carol felt safe, first, relieved, and then that things had turned out well. She said this to Tim, one night as they lay in their bed, a place whose ownership was still in confusion, and he said, unable to help himself, 'Leaving all the problems to us, down here.' 'No darling,' she said, very quietly, but with the confidence of knowing that her life and very possibly theirs were now secure, because they'd been added to: 'No. I've got a new basis for my life and I feel, believe me – this was said in the dark, they couldn't catch the glances in each other's eyes – 'believe me, that I'm stronger and more secure than I was.'

All Tim could do was scoff, he was so troubled.

'No darling ...'

He was enraged. ‘Darling! How can you push that word into my ears? We’ve been saying that word to someone else, the both of us, for ages, and now it’s debased and I never want to hear it again! I’m not your darling and you’re not mine. We’ve both been tricked, we’ve been separated from each other, we’re disgraced, we’ve got no future, I’m ashamed of myself and I’m ashamed to be here beside you as I am ... oh I don’t know ...’

It was up to her, and it took weeks. First she had to show him that she was happy, and then that she was better. She did. Then, and this was trickier by far, she had to make him see that he was better for what had happened. Hostile neutrality was as far as she got, at first at least. ‘Increased understanding is always a good,’ she told him, one afternoon in his little office at the end of the verandah. ‘Let me speak for myself. As a woman, I was used to thinking of myself, seeing myself, in relation to a man. You. But I let Gabrielle into every part of me, showing myself the way a woman sees things. It’s as if I was taken through a museum, or a gallery, and everything on display was me!’ She laughed. ‘You think that’s bullshit. But it’s true.’

All he wanted to do was grumble. ‘So what if it’s true? How does that help me? Or us? We’re on our own now. What are we going to do about where we are?’

This was easy. ‘First we have to agree about where we are.’

‘Words, bloody words, when I feel lost. Lousy. Left behind by someone who was very smart and was always going to leave us behind. She used us when it suited her, and she disappeared when it suited her ...’

Carol broke in. ‘Can’t you see that’s exactly what was done to her, by ...’

They said the names together.

‘... Ian, Peter and Darcy.’ Carol laughed and Tim was disgusted. ‘Four names now. Ian, Peter, Darcy, and Tim! How do you think I feel about that?’

‘If you really were the same as Ian, Peter and Darcy, and your name was Tim ...’

She was still laughing, and even he could see that she had something she was getting at.

‘... you’d have quite a lot to worry about. But you’re different. You’re not number four of a bad lot. She used you to get a good experience to wipe out the earlier men. She wasn’t the same with you. You must be able to see that? Tim?’

‘You might be right. But where does that leave me? Hey? Sorry to be selfish, but I’m concerned with me. What did I give, and what did I get?’

Easy again, she thought. ‘She gave herself to you, utterly and deeply ...’

‘And she left me the moment that suited her. She didn’t leave me with so much as a photo of the two of us, she didn’t give me any warning. One minute she was there ... all was well, and the next minute she was gone! I’m bitter, I can tell you. Not bitter with dignity or tender regrets, or anything like that, but mean and snakey, that’s how bitter I am!’

If he was angry, he might, when he calmed down, be tender. It depended on him understanding.

‘I know you feel angry. But can you see that she made herself better, it just happened to be at our expense?’

‘I can really, really surely see that! Who couldn’t? It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?’

‘No! You’re thinking about the pain on our side. Your side, actually, I don’t think you’re thinking much about me just yet.’

Inflicting pain was what he wanted to do. ‘You’re pretty good at looking after yourself!’

‘It’s the difference between us, Tim. I’m using the pain to make myself better, which, if you think about it, is fairly close to what she did.’

‘What she did? Are you rearranging that now, are you, so it looks

different? So we can explain it away and say that what happened didn't happen, it was really something else? That's a good trick, Carol, pity it won't work. Problems'd be easy to solve if we could deceive ourselves with sweet-smelling bullshit, if there's such a thing ...' He got tangled in his own thoughts. 'There *is* such a thing! You just invented it. Go on, now, use it! Spread it around, tell me you're making everything better ...'

He was tying himself in his unhappiness, wrapping himself so he couldn't be seen, only a display of his own creation. He wanted to rage on but she wouldn't let him.

'There's something terrible about human beings. We're not nearly as smart as we like to think. If we've had pain inflicted on us, the only way we can get over it ...'

He broke in, shouting: '... is to inflict pain on someone else! Exactly. You're right! That's what she did to us! And do I like it? No fucking no! No I don't! Not till the last noise in the universe has been sounded and everything's gone silent! Not till then will I accept it! Not even then! I'll still be as I am now, raging with rage ... sorry, I'm saying silly things, but I need to keep my rage steaming the way it is, otherwise I'm saying I'm glad I got tricked. I'm happy she did me over and got away with it. Well, I'm not. I'm not happy about it at all ...'

He may not have been aware, though Carol was, that his rage was exhausting itself as he vented it. She looked at him steadily, calmly, challenging him. 'You're unhappy, yes, but that's only stage one. Stage two, you're sullen, mostly indifferent. Stage three, you're regretful, but ever so slightly forgiving. That will happen if you hear some good news about her. She's better than she was. She's doing things now that she couldn't do then. Stage four, you start to reminisce and you remember there were good things ...'

'Oh yes? What's stage five, oh you great clairvoyant wife of mine?'

'Stage five, you realise you took part in a miracle. It hurt like hell, but everyone came out of it better for having been through it.'

He looked at her warily. 'Better for having been through it?'

'That's what I said. Do you think I'm wrong?'

His energy had gone. He was just a heap of a man, though not suffering as much as he was pretending. Then he found the grace to say, 'You could be right. Let's wait and see.'

## 16. Using the old perceptions

Tim went through a period of wanting to open new branches. He wanted to buy into small, regional airlines. He was interested in owning an island or two, off the Queensland coast, or anywhere, really. He considered, briefly enough, taxis, until Carol reminded him of a few home truths about the taxi industry. He switched to hotels, and then to the politics of tourism. Governments weren't doing enough because they didn't know what to do. Eventually she said to him, 'You could do these things. Well, one or two of them, perhaps, if you wanted them for the right reasons.'

'What's wrong with the reasons I give you? They look sound enough to me.'

'No. You're bored with what you're doing, so you're looking around for something else to grab.'

'What should I be doing?'

'Ah! That's the question.'

As so often in their marriage, she took up positions that weren't a part of his nature. He, for instance, thought it natural to make a decision and then to follow it, almost as if an order had been given and must be obeyed, while Clare, with equal certainty, would search herself for some character trait as the base for what she, not so much decided, as *allowed* to happen. She expected whatever she did to be an organic part of herself, while he expected his mind to issue orders for the rest of him to follow. The pair of them were sitting in the little

room at the end of the verandah and he was curious to see what they'd do this time.

Thinking to pre-empt her, he said, 'We don't have to change the way we do business at all. We might shift the focus of our attention to the kids. Work out what they're going to need, have a look around, shift them to new schools if the one they're in isn't doing things right.'

Carol said calmly, 'The one they're in isn't doing much wrong. I'd like them to go through to the end of the primary years with the people they know already. Choosing their secondary school is the one that matters. We have to get that right. Some people think they can fix a mistake in their children's schooling by spending a heap of money, but if you put your children in the wrong place for six months, or a year, you can't get the time back no matter how much you spend.' Tim noticed that she'd taken her eyes off him and had gone somewhere inside herself, pondering what she'd do next. Hoping he was adding something useful, he offered, 'It'll seem strange if they're going to different schools, as you're suggesting.'

She turned to look at him. 'Franzy can go to the same school as Jessye. I'd like them to stay together. He's got his direction now.'

Tim was amazed. 'He's what?'

'Found his path. It's language. Words.'

'Words? Yes, I suppose he's a pretty smooth talker ...'

She thought him pretty dense. 'He came home from school the other day with a comic he'd got from a Russian boy in his class. He said he was going to swap with this boy. Have you heard him imitate this boy's father? It's very funny, he's got him down to a T.' Tim hadn't heard this imitation, in fact he didn't know his son knew a Russian friend. 'What other friends has he got?' As Carol answered, Tim wondered how she knew about their son's dealings with others, and he said so, as if disputing what she was telling him. 'Once our two get in that schoolyard, it's like a mill pond to me. I can't keep my eye on them, they seem to lose their identity, to yield it to a mob that has leaders that I don't know.'

‘It does seem like that. That’s why it’s good, every now and then, to linger near the fence and try to get inside the games, the rituals, that you can see.’ She watched his reaction, and she could see that he was ashamed, that he’d been thinking that he’d made himself a good parent by getting his children to school occasionally and that he’d absolved himself of responsibility at that point and could leave without wondering what would happen next. He’d failed because he hadn’t set himself a higher standard. ‘Here I’ve been wondering about setting up some new branch of the business and I haven’t realised there are things closer to home that I should have been thinking about. Typical of me to be watching the horizon when I don’t know what’s at my feet.’

This was welcome; they were together again. Carol said, ‘We’re at a dangerous time, both of us. There’s a book called *The Doors of Perception*. It’s about using drugs to get the doors open ...’

He raised a hand. ‘I hope you’re not going to suggest ...’

‘No no. But people like us often *close* their doors of perception at about this time in their lives. They’ve made a good start, they’ve kept their wits about them, they’ve got a house, money, children at good schools, cars, lots of travel, everything’s going well so they think what they’ve done must have been right and that’s when they run into trouble. They think they know. And maybe they did know, but they don’t any more, because they start to close their minds, they use the old rules, the old perceptions, for everything that comes later. So they make hard, rigid decisions while they tell themselves they’re following the old ways that brought them success. They might have been fresh in their thinking, once, but they get mummified and they don’t even know it.’ Tim wanted to know if she thought that had happened to them, or was it only a warning blast she was sounding, but she’d gone quiet, and was looking over his shoulder.

‘Carol? Where are you?’

‘They don’t know it’s happening,’ she murmured, ‘because they don’t bother to check.’

Franz brought Leonid, the Russian boy, home after school one day; Carol gave them raisins and sultanas, which they left untouched, and a glass of milk. Franz told her they were hungry, so she pulled out a chocolate biscuit packet left over from a birthday party a week before. Her son, she noticed, was careful to give the biscuit on the end, the least fresh, to the visitor.

‘Franzy! That’s not polite!’

There was an argument and she told her son to empty the packet in a bowl, so that it wasn’t possible to tell which was the most and which the least fresh as you looked at them. Franz, though furious, did as he was told, but Carol noticed that he turned the bowl as he offered it to his friend and she suspected that he did it in order to keep what he thought were the best biscuits on his side. Certainly he grabbed his biscuit decisively and bit a piece out of it – the mark of ownership – as quickly as he could. Carol restrained herself in the presence of the visitor but she was still angry when Tim came home and she told him about it. She also told him that after Leonid had gone home she heard Franzy trying to repeat a Russian word the two boys had been using quite a lot. ‘He couldn’t get it right. He kept trying to say whatever it was and he couldn’t get the sounds right and I think he forgot what he’d heard the other boy say ...’

‘What did the other boy say?’

Carol did her best with an unfamiliar word; Tim said, ‘It’s the Russian for shit. Leonid was teaching our little fella, who needed no prompting, I’m sure.’ Carol said, ‘I’d talk to Leonid’s father if I thought it would do any good, but ...’

‘Forget about it. Who cares what they say, the little idiots!’ Carol was surprised by the vehemence of his displeasure. ‘We’re shaping him, Tim. Bit by bit and day by day. It’s an endless job, but you get your reward when they grow up the sort of person you can admire.’ She looked at him in some hope that the future would provide meaning that wasn’t always around in the present, and she saw how restless he was. He was in a conversation he wanted to be out of. Somewhere else. ‘Tim? Tim? Are you listening to me?’

He said he was, but he wasn't. 'I heard an interesting titbit today.' He looked at her, knowing he'd have her attention. 'Clearys, in the eastern suburbs. Some family wrangles, apparently. They're thinking of selling up. Two members of the family have got hefty debts, and they're pressing for a sale.'

'The other Clearys could buy them out?'

'No, apparently not. They can't. Or they won't. It's likely to come on the market.'

She knew what he wanted her to say. 'We'd be interested, wouldn't we? They've got a grip on a big area out there.'

He was nodding vigorously. 'We're not missing out on this. I'll ring Arthur Cleary tomorrow, tell him we're interested. So long as we make a good offer, I think he'd prefer to settle quickly. He's too proud to have all and sundry walking through the business, asking questions. He just wants to hand it over, get rid of it.' He smiled triumphantly at Carol, pleased to have their conversation back on rails he thought good. She wasn't sure whether to be pleased or to feel hurt. Both were true. She said, opting for what he would want, rather than the criticism, 'What sort of shape is their business in, do you think?'

It was what he wanted. The nonsense about Franzy and the Russian boy was behind them. 'Too many people in too many offices. Everyone's got their own little plot and nobody knows what anyone else is doing. It'd take a while to sort out.'

'You'd close some of their branches?'

'Have to. Well, we'd wait and see, you'd need to find out who was pulling their weight and who wasn't.' It was the answer to his recent indecision. He'd be in acquisition mode, and organisational change, and therefore happy. Carol knew that when this finished, he'd be back where he was. 'I need a partner too.'

This was serious. Not at all sure what she might say in reply, he said, 'That's me.'

She took it as genuine, for so it was intended. 'Partnerships need working on, otherwise they change, and one side, maybe both, don't

realise. People can get caught out, thinking they're closer than they really are. Their closeness is only a habit, something they've settled on, an agreement they've become comfortable with. It's something I was talking about the other day. Remember *The Doors of Perception*?

'The what? Oh, the book about drugs, yes. What about it?'

'When people stop developing, the wind goes out of their sails. They settle down with whatever makes them comfortable, and they don't know it. It's a very dangerous time, or it can be, because they don't know themselves any more. They've lost something important, and they don't know that either.'

He was disconcerted, but knew his wife well enough. 'Are you seeing warning signals, Carol? In you and me? Is that what it is? Tell me. If we're starting to lose our grip, if that's what you mean, I need to know too ...'

He paused; what had she seen?

## **17. Being and becoming**

The years of early schooling passed quickly enough, Carol turned her own earlier years into a source for what she was becoming, and Tim, satisfied by swallowing the Cleary agencies into Tantangara, turned his mind towards maturity. It looked dull. He had an undeniable feeling that without the inner drive of ambition to reach some goal, life lacked lustre. Things that had once had to be learned were easy, and less for being so. He suspected he'd become a creature of habit, it wasn't demanding, and without challenges, he was less interesting. Carol knew it troubled him. 'I never wanted to be boring, but what else am I?' She told him he was a man with two children, and their success, and succession, was challenge enough, surely?

He tried to believe her. The children got trips to places most of their friends had never seen, and in this at least, Tim was impeccable.

He knew more than most people about these destinations, he talked about them as they flew, he told them things about aeroplanes that people didn't know, and the children couldn't fail to see how their father, and sometimes mother too, were expected, because well known, in the places where they landed. They went to the Barrier Reef, and Uluru. They went to tropical Darwin and the middle of Australia's west. They saw huge trucks carting iron ore to the coast and ships that would cart it to China. They were promised a trip to China when they were bigger: 'When you're old enough to notice the differences,' Tim and Carol said. In this commitment to Jessye and Franz, their parents found each other again, respectfully and tenderly. Each wondered what they had been like, and why, in those times when their hearts had turned elsewhere. Sometimes they talked about it. 'There's no steady point in the whole universe,' Carol said, 'except inside ourselves. And even we, it seems, loosen our grip as we get older ...'

Tim broke in. '... so there's no steady point at all, eh? You look at anything, and it won't be there one day. And the day mightn't be all that far off!' They'd recently been talking about someone they knew with an ominous diagnosis. What would Tim do without Carol? What would Carol do without Tim? The question was internal, because each was capable of running Tantangara without the other; their staff was experienced, the business could almost run itself. 'If the worst came to the worst,' Tim told his wife, 'you could sell it, invest the money, and lead a life of luxury ...'

'... and leisure,' Carol put in. 'What on earth would I do? Seriously. If I took my mind away from business?' She thought. 'I think I'd become a philosopher. Sitting in city squares – I suppose it'd have to be cafes, these days, and coffees instead of retsina! – I'd think of tricky questions and I'd put them to the lazy bastards who hung out with me, having nothing better to do!' Tim was amused. 'Let's work out who they'd be. From the people we know already. Who'd down tools to philosophise?' He chuckled. 'I can think of one or two!'

‘No names!’ Carol said. ‘I’d never be able to look them in the eye again, once I’d thought of someone in that way. And nobody would take me seriously if they knew I’d been thinking of myself as Melbourne’s Socrates!’ They laughed. Melbourne’s Socrates! It sounded silly, but there must be someone, or maybe a few dozen people, doing the great man’s job? Cities needed someone to keep their thoughts in order, and if there wasn’t a Socrates, who was doing it? Or was the place in philosophic disarray, despite the relative order of the traffic? Were the white lines on the road, and the ever-changing traffic signals, the modern equivalent of the wise man’s questions? Nobody was going to force the traffic cops to drink hemlock, popular as the idea might be among bikie gangs! Tim relaxed, and roared at the silliness of the thoughts that came to his head. Why did he have to insist on timetables, bookings far ahead and all the other things by which his industry tried to lock down the future? Why couldn’t he tell everyone to sit down and talk to their heart’s content until someone felt like starting up a bus or getting a plane or two off the ground? Why was everything part of a scheme?

Because he and people like him, his wife included, and all their underlings, insisted on doing things the orderly way that diverted streams of income to their pockets ... In a moment or two, and without him realising that a profound and permanent change had taken place, Tim moved into middle age, seeing things humorously, and left behind forever the assumption that things were serious. They weren’t. You had to protect yourself, so you still had to get things right, but that was only so as to avoid disturbance. The world was as mad as ... a bunch of clowns, out of control? Or would it be better to say that the world was as mad as it was if you looked at it in any rational sort of way?

The change made Tim easier to live with. It took the stress out of dealing with him, forcing him back onto habit, because that was the safe way to do things, now that he was changed. Now that his outward path had come to an end, leaving him nowhere special, in

the middle of everywhere, as you might say. Surrounded by the rest of the human species, most of them crazy, and some of them, those who hadn't reached his end-point where they gave up their personal angst, dangerous. He looked tenderly on his wife and children, he had to protect them, and in doing so, learn to use the currency of their love and gratitude. And yet, even though he felt every day the warmth, love and vitality in Carol, the woman who lived with him, he knew that she was different, and that he had still to understand what those differences between them were, and, most important of all, when it was best for her to lead, and when the position in front belonged to him.

She was looking over his shoulder, her thoughts, like her eyes, far away. 'A penny for them,' he said, 'or do you want decimal coinage?'

She smiled. 'Do you know, I think I've seen it at last. How many years it's taken me.'

'A discovery?' She smiled again. 'Not really. It's been under my nose for years.' They looked at each other, in no hurry to take the step. 'Well?'

She said, 'Male and female. Man and woman. It's in the verbs, so like each other, so different. To be, to become. It's as simple as that. Men want to be, pure and simple, women think that life's understood not by being, but in the endless process of becoming.' He was, apparently ready for the thought.

'To be or not to be, that is the question ...'

Carol hadn't the faintest idea that he'd ever read any Shakespeare, but there he was, declaiming the famous lines.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them.

She'd never seen him enjoy himself so much, even if it was at her expense!

To die; to sleep,

No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd ...

He paused, as if giving her a chance to extemporise a less familiar continuation of the great speech, then he added, 'What do you say, my love?'

She was as she said: 'I have to say I'm amazed.' He told her. 'Year eleven. Had to learn a few lines from Hamlet. We could choose any bit we liked. We had to get up and say our lines, then what we thought they meant, then why we'd chosen them.'

'You picked the most famous, which is to say, the most obvious of them all.'

'I did, and so did about twenty other people. Only the first one got to recite them. I was about number fifteen, so I never got my chance to be eloquent. But I've never forgotten the lines ...'

'How long have you been waiting for the chance?'

'All those years. But never mind that. I stopped because I wanted to hear what you had to say.'

'Me?'

'You. About being and becoming. That sounded promising. I'd like to hear what you think about that.'

'It was just something that burst out of me.'

'Don't get shy, it's not like you. You're pretty forthright, so why not this time?'

She slumped. She wanted an excuse. 'After Shakespeare, I don't think I should do any talking.' Tim picked up what she'd said, by way of excusing herself. 'He was too early to be a feminist, but then he was always ahead of his times, wasn't he. Just imagine, all those boys with unbroken voices coming out with the lines he gave his women. Juliet, Lady Macbeth, all the rest of them.'

'It's ridiculous, but it shows the violence of the times, that men couldn't let women speak for themselves.'

‘But perhaps, in a funny way, it gave women’s viewpoints a better chance of being heard. The very fact that what they felt had to be voiced by boys.’

Her feminism? Into her mind came the years when she’d been ready to revise the world, and wanted the chance! Where had it all gone? Into marriage and motherhood, and yet it wasn’t utterly dissolved. There were traces still. But what was the use, if nobody was listening? She said, ‘I used to have so much to say, and nobody ever proved me wrong. I knew full well I was right. How did I get to be like this?’

She was on the verge of tears. Her lame gesture referred to the house they’d bought together, the children they were rearing in it, and for that matter to the business they’d built together, financing everything they did and owned. Weakly, she said, ‘It’s all so small. What does it amount to?’ She would have cried but he was beside her, holding her, pouring strength into her because for him, if not, temporarily, for her, they were one, and if she said she was weak and useless then so was he.

So were *they*. The realisation came to them together. She burst out: ‘I want to go on together! Are you with me Tim? Hey? What’s our fate? We’re not giving up are we? We can’t give up, Tim, while we’ve got Jessye and Franz! We can’t leave them, alone and unsupported. Who’d look after them if we weren’t here? Someone from work would look after them for a couple of weeks, then they’d get shared around, then these supposedly kind people would lose interest and nobody would want to have them. They’d be lost.’ She yelled. ‘Abandoned!’ Tim was trying to drag her out of this mood. ‘Carol! Stop it! Stop it! Stop, do you hear, stop!’

It had some effect. She was still shaking, but relieved to be held. He clung to her, distressed, angry, confused, trying to be stern but barely in control of himself, let alone her, though he held her still. ‘None of that’s going to happen, Carol. Nobody’s abandoning anybody, least of all you or me. Jessye and Franz are going to be fine.

They're going to be great people. They've had all the advantages, so far, and it's going to stay that way. Or if there's going to be anything different it'll be over my dead body.' He realised the tension in the body he was holding. 'Relax, Carol, calm down. Get a bit of sense back into you. Whatever happened to make you go wild like that?'

He was looking into her eyes, really wanting to know. She was too confused to answer, but she tried. 'I panicked, and I don't know why. We were going really well, a minute ago. Weren't we. To be or not to be was still the question ...'

'Then you took us on a stage,' he prompted.

She looked vague. 'What did I say? Oh yes.' She offered it as a new thought. 'To be or to become ...'

He corrected, trying to take her argument on. 'To be *and* to become. Both at the same time. Together. I can be and you can become ... for a while. And then it's my turn to change, so I *become* while you, for a while, you stand still, and simply be.' She smiled distantly, tears still shrouding her eyes. 'That's how it's supposed to be. No it's not. That's how it ought to be. Marriage needn't be a trap, it should be an endless opportunity, with all the opportunities *shared*. Taken in turn.'

He moved back a little, confidence returning. 'We've had it like that for a long time now, darling. That's how it's been. Most of the time. But we just ...' he didn't want to say 'panicked' again '... *tripped*, there, for a moment.' He looked at her, hoping to see agreement, acceptance. But she was getting stronger rapidly. 'And I was the one that fell. I wonder why? Normally it's me that carries the load and handles the direction we take, but today ...'

What had happened? Neither of them knew, yet each felt fairly sure that whatever had tripped them wouldn't do so again. 'We've passed a milestone, Carol,' Tim told her. 'I don't know what it was, but it's behind us now. The road's ahead!'

He said it assertively, demanding that she accept and follow. 'Taking the lead again, are you?' she said. 'Oh well, it's your right,

I suppose. Go on ahead, darling, and when you come back, tell me how it looks!

A few days later, they were having dinner when Jessye started giggling. Tim, saying nothing, gave her a firm inquiring look. Being at table meant the family was open to each other. But she continued. He looked at Carol, who said, 'What is it darling?' The child didn't want to say. Tim took over. 'You'd better leave the table while you work out what you want to say.' Jessye, in a state of confusion, did so. Tim looked at his son. 'I don't know,' the boy said. 'Jessye never told me anything.'

A minute passed. Two. Nobody ate much. Carol stood, but Tim called, 'Jessye! Come back!' Jessye returned, looking ... rebellious, was it? Or fearful that her resolve couldn't be sustained? She sat.

'Well?' Tim.

Jessye knew she had to speak. It was a law in their house. 'Things aren't what we say they are.'

'Such as?'

'You and mum always tell me to work out what I need to do. Make a plan, you always say.'

'Yes?'

'Well ...'

'Well, what?'

'Well, it doesn't work. Not always.'

'What leads you to that conclusion?'

He could see that his daughter was sure. 'Things don't always work out the way they're supposed to. Sometimes really silly things happen.'

'For instance?'

Jessye started to cry. Tim looked angry, but Carol went to her daughter, caressing her cheeks. 'Finish your dinner darling. You can tell me about it after, when you're ready.'

Nobody ate much more, but they went through the motions. The meal ended when Tim said, 'Pass me your plates. I'll wash up

this evening.’ Carol suggested that she and her daughter might go for a walk. They did so. Their house was on the slopes of Rucker’s Hill, and they had only to walk a little way to get a view of the central city, standing over its lowly suburbs. Jessye’s response to the commanding towers was, ‘You like this big view, don’t you mum.’ Carol said she did. ‘It makes me feel small, and that’s good for me, I think.’ Jessye felt otherwise. ‘I’m afraid,’ she said.

Carol looked on her daughter. ‘Tell me what you’re afraid of, darling.’

‘I’ve got you and daddy,’ she said, then she added ‘and Franzy’ as if her brother was a burden she didn’t want. Then she burst into tears. ‘What would happen if you weren’t there?’

Suburbs surrounded them, endless suburbs, made humble, perhaps powerless, by the scornful towers. Carol took her daughter’s hand. ‘What put that idea in your head? That we mightn’t be there for you? We’ll always be here for you.’ It occurred to her that she and Tim couldn’t do that. ‘Well, not forever, daddy and I will have to grow old one day, but you’ll be grown up by then. You might find yourself looking after us.’

This comforted the child in no way.

Carol took another tack. ‘Have you been watching films? At Adie’s?’ Jessye nodded. ‘You saw something frightening?’ Another nod. ‘What was it darling? Tell me, and maybe we’ll find when you’ve put it in my mind then it won’t be in yours any more. What was this film all about?’

Amid bitter tears, she told her mother about ‘this house’ where the parents disappeared, leaving the children to manage everything, including a baby, which cried when it wasn’t sleeping but would never eat (the children tried to feed it). Then one of the children disappeared, and then another, and there were only two left, a girl and a little boy (‘the same age as Franzy’), who were afraid to go for help because they were afraid of ‘things in the garden’ – ‘You saw these shapes and shadows, and horrible faces too!’ Carol was horrified. ‘Who was in

the house while you watched this film?’ ‘Just Adie and me,’ Jessye told her. ‘Adie’s mum had gone next door for a few minutes, that was what she said, but it was ages before she came back.’ Carol knew what to make of this; Adie’s mother was a drinker of some repute. ‘When she said she’d drive me home,’ Jessye said, ‘I was scared because she looked like one of the faces in the garden!’

This had gone far enough. Mother and daughter looked over a sea of suburbs. ‘They shouldn’t make films like that,’ Carol told her daughter. ‘I can’t pretend that everything’s as peaceful as it looks. There are plenty of bad people in the world, but really, we have to take it on trust that most of the time, things are quite okay. That film’s got you scared, but have a look for yourself.’ She meant the world surrounding them. ‘Everything’s peaceful enough. We can see so much from here, so many houses, that there’s got to be some awful things going on in some of these places, but, standing where we are, and looking out, we have to accept that everything’s okay until we know it’s not. That means keeping control of yourself. If someone points out a house and says bad things go on in there, take that inside yourself and be watchful, but don’t believe it, don’t believe anything just because other people say it’s so.’ She was ready to go on, but Jessye, growing a little steadier, said, ‘I’m not scared now, mum. You and daddy aren’t going to leave me, are you?’

The thought of her own inevitable death didn’t prevent Carol saying, ‘Never, darling. Never. Never. Never.’

## **18. Finding a way to go on**

Tenderness took over as life’s ruling principle. Natural as this was for Carol, and well-learned by Tim, the world was far from agreement. The rapacious misbegottens who ruled the globe continued to do so. One had only to look at news broadcasts and their equivalents on paper

to know. Tim took on a new personal secretary on the day Saddam Hussein threatened to invade Kuwait. She was known as Marny, short for Marion, and every eye followed her around the office. She was neither tall nor short, thin nor broad, but she curved, her eyes looked into the minds of those attending to her, she was all woman, and so complete that men couldn't bring themselves to challenge her and women felt outshone. Marny's hair skittered across her face and sometimes her eyes as if to say she wasn't unsullied perfection and it wasn't necessary to take everything she said as gospel. The other women wondered how often she'd loved, and whom, for having her in the office was like the presence of something untouchable rather than a person who'd won and lost.

Marny, for all her warmth, was troubled by headlines. People putting their heads in from the corridor to say, 'Morning Marny, nice day,' would find themselves having to say something about the police investigation of a racehorse trainer, or an Australian doctor being held in a Chinese jail. If they were quick-witted they'd say, 'False charges, you couldn't believe that!' and get away, but if they hesitated to think, they had Marny's anxieties to deal with. Tim could handle this better than most because he'd only to remind her of something that needed dealing with and she'd go quiet, but when he was out of the office she was persistent; the men, at least, could feel, or thought they did, a need to be comforted, reassured, behind her anxieties. Comforting meant, well ... she was so curvaceous, so enticing, they had almost a duty to help! The women saw it differently; there was something almost comic in her needs, coming from such an attractive woman but not apparently connected with her bodily appeal, so that she made them light-hearted, giving them a flippant enjoyment of her observations on what was being thrown at the public. Carol was of the opinion that she was probably more trouble than she was worth, but felt her sympathies shifting one afternoon when Marny moved down the passage telling people that American bombers had left their bases and were heading for Saddam's armies in the desert: busy as they were with

Tantangara's doings, it was disconcerting to think of men who would soon be surrounded by erupting bombs. Would there be fighter planes to strafe them on the ground, or would their destruction come from so high above that the planes could hardly be seen? Carol realised, a minute after Marny had moved further down the passage, that she wasn't concentrating on her screen: Marny's news had won.

She stood up. Bugger the Yanks! Bugger the Iraqis! Bugger the Kuwaitis who couldn't throw the invaders out for themselves. When were these wretched, frightening, wars going to stop? Never? Was that the answer, as she knew it was? She sat down again. War was permanent. So was greed, so were memorials. A year or two earlier, Tantangara had organised a bus tour of towns with memorial avenues, their trees representing dead soldiers. They'd visited Bacchus Marsh, Ballarat, and others, they'd looked at thousands of trees, and not a few memorials, and Carol had found herself then, as now, wanting to detach herself from the earlier history of her country: all those men, wanting to get away, some of them having no idea what they were going to, some of them knowing very well. History was awful, but you couldn't disown it and keep your humanity. Humanity was awful, but you couldn't turn yourself into something else. Carol managed to restore her concentration and get back to what she'd been doing, but when, a week later, Marny stood in the doorway, eyes full of tears, the moment of reckoning had come.

'Bad news, Marny? Tell me, I'm listening.'

Marny was gasping for breath. 'I didn't get a lunch break at the normal time, I was busy. A minute ago, I turned on the news. I was eating a sandwich, Carol, a salad sandwich ...'

It's got to be serious, Carol thought, if the sandwich had stuck in her mind.

'This reporter was on the ground with the Americans. They'd followed the Iraqis back across the border ...'

An irritated Carol wished Marny would go somewhere else with whatever it was that was bothering her, then in an unexpected flash,

she realised that that was what *men* thought about women, half the time: they wanted them and they didn't want them anywhere around. A quick fuck, a perfunctory kiss ...

Marny's thoughts were coming in a rush. 'He was swinging his camera, left and right. On the left, there were American soldiers with machine guns, really heavy fire so the Iraqi troops had to look in that direction, and try to beat them off. And on the right, there was this gigantic bulldozer coming up to one end of the trench where the Iraqis were, and they didn't seem to see it, and suddenly it was driving along the trench, on top of the trench, really, wheels on either side, with this enormous blade pushing the sand into the trench, covering up the soldiers. They couldn't breathe, Carol, it was awful! You could see their arms, and then their hands, and they'd be moving, and then they'd be still. Imagine! Imagine your lungs full of sand. Imagine that huge machine pushing sand on top of you and you had no way out because if you tried to get out of the trench it would push you back in with the next pile of sand, covering you. You'd go in head first and you'd have no hope. There's no one on earth would be strong enough to stop that machine, Carol, no one on earth!'

What Carol saw, looking at her, was purity. It might have been fear, despair, or possibly rage, but it was pure because it came from the unprotected essence of a young woman whose whole life was in the balance, or was it the crucible, of her understanding, and although she knew very well what she'd seen, she didn't have a thought to respond to it, a reaction to take; she was as helpless as the wretched soldiers before the machine that killed them. 'Those men,' Marny said. 'Imagine. Seeing that bulldozer blade pushing sand to bury you and you know that someone hates you. Whoever loved you once had no power to stop this machine, and it hated you. It was going to wipe you out and there was no one to help you. The last thing you knew was that you were worthless, and worse, someone was out to destroy you. Cover you over and bury you!'

Again she stopped and again Carol had no idea if there was more to come or if this crisis in Marny's life had ended. Surely not? The fears that were surging through her would take years to bring under control. Carol felt helpless too. This was women's burden, to bring children into the world, rear them, turn them into men and women and see them wasted because not wanted. Destroyed because in someone's way. And someone else was there with a camera so the whole world could know what mighty America was doing to worthless Iraqis, led to destruction by their dictator. That was what you had to believe! That mad dictator who could have you shot, or tortured till you had no will of your own, could push you into service on a line you had to hold fast against a machine that could bury you as you took your last breath.

A mouthful of sand!

Marny, for all her beauty, her attractiveness pulling men to her, hadn't had children yet, and Carol had two. Other women in the office had children, or they didn't, not yet. These other women were in Marny's boat; did they understand her better than Carol, or not so well? It hardly mattered, since she was one of the two in this realisation – that womanhood was likely to be perverted and what it produced most proudly used for an ignoble purpose, then discarded. Crap. Women were like pigs, cattle, sheep, their offspring never more than a whisker from being used and thrown away. Carol looked at the young woman who'd revealed so much of herself: 'Come and sit with me, Marny. Here.' She gripped the chair. 'What you're saying's important. It's not only women who say it, you realise, but it's women who *feel* it because we're the ones that give birth, and rear children, and have so many expectations about all they might become ...'

'I'm scared! How can I ... if that's what's ...' Marny couldn't finish because it meant getting her thoughts clear and that was exactly what she didn't want. Carol began. 'I've got two, as you know. A girl and a boy. One of my two will cop it, whichever way things turn out.'

‘What can we do?’ Marny trusted her boss, or was it her boss’s wife? She was about to find out.

‘How can we be ready? We can’t. If there’s something shocking got us in its sights, all we can do is try to get out of its way.’

‘That machine! You should have seen it, Carol!’

‘I’m glad I didn’t. It’d throw me off balance, like it did you.’ She was ready to go on but Marny picked up her idea swiftly. ‘Being on balance. I suppose that’s all the protection there is.’ It didn’t seem reassuring.

‘Women have to try to stop wars starting, and that’s not easy.’

‘George fucking Bush!’

Carol had never heard Marny use the word, and here it was applied, appropriately and with vigor, to the man who’d sent the troops in, and signed the bills that commissioned the battleships, aircraft carriers, the planes with their weapon systems and let’s not forget the bulldozer that buried the men in the trenches. ‘A man with children of his own,’ she said, not at all clear as to why that should stop the president from waging war on others. People who weren’t his own. After all, that’s what allowed him to turn destruction loose. ‘Don’t let it get to you,’ she said to Marny. ‘When you feel you want to have children, go ahead and do it. It’s the instinct of a mother, and it’s the truest instinct in the world.’ Despite the boldness of her statement, Carol was pleased to see that the younger woman wasn’t entirely caught in her rhetoric. She was looking at the older woman, assessing what she’d said. ‘There’s no security,’ she said.

‘Never was and never will be. Any security there is, we made it, and we have to keep it secure, otherwise it’ll get knocked down.’ Marny lifted her hands as if to say it all again, so Carol went on. ‘By the time things get really nasty, like ...’ she lowered her head, acknowledging ‘... it’s too late. We’ve already lost. Women’s work gets done earlier, stopping things from getting bad, if we can. That’s why men think we’re negative. We are! We have to block things they can’t even see will turn bad. The time to stop Saddam was years ago.

I don't know when it was, but it should never have got as far as the stuff the television showed you.'

Marny accepted this. 'It was horrible.'

'Most stuff is horrible. Horrible things, if they aren't actually happening, are usually about that far away.' She held up two fingers with only a glimmer between them. 'If that!'

The younger woman appraised the older. 'You're a good mother.'

'I hope so.'

'What do you do? Build a wall around them?'

Carol hadn't given her credit for being able to think. 'Teach'em how to cope, if I can.'

'If *you* can cope, or they can?'

'I've got to be tough so they can learn how to be tough. We're all vulnerable though, we all know that.'

Marny had her own ideas about this. 'I don't think I did, until today.' Carol, who hadn't seen the footage that upset the younger woman, said, 'I know it was painful for you, but we have to know these things. What you saw, or something almost as bad. Or worse, but don't ask me. I don't know what's worse than that.'

So the bulldozer burying soldiers was in both their minds. Marny: 'It's changed my view of the world. I've got that to cope with, now.'

Carol: 'It's terrible but it's true. We're not women till we know. And once we've found out, once we *do* know, we have to find a way to go on.' She looked at the younger woman, as if to ask, where's the way forward for you? Can you see anything yet?

Tantangara was busy. Globalisation was opening minds as well as places, and old habits, such as people returning to Greece, or the British Isles, to renew themselves at their place of origin, were dying. Fear of people from the north – the Mongol hordes – was dead. There was no one maker of the new age, or spokesman for it. Its meaning was in the loosely flowing babble of backpackers as much as in the minds of the articulate. World War 2, or the Asian part of it, the Japanese

role, thinned out in people's memories until it was largely forgotten, in a way that World War 1 was not. Economies transformed. America got used to having been beaten by the Vietnamese, and none the more gracious for having realised it. Tantangara was busy: Tim and Carol's presence, as elders of the firm, encouraged the younger staff to be bold in their recommendations. Day to day ticket sales were their bread and butter, then they specialised for people wanting to see wild animals, poachers thereof, for art study tours, camp followers of famous explorations, visits to architectural sites, ecological studies of Pacific islands, hiking journeys in Patagonia ...

... and so on. Tim and Carol, as owners, encouraged their staff to travel too, so they knew the places where they were sending people, and the ways of various parts of the world. Tim's children got to hear about him getting out of planes in the New Guinea highlands, or sleeping in yurts in Mongolia. He brought back things for them, telling them how they were made and what they were used for. They grasped that most of the people who visited their home were travellers too, and learned how to question them respectfully; it was best to ask things that they wanted to talk about with mummy or daddy because they could do that, mingled with a little bit of display for the benefit of the children. The best protection, when travelling, was to be prepared: this meant lots of reading beforehand and then a willingness to throw oneself on the other culture, not to mention some knowledge of the various remedies and medications that might be needed – or avoided! The ideas of other cultures, however nonsensical, had to be listened to; what might be silly in one circumstance might be clever in another, and the trick was to know what was available and when it might be useful. Their mother taught them that people used their imaginations in a variety of ways. When you're travelling, she taught them, try to find out what they sing about, what stories they tell, and where and when. You've chosen their country on an impulse, so what you need to find out is what impulses drive them. You might have something they're looking for,

in which case find a way to share; or you may have no such thing, in which case be silent. If they're poor, Carol put it to her children, they'll dress elaborately as a form of finery. If they're wealthy, they'll not want to show it, so you must look to the quality, the specialised taste, of their possessions. Don't steal from anybody, pay generously what's demanded. Don't demand things: wait until they're offered. Their mother's morality, Jessye and Franz came to realise, was about respectful inquiry and modest presentation of the self. Their father's, they saw, was similar but based on interactions and transactions; both sides had a right to do well. He was an outgoing man, curious, and willing to share, scornful of vanity. He liked things to be well organised and commercial deals were a way to do this. Everyone got something. Those who paid could expect something in return. Those who took your money had to give, or show you something. Life was an endless series of deals, and honouring your promises was the only way to keep yourself in the game.

Carol saw much more clearly than Tim the effects he had on his children. To his daughter Jessye he was a reverse-influence, to his son Franz a positive to be emulated. That is to say, he laid down rules for his daughter but thought his son needed an example to follow. Carol was not at all sure that she wanted parenting to be like this. She came to realise, as she heard other women and a few men talking about their parenting, that she, so decided as a young woman, had almost no theories, and certainly no faith, underpinning her later life. Things were there, they found their way into her consciousness, they drifted away. She tried to control only those that came closest, the rest encountered her appraisal only. All around the world things went on that she hated, but what could she do? For staffing Tantangara, she and Tim had a pick-the-best-person policy, making the assumption that a business operating in a gender-balanced area would get half and half men and women, and so it mostly proved. It was an endless irritant to her, however, that she couldn't show the world in the same way to Jessye and Franz; they needed to know that there were barriers,

and places where it was best not to go. How could they, or anyone's children, be fearless without being foolish?

It was a line requiring some delicacy to find, let alone observe. She was conscious, too, of her other binding principle, that of tenderness: men, no matter how decent, had always one eye on those who held power, and couldn't be pushed to defy them unless it was safe to do so. She thought of it first as a new form of Faustian bargain, but decided that forces beyond human beings were not involved; what she was thinking about, and discovering about her own situation, was that the emotions, the capacities of human beings had been divided – these for women, these for men, and those for everybody to share. Men wanted power, and women ...

She thought about this for days, indeed probably for years, before deciding that the issue divided women: most women were happy to cede power to men because it gave them the dirty things to do, so that women could remain, serenely separated from humanity's scum-behaviour, allocated to and practised by men. And some women, a percentage, though not large, wanted to get power for themselves, get it off men, wanted to reduce men even on their own terms, so that they could take charge. All this over the issue of power: where did she, Carol, stand?

The next time she heard from her uncle Stephen, who'd been her helper at the time, long ago now, when she'd inherited her aunt Samantha's apartment, she asked him to turn Tantangara into a private company owned by four people – herself, Tim, and, when they reached the age of twenty-one, their daughter and their son. Stephen asked if she and Tim wanted him to represent the children in the years before they reached maturity, and they did. 'It seems strange,' he said, 'when I'm older than you by a good many years to be representing those who will take over when you get too old to run the business. It's as if I'm jumping back a generation and a half.' Carol thought of Samantha's apartment, rented out, with her French provincial things still in use, though intermingled with any amount

of modern stuff which probably made everything old look ridiculous. 'I know I ought to have a look,' she told Stephen, 'but I don't want to. If I went through that door now I'd be taken back to the day Samantha died and I'd feel about forty years older, even though it wasn't that long ago.' Uncle Stephen reminded her that she'd said to him on a number of occasions that she was keeping the apartment for her old age. 'I have to hang onto it,' she said. 'It's the sort of place you could never buy back once it had been sold, and it's my link with Samantha and through her to my own parents. I think ...' she looked into the eyes of her uncle, wondering how much he understood and how much he didn't, of her attitudes, her embattled position in a world where men had far more say than women '... I think I'll move back into Point Piper when I'm at peace with myself and given up fighting the world ...'

Stephen interrupted her. '*You* will? What about Tim? Doesn't he get any say? After all, you've just signed an agreement ...'

She shocked him. 'He'll be gone by then. I'll outlast Tim. I'll end up on my own, wretched with loneliness, but unable to take on another bonded relationship ...'

Stephen considered this woman, then considered himself, and his preference for living alone, now that his wife was dead. 'Some people can't live on their own, while there are others who find it very hard to allow *one* person into their lives, let alone a second or a third ...'

It had to be said. 'Where do you fit, uncle?'

He had grey hair and wrinkles under his eyes. 'Just a guardian. Giving a bit of advice as long as I'm useful.' He smiled wanly. 'That's about all that any of us amount to. Most people need to have their egos reduced. I certainly did.'

'What did it, uncle?'

'No special thing. Just time. It has a way of bringing most people to their senses, eventually.'

They considered each other. He'd said something she found appealing. Instead of political battles and ideological warfare,

heated arguments with people shouting at each other, Stephen was committing himself to common sense, which she'd mostly regarded as a rarity, finding its way through the brain's many filters, seeping in, damping the wilder flames and compelling young fools to take in a few snippets of wisdom with their acceptance of age. Now it seemed to her that common sense didn't win any arguments, it worked by dilution. People whose brains had been filled with ideological arguments discovered, as the years went by, that the ordinary doings and commonplace thoughts of those around them had migrated to their brains and settled there, unthinkingly, until by weight of numbers they'd overcome the old fortifications and the deity that had once ruled the brain discovered that he reigned no more. 'I like it', she said, smiling on the man who'd brought it to her attention.

'What?'

'You've released me, Uncle Stephen. You may not have even have meant to do it, but you've freed me of something that was binding me.'

'Done a good deed have I? Don't tell me what it was. I'll work it out eventually.' He seemed content, and so was she, surprisingly so. She had a feeling that by abandoning an idea, a belief, and retreating to her habits, she was making herself more powerful rather than less. 'I'll have to bring my children to Sydney one of these days, and show them the place at Point Piper. They know it exists but they never talk about it, probably because I don't talk about it either. It's just there, for them, about as real as a cloud ...'

Stephen was amused. 'Clouds are real. They drop rain on us, sometimes. Most people don't look up, though, so they don't see it coming.'

Carol felt an unexpected urgency in the words, bland as they might sound, and in herself, as she accepted whatever was happening inside her uncle, causing him to say them. 'We have to focus on the right things, don't we. Otherwise we'll get caught by the unexpected. But what is the right thing, at any given time? If you can know that, you've learned the art of living.' She looked at her uncle, and he looked

at her, somehow a different man these days, since he'd chosen to live alone. She had a feeling that something similar lay in the future for her, and wondered what it was, and what needed to happen to open her to whatever it was that was ...

... hovering like that cloud above? She wanted to laugh, but didn't, and felt good, better than she'd felt in years.

Franz grasped what was going to happen when he heard his parents talking before dinner one night. They were speaking quietly, unaware of him. Jessye was going to another school. The boy was shocked. 'I'll have to go too. I'll need a new uniform, won't I?'

Carol started to explain. Jessye was in her last year at primary school, while he had two years to go before he made the same change. She and Tim weren't sure if they'd send her to a girls' school where you had to pay, or a government school, with boys, where you didn't. They hadn't got around to thinking about his change, when it came. None of this was in any way soothing to Franz. Jessye was part of his world and he didn't want it broken into, or broken up, by her going somewhere else! Carol looked at her son, sullenly aware. 'There's nothing unusual about it,' she said. 'It happens to everyone, one leaves before the other, unless they're in the same class.' The boy took no comfort from this.

'I want Jessye to stay with me!'

She wanted to tell him he wasn't the centre of the universe, but of course he was.

'It might be alright if I had a baby brother and I could tell him what to do!'

Now she needed to laugh. The egotistical little shit. Her beloved son. Society crammed families into little compartments, and made them responsible for the behaviour of the others inside their box. She'd been telling Jessye about babies recently, how they were started, how they lived inside their mothers for a long time, and how painful it was for the mothers when they came out. Jessye wanted to know if it

was painful for the babies, coming into the world, and her mother said no, then realised that babies came with a yell, and nobody knew what those cries meant, or why they came, or if they meant anything at all.

‘I could be wrong about that, darling. I don’t think we know.’

Jessye had thought that was stupid, that adults – the ruling classes, for a child – weren’t doing their proper work, if they didn’t know how their children felt about entering the world. Carol, annoyed with her son, said, ‘You could only have a baby brother if your daddy and I decided that was what we wanted ...’

‘Why don’t you have him? I’d like it if you did!’

What else was there to say? ‘We don’t do everything that *you* want, you know. We have minds of our own!’ Suddenly she saw how powerless he was, full of demanding ego, his capacities limited to those of Grade 4: ‘Life’s a bit of a trial,’ she said. ‘It’s something you’re going to get used to.’

To her surprise, he replied, ‘Who says?’

Not sure where this might lead, she said, ‘Who says what?’

‘Who says I’ve got to get used to it? I might become a rebel. Like ...’ He couldn’t think of anybody he might turn into. Suddenly he saw his mother was crying. He knew he’d caused it, he was too proud to admit his shame, so he sulked and waited. She understood well enough.

‘It’s because of that word you used.’ Though silent, he was still asking. ‘Become.’

He spoke. ‘What about it?’

It came through her sobs. ‘Becoming’s too hard. Being’s hard enough.’ The boy didn’t understand, though he wanted to. Hard in his heart, yet knowing he was in some way in the wrong, he took his mother’s hand. She patted him, then cuddled him, wishing there was someone who could do the same for her.

Jessye’s arrival at secondary level exposed the limits of her parents’ knowledge. Year seven maths problems had her father trying to

remember things he'd long put out of mind, and Introduction to Asian Languages was a mystery to Carol, whose grip on languages stopped at the borders of France. Tim felt rather pleased with himself because although he knew no more Asian languages than his wife, he had contacts who, between them, were native speakers of Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi and Thai. Tim asked his daughter if she had any idea, yet, of what she would like to become? She didn't, but she began to wonder, and it caused her pain. The people who visited their house seemed so confident about what they were and showed little sign of wanting improvement. Yet adults had no hesitation in telling the young what they ought and ought not to do. Apparently it was simple, once you passed some invisible point. Jessye, without realising it, was taking on the problem that her mother described to herself as the difference between being (a problem for men, apparently) and becoming (women's lot). She had no idea that for her mother, it was Shakespeare's formulation which was the locus of her thought, nor had Jessye ever read anything by the famous playwright; that lay ahead. She did know, however, that everybody respected him whether or not they knew anything he'd ever said, and that, whatever it was, it was loose in the culture, there was no particular place you could locate it, unlike going to church, not that Jessye's family asked her to do that.

Her father's morality, and values, were related to his work. You learned about people by seeing them in their habitats, locally and worldwide. You listened and looked, you made up your mind: it wasn't hard. Her mother was not so easy to assess because she was restless, had no fixed position, beyond a determination not to let women be used to their disadvantage and others' convenience. She was certainly strong but it was a defensive strength, not an achieving one ... or so it seemed to her daughter, who didn't want to become like her mother, and wondered how far, if at all, she was already in resemblance. Both parents, in their various ways, seemed to take it for granted that their children would resemble them, never be half so wise, but then, as their lives progressed, a miracle would occur and they'd achieve more

than their parents while still resembling them, neither generation, the older nor the younger, ever quite cracking the code of how things got handed on.

Jessye was hoping for better than this!

But how to do it? Had she been older, she might have known ways to analyse her situation, but, young, she despaired, until she noticed how boys, or youngsters on the verge of turning into men, became interested in cars, engines, hot rods, and the like. Most of them knew little more about cars than she did, but they liked to pose, to pretend, perform. One or two well-placed questions and they talked! Girls, on the other hand, weren't interested in cars. Cars! Girls were interested in themselves, in feelings, presentations of the self, in social arrangements, in kindness and cruelty. Boys made molehills of themselves, claiming to be mountains, while girls took refuge in flocks, hiding the personal in the social. Pretending to be numb, they feared for their pressure points, feared exposure, or enforced decisions. Jessye saw an escape in knowledge. Most people were grateful for the assumption that they had in them something worth knowing; you had only to ask. Questioning people made them sociable, they offered what they had, they showed themselves. Good manners then forced you to show less of yourself than the other person had allowed you to see ... but only just: almost-equality had to disguise inequality to keep people comfortable, and that, the burgeoning Jessye saw, was essential. Once people knew they had nothing to fear from you, they offered a patronising respect, and that was something you could work on, and alter, if the other party gave you time. If they didn't, then they went away feeling superior, and that was no problem if you knew their rating of themselves over you was baseless. You knew something and they didn't!

The newly social Jessye was popular, or at least respected, because her peers knew what to do. They talked, and she listened. They listened when she talked. Her respect for what they knew gave them respect for themselves; she'd made a track, a winding path that

would take her through the later years of school, perhaps the early years at university. Her only fears were of too great intimacy, and of her brother, who must surely see through her to an abyss of doubt behind. He amazed her by coming to her, only a few weeks after she enrolled at Kilvington Grammar, a girls' school in Essendon, with a proposition. 'I'll make boys think well of you if you make girls think well of me. I'll be your agent and you'll be mine. Okay?'

Jessye was surprised. Her brother was still at primary school, who'd take any notice of him? Who did he know who overlapped with her new circles? He was kidding himself ... yet he had a certain calculating coolness about him, and when he spoke nobody ever told him to shut up; he seemed to sense what people wanted to hear, and provide it. Tim saw him as the one who would take over Tantangara, and began, perhaps unconsciously, to tell him things which might turn his mind in the direction of business, though Carol warned him that a parental push in one direction was the surest way to move the young towards another. 'It's a self-protective part of growing up,' she said. 'You mustn't do what your parents want you to do.' Tim wanted to argue but Carol was sure: 'When you choose a career, you have to choose it on an impulse of your own. Otherwise, you're doing it to please someone else, and one day you'll curse whoever it was whose advice you took. Whose orders you followed,' she added, warning Tim. 'Oh hell, no,' he said, wishing to get himself in the clear again, whatever his plans for their son might have been. Their son: facially, Franz resembled Carol, while Jessye resembled Tim. Occasionally the parents discussed how, or whether, these resemblances, these carryings-on of the parents' genes affected the way they related to their offspring. 'Most of the time,' Carol declared, 'we talk at what we see. We might think we're fashioning our messages to suit the other person's mind, but all we know of that is the reaction on their face. They smile, they look puzzled, and we think we know what's going on. To some extent, perhaps. Most of the time we're mumbling in the dark.' Tim was listening, but he had plenty to say for himself.

‘You didn’t always think that way. When I first met you, you were very decided about everything. You liked to lay down the law. Draw lines and defy people to cross them.’ A shamefaced smile crept onto her face. ‘You remember, then?’ He felt he would be able to take his thoughts a little further without challenge. ‘You were still shaping yourself, or trying to. But that’s a phase that ends at some point.’ He thought for a moment. ‘We really can’t function in society unless we’re fully formed, and I suppose ...’

Carol was waving her hands scornfully. ‘Fully formed? Who do you know that’s fully formed? Of all the people I know, I’d say there’s only one that’s fully formed, and I don’t know if that’s a good thing anyway, because if you’re fully formed you’re beyond the stage of being able to change ...’

He broke in. ‘Who?’

Wistfully she said, ‘My Uncle Stephen. You know, even when I was a little girl, I remember that whenever he started to talk I could predict what he was going to say. That’s what he was like and he’s still the same!’

‘So being fully formed must be a good thing because he’s your favourite relative by far!’

She was still scornful. ‘I don’t have all that many relatives, or not ones I choose to acknowledge. You’ve got heaps more than I have ...’

Again he interrupted. ‘To be an active member of society – as I started out to say – you have to be able to carry out an arrangement. If you promise to do something, or pay for something, you’ve got to deliver. Or to look at it another way, people won’t deal with you unless they believe that you *can* deliver. Pay whatever you’ve got to pay, carry out what you promised as your part of the deal ...’

They were getting nowhere, yet they believed in the things they were asserting. Carol wanted to explain how she felt she’d changed in marrying and having children, and he wanted to say that in some way he was still the same man she’d met all those years ago: there was a continuity running from way back then to the present day and as long

as you kept that continuity in yourself then you were the same person, despite any differences that had crept in, while Carol, whose way of being, or was it becoming, was to stand on the brink, overlooking all the key concepts and motivations fighting to become upper in her mind, getting herself into such balance as she was capable of creating, and querying herself about what were the truer ideas in her mind, hated dogmatism though it was only a whisker away from making up your mind that some thought or course of action was the only thing to do. She liked to think that the mind was the cleanest, least corruptible of human functions, and it wasn't, it did its business with as much dirt and confusion as any other. She would have said she wasn't troubled so much by the Christian concept of evil as by human inadequacy, but what difference did it make? Both caused you to need redemption, or, if you wanted to call it a way out, that would do. So you tried to find a path that led to redemption, but there was no such path because there was no such thing at the end of the journey: I'm a pilgrim, she told herself, who hasn't a destination and must remain a wanderer. She was sorry for herself, and her partner could see it. Tim put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. 'There are no answers,' he said. 'Only stopgaps to keep people happy. How many people come back from Paris, or Timbuctu, or wherever it was they went – or we sent them! – and tell us how their life's been changed. Bullshit! They've had a good experience, they've added something to the little pile of knowledge they've got between their ears, and they are the same person they used to be, only they're slightly improved. And if they make another good trip next year, they'll come home improved again. If all goes well, they'll keep on learning. But,' he said, loving the word for the way it forewarned that something good, even great, was coming, '*but* there is no end-point. No perfection. No final peak, there's no Everest after which you can say you've seen the whole world. We don't know more than ...' his mind was searching, reaching, wildly '... an ant! A spider, a scorpion, a rhinoceros, you name it. Heaven's empty. There's nothing there! There's no last and

final bucket of wisdom we can drink from ...’ He would have gone on for ages, though not normally a rhetorical man. He was, rarely for Tim in his marriage, a man on top at a moment of weakness in his partner, and without realising that he was in fact demonstrating that normally she led the two of them, and led their children too in their thinking, he was grabbing the microphone of their shared thinking in order to make himself heard more resoundingly than was normally the case.

Carol stood up. His hands slid down to her hips, and she wriggled to be rid of them. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ she said, ‘but it’s not because you’ve said anything very useful. If there’s no such thing as truth or being right because there’s no such thing as an absolute, where does that leave us? The answer,’ she said, ‘is where I’ve always been. I’m not looking for an answer, or a theology, just a way of ...’

She couldn’t say it. He knew what she was thinking of, and neither did he have anything to offer. ‘Go and help your daughter with her homework,’ she said, as if she was ridding herself of him in a rage at his inability to solve life’s problems for her, but they both knew better. He stood, and moved out of the room, brushing his hand over a bowl of flowers as he went, leaving her to recognise that if they had a problem, he was working on it as well as she was. They were still married, after all.

## **19. Seurat, and a former husband**

The impending arrival in her city of an exhibition of French impressionist works stirred Carol to dig out books about the famous painters and make sure Jessye and Franz looked at them. ‘Look at the colours,’ she told them. ‘Try to imagine the textures of the paint. Then, when you see them in the flesh, you’ll know what painting really is.’ Tim was a little detached from this because he was going to be in Tokyo for a conference on Japanese tourists’ needs when the

exhibition arrived, so he could safely say things like, 'I want to hear everything you thought about them when you saw them', though privately he was drawn more to Chinese and Japanese painting than to the art of France. He said to Carol one day at work, 'I'm too aware of how advertising shapes our business to think that any other industry's any different. People think Monet and Manet are great artists ... well, maybe they are, but what I do know is that if people in Australia think they're great artists it's because someone told them they were great. Living out here, where they do, and not knowing the places these painters painted, they're in no position to judge!'

This annoyed Carol. 'You might remember that some of us have been there, and we might like to go again, one day, with our kids. You might be surprised how much you'd learn if you visited France.' A few days later, when she was showing her young ones around the exhibition, she felt that her words, France itself, and something beyond that had come back to haunt her when, trying to get a good view of a Seurat, she realised that the person she'd just bumped, and apologised to, was Martin, her former husband, a man she'd not seen in years, and that beside him, holding his hand as she'd once done, was a woman she could only conclude was his partner.

'Carol!' said Martin, and she knew from the sound itself that he was determined to be polite, even affectionate, and that he was also anxious, presumably for some reason connected to the woman he was with. 'This is Carol,' he said, 'and this, Carol, is Lesley.' The two women looked at each other and Carol knew that Lesley had been asking questions about her ever since she'd partnered Martin, however long that was. Lesley, who was tall, and wearing an expensive grey trouser suit, said, 'Martin's taken me to see quite a number of these places ...' she waved a hand '... and it does seem strange to see them here, in our city. But you,' she said, in an enforcing sort of way, '... would know these areas so much better than I would.'

Carol gathered herself for a conversation as stiff as the canvas of a tent. 'I think it's not so much the areas as the ways they discovered for

seeing them.' She paused. 'Each of these artists is aware of his method, and of the other painters' methods. They learned from each other as they stood apart from each other ...'

Martin broke in: 'And these are your children?'

So Jessye and Franz were introduced. Watching her first husband greet the children she'd had with her second husband, Carol couldn't help admiring Martin's softness with them, and a feeling she sensed in him of ... not so much regret, as of curiosity: he had no children with Lesley and she didn't seem to be a woman who would want them, so Martin was looking at a path he'd turned away from, or had been diverted from, and he was curious to know what children did to you, and what it was like to live with those who would be alive when you were not. Speaking affectionately to Jessye, he asked, 'Have you been to some of these places with your mother?' Jessye sensed that the question was from someone privileged, in her mother's eyes, someone who was also in some unstated way repellent, but needing attention. It was as if her mother, and her own family, even she herself, was in some way being inspected, or at the very least being put on display for inspection, if that was what the other person wanted.

The other person: Martin. Jessye felt he was much more formal than her father, whom she suddenly wanted very deeply, because he would know who this man was, and what to say to him, as she did not. Yet she had a sense of what she must do. She said, 'We haven't been to France, not yet. Mum and dad have taken us to all sorts of places but I think France is being kept as our final test, to see if we understand. Mum,' she said, 'sets a high standard!' She was surprised to see that her mother, and this man Martin, thought this was funny; some strand of tension had been snapped, and Martin said to her mother, 'Well, we've all got a lot of paintings to see, and we mustn't hold you up. Just one moment, though,' and he fumbled in his pocket for a business card. 'This is where we are. If you ever feel like coming around ... we'd like to meet your husband, don't forget, and please give him our regards when you see him tonight ...'

‘He’s in Japan,’ Franzy said. ‘Organising tourists. Dad keeps everyone organised, believe you me.’ Carol might have rebuked her son, but Martin was amused. ‘Then you must organise him!’ He turned to Carol. ‘This painting. It’s by Seurat, isn’t it?’ She smiled. ‘Didn’t we see it at the ...’ He left the question in the air: she nodded, then she turned to Lesley. ‘You’ve got yourself a first class guide.’ She was dismissing herself as much as the woman she was talking to, giving both of them an exit they could manage, and manage they did, so that it was only when they were two rooms further on that Jessye and Franz could ask their mother, ‘What was all that about?’

When Tim returned he was surprised by the passion Carol showed in seizing him, yet he couldn’t fail to notice, also, that at times she viewed him from a considerable emotional distance. Attraction and repulsion; need and denial of need: something had happened while he was away. Then Jessye told him they’d met a man called Martin at the gallery, with a woman called Lesley, whom Jessye described. His daughter made a point of saying that these people had no children, yet, in some way she couldn’t describe, the man was curious about her and Franzy. ‘He was so interested when he didn’t know us from a bar of soap.’ Tim gathered that the family, himself included, had been invited to visit these people, yet Carol had said nothing. That surely meant there was something to be worked out.

He remained quiet until a chance remark by his wife about the French exhibition allowed him to mention that the children had told him they’d met some people they couldn’t place, who’d invited their mother to visit, taking them too. Carol, looking troubled, told him about the encounter with Martin, telling him that it had thrown her off her path because it had forced her to go back and re-judge the woman she’d been and the one she’d become. ‘He was actually very polite, and he was more than that. He’d got rid of the crassness he used to have.’ She told Tim how she’d walked out on Martin years ago, and gone to Sydney, how he’d called on her there and how she’d rejected

him, how she'd determined that she was going to lead a different sort of life, but now, seeing him again, much improved as it seemed, she couldn't help reconsidering what she'd done. 'Don't imagine that I want to have anything more to do with him, it's just that running into him has forced me to question myself. Years ago I'd have said that I was shaping my life in accordance with my principles, which I was stupid enough to think were high and strong, but what do I think now?' She gestured. She didn't know.

Tim considered too. Like his wife, he was scornful of religious judgments, developed by people for whom he had little respect. The secular world was harder in its judgements than the church because it allowed no loopholes for softness or forgiveness; letting people off because you understood their weaknesses was only a way of indulging yourself and encouraging the faulty to indulge themselves too, when a well-organised society had to be hard enough, strict enough, to enforce self-control on the faulty. But the matter was more pressing than that. The encounter had undermined his wife's identity, certainly as she gave it to herself. It therefore subverted him as well. Believing that they had a problem to solve and that it had best be tackled head-on and as soon as possible, he wanted her to accept the offer from Martin: they'd visit and see what happened?

But Carol wouldn't do it. She didn't need to meet with Martin again, she told him, the meeting had already happened. It was the effects she had to deal with now, not Martin himself. She'd seen all she needed to know. Tim could see how worked up she was becoming as she told him that she'd scorned Martin as unimprovable, and here he was, as he'd proved the other day, a different man. 'We only get married once,' she told her second husband, 'and once we break that off we're saying goodbye to a time of our life which might have given us more.' This caused Tim to resist. 'It's not true to say we only marry once. You're married for the second time, so is Martin, and so am I. And we're all doing better than we did the first time around. And yes, it's true that we can only marry *for the first time* once, but if that first

marriage teaches us how to overcome our shortcomings, then maybe it's good to marry twice, so we can improve!

It was said so boldly that Carol feared that Tim had put down his last word on the matter when she was still floundering. She told him she didn't want to visit Martin and Lesley; the cause of her anxiety was the way she'd condemned Martin, years ago, and found out that what had once been true about the man was now wrong. They were sitting in the lounge room of their considerably renovated Northcote home, outright owners of many years standing, and their son, first, and their daughter, later, finding their parents sitting down together, not such a common sight in a busy household, both completed the family and modified what they were saying.

Tim: 'What we've built together has been a success, any way you look at it.' Franz was smart enough to know that talking about success meant that the idea of failure must be lurking. He said, 'Do we know if anybody's ever failed who was living in this house?'

His mother said, 'Some of the things that have been done to the house down the years have been failures, but I think we've fixed most of those by now.'

Franz again: 'How long are we going to live here? We're not going to move, are we?'

Tim said no, giving her a look that told her that her earlier themes were not forgotten, but they were *en famille* for the moment. Carol knew it well. The children, far from childish now, were curious, and listening hard. Mother of both, she had a feeling, not unknown to her before, but stronger by far, that a period of her life had ended and another begun. It was hard to define these things when their daily routine was strong, but it was there, somehow apparent in her secondary school daughter and son not far from the same status. It was a formative moment, she knew, though she tried to avoid it. To divert it.

'What say we move into a new line of business?'

'Such as?' (Tim)

‘Farming. Growing specialised fruits and vegetables. Closer to the earth.’

Franz broke in. ‘No! I don’t want to be tied down. IT, that’s the future.’ He looked to his sister for support, and she gave it. ‘Farming? Maybe it’s all right when you’re old and you don’t want to go anywhere, but it’d mean getting out of touch with ...’ the next word carried all the significance she could give ‘... everything!’

Tim: ‘Looks like we’re not going to be farmers. Not in the coming generation.’ He was smiling, and Carol saw that his last word had indeed been the final word. The young two were the next generation, and she and Tim were the previous one, starting to run out of time. For a moment she thought of Sydney, and those two places with grand views, the Gysberts’ flat, where she’d freed herself from Martin, and the Point Piper place she owned – her fate, her future, and even, it seemed, her resting place. She’d been a feisty fighter when she had the Gysberts’ view of Lavender Bay, her feminism was both dominant and personal, but becoming a mother, and an employer for that matter, had caused her to make peace with the world, or at least to accept it as the thing she had to deal with. She couldn’t look at the world any more as a vast machine outside herself that she could make war on or offer peace to. She was *in* it, and so were Tim, Jessye, Franz, and they were part of her as she was part of them. ‘We’ll go on as we are,’ she said, ‘but we’ll be different.’ The others laughed. ‘Great, mum!’ Jessye whispered. A snickering Franz said, ‘I’ll write that down so I don’t forget it!’ and Tim, for whom it came as a great relief, said, ‘That’s first class policy making. You change while you say you’re staying the same ...’ and he went on, though he could see Jessye wanted to break in ‘... or, to put it another way, you stay the same while you tell people you’re changing.’

This time they all laughed, until Jessye said, ‘I’m going to be busy! At school I’m going to be in a play. I think, maybe I’ll just be a stagehand or something. Or they might get me working on the business side of it, booking rooms for rehearsals, that sort of thing.’

She was pleased to have surprised her parents, especially with this last idea of taking on an organisational role, something she knew would please her dad. ‘What play, darling?’

A very proud young woman said, ‘*As You Like It*. By Shakespeare.’  
‘Have you read it?’ (Carol)

‘Of course I’ve read it. The whole class has read it. Some of them understand it, some of them don’t know why anyone would want to put it on.’

Carol felt the ground moving beneath her feet. ‘You want to put it on?’

‘I want to be in it, but I’ll do anything they ask me to do. It’s going to be great.’

Both Tim and Carol felt as if the family had accepted another member, someone they didn’t really know. Carol said, ‘I’m trying to think of the names of the people in the play,’ but her daughter said, ‘What I’d really like to be is the man who takes on the great big wrestler and beats him, but I guess they’ll give that to a boy.’ Her mother started with, ‘Well, they ...’ as if it was obvious that only a male would wrestle the wrestler who would of course be male too, because that was how things were, in Shakespeare’s time and now, and then she realised that she’d taken the first step in this new, same-as-the-old world she was now in. ‘I think that’s great,’ she said, trying to rescue the situation Jessye had brought them to. ‘I really do. I hope you get a good part and I hope the play’s successful ...’

Tim came to the rescue. ‘Anything we can do to help, just let us know. Who’s going to be the director? Maybe we can provide something they need ...’ He was vague, but trying to show good intentions. Jessye was pleased, with Franz grumbling about his school never doing anything.

Directing the play was a teacher calling himself Silver; someone said he’d changed his name from Da Silva, but if this was true, nobody knew when or why it had been done. He chose Jessye to

be his personal assistant, referring to her as the Assistant Director. He was an inspiration to Jessye. He swept her off her feet. 'Reality is manufactured,' he told his actors. 'If you get a raw deal from the world, you invent a world of your own and, no surprise, it's better than the one you don't like.' He had a way of sitting in a canvas chair as if he was Abraham Lincoln, pronouncing. He told his cast, 'The women's roles will be played by women, of course. Shakespeare used youngsters with unbroken voices. It sounds ghastly to us but it did mean that women's words were listened to, even if they had to suffer boys squawking for them.' The young woman chosen to play Rosalind tossed in, 'Only four hundred years behind!' and everyone was amused, ready to listen as Silver told them about the role of the forest in the play. Everyone who didn't have a speaking part would be a tree, crowding around the actors coming on or going off, and even masking someone who was going to say something unexpected. 'Being in the forest meant the ordinary rules of society didn't apply. If someone's going to say something they couldn't say back in the court, we'll suggest that the forest gives them protection. It'll be messy at first, but you'll get the hang of it.'

Jessye talked about this at home, amusing her parents, but causing her mother to wonder why it was so hard to change the real world. Jessye, filled with Silver's ideas, told her that reality was a manufactured thing and that if you wanted things to be different, you made them that way: it was simple. For Carol, this was so breathtakingly stupid that she was left in sullen silence. 'I'll read the play again. Give me your copy if you wouldn't mind. It won't take me long.' The copy, when it came, had notes written all over it, and that before the rehearsals began. Poor Shakespeare, the mother thought; he never dreamed of this!

Shakespeare the actor would have torn his hair at the youngsters' efforts to say his lines, and Shakespeare the writer/director would surely have raged at the efforts of much-indulged youth to present the movements of his play; even the efforts of Orlando and the wrestler were insipid enough, but Silver was patient as well as persuasive

and gradually got the thing coherent and functional enough for the participants to see things for themselves. ‘You don’t just say the words,’ he would say, ‘you live them. You are instruments for the production of these words. The instrument has to give himself – herself – to the music. The instrument is nothing when it isn’t producing music. Forget your selves entirely. Think about what the play wants to be, then give it your energy and let it be what it’s got it in itself to be.’ This didn’t stop him tearing them apart for the callowness of their efforts, then encouraging them, then coaching them, one at a time or in groups, instructing, picking passages apart and putting them together again, until his inexperienced players began to wonder how high was the ceiling they were supposed to reach.

Jessye talked about the production non-stop, but Tim saw soon enough that she was communicating with her mother and boasting to her father and brother. Tim kept an eye on his son, expecting him to flare up, or throw himself into some matching enthusiasm, but he became quieter than ever. Tim felt a need to offer him something special, but what did he lack? He’d never wanted for anything. He’d seen most of Australia, Bali, Fiji ... He wasn’t old enough for flying lessons, but when the time came, if that was what he wanted, he had only to say ... Father and son were driving along the Saint Kilda foreshore one day when Tim had a bright idea. There were yachts on the water, lots of them, the bay was rippling and the water was blue: Tim said to his son that he was thinking of joining a yacht club, and getting a boat. ‘Sailing’s a wonderful skill, you can be competitive if that’s what turns you on, or you can pick your way from one resort to another along the coast, on your own, with a partner, take the family if that’s what pleases you ...’ Tim thought he saw Franzy show a flicker of interest, and he made the mistake of mentioning Jessye. ‘Your sister’s all caught up in a world of her own at the moment, I thought you might be wanting something for yourself ...’

Franz shook his head. ‘It might be fun if you were interested,’ was all he had to say. Tim knew he had to do better. ‘Friend of mine

told me something he did for each member of his family. This was a couple of years ago. He told his kids how the stock market worked, or rather he told them how to buy and sell, and said, see what you can do with this, and he gave them each ten thousand dollars.’ The boy was interested. ‘How’d they go?’

‘One of them is more or less breaking even, one’s got his shares up to twelve and a half, and the youngest one’s the real sharpshooter. She, yes she’s a she, is on the way to doubling her money.’

‘In how long a time?’

‘They’ve been doing it a bit over two years, and he reckons she’ll double her money in three. She’s a natural apparently.’

Franz looked at his father, eyes full of question. Ten thousand dollars? Kids didn’t get that sort of money – but he couldn’t help inquiring.

‘You’re interested, I see. I’ll tell you what. We’ll do it together for a while, just playing. On paper, no real money. You make the decisions, but you have to tell me why you’re doing what you’re doing. I don’t have to approve, but I have to hear your reasons. If we’re ahead at the end of ... six months, how’s that? ... I’ll put ten thousand in an account. Real money.’

Franzy smiled a smile from deep inside himself.

Those who visited the Northcote house in following weeks remarked on its energy, with Jessye quoting lines from the play and Franz speculating on rises and falls in the market. Carol declared she was having trouble keeping up and Tim was benignly approving. Jessye watched videos of wrestling because Silver said the first act wrestling scene told an audience whether the rest of the play was going to be good or not. She was also excited because she’d consulted a map and discovered that the Forest of Arden was immediately to the north of Shakespeare’s home, Stratford on Avon. ‘He was writing about his own area so you can’t help thinking he put something extra into it, or that’s how I feel, anyway.’ Franz was discovering terms like price/earnings

ratio and dividend imputation. 'It's all a game,' he told his sister. 'It's like that wrestling match you're always talking about, except that it's done with brains, not muscle.' His father, keenly interested in the boy and their mutual undertaking, told him that life was a battle of wits and if people started flinging punches – this included wrestling, presumably – then they'd lost the battle. 'You win by being smart, by being ahead of the game, you win by making the right moves at the right time.'

Carol found it exciting to see their son develop. 'You'd think he was a captain of industry. He's concentrating all the time, making decisions!' If it amused her it was also troubling. She asked what he would do if his success followed into the time ahead of real money, and he told her he'd build a fortune. He smiled so impishly, saying this, that Carol had no doubt about him succeeding. So the question she'd put to him had been put back to her. Tim was going to put ten thousand dollars into something her son would manage. And after that? Another ten? More? When she expressed doubts to Tim he merely said, 'Isn't it better for him to win another ten thousand than to lose ten thousand? And if he can make another ten thousand after that, wouldn't we back him if we could?' The smile on his face linked him to the boy, and Carol realised that the money venture and the play *As You Like It* had, between them, put the four of them back in classic male/female positions and it was something they'd done for and to themselves.

She could hardly believe it, and yet it was a success in the eyes of their friends. People remarked on it being a pleasure to visit them and find their children so full of ideas and so keen to talk about what they were doing. Social approval supported everything the family was doing. They asked Jessye when the play was going to be put on, and where, and they said to Tim that surely he'd have to put up the money he'd promised because Franz's calculations and predictions were so accurate that his paper profit was going to be a good one!

A handful of these visitors also had children at Kilvington Grammar and took the chance to ask Jessye about the annual production at the

school, and she seized the chance to talk; Carol had never seen her so intense. She'd thrown herself entirely into the production, she was way behind in her other subjects but seemed not to care, she'd gone into the closed world of the play and, like the people in the forest, had no wish to come out. Life was so much simpler because it was happening within limits, but even so there were problems: 'Silver says, when Hymen appears at the end of the play, she's the *deus ex machina*, who sorts everything out.' Carol listened to her daughter's thoughts, particularly when they focussed on the ending with its marriages turning eight people into four couples; was that a good move, according to Jessye, or only a stop-gap? Carol wondered what she meant: was marriage a stop-gap, undertaken to fill a void, or simply a step along the way? Not for the first time, the life of her daughter caused her to question her own position. What was she, the mother, beyond the means by which her daughter got ready to produce a daughter of her own, and a son or two perhaps? There were ceremonies for marriage and for extinction, even for getting ready to marry, but what else?

The answer was everything, but the problem remained. Mothering changed everything because everything was changing, but when Carol saw the actual production, she realised she'd not thought about the character Jaques. There were four performances, two afternoon and two evening, and Carol had volunteered as a driver for any members of cast or company who needed a ride home after the show. The young man who played Jaques lived at some distance, and his parents couldn't pick him up. Carol had already found Jaques the character both excellent and disconcerting and was not a little surprised when Jessye insisted on sitting in the back seat with the actor – Robert Wellington by name – while Carol chauffeured them from the front. This happened twice. Robert was excellently spoken and very well-mannered, but Carol found that of all the people in the play, Robert's rendition of his part made him the one figure she wouldn't have chosen as the object of her daughter's attraction. In bed with Tim

after the first trip to Hurstbridge where the young man lived, and then bringing Jessye home on the return journey, Carol tried to analyse what it was about the boy's acting that had put her off. 'I'd forgotten about the seven ages of man speech. Man! It certainly was! Is. And at the end of the play, when all the others are marrying, he goes off to see the bastardly duke who's created all the trouble to start with, but has had a conversion and is going to lead a religious life ...' – Tim had glanced at the play but didn't remember Jaques' late decision to join Duke Frederick – '... and this boy, Robert, this young man ... there was something passionate, something all too convincing in the way he delivered his lines, that I thought he was a brilliant piece of casting ... that's what Jessye told me, and I thought, you would think that ... so he certainly understood his role, but too well! He was too far into it for it to be anything but exactly, spot on, his own real character!'

Tim could feel the animosity, and the amazement, in his partner's voice. 'Well mannered, you said?'

'Yes! And that's the danger!'

'Danger? Who to?'

Carol saw how far behind he was, and how sure, in his mannish way, that some late intervention could fix almost anything. When the *machina* came down to fix things, the one that stepped out was normally a he. Not this time! Carol, like Hymen, would most certainly be a she.

'Carol?'

She turned over in their bed. 'Two more performances. They'll have a party, then it'll be over. It's what happens after that that I'm thinking about.' Her mind was running everywhere. Was he doing any of the same subjects, this misogynistic Jaques? Robert? Who were his parents? 'One man in his time plays many parts/His acts being seven ages.' He'd said the piece well, and he'd been convincing at the end: 'I am for other than dancing measures.' She swung around to face her husband. 'You're training Franzy. He's keen on the world of money. He reads the game well. It is a game, isn't it?'

‘It is a game, but it’s played for real, as you know.’ This was Tim, quietly in the dark.

‘Love’s a game too, but if you lose, you lose a part of yourself you never get back.’

‘It’s our job to teach both of them to handle with care.’

Carol wanted to hit him, but she needed him as her ally, knew also that she was on the verge of losing control from anxiety, uncertainty. ‘The boy doesn’t know how dangerous he is. He half-senses something’s wrong, he doesn’t know how it looks to us. That means he can’t restrain himself the way he ought to, he’s relying on the world round him to do that for him. Parents, the girlfriend’s parents, the school rules, all the bullshit people. He won’t deny himself in any way. He’ll be smart. He’ll just wait. The moment we do anything that upsets Jessye, or makes her realise we’re concerned about her, and what she might do, he’ll be here beside her, offering things ...’

Tim propped himself up on an elbow. ‘We’ll just play it quietly. No dramas. No pushy little questions. Stay tuned in, that’s all.’

Carol was grumpy. ‘Go to sleep. We won’t fix anything, talking here in bed.’

The stock market game finished well; Franz caught a rise in the market and turned ten thousand notional dollars into thirteen. Tim announced at the dinner table that he’d open an investment account with a ten thousand dollar deposit. A week later, he and his son went into the city to meet Sam Denison, a stockbroker friend, and signed a paper to give Sam the power, under direction from Franz, to buy and sell stock. ‘Just a word of advice,’ Sam said to the boy. ‘Don’t clam up. You’re not the first to do this, and in my experience, it’s not uncommon for things to change. People who were prepared to take a risk on paper can get awfully nervous when the money’s real. Also, you’re going to have to learn to watch the whole economy, because things affect each other in all sorts of ways, and a lot of it happens out of sight. So, if you lose on something, or even if

you win, find out what actually happened, if you can, and where. The stock market's like horse racing. You need good information if you're going to bet.'

Tim thought this sounded ominous, but he'd put up the money and he sensed that his son's nerves were different from his own. He took him to the ground floor of Sam's building and ordered coffee for them both. 'There it is, mate. Happy about that?' Franz nodded. His father said, 'I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't feel confident. Your mother wants you to succeed, but she's nervous too, as you'd have noticed.' Another nod. 'I think she feels that what we're doing is a bit of trickery. Stepping over people instead of working your way up. She says you have to work if you want to get money ...'

Something in the boy's eyes stopped him. 'No. That's wrong. You work to stay poor.' Tim expected more, but Franz had finished. 'What was that? Work to ... what did you say? Stay poor?'

'It's not what I say, it's what everyone says. You need to work to get money. No you don't. If you need to work, you stay poor.'

It was hitting his father that his son was a different kind of being from himself. 'We've shown you how our business works. You need to know in case you have to take over one day.'

Franz saw his father's vulnerability, pitied it, perhaps. 'I'll work. I need to, so I get to see how things operate at every level, not just the top. It's no good getting to the top unless you know how to make things happen, lower down.' Tim had a feeling that he didn't know his son. Had he ever known him, or had he changed, lately? 'Let me ask you something, Franzy.'

'Dad?'

'Suppose you make a success of this first ten thousand, and you go on. Suppose you make a heap of money.'

'You want to know what I'm going to do with it?'

He did. He murmured, 'That's about it.'

'I heard a bloke on telly the other night. He was talking about his first million dollars. He was all smiles, as if that was really something.'

But what could you do with a million? You can't make a mark with that. You need more.'

The woman who'd brought them their coffee inquired if they were happy with it. It was a needless intrusion, but well intended, so father and son reassured her that their coffee was excellent. When she moved away, Franz went on: 'That's what you have to do when you've got no money. All you can do is please people. Serve them. Well, it's better being nice than not, but so what? You want to do something that others can't do. And when you step away from whatever it was, you want people to be surprised. You want to think, as you drive away, that they're looking after you and saying, I never thought of that!'

Franz was so self-contained in saying this, that his father hardly knew what to think of him. Boy? Young man? Unknown? Dreamer? No. He'd always been so good-natured, so easy to deal with, that ... he hadn't actually misled them, he simply hadn't shown them what he was, and now it was clear that there was metal inside the velvet glove. Tim fell back on, 'You got any more surprises for me?' Franz said, 'I'm not going to sell guns to gangsters, if that's what you're thinking. No, I'll work with ordinary people, like I said, and I'll turn money into more money, like I'm going to do with ...' He lifted a hand, pointing, to indicate that he was thinking of Sam, upstairs. '... and when there's enough of it to make a difference, I'll choose.'

Tim had gone in on himself, no longer disbelieving what his son had in mind. 'Then you'll need to pick the right advisers.' He wondered, as soon as he said it, whether, if Franz did make the sort of money he was planning to make, he'd listen to his father and mother any more, or would he have left them behind by then, and, in putting the question to himself, he knew the answer. He'd lost his son. They were still bound to each other, Tim especially, but the eventual rift had revealed itself, the potential for a rift had been sighted. Their coffee cups lay between them, not yet empty. There was a morning paper on the table next to theirs. Well-dressed people were passing along the footpath; they were in the financial district and everybody

was thinking of money in one way or another. There was nothing unusual about Franz, as seen in the eyes of those who worked, or were passing, around them. Tim had never needed Carol more, and yet the thing that was upsetting him was only what she'd been flagging to him as not, perhaps, to be encouraged in their son.

We don't own our children, Tim realised, unless we dominate with such brutal possession that they have to turn into us, all over again, and if we try to do that we'll create rebels, at best, but more likely misfits of some sort, twisted people that we can't recognise as our own.

When he and his son got home, his wife was withdrawn. 'I should be at the office,' she said, 'I know. But Jessye was in one of her moods. Wouldn't go to school. Robert hadn't spoken to her for two days and she felt humiliated. She says he gets days when he's inside himself and won't come out. I said, make it clear to him that what you feel is, So what? Normality is *you*. Ordinary decency, with a bit of manners thrown in, is *you*. She slammed her door, of course. It took an hour to get her to school, late as hell, which she will have to explain to somebody. But bugger it, I don't care. I got her there in the end.'

Tim nodded. It wasn't easy, bringing up children, especially when they weren't children, weren't adults either, but lived in that halfway land where they rejected the simplicities on either side of them, their childhood and the adult world they both did and didn't want to enter. 'He'll speak to her today, she'll come home all smiles, and we'll be wrung out from thinking about her.' Carol listened sullenly, waiting till Franz went out of the room. 'It's a battle, and it's in their interests that we win. If they get on top of us, they'll beat us down. It means we have to stick together. It changes *us*, don't you see?' He did. 'We came together when we were separate souls and each of us needed someone. We got on, we were fine. And our bedroom life was fine ...'

She lifted her hands. 'Don't talk about it. If I'm not spontaneous, I'm hopeless. Always have been. I'm not unusual, all my friends are like that, as far as I can see.' She had an air of loss about her, as if she'd

been made grandmotherly by wearing an old cardigan. 'We do get something from becoming parents, but the losses are substantial, too. I wish I knew how you do the accounts of a marriage.' She thought. 'Two columns, left and right, losses and gains. What would we put where? What have we lost, Tim? Have we gained anything to match it, or not? Tell me what you think.' She stared straight ahead of herself, waiting.

The question made him strong. 'You've put me in a contradictory position. It's my nature to love. I was fairly late in marrying. I'm older than you. But I always expected I would marry because I don't think I'm important enough, special enough, to face any judgement on my own.'

'Whose judgement?'

'Nobody in particular. Anybody in the known universe, it doesn't matter whose. There mightn't be any god but we all look at each other all the time ...'

'Sorry. I interrupted you.'

It didn't bother him. 'I'm not into individualism, Yankee style. The way to see us is as family members, social members. The way to judge us is by the groups we belong to ...'

Again she broke in. 'That's impossible. You can't put whole groups in judgement.'

'The Nazis did the jews. And the whole world judged the Nazis. It happens all the time.'

She lifted a hand, meaning go on.

'Marriage is necessary, then. But there's no one measure of success. Marriages pass through good and bad spots, pretty well all of them. You don't have to pull out just because there's been a bad day ...' she was going to object '... or a bad year!'

'Why do we have divorce then Tim?'

'Divorce is for when it's never going to come good again.'

'That's a judgement, then!'

'Divorce means the marriage has failed, yes. But there's no pass

mark, and no mark for awarding honours. There's no marks at all, even in the judgement of outsiders. It's the natural condition of people, and there's no avoiding it.'

'You said you were in a contradictory position?'

'I am. The world's over-populated. There ought to be less of us. So the more gays who get married, the better. They'll only adopt other people's children, they won't produce them.'

He was only making her restless. 'Our kids are growing up. Before we know it they'll be there. Jessye'll have kids, and I think Franz will, if he can take his eyes off money making for a minute. Are we going to feel married then?'

She thought she'd got him to face an ultimate, but he was unperturbed. 'If they have kids, and I'm sure they will, we'll know we've *been* married and we'll know we still are. And how will we know? Because we can't think of ourselves without thinking of the other, me to you, you to me. We're linked in our minds. Wedding rings and bits of paper signed at the church, or the registry, they're the proof. The symbols. The truth is inside us, and in our case, we're not to be doubted.' He looked at Carol and she was amazed at the force emanating from him. 'That so, my love?'

Refusing to lose what had never quite been an argument, she said, 'You may possibly be right.'

## **20. Part of a family line**

Years passed. The once young, then middle-aged couple grew older. Their children married, Jessye to Trevor Buckingham, and Franz, three years later, to Irene Gould. Jessye delighted in calling herself Mrs Buckingham, and when people made remarks about English royalty, she gloated. 'I might live there one day,' it pleased her to say, knowing she was being provocative. Franz, in his turn, liked

to say that he and his partner were a bird-loving family, and he should have changed his name to hers when they married. 'If we can get a house near the Botanical Gardens, we'll do it.' These jokes affected Carol: what she'd stood for so strongly didn't matter to her children. A feminist wave had swept through at the time of her first marriage, and she'd used it to define herself. Now her children were stepping into the world, wetting their shoes with waters of another kind. Trevor Buckingham was a buyer for a department store, picking up early signs of fashion so that everything he dealt with was a year ahead of the public. Carol found, when she was in the Tantangara office, that those who'd known her a long time inquired after Jessye and Franz, wondering when they were going to start families, no longer asking Carol about herself. She was, she realised, no more than part of a family line, stretching back a few generations till memory declared it lost, and forward to nobody knew where. 'Franz will be a good husband,' someone told her, 'a good provider.' Carol had no doubt of that. He borrowed money to buy houses, rented them out, then borrowed again. He scoured the stock market for companies that were undervalued, bought, and sold on the up. Gradually, and sometimes not so gradually, he increased the amounts he traded. At the same time, he worked in the lowly jobs he'd vowed to understand, keeping an eye on the bosses and the money-men from the bottom, 'the only angle,' he would say, 'where you could see them clearly.' He specialised in other men's bullshit: 'Lying is a disease,' he would say, 'and to stay healthy you have to diagnose it accurately.' He bought the homes of people he knew who were in trouble, overlooked rental payments missing, then made his demands, getting others to do the dubious deeds he didn't want near his name.

Carol and Tim didn't so much see this as read it out of the faces of the people he associated with. Yet they couldn't help noticing that these associates came and went; when they dropped out of sight they rarely came back. 'When he's made his fortune he wants to be clean,'

his mother told his father. 'He's going to go home one day, and step out the next day a different man. But what sort? He's a mystery, isn't he? Always has been.' This uncertainty concerning their son caused Tim and Carol to cling more closely to the business where they had an excellent reputation. They, and Tim especially, had a name for being enterprising, swift at seizing opportunities, but now their business was a conservative prop for two people past the middle of their careers. They employed young people, and they supervised. Carol grew more sympathetic to Tim's occasional yearnings for something new, and found herself looking around for something he might adopt; neither of them wanted to die in habit. One night, as they lay in bed – 'our conference room', he called it – Tim said to her, 'Let's set a limit. Say we give it three years. After that, we sell, whether we've got a new idea or not. Maybe we won't. It might take throwing ourselves out of a job to find something we really want. Anyway, I want to take a plunge. Get out of the thing we're in and dive in the deep end of something else. What do you say?'

She agreed. There was no avoiding it. They needed renewal and their occupation was as good a place to start as any. Three years of the old business, then the new.

Whatever it was!

Jessye got pregnant at the end of her first year of marriage. She and Trevor were doing well enough to put a deposit on a house, and when the bank wanted evidence of financial backing, Tim and Carol signed up. They had confidence in their son in law because they had confidence in themselves. Those who are used to money don't expect to be blocked. Carol thought of her days overlooking Sydney Harbour, with the millionaire yacht-owners carousing in the scope of her window's view. Some day, she told herself, she'd return to those views, that glittering water, those nights of wire cables clattering against metal masts, those dawns full of weariness and the certainty that parties would go on ...

It occurred to her that her daughter, and her son for that matter, had never had the same experience, having been brought up without a struggle in the security of her home. Their troubles, whatever they might be, still lay ahead ... or would they get through without any? What did she want for them? You were hardly human until you'd dealt with difficulties, unloaded on you by others or brought about by your own mistakes. Errors and failures led to maturity, wisdom and the like ... or they might. It was hard to mature without some wounding taking place. How could a mother wish troubles on her children? How could she not? She wanted to shield her children from pain, yet she wanted them to learn from pain that couldn't be avoided. She wanted to tell Jessye that once she became a mother her life would be changed, but Jessye knew that already. When Carol visited the home the young couple had bought, in Kensington, an inner suburb to the north-west of the city, she found a hammock slung between two crab-apple trees, and a rickety table beside it for book, reading glasses, or cup. There was also a canvas chair placed so that the person sitting in it could look into the eyes of the one reclining. Carol sat in the chair as intended and Jessye rolled into the hammock, as if by doing so she was making her mother welcome. They sat in silence for a minute then Carol asked if she could make tea for her daughter. She could. It would be much appreciated. Carol went inside while the kettle boiled, and took in the feeling of her daughter's home. Something of the previous inhabitants lingered, though Trevor was painting a bedroom for the coming child, and had some timber leaning against a wall where he was going to put bookshelves. Being the central figure in the family line had been handed on, Carol saw: she was waiting on Jessica, who was lying in her hammock, expecting ...

... her child and expecting her mother to care for her in a different way, now that the order of things had been turned around. When Carol took the teapot out, and cups, she saw that her daughter was reading *Moby Dick*. 'Good heavens! That's a long way from what you're doing, darling.' Her daughter said, in a thoughtful way,

‘There’s ever so many famous books I’ve never read, and this is a good time, while I’m waiting. I won’t be able to read things like this when I’m being kept awake at nights.’ Carol decided to take a track diverting from the obvious. ‘What are you planning to read? Have you got a list?’

‘Sort of loosely, floating around in my head. Not written down, though.’

‘What’s on it?’

‘Lots of Russians. *War and Peace* ...’

‘Your child will be at kinder before you finish that! What else?’

‘Dostoevsky. Proust, I’ve got to read him, everyone tells me ... no, half my friends say he’s awful and half say he’s marvellous.’ She studied her mother, in the chair at her feet. ‘What do you think of him, Mum?’

‘Proust? He’s a bit like the pyramids, or the north pole, he’s just there!’ Her daughter didn’t know what to make of that. ‘Didn’t you tell us once that you lived in the same part of Paris as he did?’

‘Not in it, no. Close, though. I walked through his part of the city often enough.’ She smiled. ‘I never got invited in!’

The hammock swayed a little. ‘I’ve always thought you were special, mum, because you lived in Paris. It really is where everyone wants to be.’

‘There’s nothing to keep people out except their own opinion of themselves. The French have a certain genius for making outsiders feel inferior.’

‘I can’t imagine you feeling inferior, mother dear!’

‘No, I didn’t. I was right up with them there!’ They laughed. The daughter said, ‘What was good about it? Would you like to have had your children there?’

Carol thought. ‘If you have children in a place like Paris ...’

‘If there are any!’

‘True. I suppose New York’s the same in one way, however different it is in others. In both cities, every day, almost every

moment, is a test of how good you are. They're fiercely competitive, both of them, and if you win, you work your way to the top. If you're something else, you get pushed down to wherever they'll accept you. It's a kind of meritocracy where they test you all the time.'

'And yet you feel you made it?'

'I wasn't letting anyone push me down. Most of all, my husband. My then-husband.'

Jessye had heard the name often enough. 'Martin.' Then she remembered. 'We ran into him one day, with his new wife!'

'We did. And the strange thing was, I felt he'd outgrown most of the faults that made me leave him.'

Jessye was curious: 'So?'

'It was very humbling. And it made me feel that the reasons why we do things, even very important things, may not be very good reasons at all.'

'He wouldn't have changed if you hadn't left him. It seems pretty obvious to me. So you did him a good turn, really.'

A reflection entered Carol's mind, one that she hardly welcomed. 'I don't think we ever do the same thing twice, because it's different the second time ...'

They were close now. 'Marrying?'

'Marrying most of all. When we marry, we're pushed hard up against the other person, faults and all. There are always faults, so we think the other person doesn't know how to love. The second time's different because there's been a first time, and we know that things could be different, and if we make allowances, and alter our expectations a bit ...'

'... then the second time's better?'

'It is, but it's better in a different way. If the first time had been better ...'

'If!' They laughed again. 'If it had been better, then it would have been better than the second time ...'

'... which wouldn't have happened, because ...'

It was so silly they were enjoying it. ‘The trouble is,’ Carol said, but Jessye broke in. ‘We want it both ways! We want to know what it’s like to have lots of partners, but something tells us it’s better to have one!’ She looked hard at her mother, trying, Carol knew, to penetrate. Carol suddenly remembered Wilhelm the Loge of her life, whom she’d loved with a passion far greater than she’d felt for either of her husbands; he was a man of no account except that he knew she harboured feelings deeper by far, in potential, than anything she’d experienced to that point. Jessye didn’t know about Wilhelm, yet she’d sensed that he, or someone like him, had existed. Carol could see only one thing to do; to admit, and then to draw the curtain. She said, ‘Secrets are supposed to be bad, and to damage trust between partners. That can be true, but the opposite can be true too. That is, a secret, so long as it’s well kept, guarded closely, can give you a way to slip around an impossible situation.’ There, she thought, lifting the teapot by way of asking if Jessye wanted her cup filled, I’ve told you what you wanted to know, but there’s no evidence that I ever did. We know and we are pretending we don’t know. It’s not quite a secret, but it’s close enough, and it’s the way we have to handle lots of things.

Is it not?

They chatted on, the older woman and the younger. Something more remained to be done. Their talk was idle, all over the place, searching. Jessye’s work as a publicist meant that at less than half her mother’s age she knew more people; Terry too lived by contacts, though many of his were on the other side of the world. Traditions meant little to them, unless they helped you to predict. In their quest for news and being new, they used the old rather more than they realised, dressing it up so the people they wanted to influence didn’t recognise it. Their world, then, was strangely akin to Carol and Tim’s world of travel: presentation was all. None of them knew entirely what they were doing, having to be at the frontline of everything they did. The front was simply the front because ... well, it was where everyone’s thinking

was at. Of the four, Carol had the advantage of having been where Jessye was arriving, having been through it all before. All? That was where she felt ambivalent about the relevant balance of innocence and ignorance, on the one hand, and wisdom, shrewdness and know-how on the other. Carol looked at her daughter on the hammock. ‘How long have you had this here, darling? You’ll have to take it inside when winter comes.’ Her daughter saw no attraction in a bit of wet canvas as a place to recline. ‘Everything to the season!’ Jessye beamed on her mother. ‘Me included!’

‘Thought of a name yet? Or names?’

The answer came quickly and at an angle. ‘You were thinking of Jessye Norman when you had me. The singer?’ Carol nodded. ‘Why was that? Is that what you wanted me to become?’

It was, of course, but Carol dithered. ‘I wanted you to be great at something, like Jessye Norman was. I didn’t really care whether it was singing. It could have been anything, really.’

This was dangerous territory. ‘So long as I was great. Oh mother, you must have been disappointed.’

‘No!’ That was one thing she could not allow. ‘No.’ What to say next? She had to think. ‘Wanting your child to be great is only one of the things that go through your head when you know you’re going to have a child. As you know.’

Jessye said, ‘To tell you the truth, I’m more concerned about what sort of mother I’m going to be. Will I be any good? I keep wondering whether I’ll be able to do the job. Terry gets me anxious, he’s afraid we might let the kid down, he says. Let him down? Hell ...’

Carol was quick. ‘Him? I didn’t realise you knew.’

‘Yes, Terry wanted to find out. I’d have taken whatever came along, but he got anxious and said it might help if we knew.’

‘Any names yet?’

‘No. I won that argument. Terry wanted to name him straight away but I said let’s see what we think when we’re looking at him. Terry’s got something in his head, I’m sure, so it’s up to me. I said

we'd decide when we saw the little fella. That means keeping your mind open, and he hasn't, and I have. So naming rights are mine!' She sat up. 'What am I going to call him? What do you think?'

Carol said slyly, 'Even though I haven't seen him?'

Her daughter nodded, eyes full of light. 'Even though.'

Carol said, 'It's up to you.'

'Me?'

'You.'

The garden was listening, the traffic quiet. The house was waiting for the word.

Carol: 'There's so many names.'

'What about the name of a saint?'

'So long as he doesn't end up getting slaughtered for his faith!'

'I've got one.'

'Yes?'

Jessye drew back. 'I want to hear what you think.'

Carol produced the clincher. 'The baby's waiting. It's up to you.'

'Then it's Stephen,' the mother pronounced.

'Stephen. That's a good name. Do you know any other Stephens?'

'A few, in an idle sort of way, but nobody special. Wasn't Stephen the name of the saint who gave us Christmas?'

'Don't you mean good king Wenceslas? You can't call him that!'

'I can call him anything I like!'

'Not Wenceslas. Hardly.'

'Stephen. I like it.'

'The cathedral in Vienna is named after Saint Stephen. I don't know his story, though.'

'I'll take him there and have him christened!'

The idea appealed to them both. A gothic cathedral and a baby that belonged to them drawing in all its holiness. Jessye said, 'I'll be a mother then, won't I?' The appeal of it came from inside; the sanctity was something she was reaching for. 'You can book the flights, mother dear. Four of us. No, five! What was I thinking of? I couldn't

leave Stephen behind. Who'd be here to look after him?' Her mother corrected. 'Seven. Don't forget Franzy and Irene. They'll have to be there!'

'Quite a party! But that's all right, there's someone new coming into the world. Are you happy mother? Is it all right with you?'

'I'm very happy. If I could sing, I'd sing!'

'You'd be Jessye Norman. What does she sing that you like so much, mother?'

Carol thought. There was so much. 'I love her in Richard Strauss. I love her in Berlioz. But I think I like her best when she's so bold she's ridiculous.' This amused her daughter. 'What's that?'

'When I hear her sing the Marseillaise I think they wouldn't want to get in the way of that one! She's frightening!' They smiled at the idea of a ferocious woman sending her voice into the remotest reaches of a cathedral. Especially when the child prompting the singing was going to be a saint. 'She'll have to sing something soft for my little boy. We don't want a lot of shrieking.'

'That's something we'll have to think about. Music for the great occasion.'

'In a cathedral. Vienna. It sounds good.'

'Stephen.' There! She'd said it thrice, she, mother of Jessye, mother of the mother, had moved on a stage, life had given her another role. Now she'd have to measure up. She had no doubt she would.

## **21. The grandeur of a life**

Jessye's pregnancy was a quiet and mostly happy time but the arrival of Stephen brought events one after the other. A christening had to be organised, though not as spectacular as the one that mother and grandmother had dreamed of; Tim's attention was distracted from his family by an opportunity to buy out two rival agencies, one in

Sydney, one in Cairns; then Jessye announced that Stephen was to be followed by a sibling, later determined to be female, leading the mother who'd been named for one singer to name her next child Kiri, after another. Carol started to give her spare time, when she had any, to recordings of operas. Black deeds and wild passions swam in the air of her home. What had once been inside her only now attended her every night. Tim neither liked nor disliked the music he found himself listening to; 'Too much imagination' was his only comment: Carol was never sure whether this applied to her, the composers, singers, the parts they played, the people they pretended to be, or who else. She supposed that it was possible to have too much imagination, but that was what gave insight into others' minds, and without that you were locked and bolted inside your own personality, wretched as it may be.

Franz and Irene were supportive of Jessye and her family, but showed no sign of following in their steps; Franz took the various homes he'd accumulated out of the hands of agents and managed them himself. Then he wheedled himself into the position of project manager overseeing the development of a long row of modern terraces close to the bay at Sandringham: 'Not booming yet,' he told his father, 'but in that position it can't go wrong.' In his own quiet way he'd become formidable; marriage had added to him in a way his mother knew was rare. His marriage to Irene was a case of two being much more than twice the quantity of one. To think of him as an individual was to misunderstand him; he was an influence, a series of happenings forming themselves according to opportunity. On a visit to the family home in Northcote he told his mother that conventional notions of riches were too out of date to be bothered with: 'People think that rich people drink champagne till they piss the stuff, they live in vast echoing halls like *Citizen Kane*, they grab phones and shout orders at people too scared to disagree, they have servants who bow and scrape and never speak above a whisper ... it's not so. We live in a world of money, and the stuff flows like water. If you want a good life, you

don't live in a desert because there's nothing there. You find a stream of money, then you find a way to get into it. Once you've found a good spot, you have to keep moving, to stay with it. Money keeps moving. There aren't any old aristocracies any more. They're dodo people. Then the next question is whether you show it or not. You and dad, for instance ...'

Carol was startled. His father? She, his mother ... what was he going to say?

'You've been everywhere that's worth going to, and a few other places besides. You've been to Timbuktu, haven't you mother?'

Still startled, she shook her head.

'Sorry, I thought you had. Must have been somewhere else.' He grinned. 'I don't want to go to Timbuktu. If you go to places like that they start a civil war and you get caught.'

She protested. 'Humanity!' But it didn't stop him. 'You and dad have been everywhere. That's riches, even if people call it a holiday. Other people have expertise in something. Maybe it's carving, painting, putting things together. Or they're experts in design, so the clothes, the cars they design are better than the clothes and cars that other people have. That's riches. You don't kill people to get it, you need a good nose to find out where the quality is, and then you go there. Maybe you decide you won't eat fish unless it's just been caught ... that's a decision. Any place that serves fish on the second or third day, you don't go there. You leave those places to people who've got money but no principles, because you can be rich, the way I see it, and have high principles.' He might have gone on, but Tim, seeing his son in full flight, came over.

'What're you telling us, mate?'

Irene, the young man's wife, spoke for him. 'He's giving us a very selective view of things.'

Tim: 'I wouldn't expect anything less.'

Franz, to his wife: 'There's never been anything but quality, in the family where I grew up.'

This was too much for Carol. 'I'm afraid quality's been lacking on too many occasions to let us make that claim,' but she could see that her son wasn't going to budge on the matter, and then she saw that he had changed her almost as much as Jessye had when she'd told her that Stephen was on the way. She said, 'Oh!' in surprise, and her family looked at her. 'Go on, son, say some more.'

Franz was amused. 'I've finished, as far as I know. There's nothing more to say!'

But there was. It came to her that there was something which she hadn't considered, or digested, in her thoughts. 'I saw a man this morning, walking past the post office as I came out. He was carrying a baby and the mother, who was much younger than he was – I wasn't even sure that he was the father, at first, I thought he might have just been a friend, and then in a flash I knew he *had* to be the father – sorry, I'm getting mixed up, but the mother was beside the man with the baby and she looked natural enough, everything was going normally for her, but the man, the father, had a look on his face that told me, told everyone in the street, if they cared to look, that the baby was the most important thing in the world. The living principle. The baby knew it was the object of its father's love, and it was happy. It wasn't making any noise, and it wasn't throwing its arms around, but it was happiness itself.'

Tim, hoping that she might have more to tell them, said, 'This morning?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't know these people?'

'Never seen them before.' She knew her husband wanted more, and suddenly she found herself in the position of her son, who'd spoken, said it all in a few words, and couldn't see any reason to say more.

'That was all.'

So they were left with the fact that even articulate people ran out of words, leaving those whose minds they'd gripped with nothing to say. Tim knew that both his son and his wife had reached a point

of comprehension, perhaps illumination, and that neither they nor anybody else would be able to do anything with what had come to them until the vision, the moment, had been worked through – cooked, was the word that came to Tim’s mind – and their apprehension, their idea, turned into something that could be referred to, or used as a reminder of what had happened, as happen it certainly had. They’d been changed, and none of them quite knew how.

Carol expected she might receive more visitations, as she regarded the incident with the father and baby, but the alterations came on either side of her, in news from Irene and something inside Tim, her husband. Irene told her, over the kitchen sink, that rialto of family news and gossip, that she was three months pregnant, and when, at the first opportunity, she passed this on to her husband, Tim’s response was little more than an accepting nod. There was something wrong. He was worried. Carol had to wait quietly for a few days until he was ready to talk. He’d seen a doctor on his last trip to Sydney, and another in Cairns. The Cairns doctor had him tested for ulcers in the hospital, but what they found disturbed them and they’d done a scan and found a cancer in his liver. This sounded awful to Carol. The Cairns doctor had assumed that he was to be in charge of the case, but Tim had made it clear that his treatment would be managed in the city where he lived. He’d had the testing done in another place so that if nothing serious was found, his anxieties need never be communicated to his family. Now that his worst fears had been realised, it was time to make known what he’d been told.

Carol’s reaction surprised him. She told him the sickness was inside their marriage and only incidentally inside him. He told her that he appreciated her saying this, but really it was only a way of speaking because, in the end, it would be his problem, and death, when it came, would take him, leaving her. ‘Just as I said,’ said Carol. ‘And the marriage will be ended.’ She was so definite, yet it didn’t seem right to him. ‘I’ll probably need looking after as things gets

worse. They're full of ideas about treatments they're going to use on me, but if they're interested, it's because they've got a good guinea pig for trying out things. They're curious,' he told his partner, 'but I don't hear any hope in their voices.'

That set her thinking. Voices of hope? Where did you go to hear that? When little Stephen cried, his mother or his grandmother could comfort him, cuddle him, kiss him and sing to him, until he felt happy again, but how old would he be when he realised that the love and warmth of women didn't solve anything, it soothed. It satisfied. It distracted. It gave strength in the dark periods before the victim, the sufferer, got himself outside the problem and prepared to deal with it. The trouble was that eventually the sufferer got to know that the comfort was not a solution, only what it said it was, and once you knew it was only a comfort it wasn't much comfort any more. Being comforted was something you grew out of, eventually, and something more enduring, more resilient, was needed. The sufferer came to see, eventually, that suffering was innate, inevitable, no more than a part of life, not stuck on but built in: you cried when it was new to you but you grew used to it, and by then you knew that the saddest songs were the most beautiful because the truest.

'There's only one thing to do,' Carol told the man beside her, who was strong, but not so strong that he wasn't happy to let her take over the decision-making, 'only one path to take.'

'What's that?'

'We won't have the energy to fight it if we're all confused. So we have to get everything clear. We'll start with our wills.'

This set him back. 'Our ... wills?' Even to say the word meant he knew how it exposed him. She was ready. 'What weakens people is the unexpected. As we now know.'

He was silent at this.

'One way to make yourself strong is to identify everything that might bring you down because you weren't expecting it, and make plans so you're ready.'

He could see sense in this. Indeed, it was getting him ready to follow her advice, with some hopes, at least, of being strong, perhaps, again one day?

‘So first you face the worst. Your own death. What do you want to do with your estate?’

He realised that it was years since they’d drawn up their wills. Lots of things had changed. ‘Yes, I see you’re right. We’ve got to think of grandchildren.’

‘We’ve got to think of the business. We built it. We have to ask ourselves what we want to happen to it.’

‘It’s got to go on!’

She loved him. He was ready to separate himself, in his thinking, from everything that was going to happen after he was gone. ‘Darling.’

Tenderness flowed through him, out of him to her. ‘We’ve been good, darling, haven’t we.’ He thought he knew what she would say, but she distanced herself a little, just far enough to admit the grandeur of a life, once its end was visible.

‘We’ve made something. It hasn’t just been about ourselves. When we go, there’ll still be many fine things left around, carrying on as if we were there, but ...’

‘... we won’t be.’

It joined them. They were ready now to plan, and after that, to see how their plans worked out.

It took three years for Tim to die. There was an operation which removed much of the cancer, but there were remnants in places they couldn’t get at, so it was understood that the threat would return. The planning he and Carol had done worked well. For about a year he was able to travel, then he restricted himself to the office, and younger people checked out the trains, planes and accommodation packages, while Carol oversaw the Melbourne office and the home. She scrutinised, listened, sent people off to investigate, and ran the business as she ran the home: with trust, love, and an infinite attention

to detail. Somewhere amid all this she doted on her grandson, little Stephen. ‘You’re your grandpa,’ she told him, ‘two generations on.’ The child didn’t understand this, but knew the source of his love, a wellspring deep inside his grandma. Tim had two four-day holidays with his family – Jessye, Trevor, Stephen and Kiri; and Franz, with Irene and their daughter Giselle. The first of these breaks was at Queenscliff, so they could be near the sea, and the second was at Omeo, where they could use the hotel – The Golden Age – as their base for making trips in the mountains. ‘Carting children about makes it so much more trouble than staying at home,’ Carol said to Jessye, ‘but I want something special for Tim, and for us to remember, if it comes to that.’ The daughter was more phlegmatic than her mother, but then she was in the next generation and it wasn’t their turn, yet, to think about dying. So she devoted herself to showing the children things, and places, birds and flowers when she knew what to call them, which was only rarely, for she was an indoors person and was happy to let her mother insert in her children’s minds all the themes related to being at the edges of human life: the mountains and the sea. Jessye saw more clearly than Carol herself that Carol was getting ready to lose her husband no matter how passionately she nursed him, that she needed her grandchildren about her, gripping them because they gave her a grip on the rockface of existence. Tim would go first, and even her children, fruit of her body, were less reliable than their own recently born. The all-seeing, overseeing, older woman was almost released: clinging to the bond with her ailing husband, she was with equal energy linking herself to the latest members of the family and, beyond those close to her, she was, when she had time to be, invested with a passion for the fairness, the justice, the generosity and even indeed the glory of the world ...

... when she could see it. She saw the ocean as if for the first time: it was absolute, and endless. She saw the mountains as if for the first time: they were elevated, indifferent, yet calming. Both land and sea cautioned her. Tim would die. She could react in any way she liked,

and it would hardly matter: she would survive. No voice told her so but she knew, nevertheless, that the time in front of her was the last period of her life when she would be coupled to another. Tim told her, as they lay together at night, at home, and on both these last visits – to the sea and the mountains – that she must marry again. He joked. ‘I’ll be looking down. I’ll be haunting. I’ll be whispering in your ear, darling. Get yourself someone to love. Someone that never knew me. Someone to keep you going till it’s your turn.’

Carol took this as the indication of love that it surely was, and a somehow-sequel to the times when she, first, and then he, had been in love with others – and it changed nothing. She’d had years of being a single woman, and she would have them again. How to say this? She breathed deeply, only to whisper to him, her Tim, that when she was alone she would fill her life, at first, with the consolation of her children and her grandchildren, and she’d keep their partnership alive by taking over Tantangara, delegating almost everything that he and she had done till then, but remaining, as she put it, the falcon overlooking the plain. ‘It must run well. I’ll make sure it does. You speak of being my ghost. How would I feel if I thought you could see that everything you’d built had become a mess?’ She felt him, lying there beside her, calmly, a-sexually declining, relieved to know that his business would survive, name unchanged, its methods, staffing, purposes much the same. ‘I should have been a forester,’ he said. ‘The trees would carry me on. But now you’ve promised me something just as good.’

‘It’s a human enterprise,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure if such things can ever be as good as a forest.’ She laughed. ‘They’re probably better protected from fire.’ They held hands loosely, warmly, then drifted into sleep. When she woke, in the morning, he was under the shower and she knew she was keeping him going. Their marriage was running still. It was also running out, but they were speaking to each other with a simplicity and directness they’d never dreamed was possible, years before, when they’d begun.

In the next stage, Jessye and Franz, and their partners, did their best to be close to the ailing man; Carol, giving a stream of support, needed it herself, being inclined to pick up any burden when she was already tired. Jessye's Trevor made arrangements with a restaurant the family favoured to have meals delivered several nights a week so that Carol had no more to do than serve them up, or provide the finishing touches when she got home. When Tantangara had an anniversary, and Carol felt that the family should be represented in Sydney, Cairns and Perth, Jessye once and Franz twice stayed with Tim while she was away. Jessye was surprised at her brother's devotion to his father in this testing time. He washed his father's face, he filed his fingernails, he reminded him of things that had amused him years before. Franz, his sister could see, was much less detached than she was. He was more than anxious, something in his imagination gave him access to his father's feelings and there were times when she saw that her brother's actions were reactions to a pure terror he could feel on behalf of the father he was getting ready to lose. 'Franzy,' she said, on a day when they were both with their father when Carol was interstate, 'Franzy, you're making him anxious. He needs to be kept calm.'

But Franzy wouldn't have it. 'He needs to be alive, and glad of it. Who wants blank hours, with nobody doing anything? He's been active all his life. Now he needs us to be active where he can see what we're doing, so he can do it with us, and throw in his ideas, his energy ...' his voice cracked, and tears crept into his eyes '... so that he knows he's alive!'

Jessye was startled. 'We're here to comfort him. Keep him going as best we can. I'm not a miracle worker, Franzy and neither are you!' Her brother sat down, as if he'd been overpowered. 'We need to be, though, don't you see?' She wanted to be rid of him because he was as big a strain on her nerves as her father in his decline. Her brother was supposed to be helping and he needed, was demanding, help himself. Holy hell! What could she organise him to do? 'Mum's been worried about some letter from the Tax Department. I don't know what it is.'

Why don't you and dad sort it out for her so it's one less thing she's got to worry about when she gets home ...'

This word was dangerously emotive. She and her brother were propping up what remained of the place where they'd grown up, and now her father was on borrowed time and her mother doing too much to keep everything going. Who'd own the house when mum moved out? If she did? She talked of a time when she'd live in Sydney, overlooking the harbour from a balcony in Point Piper, and Jessye was not at all sure how soon, or how late in her life, their mother intended that to be. If she was going to run the business, as she said, she'd need to be in Melbourne because that was the head office. Home? The office wasn't home, the house was; the house was to a life as the heart was to the body, the mind. One was a built, external version of the other, and Carol was away, representing the family, or its role in the business, in a distant city because someone had to demonstrate the inner life of the business and the marriage that had produced it. She felt, suddenly, that what she was doing was impossible. Houses had negative and positive times, according to how the character of the place fitted with what was going on inside; a house wasn't going to die because its occupants did; the best it could do for itself was to withdraw and hope that fresh-faced owners would buy it for its next existence in the time between the arrival of the fresh-faced people and their decline or decision to move on.

Then came the morning when both of them woke after a bad night, neither having slept very well, and Tim made a suggestion; they should put a double bed next door, in what had been Franz's room, open a doorway through the wall, and then – this was the surprise for Carol – he could move to that room, freeing her from the disturbances of troubled nights. She listened in amazement, accepting that this was a sacrifice he was making for her.

They did it.

Jessye and Franz watched the progress of this project, since they were regular visitors to the house, with Jessye reacting in support

for her mother, who was being drained, she saw, by the work of sustaining Tim, while Franz was more subjective. Without saying a word against this change in the use of the room that had been his, he revealed the displacement he felt, the pain of having his personal history and his role in the family story disturbed by being broken into, in a moodiness, a sullen heaviness his parents had never expected. He had, he told Irene, who whispered it to her mother-in-law, not only loved his father but taken him as his role model, imitating him, and the breakdown of his father's health seemed to be showing him his own future long before it could have been apparent in any other way. 'He doesn't usually show very much,' she said to Carol, 'but it's hitting him pretty hard.'

Carol had never felt more central. How little she'd known, in those days of writing her thesis, about the world she was going to enter, on those nights when she'd overlooked Sydney's harbour, fighting her way clear of her first husband. How easy it had been to win that fight and rid herself of him. Had it all been unnecessary? He'd improved himself, as she now knew. Had she been no more important than a fight he had to lose if he was to make himself better?

She supposed that was the case.

If it was, then what did that make of her? Had she too had to have that preliminary fight with Martin in order to do more than fight with Tim? They'd made a marriage, they'd created a family extending into its next generation, they'd built a business on top of the family and it was doing well, despite the mortal illness of its founder. A business was in that sense like a child. Children had to achieve autonomy, and be made skilful and knowledgeable enough to move through the world on their own; how she pitied those whose children had shortcomings that meant they could never go on alone. She realised that a part of her was ready, now, for the death of Tim. He'd been generous. He'd never held her back. He still came through the new doorway and slipped in beside her, or murmured quietly to see if she was still awake, and wanted to lie beside him. Making love

in the sexual sense was rare these days but making love – *being* love – was still common. It was an agreement they were proud to have as part of themselves. This was the test of a woman, and a man, for Carol as she reflected on herself, well into the ill-defined time of middle age. Once people got their reproduction done they moved into another period, subject to different judgements: could they bring up children, could they make of themselves a rich, productive, worthwhile strand in the social fabric, and, if they wanted to lead, could they do so in a way that made them practically indiscernible in the cloth of which they formed a part?

They could, they had, they did. The tenderness in Tim's eyes when she helped him told Carol that this disaster was also their vindication: they had to pay a great deal – a life times one – for what they were getting. Tim didn't want to die, but he'd readied himself, and the benefit of accepting the certainty of one thing was that he got the certainty of its opposite: love. Had he been resisting death with hope he'd have brought anxiety into the equation, but he'd kept it simple and as long as he did, one side of the equation equalled the other.

There came a day when he drove to the office, seated himself at the counter facing the door, and dealt with run-of-the-mill customers for most of the morning, though he allowed himself a fairly long tea break. When noon came, he sat in the lunch room for a few minutes, chatting amiably, then mentioned to whoever was next in charge that he thought he might go home. When Carol returned after a meeting chaired by the state's Minister for Tourism, she looked around, and was told that Tim had gone. 'He won't be coming back,' she said, 'It's business as usual for the rest of us, except I'll put around a list every Monday letting you know about anything that's coming up and who's expected to deal with it.' Then she drove home too, spending a few minutes in the kitchen before she could face Tim.

He was pale, in bed, and cheerful enough when she asked, 'What happened?'

‘I had a feeling I wouldn’t last very long today. As soon as I got there I knew it was the last time. I’ve got something to remember. Customers ...’ Then he rattled off the names of those who worked for them, people they trusted, and loved. ‘I wanted to see everything one more time, on an ordinary day.’ She waited, but there was no more farewell than that, so she said, ‘I suppose I can manage.’

He said, ‘You’ll be okay darling. I’ve got no hints to give you. Except maybe this. When I’m gone, I think maybe you’ll want to hang on to everything, really hard, by way of stabilising yourself. There’s probably no avoiding that, but as soon as you can, let go. You can watch over the company if you like, but you’ll need to let go.’

‘Why? What tells you that?’

‘You’ll need to start a new life that’s not associated with me. You’ll always have *our* strength ...’

She knew how it hurt him to say this, talking about a world he wouldn’t see.

‘... but you’ll need to turn it in new directions so it’s truly yours, and renewing you instead of draining you.’

It was open to her to say she wasn’t being drained, but they no longer said polite, untruthful things like that.

‘I know it will, but it’s going to be very hard to find.’ She looked at him, curious to know what he would say.

But he didn’t. He lay back, smiling, sure that once he was out of the way, she’d find something soon enough.

The house was very empty when he was gone. Hardest to enter was the office off the verandah they’d opened up together; it was his office, though she’d worked there often enough for it to be *theirs*. The difference between his, hers and theirs was one that wouldn’t go away. Again and again she asked herself how, exactly, her life had and hadn’t changed when she’d married Tim, and the hard part, the question that didn’t unravel things neatly for her mind, was simply that: what had he done, what had been his experience, as apart from hers; the same

question in reverse, hers as apart from his; and that other, endlessly lively matter of sharing. Sometimes he'd been the leader, but she'd given herself happily enough to his intentions; sometimes the vice had become the versa, and it was she who'd led the way. Sometimes it was a tangle as to how much of him and how little of her (or vice versa again) was in the mix. They'd made themselves a duo and it was painful to be one.

Again. Something in her yearned to be, again, the watcher at the Gysberts' window, as she'd been in those short, life-changing weeks before she'd heard of Tim. Alone, and fighting for a satisfactory individuality, she'd had the full responsibility for the declaration of her terms, and now she was single again, a widow – a word without hope, it seemed – the terms of her new life were so hard to face that she yearned to be free of pain via some solution simpler than having to bear what she was going through until she was so accustomed to it that she wouldn't notice any more. She thought, often enough, of another window over the same harbour, the place at Point Piper she'd inherited all those years before, but that was too easy. She'd made a visit, under the guise of exercising the landlord's right of inspection, but she'd only had to spend a minute at the balcony overlooking the harbour city's heart – those ferries pushing across and back, the yachts so busy about their pleasure – to know that she didn't yet have merit enough to live there like a goddess looking down. There was still a way to go. She'd chatted easily enough with the agent – the place was in good hands, a few things needed money spent, would he please have them attended to – before leaving, and as she walked with the agent to his car, she heard a voice in her head telling her that there was virtue still to find, and when, or was it if, she found it, she could return, and claim the key as her own at last.

## 22. Alone

Carol thought she'd have the problem of loneliness once Tim died, but it was very nearly the opposite. Franz and Jessye, not to mention some of the people at Tantangara, feeling she'd need company, did their best to make sure she didn't have a chance of being on her own. They were so bright she couldn't stand it! She gave herself visits to Sydney, Cairns and Perth, allegedly checking on operations in these cities: in reality, to see what the world was like when she was alone.

It felt strange, but positive. She noticed that she was acutely aware of the bonds that held couples together. She'd been part of a couple for years and now that she was something else, being coupled no longer seemed normal, natural, inevitable, as it had only weeks before. Those who wanted to prevent her being alone, she felt, were afraid of what they might think, or feel, if they weren't part of an agreement. You could get interested in something without having to talk your partner into it. Carol went to the ballet a couple of times, something she'd never done. She got a taxi and went to the races; it was surprisingly easy to make friends with strangers when the feeling was right, as it was at the track; all you had to do was chatter, and love the horses, neither of them hard to do. There were people everywhere, Carol realised, whose life wasn't organised, wrapped around work, or family, or religion ... any of those things. Sprawling, as she called it, was everywhere, not everyone was careful about how they showed themselves, as she was. The feminist cause had been her defence and her means of attack when she was young and something in her still clung to it. But why? It wasn't a matter that helped her now, manager of a travel agency and matriarch of her family, but something that kept her sharp; she needed that, even if her friends took it for granted that she had both business and family under control.

That was the word she wanted to shed and she didn't know how to do it. It seemed that the absence of Tim, the buffer for her strength of personality, was the shaping force, or absence perhaps, in her life,

and she needed to be alone to realise it. I have to find new ways of taking control of myself, she told herself, wondering what they would be, whether she'd discover them, like some silly, shallow new faith that people adopted, or whether she'd take on a new partner as a way of making a newly socialised self to maintain her presentability. She didn't want to be a scolding, critical presence, in fact she rather wondered if she wanted to be a presence at all. A new partner?

No.

Most people entered upon their first marriage believing it was for life, and when it ended they took on a second partner because the business of marriage – partnering, childbirth, family-making – hadn't been completed, but if a second or third (if it had been necessary) marriage had ended it was as if the mind could see that it was sick of itself, and couldn't simply start a new marriage when what it wanted, now that it was single, was to stay that way. That was Carol's position, she knew it, and, she decided, her marriage to Tim had been successful to the point where she was done with marriage, or it was done with her, and she was out the other side. Her daughter and son were in the middle of their marriages, and before too long their children would be making awkward movements towards the same state, or at least the readiness to consider it, and she would be in the released condition to which all were entitled but only a few achieved.

An achievement. That was the way to think of it. That would be the moment, come to think of it, when she would be ready to claim the key to her harbourside apartment, to detach herself from the city of her children and grandchildren, and to live alone. To be alone – that was what she wanted, and she wanted it in a back to front, upside down version: she wanted to live alone but with an open door so that her family, friends, or anyone she was interested in could come through the door, and stay for a while, but only if they didn't try to make their visit permanent. That would interrupt the aloneness which was hers, now, and for the rest of her life, as far as she could see.

Being alone took many forms. Her son Franz was apparently a devoted husband and father, everyman's socially responsible gentleman, yet he entangled himself in deals to develop city buildings and export exotic products to corners of Asia which ought to be too poor to buy them. His contempt for parliaments and councils could be inferred from the moves he made to get around them. She never read anything about the shooting of an underworld figure without wondering where the lines of responsibility led; there were subterranean chambers of dramatic emotion where lives were ended at the whim of men who presented well enough when seen away from their haunts. There were, or there had to be crossover points where social lines intersected, and every time they touched there was a moment when an impulse from one quarter might be realised in another. She dreaded these reports – of crimes, of shootings – because they reminded her of what she didn't know about her son. Whenever she questioned him about anything he showed his respect for her business acumen by giving full and frank answers which somehow she found unconvincing. He was so well-covered, his answers came so easily she felt sure they were safeguards erected so that nobody, not even Irene, his wife, could know what lay behind. She could see that money had moved from being his principal motivation to an amusement: possessing the stuff and diverting it to this or that purpose provided him with something close to an artistic satisfaction. She felt he was teasing those that didn't have it, and she would have condemned him for it had it not been for a feeling, lurking in her life since Tim's death and her awareness of her own aloneness, that she herself had become detached in something like the same way.

If she said something to Irene or bought something for Giselle, if she had dealings with Jessye and Trevor, or offered favours to Stephen or Kiri, she could see them adding touches to the portrait in their minds of their mother or grandmother. Since they were creating her in their minds, she had only to do this or that and she could influence the mental pens with which they drew.

She did. It amused her. Once life releases you, she saw, you were free to play with its features, its moments, those normal purposes which made younger people play by rules which no longer bound her. She was free, and it gave her whimsies freedom, Carol, so serious and purposeful till now. She thought she should be ashamed but she felt rejoicing deep inside her, out of sight of her family, though they certainly knew that their efforts to overcome the loneliness they felt sure she must be suffering were, for some reason, having no effect. Jessica invited her to come and live with her family; they had a big block of land and could easily build a bungalow in the garden, and she could have the children with her as often as she pleased, or she could be alone when she chose. She could eat with the family as often as she liked, or she could be ...

... alone. Jessye could see, as soon as she made the offer, that her mother was nowhere near the trajectory of her remarks, and wished that her family would stop entertaining such dreams. Her mother was suddenly a stranger and Jessye found herself in the frustrating position of talking over the situation in bed with Trevor at night time, and remembering that her mother, the Carol that she and Trevor were talking about, had told her long ago that she and Tim talked about their family problems and sometimes even their business problems, as they lay together in bed at night. As a young woman, Jessye had thought that her parents would have been better employed in loud and messy lovemaking, but now, a mother and a daughter herself, she realised that that was what had become of herself and Trevor: they were the responsibility-carriers of the family, and it angered Jessye that she couldn't share this with her brother, because sharing wasn't what he intended to do with his sister or anybody else. Something in him had died when his father died and he'd patched the wounds of that loss in some way she couldn't begin to understand. This blockage meant that she had all the more love for her own children, with a corresponding urge to interfere with their lives, controlling them so that they achieved goals they hadn't set for themselves, like being

chosen to be captain of this or leader of that when both were happier in the middle of a crowd. Why must I demand achievement, Jessye asked herself, until the snobbishness of being a Buckingham diverted her to look for achievements she could reasonably foist on her son and daughter as goals they should be striving to achieve. Parents, Jessye told herself, are mad creatures and I'm one of them.

As fortune would have it, it was Jessye's daughter Kiri who showed signs of a musical talent not previously seen in the family. She came home from visiting the house of a friend whose father played in the Melbourne orchestra. She told Jessye she wanted to do what her friend's father did. Trevor, her father, was amazed. 'First time a Buckingham has ever been interested in music. We're mostly tone deaf on my side of the family. How about you?' he said to his wife and she had nothing musical to report. The pair of them thought a responsibility had devolved upon them so they engaged a music teacher to try Kiri out on a few instruments, maybe take her to an orchestral concert for children, and advise. This was done, and to the surprise of family members in several directions, Kiri began to learn the cello, with a smaller version she could fit between her knees, and so it was that the Buckingham household changed its nature. Trevor grew used to returning to a house where the sounds of the cello, however inexpertly handled, were evidence that the house had a new identity. If the instrument started up when Trevor was at home, he would grumble, flinch, or try to find reasons to get away, but eventually it made him proud to know that his little Kiri was learning, with whatever hesitations, something by Bach; the music teacher explained that she could learn songs and exercises, 'any silly little pieces so long as she enjoyed them', but she must get an idea, early on, of where all this squeaking and squawking would eventually lead.

Almighty Bach: Trevor looked on his daughter with reverence. While still young, she'd been placed at the heart of the culture. Only a slip of a girl, with a half-sized instrument, she'd been invited to tinker

with – but respectfully – something from a man who was central to European music. Bach believed in god. God ruled the world, the stars, the heaven, the sky and the dark. God was absolute. God was the strand that gave meaning to lesser realities, the connecting, vital thread. God healed human sickness, steadying deranged minds when they erupted. God challenged the human imagination and met it full on, wherever mankind ventured. Carol liked songs and singing; always had, but her grandchild's cello told her how shallow were her thoughts; there was a tradition, holding many reflections, and Bach, working his bow – *her* bow, if you took Kiri into consideration – in and out, upside down and downside up – had shown that you could make music out of almost anything: there was dignity everywhere, available to man, because god was everywhere and if he chose to let a little girl express his thoughts then those who heard her were included. The blessing came for those who stilled their selves and let the music take them over, sometimes grumpy, sometimes joyous, simple, heavy, grand, fleet as only sound could be. Bach had found ways of making the cello capable of arias beyond the human voice, ideas at the very edge of the mind's ability to conceive, yet so sure was he, so absolute in his faith, that little Kiri's half-sized cello, squeaking and squawking as the child struggled to do what the sheet of music commanded, strove more mightily than the child's grandmother had ever striven. God, whom Carol had long thought a fiction, was showing him/her/itself through the child, and the child, named for a great singer, knowing next to nothing about ideas embodying themselves in the human mind, was making music, simply, awfully, but with aspiration. She thought it an honour and something more, something sacred, to have the cello between her knees, and she knew that when she made it sound, however clumsily, she was transforming the world. The notes quelled all the insubordination of matter, and thought held sway. 'How was that, grandma,' Kiri asked. 'Am I getting any better?'

'You are growing into greatness,' Carol said. 'I hope I see the day.'

Irene began to feel like the wives of Mafiosi, or Nazis even, who lived with immaculate-sounding men, dressed well and with polished manners, whose minds were concentrating on awful things behind them and to come. One day when she was visiting the Northcote house to see if all was well, she complained to Carol that she had nothing to complain about. ‘Silly, isn’t it. Who wants trouble? Trust me, I don’t. But ...’ The simple word was a signal and Carol wondered what was coming, expecting it would be a family matter. From the moment that had been chosen – no one else around – it had to be, but what?

‘He’s lovely,’ Irene said, and Carol knew who she meant: ‘he’s thoughtful, he’s considerate, nothing’s too much trouble, he’s a beautiful father for Giselle, he guides her carefully to make her the beautiful girl she is ...’

‘But?’ Carol reminded her, needing her to get to the point.

‘... but he keeps a secret side, out of sight, it’s where he does his business, he’s got a world of friends and contacts I never hear about, let alone meet, and that’s where he makes the money that keeps us, the money we depend on, and I know nothing about it, except that occasionally when we’re watching the news, or he’s reading the paper, and something causes him to put on a distant smile, all very secret, no comment made, he doesn’t talk about whatever it is that’s pleased him but I know he’s made some money somehow and I know I’ll never know what he did to get it.’

She looked at her mother in law. ‘Sometimes I’ll wait till he’s gone and I’ll pick up the paper, trying to find out what he was reading that amused him, or annoyed him, and even when I know which item it is I never really know what the connection is.’ She stopped, not knowing how to go on. Carol put it to her, ‘Do you think he’s done anything illegal, or is it just that it frustrates you when he doesn’t let you know?’ Irene wasn’t sure. ‘It annoys me that I don’t know, but ... anything illegal? I wouldn’t know, Carol. That’s what gets me. I’m married to him, but I don’t know what he is ...’ She saw that she’d

struck a chord with Franz's mother. 'Has he always been like this? With you and Tim?'

Carol, who liked everything clear, hard and firm, felt the world going soggy. 'I think what you're talking about has always been there but it's become more obvious, no, more pressing since his father died.'

The troubled wife: 'In what way?'

In what way? What indeed? Carol hardly knew where to look. 'He was so affected when Tim was dying, here in this house, that I knew he was being changed inside himself. Yet at the same time he was most perfectly thoughtful of his father. Nothing too much trouble. He'd sit with his father for ages, goodness knows I used to wonder what he was leaving undone, he was here so often, yet I loved him for it ...'

'That's the side he shows us,' said his wife, 'but there's another side and I'm not part of it, I'm not allowed in, I wonder about myself. Does he really care for me? Do I matter for him, or is he only being polite because it was part of his upbringing, and he feels he must?'

Carol knew what it meant to be undervalued, and she hated it. Her son? Oh dear. At once she felt wretched. But Irene was going on. 'I have a feeling which may not be fair to you and Tim. I'm sorry. I'd much prefer to keep all this to myself and worry about it on my own, but I need to know where it started ...'

'Long ago,' Carol told her. 'We could never get inside him. Couldn't prise him open. He was devoted to his father, respectful of me, but it was a political decision, something you do because you know it's smartest to do things that way. He was such a beautiful little boy ...'

'When did he change?'

Was she, as his mother, only defending the indefensible? Carol said, 'He didn't change. He was always the way he is now. I wouldn't know how to change him. He wouldn't let you change him. He's too well organised for that. He doesn't want anyone to know him. He doesn't see anything wrong with himself.' She wanted to cry, she

wanted to be rid of her son's wife, she wanted to pull open a window so they could see into Franz's soul, if there was one ...

... and that was the worst, the most horrible idea of all. Could there be something present in her that was missing in her son? And she'd never noticed, or known? How could she have shaped a son, loved him and found him acceptable, only to hear his wife say he stood apart from her, ringed himself with something joyful on one side, indifferent on the other, and locked her out? Pain in her eyes, she looked at Irene, who, aware of what she was causing, said, 'I know he means well. He knows I've got no head for business so he thinks he's sparing me when he goes quiet. I don't want to stop him doing things if he thinks they're going to be successful, I just want to know. Not to be excluded. And yet ...'

She paused, lost in thoughts she couldn't understand. 'What is it, Irene?' Carol, having been made aware of how little she understood her son was being made aware of how out of touch she was with his wife. 'Irene!'

The younger woman answered meekly, as if called to order: 'Yes?' Carol saw that she was expecting a rebuke, that it would cause her shame if it came, and that such rebukes probably came her way fairly frequently, if she put demands on her husband that he didn't care for. Carol put her arms around Irene. 'Men. They're so different. They know how we like to share things, so if they want to please us, or reward us, or just plain make us happy, they share. If the opposite, they don't.'

All Irene did was nod, she'd been reduced to that. Carol felt herself spotlighted: she'd devoted years to the cause of women and here she was, unable to satisfy her son's partner, not knowing even what was wanted of her, let alone how to do it. How was she so helpless? She hadn't always been this way. What she'd had with Tim was intense, intimate, yet separate too, because he'd known that he had to give her room, and time, to make her own decisions. Franz, her son, had loved his father too; perhaps she'd let Tim-in-her-mind do the hard work

of connecting intimately with her son instead of forcing the child, the boy, youth, man, to let her see into his mind ...

She knew this was no good. Whole societies organised themselves so that women and men lived apart. Women ran the home and men the world around it, and they then changed this to themselves running the world and women providing the bases, the springboards, for their achievements. The pretence was that the world was divided equally but the reality was something else. She thought of clubs for Mediterranean migrants. The men sat playing cards, smoking, sipping coffee, agreeing with the views of other men because that was all they had to do. The clubs had no function but to get the men out of the hair of their women. Such a virtue! They were useless so they might as well be useless together. And then there were the country's black people, who also separated the women's world from the men's. They had men's business and women's business, the men responsible for making men out of boys. People who were said to be primitive and people who were said to be 'civilised', they all had trouble putting the sexes together. Why should she think this wouldn't affect her?

Yet she did. She'd left Martin because he wasn't the man she expected him to be; now Irene was unsettled because Franz had closed sections of his life to her. It wasn't what Carol had lived for, but that didn't mean she could rule her son's life. 'What are we going to do?' she said, and Irene lowered her head, indicating that she saw nothing. She wanted to tell her not to be helpless, but she was helpless herself. Then she thought of an idea.

'Where is Franz at the moment? I want to talk to him.'

'He's with those men that I never see. What do you want to say to him?'

'I want to offer him a job.'

'A job? Doing what?'

'Doing my job. It should be familiar enough to him. He's grown up alongside the job, or it grew alongside him.'

'His father's job?'

‘It’s changing all the time, but yes.’

Irene examined the idea in her mind, looking for traps and side effects, particularly on her. Carol: ‘I can see you’re cautious about it. So you should be. I’m not asking you to say anything now. I’ll put it to him. He’ll have to consult you. You can say your piece then.’

Carol got her chance a few days later, when Franz told her about a travel agency in Canberra that was in financial trouble; he thought Tantangara should step in. She wanted to know why it was losing money and he said casually, ‘It wouldn’t be hard to turn around. People in Canberra can afford to travel. Except they prefer to do it at others’ expense.’ It was the sort of remark that would go down well with his money-hungry friends. His mother said, ‘If I took it on, who’d run Melbourne?’ He laughed and said, ‘I’d run Melbourne for the couple of weeks you’d need to get Canberra in order.’ She challenged him.

‘Two weeks to restart a business?’

He wasn’t deterred. ‘Businesses run down when people know they can get away with stuff. Frighten shit out of them and they stop. You make it clear that they’ve got one chance and then they’re out. All the stuff about who does what or which way they file the bits of paper ... you sort that out when you feel like it. If you want to fix a business,’ he said, ‘you spend day one looking at the books. Finding out. Day two you have a look at your people. Day three, a meeting. Tell’em your goals, give’em the date when they get judged. If everything’s all right on the day, they keep their jobs. Not all right, they get the flick.’ Casual as he sounded, she knew he meant it. ‘Fortunately,’ she said, ‘Tantangara’s not in that condition ...’

He noticed her caution. ‘Canberra, however, is. What do you think, Mother? You feel like cleaning them out?’

She took her chance. ‘I’ve been thinking of retiring.’

He showed no surprise. ‘In five or ten years, perhaps.’ She shook her head. ‘No. Now. And hand it all over to you to run. Keeping the

business in the family.’ If she thought she was challenging him, he showed no surprise. ‘Can’t leave out Jessye and Trevor. They’re part of the family too. Not that they want to run it.’ He thought. ‘A business changes when its founders retire, or die. Dad’s gone, but you’re still there. Do you really want to retire?’

Suddenly it was Carol that was under scrutiny. He added, ‘Or do you want to see me in a different line of business? Working longer hours, making less money, but operating close to home? Your home, my home. Living a different sort of life.’ He didn’t even put it as a question, showing that he saw through what his mother was proposing. ‘Mother?’

Did she really want to retire? No, yes: what she really wanted was to have things the way they had been, but that was impossible. What she really wanted, also, was to have him leading a life like her late husband’s, well away from men she didn’t know, and suspected. She wanted him to live a life that made Irene comfortable, she wanted him to be the boy she’d loved who’d somehow become a different sort of man, she wanted him to take the control that had been her husband’s so that the position that had been hers was a little closer to being unchanged. To her silence, he posed his questions again. ‘What is it you want?’

That was easy. ‘I want time to stop!’ They looked at each other and it dawned on him that she’d got inside him with that call in a way he would normally not have allowed.

Franzy decided to do it. Irene was amazed, Jessye a little suspicious until the terms were worked out, and Carol felt a load remove itself from her shoulders. They set up a board, headed by Carol, of all family members over eighteen, and a general manager – Franz – responsible to the board. Each branch – Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Cairns (Canberra was added soon after) – had a local, non-family person in charge. The board met quarterly and more often if required. Franz instituted a prize, named after the late Tim, for the staff member who

wrote the most business between meetings of the board. All staff got minutes of the board meetings; there was also an 'Innovations Officer', a position held from one board meeting to the next, and slides of trips, or photos, whether taken by staff or customers, were used in the agencies' advertising. Tim's management had been so personal that there was an inevitable change noticed by the staff; people making enquiries got 'information' in piles from the new regime but less in the way of recommendations. People noticed the deference given to Carol and it made her feel older. For the first time in many years she thought about Samantha's apartment on Point Piper; she didn't feel ready to move but she wondered what the first signs of willingness would be. Jessye, her daughter, suggested that she sell the Northcote house and move in with her, Trevor and the children, and she said it so blandly that Carol realised her daughter had almost forgotten Point Piper. How long was it since it had been mentioned? It must have been years. Years – each of us got a ration, and Carol wondered how many she had left. It seemed to her that she had become a spare, not a vital, part of Tantangara, partly because she'd done everything so many times before and partly because the customers, the public, were changing. They didn't move automatically to Europe, with London as their gateway, they visited countries in the neighbourhood as if they'd known them all their lives, travellers were looking to South America, South and central Africa, and the communism of the governments in Russia and China bothered young travellers not at all. Globalisation was happening and people saw it as liberating, if they were young ...

... while Carol felt that the frame through which people knew the world was altering. It was not only where they went but how they looked at things. They had no shame about showing their ignorance; wasn't everyone the same, when they were away? Societies were not quite so hierarchical, even in Europe. Nor were they fussed about representing Australia, to its credit or shame: they were individuals, or families, looking for what they wanted and if they didn't find it in one place they went somewhere else. Keeping up traditions wasn't

their job any more, they had no memory of class-bound travel by ship, they got to places quickly and looked around. Carol was reminded endlessly of travelling to France with Martin; it had been different then. She made a point of avoiding discussion of these differences for the obvious and uncomfortable reason: they made her feel old. One of her most telling memories of Europe was how the young people managed to appear young – their clothes, their movements, songs, their sex: these things could not be taken away from them, yet for her, Europe was incredibly old, heavy to the point of being burdensome. The young learned to pick up their burdens early, while visitors from her country, and some of those from America, though not all, did it differently. The day Martin had left her in Paris, to return to Australia, and their eventual separation, she'd had a feeling of great intensity. She was on her own, the threads of life were between her fingers, a Wagnerian sense of fate had taken hold of her and she'd sung ...

What had she sung? She couldn't remember. It was a moment she'd sworn she'd never forget, nor had she, but what she'd sung had passed out of her mind. All she remembered was that she'd passed into another dimension, that of song, and that for the moments of her singing, she'd not been earthbound. It was marvellous, or it had been, and she'd needed the accession of strength it gave her because there was no other strength to be had: her husband had left her on her own. That was a time of trial ...

Now she was on her own again, but with a family this time: daughter, son, their partners and children, not to mention all the expectations that they and the surrounding society had placed upon her. She wanted her song, whatever it had been, because it would indicate that there was still freedom in her, somewhere, waiting to break out!

Or was she now so socialised, so much a mother, ex-wife, grandmother and business manager that her freedoms had been exhausted, to be replaced by duties, obligations and all the other impositions that people, especially women, accepted along with their

lives, as if the burden and the old exhilarations were inseparable as she entered her later days.

Oh time!

She realised, sitting on her verandah one evening, just outside the office she and Tim had made – his home within a home, she used to call it – that she thought in terms of major abstractions, these days, even more than she had in the days, long ago, when she was finishing her thesis. Dream, traum, and rêve. She'd put ever so much effort into the thesis and it had brought her rewards, internal and external – a doctorate she could flaunt when it suited her, and a fluency of thought that hadn't been a part of the young woman who'd started on the topic. Question: how did you teach yourself to think? Answer: throw yourself in at the deep end and you'd be amazed how quickly you learned. Today, she did everything with ease because she was unpicking the basic meanings of the society she was part of, and while most people were wringing profits out of activity she was squeezing meanings out of words, and thoughts and actions insofar as she could understand what people thought they were doing. Tantangara, a series of travel agencies to everyone else, was a social laboratory to Clare, where people put in money and requests, and her staff got them tickets, bookings, arrangements that would happen at fixed times on the days set down. Who were their people and what were they seeking when they looked at the posters lining the walls? Beaches of Thailand, islands off Hanoi, the Great Wall, the Empire State, the doorway of 10 Downing Street ... it was all a shallow construct of the world, little better than a media replacement of reality, and yet each of the places did exist and you could confront them if you chose. There was a Kremlin, there were Ural mountains and bitter Siberia. There was Uluru in central Australia and it carried meanings galore, some of them ancient and profound, some of them easily apprehended from a plane. Travel deepened you so long as you watched the watcher, aware that the real object of consideration was the interloper. People said that you learned by examining what was foreign to you, but it was truer to say that you

became aware of what you had hitherto been. If it took unfamiliar surroundings to bring this about, then it was worth paying money and putting yourself to the bother of going to places that were unfamiliar. To travel was to change the normal, it was something that needed to be done, yet not too often because the regular traveller became a different person from the stay-at-homes. Citizens of the world needed to know that many were not. Was it undemocratic to have two types of citizens, those who stayed at home and those who flew whenever they could? Were the wings of a plane the insignia of the modern aristocracy? Were these aeroplane-aristocrats different from the ancient seigneurs of land? Was there an equivalent in the modern age of those who'd named themselves by where they came from – de, da, von, or a family name that was the name of a place? Carol de ...

What?

She'd born two children, had three grandchildren, she'd replaced Martin, partnered Tim, she'd seen her Aunt Samantha on a bed and knew that she was dead. The same would happen to her one day, no avoiding. What did she want surrounding her, when that happened? The French provincial pieces of her aunt? Yes, she did want that, but she wanted something more. She wanted the waters of Sydney Harbour, because she'd realised herself, in several senses of the word, overlooking them from one place and if she was to have progressed in the course of however many years she lasted – a total, so far, of sixty-four – then she needed to be looking at the same thing from a different angle. Point Piper would give her that! She'd be looking back to where she'd come from, just as, when she was liberating herself from Martin, she was trying to see where the new paths would lead, and she knew there was a contradiction between a path and a view, because you were static when you considered a view, even if you were exulting in it, but if you were on a path you were moving forward (back or sideways!) to where you thought there was a goal. Goals were illusory, because you could nominate anything, any silly thing and say it was your goal.

So what could you nominate as a decent sort of goal? It was a question unexpectedly hard to answer. Exultation, a peak? Yes, so long as you didn't get sick of camping in the cold at the top. Despair? She didn't fancy that, but could see it might be the logical outcome of a certain sort of path; she hoped it wasn't hers. Contentment? Most people would settle for it, but she wanted something much the same, but a little better: serenity, that was its name.

How hard would it be to find? She finished her glass of wine, the wine that Tim had bought by the dozens in his years of life, a wine she'd never change now, and, letting her mind drift to the north, the harbour view she was aspiring to, she took herself to bed.

### **23. An armistice with the world**

Next time she was in Sydney, she took a taxi, though people from the office offered to drive her to her hotel, and she told the driver to take her slowly down New South Head Road (it occurred to her that she didn't know where the old road used to go) and turn into Wolseley Road, Point Piper. She stopped the driver, an Indian, occasionally, causing him to ask her if she was thinking of buying a house? He was over-impressed, she felt, when she told him she already owned a place in the area. 'You are rich lady, then?' was his comment. 'No,' she said, 'if I was rich I'd own one of the really grand places,' and she pointed out a few, famous homes owned by famous people. The Indian was more impressed: 'How you know? These people are your friends?' Again she demurred. 'I inherited the place,' she told him, not liking the fact that the man was curious and contrasting her fortune with his own; she sensed that he felt that driving a taxi was beneath him. She wanted to tell him that when people migrated they did it for their children, and if she looked back on years of moving around she felt that taxi drivers had a better opportunity than most to understand a

country, to find out its attractions because they'd had to drive people there, to be of service because that's what they were paid to provide ... but none of this was said because taxi drivers, by and large, wanted to complain: she thought of dismissing him, but there were no phone booths around to get another car, so she simply had to put up with him. Then she saw a tennis court, with four people playing doubles and others enjoying afternoon tea, and a yearning she hadn't expected took her over. She told her Indian to pull over and sat looking at the players and the gathering; when one of the tea-drinkers waved to her, she felt an impulse overtaking her. 'I'm going to join those people,' she told her driver. 'I'll pay you now.'

And she did, to his amazement; as he drove away, Carol could feel his hatred of a woman, citizen of the country he wanted to be adopted by, dismissing him because she needed him no more. Carol trotted down the steps from road to court, approaching the woman who'd waved and now stood to receive her. They exchanged names - Carol, Maddalena - to the amusement of the other members of the party who explained that they were expecting another friend who lived in Crows Nest, and when the taxi pulled over they'd all assumed it was Noreen, and Maddalena had waved because she takes her glasses off to play tennis ('Lord knows why!') and it was only when Carol had got close that they realised they were welcoming a stranger, at which point Carol told them that she wasn't a stranger to the area, even if she didn't know them, because she owned an apartment further along the street, at number seventy-eight, and she'd never lived there, but it had been her Aunt Samantha's, and Samantha had left it to her, and she'd always intended to live there one day ... and her husband had died the year before and she was starting to think about making the move and the reason she was in the taxi was that she was surveying the ground, as it were, or as it might be, for where she'd live the last part of her life!

The tennis party thought this fascinating, and when she revealed her distaste for the driver who had brought her to the area she was one of them. 'They shouldn't be allowed to drive until they've passed a

knowledge test! They pull out their street directories so they can find ways to take you on a roundabout ride so they can charge you the earth!’ Maddalena said, ‘I asked one of them why he didn’t have one of those little screen-map things they put on their dashboard to guide them and this Indian man ...’ her voice was full of contempt ‘... told me it would only get stolen. Stolen! If it got stolen it would only be because one of his sort had taken a fancy to it!’ They all laughed. Carol was given a chair, and tea. She was asked if she played tennis, and she didn’t. Where was she from? The game in progress ended and the players joined the group around the stranger. They wanted to know about her business. Some of them had booked trips at Tantangara’s Sydney office. ‘Goodness! It’s a small world!’ then they wanted to know about Carol herself. If she’d lost her husband, was she going to remarry?

No. She was firm about that. Then how soon was she coming to Sydney, she was fortunate to have been given her apartment all those years ago because the prices these days ... ‘I’d never be able to afford the place I live in now,’ Maddalena told the group, who knew it anyway: ‘We bought it for ...’ she named a trifling figure ‘... and it’d be worth ten times that today!’ Everyone agreed, fingering their blessings. They wanted to know if Carol remembered the name of her driver. ‘They’re supposed to have their names and numbers on display in case you want to report them.’ ‘Half the time the man who’s driving you is a different man from the one in the photo. He’s filling in for his brother, or sixty-fifth cousin or something. No respect for the rules, those people, only in it for the cash!’ To this, Carol said mildly, ‘I suppose we all have to make a dollar one way or another,’ and it was the amusement of the men that made her look more closely at the tennis party, all within a few years of her own age. The men made her think of whip-cracking lion tamers, laughing ever so easily, and the women of rocks believing they were flowers. Wealth had given them privilege and they’d never learned to question themselves. She’d be surrounded by such people when she came to live here and she’d need to present herself in such a way that they accepted her as they were doing now. Thus far, it

had been easy: she was still Noreen, who, coming as she did from Crows Nest, wasn't quite one of them. They liked Noreen because she showed them what they were and they liked that. Carol was curious to know what the men did – the women, she saw, did next to nothing – but knew she mustn't ask. This amused her. Thistles thought they were roses! 'It's an exclusive area,' she said, making it sound like an appreciation. 'You can't exactly pick and choose, if people have got money enough to buy in, but you can make them know if they're welcome or not!' They almost applauded. 'What was the name of your business? Tantara. I think I know where it is. We must use it.'

This early examination of Carol by Point Piper's people was almost complete when another taxi pulled up and Noreen arrived. Much amusement followed. Carol was shown to Noreen as the person they'd thought was her. Maddalena remarked that this mistake was not so silly because they were alike, the two of them. She stood them together and the party was amazed. They were indeed alike, apart from the clothes; Noreen was dressed for tennis and Carol for the office. 'But the features,' Maddalena shrieked, 'and the way they touch one hand with the other. Look!' The tennis players looked, and it was so. Noreen and Carol were alike in mannerisms, as if both had copied the same model, and they were similar in face, each having the same way of using their eyes to indicate the importance they did or did not attach to something. Watching them in face one had to wonder how similar they were in mind. Yet each felt the other didn't want the comparison taken too far; they were happier on their own. Once the hubbub over their similarity had died down, and the party was wondering whether there would be time for another set or two before what looked like a downpour would arrive, the two women, pushed together by their resemblance, told each other that it would be good for them to visit each other when Carol was a Point Piper person and Noreen was ...

... a Crows Nest-er! They laughed heartily, the pair of them, but their next meeting was closer than that. The following day, Carol was telling the people in the office what had happened when Noreen

walked in, insisting that Carol come out to lunch with her. She felt it was not to be avoided, so she went, and heard the story of Noreen's life. She'd married one of the wealthier of the Point Piper set, only to realise that he was an underworld figure responsible, albeit at a distance, for a fair slice of Sydney's drug supply, and in a rare top-level bust he'd been found guilty and jailed. 'I moved,' she told Carol. 'It was the only decent thing to do. I'm comfortable where I am. It's actually a better house than we had on the point, though it's only worth half as much. Position, position, position, you know what they say.' Carol asked if she missed her husband, and how long was he in for? 'I try not to think of him, and that means I'm relieved that he's inside, but he's in for seven years and if I know him he'll be pulling every string for an early release.'

'So he's coming back.'

Noreen looked at her look-alike. 'Yes.'

'How do you feel about that?'

'Awful. Terrible. Got any ideas?'

Carol didn't have any ideas, or not off the top of her head. 'Those people you were with yesterday, the tennis people, can any of them do anything for you?'

Noreen sneered. 'Do anything? No. Why would they want to?' They'd looked up to her husband while he was respectable, then they'd backed away. They still let her play tennis with them only because she'd moved and they could separate themselves from her whenever it suited them. 'I'm one step away from being a non-person. They think they hired that tennis court. I hired it! I was the one that got it for them so they think they're being awfully decent in letting me play with them, but they don't let me inside their front doors any more, you can take my word for that!'

Carol considered her. What to do? 'Do you want to be back on the point?'

'No.'

'Are you happy where you are?'

‘It’s a good house.’

So that was her answer. She was wretched in herself. And she’d come to Tantangara to meet her look-alike. ‘I’m not sure what to say ...’

Noreen blurted out, ‘I want to work!! And I’d like to be a long way away!’ Suddenly Carol saw what she was looking for. ‘Perth? Cairns? Canberra?’ She noticed that ‘Melbourne’ didn’t slip onto her list. Nor Sydney, because that was going to be her city one day, perhaps fairly soon. ‘Do any of those appeal?’ Noreen’s face went blank, dead, empty. ‘Nothing appeals to me except being a long way away when he gets out.’

‘Perth? Cairns? Perth might be all right. You’d have a whole country between you.’

‘Not far enough!’

‘It’s the best I can offer. We don’t have any offices OS.’

‘It gets bloody hot in Perth. They don’t have southerly busters.’

Carol was almost amused. ‘They have Fremantle doctors. And much good may it do them.’

‘You sound cynical.’

‘Every city in the world likes to sing a song about itself. It’s what you do when you’re there that counts.’

‘I’d be selling trips to other places.’

‘You’d do that better if you were unhappy where you were.’

Noreen saw the sense of this, even if it didn’t add much hope to her life. ‘Would you keep who I was a secret?’

‘Yes. You could change your name if you liked. But do it before you get there. Work out your identity. Have the story ready.’

Noreen paused. This woman who ran Tantangara was prepared to do what she wanted. She could, if she liked, stop fuming about her circumstances and change her life. ‘Can I have a couple of days to think about it?’

Carol dipped in her bag for a card. ‘I’ll be going home tomorrow. Contact me when you’ve made up your mind.’

‘Any conditions we haven’t discussed?’

‘No conditions we haven’t discussed. If you want to do it, I’ll set a salary, tell you what you have to do. You’ll be a trainee for a month, on probation the next five, then you’d go on our superannuation scheme. This’ll all get explained if that’s what you decide.’ Carol looked at Noreen, looked into her as far as she could. ‘I’d grab it if I were you. Nothing ever solves a problem completely, but this is about as close as you’re likely to get.’

On the flight back to Melbourne, it occurred to Carol that she’d helped someone escape the way of life she’d marked out as her own. She almost spilt her tea! Quite a contradiction. What would they get Noreen to do if she asked to go west? Carol thought of eco-tourism in various forms – whaling as it used to be practised, whale-spotting in the modern way, with binoculars the only weapon. Something to do with mapping, perhaps – coastlines from the sea, or the endless search for minerals as revealed by signs and signals on the surface of the earth. And could aboriginal people be persuaded to reveal their secrets for following the movements of animals they hunted, or for finding water, for that matter? She’d like to develop some simple trips that would bring groups back on later visits. A nice idea but would it work? That could be Noreen’s job, but she could hardly send her to Perth to work on something unless it had a future; Canberra would be the better option, with a business to build. The only trouble with Canberra was that the business was being rebuilt under Franz and he wouldn’t like his mother interfering. No, it looked like Perth for Noreen, as far from Point Piper as she could get. I’ll represent her, Carol thought: she’s the same age as me. She can be me in the west and I’ll be her in the city of first settlement. As the plane neared her home city she recalled something she’d noticed in a newspaper they’d put in her room at the hotel, a photo of a vessel entering the harbour in ceremonial fashion, the crew, clad in white, lining the deck. She realised that it was a traditional way of entering port but didn’t understand when it was

done and when it wasn't. Neither the caption nor the accompanying article made her any the wiser and she wanted to know. It was a form of manners, but who was sending what signal to whom was not clear. She knew, also, that it had nothing to do with death but the formality of it touched something she'd been thinking about: when her time came, how would her departure be signalled to the world? She could make her wishes known to Jessye and Franz but as she well knew, they were quite capable of saying yes to her face and something different later, when she couldn't come back to argue. How do I want to leave the world, Carol wondered, and the thought was still on her mind when she left the plane at the airport, to be greeted, to her surprise, by Jessye, Trevor, Stephen and Kiri.

'Good heavens! What brought you all out here? It's such a long way from home. And the traffic must have been awful at this time of day!' she said as Jessye and Trevor swallowed her in embraces and the children tugged at her hands. Nobody answered unless it was by claiming her from the line of people exiting the plane, many of them, also, being welcomed. 'Great place for kissing,' said little Stephen and Carol picked him up to kiss him, which he wanted though he pretended not to. 'Travel's our business,' said his grandma, 'so kissing's our business too!' She did it lushly. 'What's that you've got there?' It was a tiny Qantas plane, made in China; 'You tie this string to something in the ceiling, and you start the motor by pressing this,' Stephen showed her, 'and then the plane flies round and round and round ...

'... till everybody's sick of it,' said his mother. 'That's why I said it had to go in your bedroom, nowhere else!' Stephen nonetheless had his plane, they'd collected grandma, so it was time to go home. Looking around, he spotted a motorised wheelchair and was envious. 'I'd love to ride in one of those!' Trevor laughed. 'Not for sixty years yet! You carry grandma's book for her!' Then: 'What are you reading, Carol?' It was how she liked to be addressed. She showed it: *The Leopard*, of Giuseppe di Lampedusa. 'A man who did a bit of travelling in his

time, though he never got this far!’ She smiled. ‘Sicily, Italy, Europe.’ She was wondering where he’d stayed, and how his hotels had looked after him, when Jessye told her, ‘We’re expecting you to stay with us tonight, Mother. You won’t have any food in your house. You can’t go back to that. Trevor’ll drive you to your place in the morning so you can pick up your car.’ Carol accepted this with another smile and they were soon at the luggage roundabout, the children checking the cases as they pushed aside the flap. ‘They expect my case to come out first,’ Carol told her daughter, ‘but since I don’t care to pay the fee, it won’t.’ Her case came soon enough and five minutes later they were at the family car. While Trevor was putting her case in the boot, Carol looked around: being home meant that for a few minutes she was free of concerns about the far-flung branches of the family business ...

...until, to her surprise and discomfort she remembered Noreen; why had she offered that woman a job? She couldn’t find any reason for her action. The best she could think of was that Noreen had been desperate to make a move of some sort so she’d given her a push. There, see what you think about this! She herself had been hijacked into staying the night with her daughter and her family; with the grandchildren she loved more than she loved herself, these days. It was no hardship, and Trevor would take her to her car ... Carol had a feeling that it was the children’s idea, that is, Stephen’s and Kiri’s idea, and that was how the world worked: the young drove it, pushed it, made most of the clamour, while their parents used their money to cause things to happen, and the generation that was older again ... they threw the odd coin into a bowl for those battling behind them. It gets easier, Carol saw, simpler, you walk through things that used to frighten you, or were beyond your powers. You wanted so much to be useful, to bring about changes that the world needed, and everything you did was as successful as it was easy, yet the world didn’t get any better.

The world! How much overhauling would it take to make it good for women, and so many of us were trying, she thought, so where were the results? Where was the sign?

She gave up. She listened merrily to the children chirping in her ear, she tried to judge, by the way they spoke to each other, how much persuasive power Trevor had over Jessye, if any, she chattered about things in the Sydney office, but when she mentioned a taxi ride through Point Piper she could tell that Jessye had other plans. Nobody particularly wanted it but Jessye planned to have her mother living with them, and putting in huge sums of money for the coaching that would make young Kiri into the famous cellist her mother wanted her to be. Carol shuddered at the thought: the risks involved, the money so uselessly dispensed if you didn't reach the level where you could charge enormous fees and do concert tours of the world! Who said it had to be conquered? Wasn't it enough to live in it, and enjoy? They had dinner, something simple, and they cleaned up. Jessye caught her daughter's eye and Kiri brought in her cello. Carol tensed. Would the girl be any good, really? Or just 'promising'? She played a couple of pieces and, Carol noticed, was musician enough to toss them off. So she, the old lady of the family, had no alternative but to say the sacred name. 'Bach?'

Kiri played, and the meister was still beyond her, but she was so much better than she'd been last time, that Carol was amazed. 'You really are coming on!'

Kiri said, 'It's harder than anything you could imagine, but I'm beginning to see why people think it's worth struggling to be good.' She looked as if she wanted to say more, but nothing came. 'Thank you darling,' Carol said. 'You must play for me again, soon.'

A couple of days later an email came from Noreen. There was some confusion as to when it had been sent. She was going to Perth. She assumed the offer was still open? What would she have to do?

Carol spoke to Franz. She expected him to object to her dropping an inexperienced woman of her own age on the business, but he showed no sign of this. 'Wildflower tours, forest tours, water storage, shipwrecks, aboriginal painters, resistance in the Kimberleys ... she's

got to get on top of all those. And the ordinary day to day work, flights, trains, buses, that sort of stuff. She's got to know it back to front. And you'd better tell her that when she's done her probation, I'm going to interview her before we sign her on. She has to convince me she's got a future. That all right with you, Mother?'

It was. Carol was feeling odd, and wanted to be on her own. She went to the toilet to look in a mirror, expecting to see a red face, but the flush she was feeling wasn't visible. She went back to her office and the feeling went away, before it came again. She'd been expecting it for ages but it had still caught her unawares. She'd heard plenty of women talking about it but now it was happening to her. When the flushes went away she felt empty, as if something had been taken away. She'd reserved the morning for an examination of Tantangara's offerings; she'd had a feeling for some time, and Franz agreed with her, that they were trying to sell too many things, and their staff didn't understand them as well as they might. It was time to cut back, restrict the choices on offer, 'rationalise' was the word, and let other, smaller agencies offer the conventional stuff, and specialise in things the little people couldn't provide. That was her job that morning, and suddenly she wasn't sure that she could do it. Flushes came and went. She wished it would all happen in one decisive moment but she knew she'd been overtaken by a process which took time. She sat at a computer, analysing money flow from each of the agencies, category by category, a calculator beside her. The modern executive. She thought of herself scornfully. What was happening to her body wouldn't show in the figures, much as it mattered to her. What was she losing? She hadn't had a sexual partner since Tim, and had rarely wanted one. His death had ended a time of her life, but the potential had still been there, and she knew of older women who still enjoyed their partners. Was it only a colouring, some part of the recipe of loving, living, that was changing her as it went away? She tried to concentrate, telling herself there were no decisions to be made, since she didn't know how it was going to affect her, so she'd better put her head in the figures, when Franz came in.

‘That woman didn’t turn up.’

Carol looked at her son. ‘Who? You don’t mean Noreen? Didn’t she get to Perth?’

He shook his head. ‘She emailed them. She was coming on a certain flight. She’d be at the office at such and such a time on Tuesday. She never appeared. Next day – nothing. Same the day after. We’ve drawn a blank.’

Carol was amazed. ‘She’s the same age as me.’ Her son smiled. ‘Whatever that’s got to do with it. She’s not as reliable, Mother dear!’ He was chuckling now. ‘Good job it was you that built the business, not her, whoever she was! You’re not going to chase her up in Sydney, are you?’ He couldn’t believe she’d be so silly, and she wasn’t.

‘I’m going to forget her. I tried to do her a good turn, and she ...’

Franz finished it. ‘Skipped away! And having said so, that’s what I must do myself. I need to talk to those hire car people.’

He was gone, leaving his mother in confusion. Menopause had announced itself, and Noreen ...

She rang the Perth office and got Noreen’s email address. She sent her a blistering message. ‘Why aren’t you in Perth? What caused you to change your mind?’ Et cetera. She was angry. She’d been helping someone in need. She felt she’d been spat on ... and this turned her mind back on itself. Instead of being able to shape events, she was at their mercy. Was she weaker now, and couldn’t make things happen? She wanted to cry, she wanted to shout her rage at everyone in the office, and knew she mustn’t; they’d wonder what was wrong with her if she spoke in anything but her usual decided way. She wanted to go out for coffee so she could examine herself, but knew she mustn’t. There was nothing she could do but what she’d said to Franz and one or two others: she was examining the returns and the cost of the inputs for each of the categories of things that the company did. That had been her plan and it must be carried out. In a foul temper with herself and the world about her, she analysed the company’s costs, allocating them, office by office and then to each of

Tantangara's offerings. There were all sorts of things that wouldn't fit the categories so she drew up another 'To Be Distributed' column and worked on. She would have said she knew the business well, but there were totals that surprised her, among both the costs and the revenues, and variations between the offices that were greater than she'd realised. This has been worth doing, she decided, and was getting ready to print out her findings when she felt she owed it to Franz, the rest of the family and the workers in the four offices to distribute those To Be Distributed amounts. She did this in a variety of ways, making clear in each case what her methods had been, until, at about 1.30 in the afternoon she was satisfied. If there was anybody who hadn't taken a lunch break by now she'd share their break with them; there was an excellent little café next door but one. She saved the work on her computer, gave the command to print, and moved to the door of the office where staff dealt with the public. A young man called Roger was collecting papers from the printer and she had a feeling that he might have picked up the first page or two of what she was printing out, so she stepped forward to check. 'No, Mrs Carroll', he said, muddling her name, 'I knew you'd be printing pretty soon so I got my job in first.' The printer started to whirr. 'This is your job now. See?'

He was right, and what pleased her more than the fact that her job had been done and was now printed, was her own improvement. Her flushes had gone, she didn't feel cold and empty, she felt fine.

The relief was only temporary. What happened when Carol reached the office on some days reminded her of the muddles and confusion she and Tim had experienced in their early days of getting the business going – forgetting things, losing things, not keeping checklists and so on. In particular, she wondered how much of her inner chauffage or frigidity was perceptible by those she spoke to. After a time she realised that what was troubling her was not a failure of memory or uncertainty about her intentions, but a feeling that she, whether

working on a computer or talking to someone, was not quite the person she'd been. Something was wrestling with her self. Her identity had been in a state of continuous development for so long it was confusing to have it changing and, as far as she could tell, in two directions – towards the extra and embarrassing tendency to excess (the flushes) and, in the opposite direction, towards an emptiness, a loss of some dimension she'd taken for granted since ...

... being the age of her grandchildren. It was certainly throwing her around, but she had no intention of being altered, whether in her mind or her affections. At the office, she contrived to have Roger, the young man who called her Mrs Carroll, show her how to unblock a photocopier they'd recently acquired, and he did it so affably that she felt sure she was fully functional, that's to say, the changes she was finding so disconcerting weren't obvious to him because he wasn't looking for them. She was safe with Roger and if she was safe with him she was safe with the world. It's all a matter of confidence, she told herself, yet she knew that she was also feeling, deep within herself, a need to relearn, no, to reconfigure the world as she'd known it. She was in a period of change and, able as she might be to secure most of this process from the eyes of others, she couldn't deceive herself. She had to identify the changes and learn to deal with them, one by one. First, the changes were her business, and knowledge about them belonged to nobody else. Next: her business was service, and there was no reason it should fall away. These were easy reasons both to impose on herself, and to follow, but their effect was a certain drying out, a falling away of the daily human touches that linked her to people she dealt with, a certain dryness in her performance, as if she'd lost interest, though she hadn't. There was also a wish to measure achievement, as if she was no longer made certain of it by people coming through the door. She liked graphs, lists, bank statements or anything statistical, and the occasional grateful letters from overseas clients held less interest for her now. School children came asking for pictures, maps and brochures they could use for projects, and she

noticed that she gave them more than she'd ever done before but was less interested – less charmed – by their thanks, even their smiles. This made her feel that she was losing something and she examined herself closely when she was on her own, trying to clarify in her mind what she was becoming. Franz, her son, her manager, said to her quietly one morning, 'If there's something worrying you, pass it on to me, Mother. I'm paid to be the worry-man.' She might have snapped at him but she saw he had more to say. 'You're the benevolent spirit we keep here to keep everyone who comes in happy. Seriously. That's your job. Make them happy, by showing interest, asking them where they've been, their hopes and dreams, that sort of thing. They'll loosen up for you in a way they won't for the rest of us. It's called using your strengths to advantage, Mother dear. Knowledge is what you've got in spades, throw in that warmth if you'd only use it, and we'll be in for a record year!'

It was like having Tim again, making her feel good about herself so that she could make everyone else feel good and pass it on to their customers, and it made her want to cry. She'd been so long in the business that it had become her way of doing good in the world, and the world was a place that needed it. The world! She felt that the world needed judgement, just as she felt, silly as it might be to someone who believed in no divinity, that she was subject to judgement herself. She would offer herself up to the judgement, the trial, of the world, but only so long as it submitted to her in its turn. That was a quaint undertaking, yet she felt that it was also the last great work of her life. Her grandchildren would grow up, her children grow old, she'd move to Samantha's apartment with the wonderful views, and she would first make peace with herself, and then arrange, if she could, her armistice with the world. Armistice? Had she then been battling it? Yes, she had, and it had been clever; it had kept her concentrating on the handful of people who mattered most to her, and then to the score or two closest to them, and then to the century or so still personally visible from where she stood in an inner position, and beyond that the

gigantic world went its own ways regardless of what she thought was and wasn't virtuous or even acceptable.

And she'd let it get away with this trick!

She smiled, in a bitter, wrangling, teeth-revealing way. The other side in the contest she was prefiguring had out-thought her thus far, leaving her shooting at small, inessential targets, like Martin, her husband number one. And what had happened to him? The moment she'd taken her eyes off him, he'd improved, and probably, from what she'd seen of the later man, wasn't even a target anymore. That had moved on to others that she didn't know, so she'd dropped out of that level of the fight, without seeking to discover where its other levels were still going on.

Until now. Was she at peace with herself, because she wanted to take over Samantha's apartment pretty soon and see what she had to do next. How ready was she? Was she at peace?

She wouldn't know till she tried. The main obstacle to be overcome was her daughter. If Jessye worried, Trevor would worry. Then they'd get at Irene, but Franz would calm her down with promises to visit, and Giselle, her other grandchild, would accept. Her father ruled the house in his silent way. Carol noticed that she approved of this; Franz had been smart enough to marry a woman who took her directions from her man. It was unquestioned in their household. Carol further realised that Franz couldn't be managed because he didn't let you know what he was doing. She was sure that he spent at least a quarter of his time on the hidden investments and development projects which had been his early income sources. He had more money than Tantangara paid him, though he hardly let you see this ...

She wouldn't know till she tried. Her first step was to see the agent who did the leasing of Samantha's apartment to find out when the present leasing period ended. This was very close. She instructed the agent that the apartment was to be leased on a monthly basis so that she could resume control at short notice. This was done without

change of tenant. All the better. The next thing she did was to take a photo of Tim to Sydney and put it on her desk at that office, something that Franz noticed next time he was there. ‘Getting dad ready to come up, are you Mother?’ She was. Her son was not to be fooled. ‘Going to have trouble with Jessye. She’ll say she’s being rejected.’ Carol thought about this. Jessye was capable of anything but had done next to nothing. It seemed to her mother that her first-born spent her time wondering what other people were going to do, then worked out how to fit in. If she was ever successful it was in collaboration with someone else, never on her own. Where did she get that from, Carol wondered and of course the answer was rejection. Her daughter had chosen, if that was the word, not to resemble her mother. Daughter had wanted to resemble someone else, but had never found the person. The die was cast when I gave her that name, Carol thought. I called her after Jessye Norman and she, all unknowing, chose not to be whatever the name Jessye meant to mother. Bullshit! Pop psychology! Carol told herself, and at the same time she saw that it hardly mattered. *Something* had happened in those early days, long ago, to close some part of the young psyche against the intentions it could read as they emanated from the mother’s mind, even – and this was the amazing thing about babies – if it never reached the surface of the mother’s mind, let alone escaped her lips. If we want them to follow us, Carol saw, we have to walk forward, eyes firmly fixed, and let others tell us what’s happening over our shoulder, behind. Planning? You can’t. Making provision for eventualities that may not become events? You can do that and much good may it do you.

Back in Melbourne, she went to Readings Bookshop in Carlton and drifted along the shelves. She wanted something by a woman that was good. She spotted a collection of letters between the country’s women writers a couple of generations back – *As Good As A Yarn With You*, edited by Carole Ferrier. One of the letter writers was Eleanor Dark and Carol had a copy of *The Timeless Land* at home, unread. Un-bloody-read! Her days were filled with schemes to get people to

Pacific islands before they got submerged by rising oceans, and there were her own country's women, mostly forgotten now despite the fact that they had written the books that mattered in the time between the wars. Longer than that. She had read *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* of Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw and that had come out in 1947, predicting an end to the patriarchal world that never eventuated when it seemed it must. Suddenly she felt energetic in the old way, the first-time-married way, and she wondered if she could pick up the story and take it somewhere, now that she was reawoken.

She rang Jessye and allowed herself to be invited over for dinner. By mixing attractive invitations with dutiful reassurances that Stephen and Kiri would have her utmost assistance when time came to choose a career path – and Kiri's already appeared certain – she brought Trevor and her daughter to a state of grudging acceptance of her plan to move to the apartment overlooking the harbour. 'When school holidays are getting close I'll draw up a list of things to see and places to go so that they'll return to Melbourne made wiser by their Sydney experiences, and when I'm needed down here – you're going to be away for a while, or Trevor is – I'll come down and stay with you. I won't go back to Northcote. We'll rent that out until we know what we want to do with it. One of the children might need it one day, they might have a time when they want to be away from home but can't afford student accommodation.' She gestured. 'They move into the old house, there's plenty of room. Kiri can practice all day and half the night if the others who are there don't mind.'

'The others?' This was Jessye expressing the fear she ought to have overcome by now but hadn't. Carol often asked herself where the fears, the inadequacy, came from, and whether they were truly a deep-rooted condition, as Jessye wanted them to believe, or simply a device for getting her own way by making her family worry about her. This was certainly her way of controlling Trevor, and he appeared not to know it. Feeling humiliated made Carol all the more determined to get herself to that balcony overlooking the water, far away to the

north, and she realised that just as she had once forced the issue with husband Martin by going north and liberating herself, something in her was getting ready to do it again, a different mission, perhaps, but carried out in a way that was familiar. ‘I wish you had been a singer,’ she said to her daughter, ‘we’d talk to each other by singing songs, and we’d know what each other meant just by listening ...’

This was a cruel thing to say and the surprise on Jessye’s face told her mother how deeply she’d hurt her daughter. Trevor too looked startled, and yet he knew that if any peace was to be made it would be via him. ‘Jessye’s always told me about how you sang in Paris in a way you’ve never sung out here.’ Carol looked scornfully at him. ‘She wasn’t even there! She’s the child of my second marriage, not my first. The first marriage was awful and I got out of it as quickly as I could. Nothing improved until I got married to Tim ...’

‘... whom you must miss dreadfully,’ Trevor put in. ‘He was a fine man ...’

This was as annoying to Carol as listening to her daughter: ‘a fine fucking man!’ Who was he to say? And yet she was angry with them in a way they didn’t expect, therefore they would blame her for a wrong when it was only a resistance from within her to the hold they had over her. She was family and they were old enough, now, to think the rules were laid down by them ... and here she was, ready to reassert herself when she no longer had the authority lent a woman by a man. Tim was dead, she had to use charm and cunning if she wanted to assert her wishes, as she did ...

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘He was a fine man. I’m always hard to deal with whenever he’s mentioned.’ She dealt a false card she didn’t even own. ‘Living on my own is the best way I can still live with him.’ She went on with it. ‘I think it’s best to let Franz run the business from down here while I keep an eye on Sydney with an occasional visit, I wouldn’t want to be there all the time, quite the opposite, Franz would be in charge there too, I’d only be a family presence they could refer to ...’

She rather hoped that Roger, the one who'd called her Mrs Carroll, and still did, it was a joke between them now, would be second to Franz and in charge when her son wasn't there. That way she should get some amusement in her later years and not be afraid to go in because the young people were thinking she was from an earlier age and didn't know what was happening. She could spread her mind and invest her interest in other things as they occurred to her. What were your last years for? Besides, and she hoped this was a winning argument, she could offer Stephen and Kiri access to another city, Australia's first, free of charge and from its premier location. 'You'll come and visit me, won't you darlings?' she said to the lad and lass she did love with all her heart. 'Are you going away, grandma?' Stephen said, and the regret in his voice would have touched a heart of stone. Kiri couldn't speak. Carol said, 'Only if you come and visit me. Mum and dad will bring you up at first, or put you on a plane and I'll meet you at the airport. When you're older you'll want to visit Sydney for yourselves, you'll want to escape family for a while before you start families of your own, but in the middle, there ...'

She was extemporising, but something in it caused Jessye and Trevor to release their objections: '... there'll be a few lovely years when you'll have a second home and I'll do everything I can to help you enjoy it. We're a travelling family and this'll be your first big step.' Happiness overwhelmed her. What she was doing was selfish and she knew it; she was giving herself a long meditation to end her life, and causing this part of her family to fit in, and she was dressing it up, with some approximation of truth, as being for their benefit too. Now she had to make it that way. She would! Or she'd try – that fall-back position human beings accept most of the time, and for the greater part of their lives. It was called making the best of it, and that was what they were going to do.

## 24. Go, Mother!

It was easier with Franz, Irene and Giselle. Franz told his mother, 'It's a bold step. Plenty of people would wonder why you're doing it. Maybe that's a reason in itself! Anyway, you want to do it, so there *is* a reason. Give it a go! We're not going to lose you. I'll be up there all the time and Irene and Zelly will visit – if they're asked! Are you taking stuff up there, getting new furnishings, or what?'

It occurred to Carol that he didn't know the Point Piper place except by repute and had lost sight of the antique items it held. She told him, 'There's things in there that I've always valued, because they belonged to Aunt Samantha. I'll empty out everything else and buy brand new.' The only other thing Franz wanted to know was where she'd stay while she decided on curtains, furnishings and so on. She was firm on this. 'In the apartment. I want to wake up there and sit looking out the windows, with the old stuff behind me. And I want to come home from the office and open the door on the emptiness when I've got rid of everything I don't want.' Her son was amused, Irene concerned for her in an almost empty place, and Giselle amazed that anyone could be so bold. 'What about your old house, grandma?'

'It'll be empty till I know I'm not coming back, then we'll let it out. Or maybe we'll sell it, but that's a decision that can wait till I'm established!'

The four of them knew that talking about being established was one of her ways of establishing herself. The transition was underway. Franz, who'd known this from the beginning, was smiling faintly. 'I'm going to be very curious to see what you come up with, Mother. I've never really thought of you as a Sydney-sider, but you will be. There's a difference, isn't there? Wherever you go, people are not quite the same. When I was in France two years ago I kept thinking of you. Some whiff of the place had attached itself to you ...'

She jumped in: '... and I never want to be without it! It's very precious to me, though I don't know what it is.'

The day came. She set off. A couple of weeks before she'd rejected the aeroplane as too quick. She told the family she'd drive. Surprised as they were, they fell back on discussing distances, places to eat, and mutual arrangements between the automobile clubs that would come to your rescue if you broke down. 'I'll be all right,' Carol said, and family, of course, said, 'Of course!'

She left after breakfast, a day earlier than she'd said. She wanted to surprise them. 'I'm in Holbrook!' But she wasn't. She'd left the highway to dawdle where she pleased. Transitions are not easy. When she rang, she was in Beechworth. 'Ned Kelly was jailed here,' she said and they knew she was asserting independence. Go Mother! Amazingly, they were with her, doubts and all. Giselle, without telling anybody, prayed for her. Stephen, prowling through his books, could find no story to tell her, went to sleep, and woke up sad. Kiri knew her grandma wanted a solo and played her a couple of minutes of ...

... Bach. The human mind is an amazing thing, greedy, selfish, opinionated, cursing itself for what it can't do, and occasionally achieving. Kiri knew her grandma was connected, somewhere on the road, so she played, better this time than last, a piece they both knew. Civilisation was civilisation after all!

Carol reached Sydney, found her way through the turmoil, stopped in Wolseley Road and found, in her bag, the key. She approached the door trembling, to be spotted by the caretaker coming out of the lift, who introduced himself as Harold McLaughlin. 'Greetings, Harold,' she said. 'We're going to know each other well.' He asked if she had a key, or would she need one of his?

She had her key.

She opened the door, knowing that what lay beyond was the rest of her life. Harold brought in her bags, gave her his blessing in the mildest of glances and a few trite words about the weather, and then she was alone. At once the question posed itself: 'Why have I done this?'

‘Why have I done this?’ She moved to the bedroom which would be hers and took in the view. Clark Island seemed further away than she remembered. The light was from the east, the shadows falling away from her; this caused her to realise that almost all her memories of the place were afternoon ones. The bridge looked very steely of a morning, whereas of an afternoon it was a graphic etched against the sky. There were few boats on the harbour. She wanted a battle cruiser to come through, crew displayed in white and lined on deck, captain saluting ceremoniously... and suddenly she laughed, realising that the reason she wanted a ship was that she felt she deserved it! ‘Oh humility, cover me with a shroud!’ She went into the passage and to the bedrooms on the other side, the second hardly more than a balcony to the first, but blessed, both of them, with *view*, that priceless quality of the city she’d resumed. It felt good to be back and she knew that she couldn’t have left it much longer. To achieve the promotion Samantha’s place was giving her you had to pay a price in years. Three and a half decades had swept her along since last she’d lived with a view, and she’d been young. That meant foolish, surely, so was she possessed of any wisdom now? She heard a knock at the door.

Harold McLaughlin. She felt she ought to ask him in for tea but there wasn’t any, not even a cup for herself. They stood in the door while he briefed her. He was in charge of the building and could deal with a good many problems. Others were out of his control. They’d had low water pressure recently in apartments on the other side of the building, not hers. He hadn’t been able to do anything about that. Phone calls had had to be made. Best if they came from him because he knew how to handle the people who’d be coming. He unlocked doors, showed them where things were – taps, switches and the like. There were several businesses in Double Bay that looked after residents; he gave her a list to leave near her phone. There were businesses to avoid. Harold favoured a certain taxi company, and gave her a card. He mentioned a couple of residents who had quirky ideas about their parking rights; ‘For goodness sake don’t get into an argument with

them. Mention it to me and I'll sort things out.' Another smile. Carol saw that he liked to be needed, next to invisible, and unbeatable, if such were possible at his level of society. This entertained her. She would watch him. He would be a useful mirror in which to examine her own progress ...

... towards whatever had brought her back to overlooking the harbour she'd abandoned years before. As soon as Harold had gone, she drove to the shops in New South Head Road; later in the day she got a taxi to the city and ordered beds, bedding, started to look at crockery and cutlery but called it a day. She shouldn't rush. Everything should match everything else. Things on which her life rested should all be outcomes of each other. When the harmony she hoped to build had been completed she would enjoy unpicking it. What had come first? Which had followed what? Had she made mistakes and could they be repaired? The emphasis at first was on the place around her. She would circle for weeks until she knew her inner self was ready. The curtains would fill with light; she'd have the place painted white so it spoke respectfully to the light outside, whatever that happened to be. She remembered storms from years ago; she'd want to experience them in an illuminated condition, when they came. Fear didn't have to be locked away if it could heighten experience. It occurred to her that Harold the caretaker might have it in his head that it was one of his roles to 'support' lonely women who took fright when nature banged and boomed. No thank you, Harold: keep away!

Once the painters started she'd have to move elsewhere. The smell of fresh paint would need to settle before she'd come back. Friends had invited her to stay with them but she preferred to camp, as she put it, in a good hotel. The weeks of her return weren't going to be comfortable, or comforting, they were going to be a time of dialogue between her and what Wolseley Road was going to become, to mean. One way of protecting herself in this time when she was living in a place where she didn't yet feel she belonged was to recall past moments, events, sayings and people. She would take tea, and later

wine, to the window of her bedroom, connecting with the harbour as best she could, feeling the enormous energy of the sun blasting the city before it settled, inviting night to follow. She remembered Samantha, and Uncle Stephen, long gone to god, and allowed that she was their descendant: if something of them was in the history of this apartment, it attached itself to her. Somewhere and somehow, she'd come across a diary the young Samantha had kept when travelling through France, the trip which caused her, years later but just before she married, to buy the French pieces that were in the apartment still, cherished, embodying something of the young woman who'd bought them, and of a David Jones that didn't stock that sort of thing any more. Carol's mind, lingering, tried to work out the year and put it somewhere in the 1920s, a hopeful period if you had enough money to ignore the disasters on either side, two mighty wars that were like the world retching to be rid of a race that troubled it ...

And it was still here, still hopeful, forever perched on its cliff like a bird too heavy to take off in the normal fashion, a species tumbling into the atmosphere to see if it could fly, or would it crash to the rocks below, never to soar again? It was a question mankind kept returning to, and here was she, Carol, contemplating. Night was beautiful, creeping out of everything, revealing the other side of nature to the light which brightened the harbour's sails and the uniforms of those sailors, making their entries both triumphal and courteous. Welcome ships! Welcome men! And women too, they were sailors now, Carol's journey towards acceptance wasn't being made alone! She remembered suddenly, while sipping wine at the window, how Jessye, her daughter, had loved a boy whose name she'd forgotten – No! It was Robert Wellington – who'd played the part of Jacques and gave a reading of the seven ages of man speech that had engraved itself on her mind ... Where was Robert now? Which of the seven ages had he been through, and which were still to come? She felt he'd been unlucky in the body he'd been given to inhabit, and that by now he'd be somewhere in the process of decay. If he was, where was she? She'd created a last phase,

hopefully long, in which she might make peace with the world, an honourable settlement, but how was she going to do this?

She had a window on the world, as she'd had, decades ago, when getting free of her husband was her goal. Done! She'd had the Gysberts' flat as her base, but they'd taken it back, and she'd left for Samantha's. Done! Samantha died, leaving the place to her, and she'd felt it was too much, and somehow dishonest, to take her rank from the wealth of a position favoured by money and nature. She'd gone away and lived a life, only to realise as the years slid by that she was occupied by the world's terms and she was making no headway outside her immediate family and they, like everyone around them, were making their decisions in their own way. Was there nothing she could do? Sipping her wine, she looked into the darkening sky. Why couldn't she be assumed into it and return with the day, the sun her ally, dictating to an obedient world the terms of its existence? She burst out laughing, grabbed the window ledge for balance and knocked her glass sideways. I'm not drunk, she told herself, just unfortunate! She got a cloth from the kitchen, mopped up, and filled her glass, putting it, this time, on a little low table by her knee. Good glass. Sit there and don't move. I need to order my ideas!

Needless to say, they wouldn't be ordered just by looking at them. The usual shambles they remained. What did she want and what could she do? Crowds could be stimulated to roar for freedom, equality and ... sorority, an awful word, but weren't they all? Jails could be torn down and their cells ripped open, but all you were doing was letting the criminals loose unless you filled their heads with a better purpose than they'd been able to invent themselves. The first stage of a revolution – getting rid of the hated past – was the easy bit. What came next – the hard part – had to be strong enough to stand the battering of the human imagination and the probing acid of analysis. All the world's a stage, Shakespeare said, And all the men and women merely players/They have their exits and their entrances/And one man in his time plays many parts/ His acts being seven ages ...

That was what the great man said, and his women were played by boys because that was how things were done in that time; that would never do! Carol took another sip. It took a woman's parturition to bring any of them into the world; Shakespeare knew that but where was the mother? 'At first the infant/Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms'! And how had the conception come about? And who with? The nurse? No, the mother, and who decided who she'd mate with? What forces brought the woman to the man who'd be father to her child? Children? Carol thought across her life. She'd been lucky. She was lucky still. She could have got tangled up with a policeman in Albany, taking his orders from a crook, and she might have been there still, if she hadn't wriggled out in time. She might ...

'Might have been', whatever it meant and wherever the chances were dealt out to people as the hand they had to play was the ruling principle of the universe, despite democratic elections, monarchies, autocracies, one party rule or whatever else prevailed. *This* might have been, or that, and you took what you were given. If this couldn't be changed, what then? Where could mankind intervene and was man ever kind, except occasionally, when things were going well? Chaos had overtaken Carol's mind with the night, because she was accepting what she knew as far as its limits extended, and it was all pretty awful, really. Women were the instigators, and if they accepted a disgraceful man and let him into them then who knew what might follow. Women were most vulnerable where they should be most controlling. She was tempted by those societies where men and women lived apart, meeting each other on special occasions only, when and as the women directed. But temptation was as far as this idea got, because it wasn't the way of her society, and it wasn't, finally, her choice of how to live: she liked the tension, the struggle, between male ideas and female, male emotions and thought patterns and the ones that came to women's minds. Also, she found it amusing to watch the devious processes of women marrying into men's families, assuming their husband's name, and then subverting what it meant to

be a Scott, a Heard, a Jacobson, a Dutilleux or a Carbone, when they themselves were Whistlers, Brooks, Lawrences, or Tamerlanos. It was said that when a woman married she was inducted into her husband's family, but it might better be thought of as one family subverting itself by absorbing qualities from outside. That's to say, the Scotts, Heards, Jacobsons et cetera thought they were acquiring a new and dutiful member when in fact it was they who were going to be changed because the curatorial aspect of a woman's life, added to her shaping of the children she bore to the Scott, Heard, or Jacobson with whom she was partnered, meant that the receiving, inducting family was changed by the new arrival whether it realised or not. Those who thought scientifically could see this in relation to the gene pool but it happened to every feature and characteristic that makes a being.

These were thoughts that came to her window, perching there, tempting her mind to follow her eyes into the great beyond they'd flown in from; she also saw, at weekends when she was home, looking out, the planes of the world lumbering in, laden with Australians coming home and foreigners visiting. They were low by the time Carol saw them, getting ready to land, following paths invisible to the human eye, but knowing, mysteriously, where they were in relation to the strip of land where they'd put their wheels on earth. Carol never saw them without loving them, these bringers of scientists, politicians, people who chased money, holiday-makers, scholars as she'd once been, children, people of many languages and people with one. The arrivals got off the planes through tubes, went through customs, changed money, collected luggage, got taxis and went to the coast, the inland, the outback. They brought their luck or their personal disasters, some of them, no doubt, hoping to leave it behind when they left the airport, others aware that it had located itself in their heads and was not to be avoided. I'm not a traveller now, Carol knew: I've got a home, one empty, in Northcote, Melbourne, and one waiting for me to get to know it, here in Sydney. Already she was beginning to feel the city's rhythms, times and fluctuations. When a

hot and dusty wind blew from the west she called it a 'brickfielder' and there were also the stormy changes called 'southerly busters': how she loved to name them like a native! She saw ships coming and going and let her mind play with yachts on the harbour, most of all those bound for Hobart in the holiday race. When she watched the ferries from the city to Manly and back she loved them for having dual existence – linking two sides of the city according to the timetable of clocks and calendars, linking the activities of earth to the sweep of sky and the endless upheaval of water. Two waters, even, one inside the Heads and one outside, waves churning in to rock the boat and its passengers reading their papers and looking at their mobile phones. These journeys were short but they linked everything to everything, dividing the days of people going to work, and coming home. They sat as easily in the city's history as they did on the water, making the city's obligations that little bit less onerous because they were escapable for the periods of transition. Humans on water are not the same as humans on land. Wild ideas flourish on water, crimes are committed on the land. There were other bridges than the famous one, and she thought she would make it her business to traverse them and see where they led.

Then a sadness came over her as she accepted that she was impermanent. One day, like Aunt Samantha, she would lie down and not wake up. She'd been sent off shopping by the aunt who was taking her in after she left the Gysberts', Samantha had been in two minds between shopping and lying down and Carol's arrival had allowed the old woman to split the roles: she would lie down and Carol go to the shops. Carol had gone, and so had Aunt Samantha, leaving the place to Carol in her will. Carol herself now had a will drawn up, witnessed and signed. There'd be no mess of law when she went. How simple it all was. Confusion in the mind created confusion in the world, and an orderly mind created simplicity. She smiled a little sourly. There was a story that when Christ had been born angels had sung that there was peace on earth and goodwill

in heaven. Europeans were quick to supply angels with thoughts they wanted to highlight. The people of Europe privileged certain thoughts, ideas that suited them, or gave them ease. It was hard to avoid the cornerstones of their thought, so well established were they. Carol looked at the harbour, proud. They'd sent their rubbish, their failures, to the end of the earth and a great city had risen. Swallow that, proud Europe! Tears came to her eyes and she realised that her feelings were up and down like a roller-coaster, and of course that took her back to the window at the Gysberts', where she'd waved goodbye to Martin. Her life, she felt, was returning, charged with the duty of making itself whole. How did Shakespeare end? She remembered well enough.

Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.

There was only one alternative – die young, and she hadn't done it, nor had she been forced to watch her children or grandchildren go too soon. They'd be visiting before long and she had better make her apartment welcoming; how to do that? She'd draw up a list of places to go and things to see; children loved to discover, which meant that if adults were clever they'd plant questions, curiosity, in young minds, ensuring that discoveries took place. She remembered Samantha telling her, many years before, that she'd been backing her car out of the garage on Wolseley Road and almost backed into a car the likes of which she'd never seen before. Getting out to remonstrate she found the driver even more distraught than she was; it was, he told her, a Hartnett, a car he was producing himself, and this was the only one in the world. 'Watch the papers in the next few weeks,' he'd told her. 'This little vehicle is going to make news!'

She'd watched as instructed and snippets did appear, but eventually even she could see that the mighty General Motors of America had teamed up with the Australian government to make the Holden, and

Hartnett was heard of no more. It had joined the Stanley steam car as a casualty of its industry, shot down by those who had big guns trained on places where they expected competition to emerge. Were people like cars? No. Were cars like people? Yes, in that they aged, and how quickly or slowly, how well or badly they did so depended on how they'd been made in the first place. What sort of cellist would Kiri become? She'd have to take huge steps quickly if she was to become famous, and her grandmother hoped she would. Would her parents push her, creating opportunities and openings? Carol feared they wouldn't because they weren't driven people. Jessye and Trevor thought that nice people helped nice people do nice things when there were only a limited number of vantage points and the struggle to occupy them was bitter. Oh Kiri ...

Carol looked at the water, Carol was always looking at the water. The water wasn't looking at Carol, it neither knew about her nor cared. Care belonged to some species and not others. Fish lived and died in swarms, nameless, unowned, possessing no notions of lineage. They could be netted, canned and eaten with never a thought about what had happened. Strong-minded people added purpose to their behaviour but if they could be demoralised, forced to forget the scent of hope, they too could be slaughtered as in Cambodia. Madness could be driven through the minds of a nation, as in Mao's cultural revolution, overturning the values for which his land was famous. Beware revolution! Beware the turning upside down of things. Yes, there were blinding moments of miracle but for the most part humans made improvements in steps, one or two at a time. The effect of this was that if you looked at the totality of human life the most you could expect was a few little things here and there. For every peace treaty there was an armament manufacturer making sales. For every war zone restored to peace there was a new conflict between occupying and displaced peoples, usually near a border; the poor were always getting pushed this way and that, unwanted. If you had wealth, some notice might be taken of you until your money had been taken away,

and if you were poor, then, as the Christian new testament told you, even that which you had would be taken from you.

A woman at a window. Two eyes trained on a world which could be likened to anything, depending on how you wanted to see it. Let us say then that you wanted to make a judgement of the human race because you belonged to it, you were aware that your end must come and you wanted to make your peace. The easy way was to summon your family and close the door, because most could fill one room with goodwill. The earth, as the angels had had it, millennia ago? No, not possible. Carol had never found compromise easy but she didn't have much room to move, seated at Samantha's window, sunlight streaming through, images of the city flooding with it, ships dotted wherever the navy had created a berth. For ships, the harbour was a place of departure and return. Carol had, she knew, a certain number of returns – one for each remaining day – and one departure, like Samantha before her. Suddenly the window felt like a trap, a cage, and she left it, pulling the blinds down, and shut it out of her mind for days.

She found reason to go to Cairns; 'I'm not inspecting the office,' she told Franz. 'That's your job. I'll call in just because I'm in town. What I'm really doing up there is visiting an old friend I haven't seen in years. I want to catch up.' Franz was untroubled by this. 'Have a good trip. Tell our people I'll be up in about three months.' Carol laughed. 'How did I raise such a bastard of a son?' He made a point of arriving when least expected, convinced that if he didn't surprise people they'd hide things from him – and Carol knew he was right because his visits usually turned up something that wasn't supposed to be happening. They were cautious in the Cairns office when she asked after Andrea, her friend of years before. It was only a name to them, but when Carol remembered Andrea's family name, Trevorrow, something came to people's eyes. 'That was her name years ago,' Carol said. 'She might have got married since, or maybe decided she wanted a change. People do.'

She knew very well they did, especially the types who fled the south and settled in tropical indolence when they got to the country's top. 'She came in here a couple of years ago,' someone told Carol. 'She'd somehow got to know people in the Chinese villages that some of the Palmer River miners had come from. She wanted to bring them out to see where their ancestors had scraped together a few bits of gold. So she said. What she really wanted was for Tintangara to pay for her to visit China. Said she spoke Chinese but I never heard her, so I doubt it.' This sounded to Carol as if Andrea had wanted to get on the Tintangara payroll; it'd be Andrea's style. 'Do you know where she is?'

The last they'd heard of Andrea, she'd been living in Cooktown, so they gave Carol some names to contact, she hired a car, and took off, as she'd done all those years before. The giant Captain Cook, twice repainted and twice re-faded, was still saluting drivers heading up the Cape. She told the Captain that she'd passed inspection years before and wanted support for what she was doing. She wanted Andrea to tell her she'd done well in all that she'd taken on, and the reason she wanted it was that Andrea, she'd felt years before, had been more robust, more substantial than she'd been, back then. What would they be like, now?

It was decades since they'd seen each other. Letters had stopped. They'd grown apart and what she was doing was silly. Useless. Her car, on the other hand, had a mind of its own. It seemed in league with the sunshine, the breezes and the rolling road to shift her north at speed. But why? What did she expect to see? Coral trout on the table? A woman of her own age who'd taken another direction? There was an emptiness in her life since Tim had died and all the filling of family couldn't quite overcome it. Again, why not? She thought about this as she thundered through the hills. It was her refusal of judgement, she decided. She loved her descendants but ignored any perceptions they might have of failings in her ways, deficiencies, shortcomings. Franz might be the manager of the business but she was its ruler, and if she'd

shared the ownership around, that had been her decision. She had enough friends of her own generation to make it impossible for family to control her. She'd been strong for so long, she'd carried the family with ease, she suspected herself of wanting to uncover a weakness to justify self-pity or something of the sort. She'd look into Andrea to see what she could see ...

But first to find her!

At the post office they told Carol about an ill-kempt woman of sixty or so who collected her mail every couple of weeks. They had an idea she lived in the bush somewhere but didn't know where. The town had a doctor so Carol went there. The nurse on reception smiled when Carol made her mission clear; Andrea had left her mark on the place, but again, the clinic didn't know where she lived – and this in a tiny if sprawling settlement. The police station was next. The young constable invited Carol to sit down once he grasped what she was after. Pointing across the water where the Endeavour River broadened to meet the ocean, he said, 'Over there.' She felt he was setting things up in a way that would provide him with amusement. 'I knew her well, once,' Carol said. 'I haven't seen her for years.' Some explanation was needed. 'I think I've changed a lot over time, but not many of my friends have known me long enough to tell me if I have or not. So I decided to go back to the oldest friend I know, to find out what changes she could see.' The young man looked at her appreciatively. 'I'm sorry I couldn't do that for you myself. It'd be interesting. But Andrea? She's got her mind made up about everything.' Carol gave the policeman a stern glance, causing him to say, 'I'd better warn you. If you go over where she hangs out you can't be sure of your reception. She might be pleased to see you, nice as pie, that sort of thing. Or she might order you away. Not want to see you. You're as likely to get marching orders as not, so take care.' He had more. 'She lives in a caravan. There used to be a house of sorts there as well, but it got burned down. Abs. Know what I mean?'

She didn't.

‘Blackfellas. House was empty, they started rippin bits off it, fire started, usual story. Abs used to prowl around for more wood but she told them to piss off. I got no idea who owns the place but the abs think she does because she got matey with Tonker Timlins, ex-cop. Used to be in charge at the Cape but they eased him out, I don’t know why. Asked to be transferred here but the bloke in charge wouldn’t have him, so he resigned and started farming. Quite a change after keeping the blacks in order. He’s farmin over there, few hundred metres from the caravan ...’

Carol’s spirits sagged. ‘Is what’s his name ... Tonker, is he, are he and Andrea ... ah ...?’

The copper was nodding. ‘You got it. They’re a couple. A unit. He’s still got a house of his own but for some reason he prefers the caravan. The abs keep away. Just how she wants it, apparently.’ Carol was feeling around. ‘When I go over there, is he ... ah ... likely ...’ Her policeman smiled broadly at her. ‘He won’t hurtya. He’ll just get in the way.’ He felt the need to add something. ‘He’s a very dominant sort of person. How she manages him, I don’t know, but she does, somehow or other. I’ll be interested to hear what you think.’

She’d been sent on her way. She could get someone to take her over in a boat, or she could drive around, and it was some way till the river was narrow enough to bridge. She drove slowly. She had a feeling that by coming so far she’d exposed herself, opened herself, dangerously wide. Andrea would have changed ...

The block was awful. The wreck of a house half-hid a modestly-sized caravan, with thick, tense cables holding it to the ground. Cyclone protection. The tropics weren’t always as she’d seen them on the drive up. One end of the caravan had been bricked in to stop wind getting under the van and lifting it. Bush grew almost to its door, which was open. A woman of Carol’s age stood in the doorway, looking out. Her hair had been brushed but her clothing was decrepit. The woman looked sourly at the person getting out of the car.

‘State your business.’

Carol's heart sank. As if to reclaim something lost long ago, she said, 'Andrea Trevorrow.' The person so-named said, 'Also known as AT, afternoon tea. Which makes you about four hours early.' She turned and went in, out of sight. Carol called, 'Andrea! It's Carol. Me! I brought you here. The first time either of us had ever been this way! We stayed at the ...' She couldn't remember the name. 'The Frenchman who ran the place cooked a coral trout. We shared it. You can't have forgotten that!' Andrea didn't reappear, but she did call out. 'You were going to turn your life into music. You remember that? Music. It was going to be so eloquent. The rest of us envied you. What are you doing up here? Trying to find out where you went wrong?' She was, at least partially, letting herself be seen by the outsider she was challenging. Carol remembered the call she'd made, all those years ago, and the moment, even further back, that had caused her to make her claim. Angrily she called, 'If you'd care to come out where I can see you, I'll answer your questions. They apply to you as well as me, if you remember? You remember, Andrea? You agreed with me, and supported me? Or have you forgotten? Come out and tell me that!'

Her challenge worked as well as Andrea's. In the doorway of the van appeared a weather-beaten woman who'd taken little care of herself these many years, her face laden with the truth of herself: stubborn, cranky, undefeated, making the best of nothing because she was forced to, a woman incapable of the compromises which came from existing inside organisations, a drop-out maintaining that her life was as good as any other's. Looking scornfully at Carol, she said, 'Let's hear you sing!'

Not easily beaten, Carol said, 'That's how I started. That was the beginning of the track that brought me here. I was in Paris with Martin, my first husband. Some people were walking home in the middle of the night and they broke out into singing. I was standing at the window, which was open, though it was bloody cold, because I wanted to hear them.'

‘What were they singing?’

‘I can’t remember now. It hardly matters. They were singing anything you want them to sing. What about you? Do you sing when you go walking in the bush? Over by the beach, the opening to the ocean?’ Carol looked to her right and there was the opening, cut by Captain Cook’s river, thousands of years before, leaving sandbanks, stretches of water plants, with a hill on either side of the *Endeavour’s* entry-exit, and a line of hills to north and south, hills where the black people had lit their fires and caused the English navigator and his leading scientist, Sir Joseph Banks, to wonder if they’d ever see home again. Banks had died in his own country, Cook in the Hawaiian Islands. They were men who’d turned their lives into journals, but the Australian women had travelled a way too. Andrea had softened fractionally at the mention of singing. ‘It’s the thing I remember you best for. I’d heard a lot of women raging about this and that, their men mainly, but you were the first to make it part of your program. How far have you got?’

Carol might have said that she’d got as far as having the courage, and the interest, to come back to Cooktown, and back to the grumbly woman in front of her, but she said humbly, ‘I’ve got as far as handing the search for music over to my daughter’s child. She’s called Kiri, after Kiri Te Kanawa, but she took another direction and she plays the cello.’ Her voice trembled. Something from one of Bach’s suites was the last thing Kiri had played her before she left. Andrea wasn’t impressed. ‘Is she any good? There’s no point in spending money on lessons, and gowns, Carol, *gowns*, if you’re not up to the concert platform. That’s how they judge you, as you must know, somewhere in your secret heart!’

They looked at each other. Had Andrea had any children? Carol wanted to know, but if she asked, she’d be confessing to what women already knew about each other, and expected from each other – that there were standards for everyone else and standards for their own children. ‘She doesn’t want the life of the concert platform, and she’s

not up to it musically, but she's a fine musician. Let's say that she's one of those that keep music alive even if they don't define the mountains that everyone wants to climb.' There! She'd said it strongly and well. Get onto something else, Andrea, or change your tone a bit! She decided that Andrea had had children and that they were nobodies, nobody and nothing! She, Carol, had won and now, of course, she'd have to pay the price, whatever it was.

'Well, if you're not chasing music, what's your claim to fame these days?'

She struck back. 'I don't claim it. Would I come here if I did?'

Andrea wasn't affected. 'There's no fame to be had in these parts.' Carol flung at her, 'What do you do all day?' She wasn't so much asking a question as making it clear what she thought of Andrea's situation. How dependent was she on this farming cop? What sort of woman had she turned out to be if she was dependent on that sort of man? Then a sickening memory slipped onstage in her mind: she'd got herself out of Albany, and a relationship with a similar sergeant years ago, felt scared of him for a couple of years, and then forgotten. Now he was back, not in her life but in her judgement of herself. She'd made a statue of herself but it wasn't a very true one, or if it was true it was hardly alive. She said to Andrea, 'How did you get involved with him?'

'How does anybody get involved with anybody? You want a relationship and he's what happens to be around.'

Carol said, 'Let me tell you something,' and told a willing, indeed a curious Andrea the events of Albany, years ago. When she finished, the other woman said, 'Come in and I'll boil water for tea.' So Carol entered the caravan, her mind entertaining the quirky thought that it would be good if a cyclone sprang up to test the defences of this van secured by ... what was his name? ... Tonker Timlins! Sitting on a stool, there being nothing else to sit on, she said to Andrea, 'How did you start up with this man ... your partner ...?' She found herself, for the first time since her arrival, being looked full in the eyes. 'He asked

me to a dance, in Cairns. I was flying south the next day. I thought it would be a good way to pass the last night. Instead, I let the plane go. Wasted the ticket, which I never cashed. Drove in this direction the following dawn. Got here about lunchtime, had a meal at the pub. Saw the farm, such as it is, that afternoon, then he asked me, did I want to live in the house or the van. I thought the thing'd last about five days at the outside so I took the van.'

'How many years ago was that?'

Andrea was affected this time, and at last. 'Don't ask.' She looked at her visitor from Melbourne, was it, or Sydney, and said, 'It doesn't bear thinking about. What I'm talking about is the sort of thing that anyone's life can depend on. The things that make us change direction. The lottery numbers. This one's a winner, this one, you go crazy. Marriage.' She rested her hands on the tiny sink, eyes blazing. 'I'm glad I'm not married. Marriage is still sacred to me. What I've got here isn't sacred, it's a mad house. I need to believe that somewhere some people get it right. That way, I can bear the mad house because ... this'll sound funny to you, because you've been married twice ... it's not a permanent condition. When I say permanent, I mean sacred. If a thing's permanent, it's sacred. It's got to be. The two go together, in my mind. Even if it's silly. My mind, which is about the only thing I trust, says permanent things are sacred and everything else is something else ...

She might have gone on but Carol broke in. 'What's permanent mean? The bricks at the back end of this van, are they permanent? The chimney in the old house over there, they're the same bricks, are they permanent?' This time it was Andrea who broke in. 'I know this is silly, but this is my answer. If it's sacred, it's permanent and if it's permanent, it's sacred.' They looked at each other, laughing hilariously, Carol thinking Andrea was at least lovable, if mad, Andrea thinking Carol was moderately human after all. This was their reconciliation, after decades apart. Andrea, looking at her friend of years before, turned a tap on, then off, to say, 'If you had

any brains, you'd leave. Now. If I had any brains I'd tell you to go. But you're not going and I'm not telling you to go. So what's wrong with the two of us?'

Carol could feel the moment expanding. There was a wasp in the caravan, buzzing. She saw it for a moment, then it disappeared, quite possibly out the door. 'No matter how mad the world is,' she said, 'there are always moments of judgement. Of clarity. Moments when you can see where you are, and others are too.' She paused, allowing Andrea to break in, or was it to start the second line of a duet. 'Yes, you see where you are. You know. You understand. Can you make it any better? Of course not. Nothing changes, except one thing. You *know* that nothing changes. There's an increase of pain. Isn't that how it is? Or do you manage to kid yourself into believing something, Carol? Carol? Tell me honestly and truly what you think.'

Carol, her friend of years before, searched inside herself for something to say. She offered what she found. 'Let me tell you what women do. It's like the knitting which they also do.' Andrea turned away. 'Knitting! Christ! Is that where we've got to? After how many thousands of years, and we start talking about knitting!' A bitter smile was all that kept her from tears. Carol gritted her teeth to say, 'Yes, knitting. Let's talk about it. Why do women do it? Because they can't see a way out, so they knit themselves into a trap. They make a blanket, a rug, a baby's cardigan. Anything at all, it doesn't matter. It's their evidence that they're fully conscious. They haven't been beaten, but they haven't found a way out either. So they voluntarily concede. They finish the rug and they *give it to you*. They put the cardigan on the baby. They pull up the lovely little rug they've knitted to baby's precious nostrils, and they smile. They haven't been beaten. They've raised the white flag themselves ...'

Andrea nodded. 'This is the they-don't-know-how-to-win theory. There's something to it.'

'Have you got a better answer?'

Andrea shook her head. 'I'm just an old woman in a scungy little caravan about five minutes stroll from the end of the earth. What do I know?'

Carol said to her contemporary, 'It's not the end of the earth. In this country, it's the beginning. The Captain ran his ship on a reef just out there.' She pointed, for emphasis rather than direction, since she wasn't sure which way she was facing. 'It's in his journal, him and the other fellow. Banks. Sir Joe! They were scared by the smoke of the blackfellas' fires. They thought they might never get home. Their wives, their children, their neighbours ... they might never see them again. If the blacks killed them and burned the ship, which was quite possible, it wasn't very big, you know ... if that happened, nobody would ever know what happened to them. It was something that happened all the time in those days. Ships disappeared off the face of the earth and nobody saw them go. Think about it, Andrea ...'

From the way her friend's face lifted, she knew that her partner, the policeman that was, or had once been, never called her by her name. Did that make them close, or separated by far? Carol didn't know, but she knew that she knew something about her other self, this woman opposite, in her knocked about van. Carol ventured a little. 'We talk about the pits. You live in one. It's deliberate, or as close to that as we can get. You want it this way.'

'It's true!' – Andrea.

'I went the other way. I've got money. I've got the most wonderful place to live. Anyone who sees me coming and going, back in Sydney, would say she's got the world at her feet. Look at her, nothing missing there!' They laughed then, the two of them, while Andrea made the tea they were going to drink. 'No quality here,' she said. 'Just what they give you at the local store.' She looked at the visitor who'd be going back to Sydney soon. 'Still, it's better than the Captain's sailors got. They never got a cup of tea handed to them, as far as I know. You've read his journals, have you?'

Carol said she had. They talked, they drank their tea, they sat

in silence. Each knew in some way what the other was thinking, until the moment came when they had to stand. They put their arms around each other, they kissed, crying as they did so. Quietly, and carefully, for Carol had forgotten how many steps there were to get out of the van, they moved to the car she'd hired in Cairns to bring her to the Captain's encounter with destiny, and Carol's, and Andrea's: they looked into each other's eyes. Andrea opened the driver's door of the hired car, Carol got in, starting the engine as she sat. 'Travel well, darling, even if it means staying where you are. Travel well, darling!' Her car knew what it had to do. It eased itself into its long journey towards Cairns, Sydney, and the final years of Carol's life.

## **25. Roger**

Years passed. Franz lost interest in the travel business and reverted to his life as an out of sight developer. Roger, the young man who'd once called Carol Mrs Carroll, took over as director of the firm. Certain members of the family divested themselves of their interests in Tantangara; it was no longer a family business, except for its sole surviving founder. Giselle moved into fashion, Stephen took up medicine. Jessye visited her mother regularly, never without asking her to spend more time in Melbourne. She made a variety of suggestions – live with her and Trevor, buy a city apartment, get a penthouse overlooking the bay, even a suite of rooms connected with the main office, which by now had been moved to the city centre. Carol would have none of them. Questioned by her daughter, she told her, 'I'm not entirely a family person, much as I love you all. I need the detachment so I can see what I've done with my life.' Jessye was unimpressed. 'What we've done with our lives, Mother, is all around us. It's called family.' She'd have gone on if Carol had allowed it but by now she knew how to block her daughter. 'Family is

about connections between people, and of course they're important. However it's also a fact that we die alone and if that's true, as of course it is, then it's also true that we live alone, or at the very least we judge ourselves on our own. Darling I stay with you when I'm down unless I'm with Franz and Irene, and I'm down here so often I think I keep the airlines profitable, so can we leave it at that?'

They did. Carol, back in her apartment overlooking the water, fretted over her failure to do anything significant with her life. She'd imagined, early on, a differently balanced world and neither she nor the movement she'd been part of had brought it much closer. Years before, in confronting her first husband, she'd felt she was also contesting with the world: Martin had been beaten off quickly but the world was another matter. In expecting to win the second round she'd made a mistake. She thought she could last the distance but what did that amount to? It troubled her. She felt the least she could do was leave a road map for younger women to find a way forward, but that was easily talked about, harder to do. Something that kept coming to her mind, though she barely mentioned him to Jessye, was her daughter's first obsession, the lad called Robert Wellington who'd played Jacques in a Kilvington Grammar production of *As You Like It*.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women, merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

It wouldn't go away. Famous as it was, there were greater passages in Shakespeare, but this one had taken her over like something painful, even poisonous, that the stomach couldn't eject. She wanted to prove the playwright wrong, but that was beyond any ordinary mortal; it couldn't be done. Hamlet, Prospero, Lear ... they were like colossal statues, towering over ordinary people, overshadowing them, preventing them from seeing things that must be there, the possibilities that women dreamed of. Even the sight of a Complete Shakespeare

drained her of any power to alter what she'd been given. Something heroic needed to be done and nobody had any idea what to do.

So they were powerless. She fell back on conversation. She had friends to share her view of the harbour. She rearranged the rooms so that the third bedroom, the balcony with the view, became an intimate sitting room where she could pass the time with visitors, who told her often enough how they envied her the outlook she owned.

Owned! She was in her sixties and her doctor had told her to slow down. There were only a few more years of possession before she'd pass everything on. Young Stephen, the doctor, and getting ready to marry, loved the elderly French pieces and Carol had told him they were his, once she'd ...

... passed on. He was grateful and assured her he wasn't looking to that transition. How could he? She thought this was easy. 'People say they love continuity, but they fail to realise that they *are* continuity. Continuity is something that passes through them, taking them away with it. When continuity's done its job, there's nothing left!' She thought this amusing, and persuaded her charming, ambitious but thoughtful grandson to chuckle lightly – *professionally*, she thought, but loved him none the less for that. We all needed doctors. After a year or two of this fairly intense socialising, she realised that the visits she enjoyed most were those of Roger, manager, now, of Tantangara, and based in Sydney. She thought he should be married, decided he was gay, then changed her mind. He *was* gay but had never made the move. He not only hadn't come *out*, he hadn't allowed it to himself. Human love masqueraded in his life as friendship, and she decided that for her, at least – she hardly knew his other friends – love as friendship was enough. She knew he was becoming fond of her in a deeper way when he let loose with the city's gossip, layers and layers of it. Many of the people he talked about were known to her through the business; some had done their bookings with the firm for years, others were new, but all were fascinating once they'd been through Roger's mind. As they became people in his stories they

acquired characteristics of his own which he hardly knew about: farcical, desperate, brave. Carol – Mrs Carroll; she'd almost begun to think of herself in the way that he named her when he used a name at all – would listen to his reports on the business, then say to him, in a casual way that deceived him not at all, 'Seen anything of so and so lately?'

And he would start. He had a fascination with sexual activity among the rich. In his view, sex was different when the people involved were glamorous. Carol used to tease him; he ought to set up a sexual market to rival the stock exchange. People could be quoted, given rankings, or if necessary subsidised by their families in order to lift their desirability. The more she teased him the more he showed her, through the stories he told, which she didn't doubt were somewhere near truth, that reality was well ahead of her imagination. His most productive source of intelligence came from bookings for the world's ski destinations – the south island of New Zealand, the Rockies, Switzerland, and so on. He spoke of a surgeon of Chinese descent who set him the most difficult timetabling problems: his last operation would finish at this time on that day, he wanted to go to Korea, and he had – *had* – to be back by that time on this day. The man was unmarried but always travelled with someone called Mrs and using his surname. This was not uncommon. Roger could rattle off lists of pseudonyms used by the wealthy, the famous and the politically vulnerable. 'They're the most scandalous of all,' he would say. 'You have no idea!' This might have offended Carol, since she'd worked in the industry for decades, but she knew the words were only a prelude, a fanfare before he amused himself by amusing her. He used to say, 'I don't care what people do, you know; it's not my business ...' and by this stage she was normally laughing '... but when they try to combine their natural promiscuity with their po-faced respectability, and be two people at one and the same time ...' Carol would join him: '... that's when human beings are a laugh!'

Conscious as she was of her dependency on Roger for keeping her in touch with the world at play, she began to keep a notebook. Sometimes it sat on a table near her bedroom window, and sometimes in a drawer, in the visitor's sitting room, again close to the window. Sometimes she accused herself of verbal diarrhoea, sometimes she felt there was a direction behind her impulses. 'I must have learned something,' she wrote one day, 'but what?' Sometimes she hated the notebook and determined that she must reduce it to pulp or throw it in the rubbish tube the original builders had equipped the apartments with. She decided against this. She had an idea, a fear really, that Harold McLaughlin, caretaker, would sift through the stuff people threw out, looking for things he could use to blackmail them. No! The Sydney office of Tantangara had a shredding machine, though she didn't like to be seen bringing things to it; that wasn't the image she'd established with the people who worked there. At other times she felt a stupid pride as she rescued some incident, some saying of Tim, her husband, from oblivion. She liked the word oblivion; it represented the enemy. At other times she would have said that oblivion represented the inevitable. Consciousness, awareness of being alive, was the miracle, and if people could make it happen by taking a ticket to a Pacific island then good luck to them: they got it easy!

What did she want? She asked herself this when she wrote in the notebook, as if she expected the book itself to grab the biro in her hand and dictate its reply! Not going to happen! No, she wanted to make a statement, or rather, she wanted to be the sort of person who wrote statements because she was clear-headed and could see where others couldn't get beyond their confusions. She went through a period when she was sick to death of this idea of immortal thoughts, and this coincided with the Australian Broadcasting Commission holding a chamber music competition in Melbourne, which attracted scores of young performers including her own Kiri, with her cello. She travelled down, staying with Jessye and Trevor, listened to Kiri analysing the works her group would be playing, the strengths and

weaknesses of other entrants, how Shostakovitch should be played and so on. Those mighty names! Brahms, Schubert, Beethoven. What they'd written was a stream of clarity running across the plain of human history, and although Carol didn't feel she was adding to existence on the same level, she was in her modest way opening the eyes of humanity in that she was sending them places to see what they hadn't seen before. The mind needs opening and she was doing a little of that, surely?

Kiri's quartet didn't win but they made it through to the final round so her grandmother was proud to be introduced to the young musicians she mixed with. They were so fresh! They knew so much, they dived into scores to prove what they said about this or that composer, and they soaked up every word when one of the radio commentators, or the judging panel, had anything to say. So there was enthusiasm and a willingness to learn, added to expertise and ultimately critical standards. Life, thought Carol, should be lived this way!

But it wasn't. People blundered along, repeating the oldest mistakes in the book. The book, the book! She left it at Point Piper but it was there when she got home, waiting. What would she say? She realised that she wanted a sign, some indication from the world outside that it was interested in her mind and what it produced. She remembered something she'd heard long ago, at school – Horatio Nelson had had flags hoisted on his ship to tell the crews of his fleet 'England expects every man this day to do his duty.' How did they feel about that, she wondered: battles were fought at close distance at the time of Trafalgar and cannon balls, ships on fire or hacking swords were scarcely conducive to health. Every man! Men's duty was to act, fight, get each other out of trouble if they could. Men were defined as active, purposeful, directed towards achievement, while women ...

She knew it all, those all-demanding claims that took up ninety something per cent of the thinking time of women but were not quite central. If women did what was wanted of them there was always an emptiness unattended to, something which ought to have

greater attention but never got it. Women were like the crew of a ship, obedient to the officers' orders. They were far from helpless but somehow they never got control of anything for long enough to set lasting directions. If they satisfied the requirements put upon them they were praised so they headed without being directed to whatever needed urgent attention. It was assumed they would put others first and themselves last, likening them, this time, to the captain of a ship in distress who left it only when everyone else had been accounted for. Tradition! It supported human beings who couldn't see their situation clearly, and it locked people inside their own minds, obedient to the limitations they'd inherited. Carol respected tradition but wanted to change it so that it included things she knew had been left out.

But what were they? Many years before, when she'd been angry with her husband, she'd come to Sydney and occupied a place with windows on the world. Looking out, in those eventful weeks, had been a form of looking in, and that was appropriate because she wanted her own feelings, her own development, aligned with the world. Marriage, the central sexual relationship, had been her drama at that time. Now was different. She was growing old, she wanted harmony with the world, and again she was looking at it from a vantage point, commanding, humble, secret, in that the world didn't know she was watching, yet very much able to be held to account because she was desperate for acknowledgement from outside that all was well within.

If it was!

She wanted to throw away her notebook and start again but knew she shouldn't. She'd started something and had to finish it. She reread quickly the things she'd written; they were shallow because they were all over the place. Bits and pieces. This and that. What she wanted would be huge in scope yet only take a page. It would be read for years, referred to. It was beyond her. Yet she knew that this test she was setting herself was decisive. It was why she'd returned to Sydney when she had any number of reasons for staying in the south. What was she going to say?

Sitting by her bedroom window, notebook open beside her, she picked up her pen twice or thrice but put it down each time. What was that about? The thought that came to mind was about something else entirely, her old favourite, the ceremonial entry of a warship. She couldn't stop herself from looking but of course there was no such ship on the water she could see. How many men made up the crew of a battle cruiser or an aircraft carrier? Hundreds, no doubt, but she didn't know. It wasn't women's knowledge, or what aboriginal women called women's business. No, it was men's business, they were proud of doing it, yet it was so bold, dramatic and all-assuming that it left a way open for women to follow, to respond. There was nothing wrong with letting men make big statements so long as women got their chance to follow with something they, in turn, needed to say. She glanced out the window and again there was no ship making formal entry. Rain was streaming down on such vessels as she could see, sailors were clambering here and there, no vision was imposing itself on the city's arena, she didn't really want to look. She wrote: 'The view isn't telling me anything. I don't have anything to offer it. We're like a chess game with neither player willing to make a move.'

Frustrated as she was, she could see that the approach had to start with her. It was her move, to stay with the chess analogy, and she had no move to make. Leaving the notebook where it lay, she left the room, called a taxi and went to the office. Roger greeted her warmly, pleased to have her near. He told her he had some letters and some notes on his desk that he'd like her to look at. They were from a semi-literate man who had an idea for taking visitors through what he called 'artistic' areas of inland Australia. 'With someone good to manage it,' Roger said, 'I think we'd have a workable idea. This fellow's not the one, but if we get it up and running we'd have to think about using him somewhere along the way. What do you think?'

Carol read, pulled out a map, looking at the distances involved, and the logistics of feeding people and moving them to the sites suggested. It was no harder than various trips already in operation in

the Kimberleys, but it lacked a central experience. If people didn't fall in love with the idea at the start there was nothing to win them over. 'There's something there,' she said, 'and there's something missing. Tell him we're working on it. We'll be in touch.' Roger smiled. 'We say that an awful lot.' Carol knew this. 'If we put an idea in the window, it has to be workable. We're not inviting people in here to lose money for us.' They thought. She said, 'It's worth a bit of time. Tell me what you see in it that's too good to lose.' He sat on the other side of his desk. 'It catches the mood of the time. The black people are on the way back. They'd be doing the teaching instead of being looked down on. If people from the coastal cities, or overseas, got onto the idea, they'd take in something really unusual. It'd be the primitives teaching the clever people. That'd be a first!'

Carol nodded. 'It would. But it needs a leap of faith, otherwise it wouldn't work. You can't guarantee such a leap would happen. I've always said you can't sell an idea if it's going to come back and work against you. You ruin your business that way.'

Roger leaned back, hands on the back of his head. 'What about an exhibition, in Alice Springs and Sydney, of paintings done by people who've been on the tour?'

They talked about it. Carol said, pointing at the letters, 'What sort of background has this man got? And what's his name again?'

'Jimmy Bramwell.'

'Jimmy? Is he aboriginal?'

'Probably. I've never actually met him.'

'Why doesn't he do it himself?'

'He wants us to funnel clients – customers – in his direction. He's got no business experience so he's got no confidence. He thinks we've got busloads of people lined up ready to go wherever we tell them.'

'Sounds like us talking when we've had a few drinks!'

Roger laughed. 'Confidence is everything. You can pull off anything if you believe in it enough. Also, it helps to be desperate.' They agreed to leave it a few more days to see if either of them had

an idea about how to develop Jimmy's ideas, and Carol went home. Another taxi, but she felt different this time. When she got home, she started to write about Jimmy Bramwell and why he couldn't carry out his own proposal. In that, she and Jimmy Bramwell, whoever he was, were alike. The reason she wasn't writing was that she wasn't desperate enough. She had ideas floating around but there was no urgency. She'd committed herself to formulating them, and she'd told herself they'd be important, but would they? She hadn't put herself to the test because she didn't know what the test was, and the reason for that was ...

She was horrified to realise that she was afraid of finding out what she really thought. She'd borrowed ideas all her life and now she felt a need to speak she was scared of what her mind might produce, and equally scared that there might be nothing there. There might be nothing there! In a flash she was back at that earlier window, years before, waving goodbye to Martin, her husband, voyaging away in a ferry. It had been easy to make her thoughts plain when she was angry, but now that she was calm there was nothing stopping her. She picked up the notebook and turned to a new page. She wrote.

The first problem is the difference in the way they speak to you. You have to know what it means, and nobody tells you. That's because it means everything, and nobody can say. There's a reason for that. They don't say it to themselves. If they said it to themselves they'd have to admit it when they were challenged, but if they haven't told themselves they can deny it easily.

The second problem is a result of the first. When a girl realises that she's going to play by different rules, and this is going to happen for her whole life, she is misled into thinking that this is superior, and it actually and most deceptively *is* superior for a short while, then the game changes and *superior* becomes,

in a puzzling, confusing and mystifying process, *inferior*. This is not meant to be seen but many people can't hide what's happening and this is a time, therefore, when many a young woman becomes desperately unhappy. This unhappiness has to be hidden, if possible, because nobody admits its cause. The problem, if brought to the surface, will be mistreated.

A series of steps then follow. They are to do with the creation of separate worlds for boys and girls. Boys suffer grievously in this stage because they are narrowed so desperately that their need for women is urgent. Boys are told that they are important but few of them feel it. They lose the sociability they had as children. Women get the job of civilising them again, something they resent because they think it ought to be easy and they despise the males who find it hard. Boys make fortresses of themselves, trying to keep others out, especially girls. This absurd phase is supposed to encourage the conquest of one group by the other and it does, in a flurry of resentment and limited understanding.

Pairing off is the next phase. This is wild, cruel and sometimes even fun. Those that do well are triumphal; others kill themselves; and a third group kills the woman (usually) or man who's let them down. This is the phase of man/woman relations which draws most attention from writers and film makers: everyone has things to say about this stage and if not everybody can be correct in all they say, neither can everybody be wrong. There are so many stories around, such a range of case studies, that anybody can reach any conclusion that suits them. Therefore everyone is opinionated, unless of course they are defeated and it's known, in which case they are laughed at. Or ignored. Or scorned. The stakes are high in this stage of the game!

It is also true to say that the rewards and prizes come in many types. For people who don't know what they want in any personal sense there is a glittering range of pseudo-rewards, such as a wealthy partner, a beautiful, sexy partner, a lifestyle or place of residence which is alleged to satisfy dreams, and therefore be precious to the few who have them. But this stage of richness and drama will be ruptured and put back together again by the arrival of children.

A complex matter becomes profoundly entangled, and has to be read in the light of another aspect of the interaction of men and women which hasn't been mentioned yet. This is the creation of families. Families are known by their names ...

Carol felt a shudder run through her. She'd kept herself as cool, even distant, as she could while writing these lines, but the next phase of what she was going to say seemed to signal a pulling apart of all she'd ever done, both alone and with the dead man, Tim, who'd been her husband. She called to the window, 'Tim!' but of course he didn't come out of the air to rescue her. What she was going to say had to be written alone, and considered alone by anyone who could be bothered reading when she'd finished. When would that be? She wanted freedom, but she had to be the obedient servant of long-suppressed or refused ideas if the freedom she valued was ever to be hers. She realised, also, something she'd shielded herself from knowing, that what she was letting loose on paper for the first time was what she'd hidden from herself as long and as skilfully as she could. You couldn't do what she was doing and remain the same. She was changing herself with the very words she wrote. Freedom? Yes, to become something else, quite possibly something she didn't want to be.

There was no decent way out. She had to go on.

... and the names are passed down the male line, as if everybody called Smith is a Smith, when only half of them are Smiths, and the other half have held, then buried, an earlier name. They were once known by their family names, but when they married they shed those names to become Smith mothers producing Smith children, but these little Smiths were fifty per cent Scott, Heard, Jacobson, Dutilleux or Carbone, or else they were fifty per cent Whistler, Brook, Lawrence or Tamerlano and while their marriages had committed them to Smith family values they brought to the task whatever had made them Scotts, Heards or whatever else right down to being Tamerlanos. A hotch-potch indeed! Women, it might be said, were the active chemical agents in breaking down a system which was no system at all, but a random mixture of bodily genes and mental dispositions. When these genes, habits, properties and neatly written family histories were put together they used the name of Smith; this was how men managed to think they represented stability, because they did, but the much more complex role was carried out by women who called themselves Smith while propagating the genes and the ideas of the Scotts, Heards, and various et ceteras down to the Tamerlanos (if there was no Z-beginning family available).

She stopped again. Where to from here? She wasn't sure. She stood up, took herself to the kitchen and got herself something to eat. Fish and salad, that was basic enough! Simple as truth should be if you were going to make anything of it! She drank two glasses of wine with the fish, then she poured herself another, and took herself back to the window where she'd been writing. She wanted to go on but she might have to wait till morning cleared her mind and brought her some more to say. She glanced at *As You Like It*; Shakespeare put his thoughts more expansively, more compellingly, than she could. So

what? He was the master of all time, while she was trying to make a mark, unsure of how you went about the task. She took a look at the harbour outside, glowing at the end of day, and put her head down again. This time, when she wrote, it came out as two lines, related to each other, like cousins:

How can we agree when we do not understand,  
Or understand, when we don't know how to agree?

This puzzled her. Something unexpected was pushing its way in. She felt like a graffitist, caught out by the respectable thinkers of her city as she struggled with thoughts she was in some way ashamed of. This made her angry. She'd never been ashamed of her ideas and she wasn't going to start. What did she want to say? Feeling strange, and uncertain, she added:

You've shamed me into signing a sheaf of lives away;  
I was the reaper and I told them all was well,  
Or would be, if only they could make you smile.

But ...

But what? Who was arguing with whom, or trying to convince? Carol found herself glaring at the window as if something hostile was out there, confusing her when she'd been setting her ideas down as clearly as could be. Then, when she moved, twisting around on her chair and staring at the glass again she saw herself, or parts thereof, reflected in the glass. She was holding her piece of paper and advancing it towards the woman in the glass, who did the same, until the papers touched. Carol shouted, 'So!' and challenged her other self, hiding in the glass. 'Poetry feels insulted by prose, does it?' She thought. What would that other woman say, if she had the power to speak? 'Prose thinks it can do the job, but poetry insists on being called upon, when it knows it can only make an incoherent mess?' Desperation had her now. 'I can only make a mess?' she said, asking herself, without quite believing.

'No!'

A burst of energy reached her and she felt she was inspired. She hadn't felt so overwhelmed since Loge played her his magic fire

music, surrounding her with an idea that she was worth having and the ecstasy that came from being thought worthy by a flame. Ideas were the strongest things in the world and one was hovering near, calling on her to give it body so it could take its place on earth. What?

But there's an answer in the earth, a striving in the grass,  
There used to be a wisdom there, eaten now by worms,  
Lower forms of life being always envious of higher,  
Setting traps to lure the stars down low from heaven,  
Marrying them to virtues, producing earthy kids  
Who, playing with mud, wonder what they left back in the sky ...

She stared at the words, barely coherent, yet talking to her, from her, as if they were half alive. They were, they came from the mind of that joint creature who sat at the bedroom window and sometimes disappeared into, or emerged from, it. Why was she divided? No, she wasn't, she was incomplete. She'd never brought that second half of herself to life before, and wasn't at all sure it was a good idea to try. She looked and the other woman, of course, was looking just as hard. Both were incomplete, yet it was silly to try to make them one, because the glass was too clever at dividing them. 'I have to do this in another room.' Both of them said it together, neither of them could bring it about without the collusion of the other. If one walked away, the other walked away, if one remained so did the other. There! Here! How many selves did she have? Were there any more? She recalled how, years before, she'd walked down the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, wondrous construction, glancing occasionally – only occasionally – at herself reflected, conscious of the scale of the room as being itself a reflection of the scale of the occupants: the King was France, the gardens outside were an ordered version of the country as it would never be, but might, if it too reflected on its self, aspire to be. What happened outside was reflected inside. Those were the days! She looked at the lines that she'd produced. Were they the best that she could do?

That was a real question. In every person's life, in every period, certain things were possible, others were not. She'd spent her life

fighting women's causes and now, at this late stage, she found she didn't know what she wanted. How could she be so empty? Oblivion confronted her; she'd be entering it in a few years, she was getting close already. She loved her children and grandchildren, but she had to have fulfilment of her own, not a brief moment of holding the cake, the candle, the prize, but an illumination that would last, that she could cling to in her final days. It would happen inside herself, it wouldn't be awarded from without. What would it be like? It was not so much that she wanted peace, though she did, as that she wanted a feeling of permanence: permanent change was the underlying state of the universe, she suspected she'd always known this but had never been able to build on it, or make a statement of it; all she'd ever done was cope with it, adapt, obediently follow whatever was happening. She found her mind wandering to Roger, a man nearly fifty now, who'd recently rented half his house to a young woman, a single mother, with a child of two. Two! Roger had never been the most punctual person but even Carol, whose comings and goings were very much part-time these days, was aware that Roger was distracted. He was learning about two year old demands, and the urgencies of being a mother with little support. This was life in its deeper processes, and he was above them, floating. Roger was clever enough to learn, generous enough to give to those sharing house with him. He was finding a way through life semi-attached and semi-detached. It wasn't bad for him. He was unstressed, though aware of the stresses that came with being responsible for a child. He didn't have to pay, from his own person, to gather what he picked up from mother and child, and when he talked about this half-family with Carol he knew instinctively how much more she apprehended than he did. Carol suspected that there were times when the mother was working, Roger was at Tantangara, and the child was left alone. How often did this occur? Did the child resent this, or feel afraid? She knew Roger well enough to know that if she inquired he would tell her that the only time the child was alone was when it was asleep. 'We wouldn't dream

...’ he would tell her, rendering their friendship imperfect, impure, with a lie. She didn’t like swallowing this compromise but it was either that or the friendship, and she valued Roger, always had, and now knew that it was on her curiosity about his imperfections as a man that their friendship rested. Where, and on what, did her other friendships rest? They rested, she saw quickly, on the wish of other people, men and women, to be near a strong woman, with mind made up, who had a career and an ideology which she managed to stitch together fairly neatly, and on her wish to be admired. Was there anything wrong with that?

No. Admirable it was not, but everyday it was. Her life was common currency. She saw in it no jewels. Kiri’s music might yet let vision spread its rays across the family-scape; Stephen probably enacted nobilities of tenderness and care, which neither she nor anyone else with family connection would ever know about: Giselle? She wasn’t sure.

She turned back to her notebook.

## **26. A second death and a third start**

Carol had a taxi call every day at ten thirty; she was at the office by eleven, and Roger was smart enough to have a matter or two awaiting her decision. This might only take a minute but it established her importance in the minds of the younger staff who were picking up the company’s practices. Roger himself was stern, humorous, profit-chasing, yet forgiving: he was always leaving room for the personal to slip in if Carol wished, as occasionally she did. There were still a handful of customers from Tantangara’s earlier days who remembered Tim, and they liked to recall the places they’d been to, something Carol did with faultless memory. ‘The Wilsons are going back to Vanuatu,’ she would say: ‘for their third visit,’ then she would linger

until it was appropriate to say something like, ‘You’re in good hands! Wilma will get that organised for you.’

The time of ten thirty was a fixture, but her arrivals could vary a little because sometimes she stopped her driver in New South Head Road, and sometimes in the city itself, to choose some flowers. If these had been bought for her morning arrival, she put them in a suitable vase – there were several in the tea room – and placed them on the main counter where consultants dealt with the public. This was never impersonal. Carol’s flowers were an act of praise, or reward, for something achieved recently or perhaps for some kindness toward, or recognition of, Carol herself, an honour which she made sure was shared around. Regular customers understood the flower-code and made a point of directing their requests to whoever had the flowers beside them; there was a Mrs Wilmington who expected them to be moved to wherever she was being served because her orders were among the most lucrative that Tantangara provided. Carol’s smiles as she carried through her rituals established her as the grande dame of travel. She usually called her taxi to take her home at about three thirty, but if the office was busy she liked to take a chair at the counter and deal with some bookings herself: she remembered the phone numbers, booking codes and names of people in other agencies that had to be dealt with. Once, on a call to the Melbourne office she found herself speaking to Franz and Irene’s daughter Giselle: ‘What are you doing there, darling?’ Giselle had persuaded her father that she ought to know how the business worked because she might need to know one day, if her other ambitions failed. ‘And what are they, darling?’ Giselle said, ‘I’ll tell you when I’m in Sydney next, grandma. I’ve told Father that next time he goes to Sydney I want to go with him.’

‘And when will you be up here, darling?’

‘I’ve told Kiri that next time she’s got an engagement in Sydney she’s to tell me so I can start working on Father.’

‘That sounds marvellous! Make sure I know when you’re coming, won’t you!’

Back at home, at the window where she put her flowers, she liked to think that they were ‘talkative’, as she put it, and part of the conversations she thought she intercepted between breezes, waves, ferries, even the moods of the days rolling past. She told her friends, ‘I still haven’t seen a warship enter with its crew on display, you know what I mean, all lined up along the sides. I haven’t seen it yet, but I will!’ Younger friends thought it amusing, perhaps a little silly, that someone so strong on women’s equality should have such an almost mystical regard for sailors lined up in ceremony, but this may have been because they didn’t recognise the wilfulness of the humour which brought this practice, this ceremonial, under her observation. ‘Men,’ she would say, ‘are past masters of mastering the past. We are still learning how to take hold of the future!’ Young women at the office, hearing her say such things, would draw strength from them, whatever they might be construed to mean. Carol’s strength – and they too, like Roger, her senior officer, liked to call her Mrs Carroll – was so obvious that it could, they saw, be applied to whatever she chose. The younger women often wondered if she knew how privileged she was, in their view. Taxi drivers carried in her things. The luncheon venue two doors down made her special sandwiches. Customers from years before hoped to be recognised – as they were. The flower people in New South Head Road were as full of suggestions as they were of deference. If Roger went to industry conferences he had only to mention her name to be listened to. A young woman called Rose had the job of bringing a pot of tea to her desk a few minutes after she arrived at the office; Carol made it clear that she needed, first, to see what needed attention, and then the tea could arrive while she thought about the actions she would take. They were all used to her calling, ‘Get that green cup of yours, Roger, I need to hear your thoughts.’ Most of all they loved it when she asked them, male or female, about something they were wearing. Where did they get it from? What did it cost? What else might they have chosen? Who was running this shop and did they cater for people a little older?

This love they had for her, and it was no less, had a special quality of timelessness. It was as if it had always been. Only Roger, in the Sydney office, remembered the days when Tim had run the business. It was as if Carol had arrived, magically, to take it over. The airport had once been owned by the government, now it was privatised. The toll on the bridge ... Railway bookings had once been made thus but were now done differently. Everything had a past, which none of them knew, but Mrs Carroll ... was interested in them. Had they thought, they might have realised that she was old enough to be curious about what the world would be like when she was no longer in it, but they didn't, for the most part look at her, or the world, in that way. Clarity comes as desire fades, something they had yet to discover. She wished, and none of them knew this, that she might leave half a dozen immortal verses, as numerous poets had done, but she wasn't used to working marble nor creating gilded monuments. It wasn't her, yet she carried her notebook with her, to the office and home again, hoping that some thought might take her over which was worth writing down. She never got out of a taxi, arms full of flowers, without wishing it was an arrangement of words that she was bringing, and that the arrangement had come directly from her mind. One could die easily then! She knew, as the young people surrounding her did not, that a blank page was a test of the onlooker's mind. Had they, had he or she, anything worth putting down? No, was the answer for most but by the time you got to Carol's age, she thought, you really ought to have something to say, other than those words of caution that old people loved to put as roadblocks before the impulsive young. She had a dictionary at home, a great big heavy thing, containing some vast total of words, and Tim had once shown her a many-volumed edition of the Complete Oxford, a terrifying dinosaur of a book, and she would never know the meanings of one fiftieth of all those words, but, it was comforting to know, there *was* a limit. There was an end. If you began a lifetime's journey at A, there was, however far away, a finishing line called Z, where one might rest, before starting again on all the new

words that had been collected while one had been making the first run through! The language could never be mastered because it was being invented all the time. People said Shakespeare had helped to unify the language: good! But one had only to read a few lines by the master to see that it had changed since his time so that only those familiar with his ways of working could understand him today. Every year a few thousand words were collected, they were left to gather in a holding tank and most of them evaporated. The rest got a spot, a definition, in the dictionary, and stayed there, institutions, until nobody recognised them any more and they were said to be of historical significance only.

Were not humans the same? They were infinitely changeable but it was an infinity, like the symbol itself, which turned in an endless cycle, a system you could never break out of no matter how hard you tried. Carol knew the sea in the same way, a tidal monster lurching inwards and outwards according to the gravity of the moon, but also, as the basin providing clouds and rainwater falling back to earth again. Life in all its detail was obedient to these greater, simpler cycles and she had realised, by her present age, that she was obedient too. Carol was grateful for those occasions when she worked late with everyone else, and just as hard, coping with some rush of work, because it interrupted the feeling of obedience, which came to her as normal, when her taxi called to take her home. Home meant the window, the water, the splendid view, the expectation that she must rise to the demands of a city sitting grandly over its waters. It was wonderful when a cloudburst filled all the drains and pipes that led the city's excess into the harbour; it was so natural for water, so impossible to control humanity's excesses in the same way. Why couldn't the underworld, the drug-world, and the police and customs who were supposed to be controlling things all be flushed down those same pipes and emptied into the mouths of sharks tempted into the turbulent harbour to clean things up? This was too simple: humanity had to be able to live with itself. It was always criticising itself, trying to lift its game, but there were always others driving its efforts down.

There was an afternoon when Carol got home elated because everything had gone well, Roger was full of suggestions for opening a couple of new offices by buying out existing agencies and his figures showed how well he'd done his homework, so it looked like Tantangara was about to start a new phase, with the idea that it should then become a public company, listed on the stock exchange, after which Carol could reasonably retire, her life's work done, when she realised that her life's work would never be done. She wanted women to make their lives better but a stone pushed uphill could always roll down or a gain made here be offset by a loss over there. Women needed the pride of victors and how could they get that when they were treated, characterised, as victims, and often believed it themselves? The only way forward is to occupy new ground and never give it up. Nobody thought that was easy to do. The truth was, she realised, that she needed floods of new energy to carry it on and she was growing old; she could think more clearly than when she was young but she didn't have the energy for fighting any more. All I can do, she told her flowers, as she put them in the vase near her window, is try to be like you.

Flowers? She'd read, she'd been told often enough in men's stories of the trench warfare in France, of red poppies flowering where carcasses of men lay everywhere: nature, which the French sometimes characterise as *morte*, ever so sweetly contradicted what was happening by offering the warmongers flowers. Was that to be her tactic in the last phase of her life? Perhaps it was. Flowers didn't kill anybody, but they could be defiant, if you put them in the right places. She was trying to win a war by not fighting, was she? That was an old tactic, and it did work at times, it was true, but it could fail too.

She was tired. She wanted to know whether the young mother who shared the house with Roger was looking after her child properly, or leaving it at home while she looked for income. Carol could see where that might lead. Did Roger have enough sense, enough womanliness in him to see the dangers, and prevent them? She depended on Roger

for so much she couldn't afford to open any grounds for quarrel. That left her with her family as her terrain. She was unaware, however, that Jessye had rung Roger on a couple of occasions to ask after her mother's health, energy, lucidity and so on. Roger reassured her but Jessye made it clear that 'the family' wanted their mother to return to Melbourne to live with them and called on Roger to let them know should any problems arise. Roger said nothing of this to Carol but he watched carefully, listened to everything she said and formed the impression that she was a woman still in search, and that a return to her family in Melbourne would be a form of yielding which she wouldn't countenance. He talked to her about the flowers she brought to the office, the customers, Rupert Murdoch's campaign against the country's first woman prime minister, the availability of RU 486 and much besides, but sensed little weakening in the woman who was the link to Tantangara's earliest days. Then she told him that her daughter was visiting Sydney in the following week and she wasn't sure whether this would interrupt her normal office attendance or not.

Jessye got a taxi to the Wolseley Road apartment. Harold McLaughlin escorted her to her mother's door, then left, having by now sensed Carol's estimation of him. Jessye, looking at the door, considered the separateness of lives, and knocked. Her mother let her in. Jessye found her mother welcoming, which warned her that she'd better not be in any way abrasive or she'd find the same human quality released on her. When Jessye asked questions about shopping, cooking and general self-maintenance, Carol saw what was coming. 'You and Trevor would like me back in Melbourne. I think I'd be a nuisance. Nonetheless I'd do it if I felt free to make the move, but somehow I don't.' This surprised her daughter. Not free? What could be holding her back? Carol pulled open a cupboard and brought out an old photo album. A moment later she was turning pages that recorded a trip made when her children were very young, with Tim, their father, in south-west Queensland. 'You'd remember this spot, darling, of course.' Jessye had to shake her head because she didn't. 'Remember

the train? We were camped somewhere not far from Charleville, in a belt of trees, you and I and your father and little Franzy, as he was then. You remember a big pile of sand by the railway line? That was why we stopped. You and Franzy didn't see the sand at first, but when your father and I were pitching the tent, the two of you discovered it and you played there for hours. I'd never seen the two of you so happy together.' Jessye was smiling indulgently but she couldn't remember the occasion. 'When was this, Mother?'

Carol was suddenly soft, and vulnerable. She sat down, looking at this daughter who'd come to reorganise her life if allowed to do so. 'You were both very little. Four and two, or something like that. Your daddy and I lit a fire, and we sat on a rug and ate our dinner, whatever it was. And you and Franzy got into your pajamas and dressing gowns, and it started to grow dark, and you climbed up on this big pile of sand ...'

'What was the sand there for, Mother?'

'Heaven knows, I suppose the railway men put it there for some reason. And then we heard the blast of a siren, and a rumbling, and along came a train, going very slowly, with its lights on, though it wasn't quite dark, and I was watching you two, and you stood up and waved, and the driver of this enormous, rumbling train blew his siren, and it echoed in the bush, and I cried a little because you'd got the driver to toot at you, the two of you ...'

'It's funny, I don't remember any of this ...'

Carol was weeping.

'Mother?'

'That was when I knew I was a mother. The strongest, most passionate person in the world, and the weakest. I would have died to defend my children, but I was helpless.'

'You said Father was there?'

'Yes he was there. Everything was fine. We knew where we were, more or less, there was nothing wrong, except I suddenly saw my situation.' Jessye too was a mother so she partly understood Carol's

condition, but knew that there was some factor present in the older woman that was absent in her. She sensed also that in some way she'd disappointed her mother, letting the family down. 'I'm here to talk about what's best for you, Mother.'

But Carol wasn't having any of that. Some other time, she made clear. Returning to her Tantangara self, the woman who'd built a business, she said that when she felt it was appropriate to make a move, she'd return to the family in Melbourne – she left the way open for it to be *near* Jessye and Trevor but not with them, or even with Franz and Irene, if she chose – but she wasn't content to do that just yet. She did say, and somehow it separated her from her daughter rather than brought them close – that the French furniture she'd cherished all these years, and which Samantha before her had brought into the family – should probably go on to Stephen, because of all the family he appreciated it best. Jessye received this news stiffly, and left.

Weeks passed, and then Kiri called her grandmother. Could she visit? She'd be flying up soon, and she wanted to know the best day and time to arrive. Carol told her to come late on Saturday afternoon, and Kiri accepted, though it meant she wouldn't have long before a concert she was going to that night. Was there anything grandma wanted her to bring? Pickles? Fruit? Any special bread? Chocolate, or CDs of music Kiri was getting to know?

Carol said no, she herself, Kiri, was what she wanted to see. Kiri knew this included her cello, and brought it: the smile on Carol's face when she saw it told her how grateful she was. They talked over tea at the window-spot in Carol's bedroom; Kiri knew she was being introduced to some lines of thought her grandmother wanted to share with her. After a glance at her watch she explained that she was going to a concert and couldn't stay long, so they should arrange a second visit; she'd be in Sydney for so many days before her return. This caused Carol to become anxious. 'I wonder if you've got time to go down to the shops and get a few things for me? Normally I'd do it myself on my way home from the office – the drivers are all used to

me by now – but yesterday I didn't feel like it. I put it off, to be quite honest. And I don't feel any more like it today, so could I lean on your young shoulders, darling? I've got a list.' Kiri said, 'That's fine, yes of course, grandma, can I take your car? I suppose I'll find somewhere to park. I know all your favourite places by now.' The old lady smiled, gave her the list, and money, then followed her favourite through the lounge. The cello was leaning against the wood, almost black, of a grand long table, its legs and surface held together by shapely, if rusted, curls of metal. 'It'll be happy there till you get back,' Carol said. 'And when you do, you must play me something.' It was a moment of happiness because full of anticipation.

'And what would you like me to play you, grandma?'

The old lady made a magnanimous gesture, something uncommon for her. 'You, my darling, can play me anything you wish ...' she held the pause for a long time '... so long as it's Bach!'

Kiri cried out in joy. That was exactly what she'd intended. 'What say we play it right now? Do you think? Or would you rather wait?' The two of them looked at each other. Music now, or soon? Postponing is also a pleasure. Clare said, 'We'll frame the moment. Do my little bit of shopping now, and when you get back, we'll have the music. Then we'll have one little sip of sherry and then you'll have to get off to that concert you were talking about. Mister Bach will have to accept two ladies squeezing him today. All those children that he had, he won't mind if we squeeze him hard so we can fit him in!'

Then Kiri was gone, and the cello, like Carol, was waiting for her return. The cello knew its owner's fingers, her bow, her musical inclinations and her habits, one and all. The cello knew how to fill in the intentions of composer and performer. It was almost true to say that the cello knew the nature of the music it was making even better than those who wrote it or performed it, in much the same way that an orchestra knows what an orchestra is, and does, better than those who make it up. Music is a something, perhaps a tradition, that understands itself, that keeps itself going, in a detached, communal way every

bit as much as it's kept alive by individual brains. Something of the weakness that had stopped Carol from shopping on the way home the day before, and again today, came over her. She wanted to lie down. She gave the cello an approving look and went back to the bedroom, where the afternoon tea things still sat on the table, near the window which spoke so eloquently of the world outside. She smiled on the table with its cups. The afternoon had been a joy, the world was kind to her these days. She lay down, glancing first at the clock by the bed. Kiri would be a good half hour at the shops, and she had to get there and back, so there was time for a nap. Carol lay on the bed, eyes away from the windows, and rolled on her side.

In New South Head Road, the shops were busier than Kiri expected and it seemed ages before she let herself in. All was quiet. She put the things she'd bought on the bench, knowing that Carol would want to put them away herself. Any sign of her stirring? A darkness, a suspicion, entered her mind. She went to the bedroom, apprehension settling on her like a cloak.

Carol was still, on her side and turned away. Kiri knew the whole of what had happened before any part of it could be identified. Carol, who'd needed a short rest, had entered the endless condition of no return. Whatever happened to her body would be done by others now, and she, Kiri, was the first to know, therefore it was for her to decide. She went to the lounge and picked up the cello. 'Come on you, we've got something to do.' Instrument and musician went to Carol's bed. There was a chair. Kiri knew it was where Carol put her clothes as she took them off. Today, it would be used again, but by her. The window was open, sun sliding across the waters at a low angle. 'Say goodbye, world, to a wonderful woman! I'm going to help you!' She took up the bow and struck hard into the Bach that the two of them knew so well. Would she play the whole lot, or just the first movement? The whole lot! An enormous surge of energy swept through her, over her, bringing the dead woman's spirit to her own for as long as the cello lasted. Kiri's hands shook, her head shook,

but she was firm too. She knew she could get through the music, not only because she'd rehearsed it for so many years but because she wasn't alone. This was true even if it was also true that she was being kept alive in the music by the dead woman's spirit. Bach was used to keeping others alive with the mighty energy he'd captured in his pieces, affirmations that were beyond a world to make. There was something in the cello, singing and bouncing, rasping, whispering and breathing thoughtfully through the successive bars, high and low, of this music that told the listener that it was only possible because Bach had imagined music talking to itself in its primal conversation before anything else had been considered.

She finished. She heard a knock at the door. She went to it. It was the McLaughlin man, caretaker. 'Is everything all right?' he wanted to know. 'She does play music at times, but not usually at this time ... ah ... that is ...'

'All's well,' Kiri said. 'She's fine. I'll be back a little later to clean up. Nothing for you to worry about.' She glared at him until he left, then she left too, taking Carol's car. She'd be back after the concert and she'd sort everything out then. She knew the dead woman would be laughing if she'd known ...

The people at Tantangara were shocked, but they got used to it quickly enough. Days at the office went on much the same as usual, though they admitted to themselves that they still half-expected Mrs Carroll's taxi to bring the old lady in, carrying flowers and anything else she'd brought with her that morning, and there was also the hiatus, the breathing pause at about three thirty in the afternoon, the time when she gathered herself for the trip home. They missed her in so many other ways too ...

Or so they said, and it was genuine enough, but habit, customers and daily business filled the gap. A couple of Thursdays passed, and they got paid, so Tantangara was carrying on, for the time being at least. Roger remained in charge, trying to support his people by

occupying, in a very small way perhaps, the space that Carol had occupied in the office and in their minds. She, the departed one, sprang a surprise on him one day, however, because when he went into the lunch room there was a *Sydney Morning Herald* on the table, open at a photo of a Chinese warship making a visit to their city. It was a few minutes inside the heads, moving slowly towards the city's opera house and bridge, and its crew were lined up, port and starboard, along the sides of the ship, in white, caps on, looking ever so disciplined and as if they had trained the ship so well that they could take their hands off, knowing that the ship would know what it had to do. Knowing what this business of a gestural, ceremonial entrance would have meant to his boss if she had seen it, Roger knew he was going to cry, but there were people in the room, and one of them, a very recent young recruit who had only seen the dead woman once or twice, was looking at the photo curiously.

'It's rather wonderful, isn't it?' Roger said.

'Why do they do it, do you know?'

'They do it because they've always done it, I think that's the best we can say.'

'We can't say much then, can we?' He didn't mean to be impudent, he thought it was a stupid thing to say.

Roger waved his hand over the photo. 'It means a lot to a lot of people. In many parts of the world.'

'Here?'

'Here, yes, here. In this office, or it used to.'

'In this office?' Surely there was nobody so silly as that?

'Yes, yes.' The young fellow didn't say anything, not knowing where this was taking him, and not caring. Why should he? Roger was being a bit queer, was all he could have said.

'There's so much meaning been brought together in this ceremony, and the various meanings have other, different meanings for a variety of people ...' The young man was still listening, though to what he couldn't have said. Roger tried to go on: 'When one

meaning's been perfected, it gives people opportunities to create new meanings nobody had ever thought of ...' He paused. 'I'll keep that picture. It's a pity it didn't appear a couple of weeks ago, but maybe she caused it to happen ...'

'She? Caused it to happen? Eh?'

Roger was exasperated, and not a little confused. 'Yes. That's not impossible. She was a woman ahead of her time trying to teach her city to catch up, best way they could.' The young man wasn't risking any further comment, nobody else was listening, so Roger folded the paper. He could take it home and think.

## Author's note

This book had a predecessor called *At The Window*, published by McPhee-Gribble in 1984, with a moody, early morning photo of Sydney Harbour on the cover. The photo was taken by David Bradley, husband of my friend Maggie Gilchrist, whose front room overlooking Lavender Bay gave me a locale for the book. Maggie and I had spent hours there discussing the techniques of various writers – how they started books, managed plots, dipped in and out of conversations, did or didn't describe places they mentioned, and so on. As best I can recall, I didn't write a single sentence of the book in the flat itself. It was mostly the opposite – the flat occupied a space in my mind, the events of the book happened inside the space, and the writing space took on the character of the actual space.

I had high hopes for the book. It was my contribution, I thought, a man's contribution, to discussions about feminism raging at the time. Feminist thinking, it seemed to me, was so radical, so life-changing, that men *had* to be part of the conversation, even though a majority of men chose to stay over the horizon throughout the debate. I think it would also be true to say that many women didn't expect men to show anything but the most defensive interest. My book attracted nothing better than a couple of scornful reviews and I had to admit the project had been a flop.

Many years later, after I went back into my Gippsland past to write *The Pilgrims* (2012) in gratitude to some Chinese friends, it occurred to me that I had left Carol, the central figure of *At The Window*, closing the door on her experience of separating from her husband and with the rest of her life ahead. I determined that I would follow her through the remainder of her days, by way of seeing what happened to the feminist movement which had affected me so strongly in the nineteen seventies. This simple decision cost me ten months of effort. *Swinging Doors* was one of the hardest of my books to get down, all the more so because it came when I was used to words rolling out of a

mind operating with confidence. One of the difficulties lay in keeping the thing short. There weren't enough pages for all the characters and incidents of a life, nor was it my intention to be encyclopaedic. I had always thought of *At The Window* as a novella – small in scale, large in scope – and although the new book simply *had* to be a little longer, it was still, in my mind, an essay-like, condensed, treatment of the same theme, that of how far feminism had affected the recent life of my country. This involved me in the lives of various families connected with Carol – Mrs Carroll as she becomes late in the book, to the amusement of its writer, who had no idea this was going to happen. There was so much to squeeze in. I wanted to show a woman and her family over several decades, with the steps and stages of changing lives being taken for granted. Underlying it all was my wish to show that Carol had been fairly successful in upholding her youthful faith, and yet at the same time the society surrounding her hadn't moved so far. Hence the repeated references, late in the book, to sailors lined up for their ships' ceremonial entrances to Sydney's harbour.

A word about Sydney. I grew up in the Riverina, an area closer to Melbourne than to Sydney, and I've spent the greater part of my life in the southern city rather than the Pacific one, and yet I have only to enter, or even get close to, New South Wales and I feel nearer to my origins, the deepest parts of my own identity. At the age of 79, all this does is amuse me. Life is full of contortions and unexpected, inexplicable things, and I am as subject to them as anyone else. Somehow I need that part of me which I call Sydney, the side more inclined to take chances, the less ideological side, and during the writing of *Swinging Doors* I knew that if I was to work out the things in Carol that most needed saying, I had to get her back to the city that dominated *At The Window*. At the end of her life I return her to a Point Piper apartment I first saw in January 1947, and many times later, as a guest of my friends, the Macfarlan family. Past and present unified in the writing and I was able to place my ideological analysis in something which I like to think of as an area of whitefella dreaming.

I fell in love with Sydney in my youth and love it still, so much so that I have only to see it occasionally to be happy that it's still there, going on in the endless way of time, which is, of course, via some references to the music of J.S.Bach, another theme of the book. Readers will notice that Kiri, Carol's grand-daughter, picks up the burden of Carol's themes and struggles by playing the music of the Leipzig master. Carol dies, as Samantha died at the start of the book, and what does Kiri do? She takes the story forward by taking it back, the writer withdraws, and you, dear reader, are left with the book.

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