

didgeridoo



some histories by

Chester Eagle

didgeridoo

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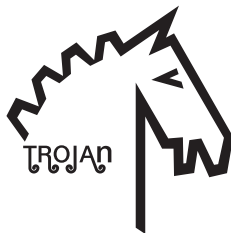
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Prelude

History and story are essentially the one word, deriving from Latin ('narrative of past events, account, tale, story', according to the OED) and also from Greek ('a learning or knowing by inquiry, an account of one's inquiries, narrative', this latter definition deriving from a word meaning 'a knowing, learned, wise man; a judge'). The Greek meaning is embedded in today's notion of an historian, someone, most probably with academic training, whose researches have uncovered much, but whose account - whose story - will not necessarily excite us. Flights of fancy and bursts of imagination uncontrolled by scholarly discipline are thought to belong, in today's world, to the story-teller. 'Historian' and 'story-teller' roughly approximate, in their difference from each other, the words 'scientist' and 'artist'. The first can bring evidence to support what is proposed, while the second trusts to more intuitive and perhaps theatrical means. Or so we say.

In this collection the two meanings merge. History is story and each story is, among other things, a history of an historical endeavour, which, in turn, is shaped by the story, the narrative, the life, of the person working on it. Stories are full of life, and to tell them we surely need both knowledge and insight. (Do these words, too, repeat that difference between the scientist and the artist? If they do, we are talking about a division in our culture, or should we perhaps think of it as a culture which has two important ways of knowing and is, perhaps, striving to find more? What could be wrong with that?)

The reader will quickly see that the people whose names identify the stories are in regular contact. They attend the same tutorial. Each is attempting the same task, given them by their tutor, who places himself on no higher level. Each has also a separate life to lead. These lives

provide part, but only part, of my narratives, because the efforts of these people to clarify their research are a thread of the narrative too, in a way that anyone who has ever tried to untangle a problem will readily grasp. History strives to eliminate or to reduce the personal, the subjective, yet is driven by it and makes its narratives out of the personal, the subjective, and all the other forces rampant in the human story.

At this point my argument would seem to be rather like the shape - or do I mean the behaviour? - of a crystal. Crystals are known to have 'pure' or 'essential' forms, yet in the ordinary course of events an attempt to grow a crystal will produce a lump of material, endlessly extruding similar features, but unable to manage the exclusion, the single-minded concentration, needed to reveal the pure form.

Notice my words. 'Exclusion' and 'single-minded concentration' are attributes of scientist and artist alike. To know, we have to reduce our focus, and find ways to eliminate influences not directly relevant to the thesis we wish to test. Artists, too, know about exclusion. Experience will teach them, if they didn't know it when young, that to say more they must attempt - or at least use - less. This is itself a theme for one of these pieces.

There is no end to this matter. I shall stop here, and let the stories - the histories - speak for themselves.

Brigitte

Things had been difficult for weeks. ‘I want to go back to France,’ Brigitte said, ‘and I know you don’t. You hate indecision, I know that, so we are going to make a decision.’ She saw his eyes move to the map on the wall: the world, with their countries far apart. ‘But we are not deciding at once.’ His eyes turned to her. ‘I am going to university to study the history of this place. Then we will make up my mind’ - he started to smile - ‘if the children don’t make it up for me.’

As the weeks passed, and lectures got underway, Peter noticed that his wife had in some way adopted the members of her tutorial as an extra family, added by her own decision, not through his connections. When Stephen Macfarlan, the tutor, had a barbecue at his home one Sunday, Brigitte introduced her husband to the others as if he, not her, was the outsider: as he was. All this changed when she came home with the topic on which she had to talk. ‘How can I make sense of this? I don’t know anything about it!’ He looked. ‘The symbolism of sport; Australia’s relations with Great Britain.’ ‘Good one,’ he said. ‘Very interesting, really.’ Most of the books on the reading list were about cricket, horse racing, and rugby. She was angry, for a reason he couldn’t identify. But as she was putting dinner on the table that night, he sensed what it was: she didn’t want to ask him for help in the very thing that had given her a fresh platform in their relationship. Peter knew he would have to be cautious. In the course of the meal, he said, ‘The symbolism of sport: do you have any problem with that?’

Sullenly she said, ‘No. It must mean something. All that activity which goes on ceaselessly in this country, it cannot be entirely without some message for trained observers.’

‘And you feel untrained?’

Ignoring the question, she asked the children to finish quickly because it was past the time they normally had their baths.

‘Perhaps you think that what is there to see isn’t really worth seeing?’

‘P’r’aps,’ was all she would say.

Days passed; he found the list of references on the desk they shared. Showing it to her, at a carefully chosen time, he said, ‘Why not bring some of these books home? You could read bits to me, tell me what you think, ask about anything that you don’t understand.’

She was still snakey. ‘The blind are going to lead the blind, are they? You know the painting by Bruegel?’ He reminded her: ‘We saw it together, in Naples.’ The softness of his reproach had its effect. ‘We had no children then. I never imagined that we would live in your country. I know what you think. You think we are hard and ...’ the word wouldn’t come easily ‘... euro-centric. But why not? Everybody sees the world in the way of the place where they grew up.’

‘You grant that then?’

‘Of course I do. It’s only commonsense. But it’s also commonsense that some places are better to grow up than others. To speak plainly, that some places have much better cultures than others. More culture. Deeper. I do not mean to upset you. You are very touchy on this. But I have a feeling of loss, living with you here. I do not like it. I know you are at home, our children are at home, but I am not. Okay?’

He said, ‘Did Stephen give you this topic deliberately? It was pretty smart of him, if he did.’

She thought. ‘I think he did. It’s a challenge I didn’t really want. Oh well, I can always become a drop-out.’ This glimmer of humour told him she would rise to Stephen’s challenge. ‘Bring home some books, Brigitte. I’ll enjoy talking about them when you’re ready.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That is good of you.’ A few minutes later she filled his glass before she changed for bed. ‘I’m going to read for a while. Enjoy your wine.’ Sitting on his own, listening to the sounds of the house, in case one of the children woke, he felt the mutuality

of their situation, their interdependence, his awareness of the way the society spinning around them worked, her adventurousness in wanting to see into its ways, her contempt a necessary corrective, needing to be expressed at the very moment that she was letting alien influence in. He loved her for her courage, and wondered if he would really be able to help.

For days he heard no more of her presentation, then she said to him one evening, 'Tell me all you know about Smithy.' He was puzzled. 'Smithy? That could be anybody.' She chided him. 'Oh no.' He sensed that he was being teased. 'Where did this Smithy come from? Who told you about him?' She said, 'I see you don't know. He is a very important figure in the history of your country, and you haven't heard of him?'

'Oh, that Smithy?' He put his arms out, as if he were flying.

She lifted her hands to shoulder height and twiddled her fingers as if she too was taking a turn in the air. 'Good. You have redeemed yourself.'

'Well, that's a relief. How does Smithy fit into your scheme of things?'

She said, as if reciting something the whole world knew, 'He offered to fly Mrs Bradman to see her husband, in 1934. Australia was in peril! Mr Bradman was having an operation. They were going to cut him open! He could not play cricket when he was on a table, smelling chloroform.'

'I dare say he could not!'

'When she heard what was going to be done to her husband she sent him a telegram, "It's all right Don, I'm coming".' She laughed. She couldn't stop. She began to wipe her eyes. 'I am coming, Don! You won't die because I won't let it happen! What faith in herself she had!' She was still laughing, still wiping her eyes, and, her husband felt, her laughter included him as object. If Australians had ever been silly, that was his to sort out. He smiled weakly. 'Ah, the symbolism of sport! Well, you see, he was in the hands of English doctors. They'd never get another chance like that to be rid of him!'

‘The English were stupid. They should have got Mr Jardine and Larwood to dress up as doctors in white coats, and then, knives in their hands, they could have put him out.’ She thought. ‘No, back in the pavilion!’ She was triumphant.

‘You’re making big progress!’ She assumed a modest expression. ‘Not really. It’s nothing. I tickled it down to fine leg!’ This time, laughing, she felt a need to sit down. He grinned. ‘Next time we have a roast you’ll be showing off your late cut!’

‘I know what that is! It is when you hit the ball past the umpire and nobody catches you out!’ He didn’t correct her. ‘So how’s it going?’

‘I have read hundreds of pages of this rubbish, and it is growing on me. Though I do not understand! It is all a Chinese opera to me. I can see how English it all is, and the Australians understand what has to be done, so they are English too. I can see that. The English are frightened of Mr Bradman. Your country is proud of him. He carries their hope. They do not have much else. When he is sick, Mrs Bradman flies to his side. She goes to the other side of the world. She passes through my country to do this.’ Brigitte paused. ‘I hope we were kind to her.’ Peter remained quiet, respecting what was going on in his wife. ‘She caught a ferry from Calais to Dover, and then she was in London.’

‘The capital of the Empire.’ She sensed an element of superiority in his teasing.

‘You are strange people,’ Brigitte said. ‘You say silly things because you are silly, but just as I am certain that everyone in the room is stupid, I see they are laughing. What they say becomes ridiculous, and they enjoy it.’ She thought. ‘The men of your country who play cricket, they are boys. They pretend they are men, but they are only schoolboys. They don’t want women in the world. But Mr Bradman depends on Mrs Bradman, and he knows it. He says so. That is good.’

‘If you’ve been reading about cricket you’ll have seen the admiration and the animosity flowing both ways, us to them, them to us.’

She said, ‘Such a journey! She took the train to Perth, then a ship to Naples, then a train to Calais, then the boat. Another train. Why did

she not fly with Smithy?’ The name made her smile again. Her husband said, ‘Just as well she didn’t. She might have disappeared. That’s what happened to Smithy, not much later. Where was it? I can’t remember now ...’

‘The Southern Cloud. The name is interesting. Do you think your country is southern, now?’

‘No. It’s the centre of the world.’

‘I thought you would say that. It seems so far away, to me.’

‘I think we like it that way. We want to be like that.’

‘Why are you scared of being close to civilisation?’

‘Because it isn’t very civilised. You ought to know that. There’s been enough wars fought in your country.’

She considered him as if he had earned a little respect. ‘Men from this country came to fight in them. I have seen their graves. You would not come with me.’ He said nothing; they’d been through this before. ‘They are so far from home. It is very disturbing. I do not want to die in this country, Peter! If I die here, you are to take my ashes to France, you have promised me this!’ Her face was full of a passion that reached over everything else. ‘Promise me again!’

‘Brigitte, my love, your ashes shall rest wherever in France you want them to be. If I am alive I shall see that it happens!’

‘And if you are not?’

‘The children will be grown up. They can do what they must for both of us.’ She stood again and moved to him. They put their arms around each other. ‘We are married, Peter,’ she said. ‘We cannot untie that knot now.’

Days passed. Brigitte’s energy went into her talk; she worked, in the study they’d built in the roof of their home, far into the night. Sometimes, when Peter was getting the children’s breakfast, and seeing them off to school, he realised, looking at his sleeping wife, that he had no idea when she’d crept into bed. When he went upstairs before going to work, he saw the piles of papers, and the open books, that she’d spread along the table. He remembered dimly that he’d woken, or risen to the

surface of his sleep, to the sound of music from above; normally, when he looked at the CDs in the morning, they were in alphabetical order by composer; one morning, though, when Brigitte was asleep, he found a case open, and the disc in the player: *Pelléas et Mélisande*. It was a recording she'd bought, years ago, in France, before they married. This struck him as an indication of her mind. He said nothing to Brigitte, but increased his attention in time to realise that something was happening inside his wife. A change was taking place which was saddening her, and making her strong. How could this paper she had to give be affecting her in this way?

He found the libretto of the opera and read it while she was asleep. She'd been playing the first disc. He read the scenes carefully. He had to find his way into her understanding; she'd never forgive him if she found him listening to the music without knowing what he was searching for. She would say that there is a price for every agreement, and that each must pay the price alone, so they can return to the agreement with honour in their bearing, and there could be no honour when one was spying on another. How proud his wife was! One part of the story grasped his attention. He felt sure it was what she'd been listening to. One of the characters was reading a letter from her son, who'd gone far away, and married a stranger. What he'd done was not the family's wish. He was telling them when he'd be home. If they didn't want him back, they could show no lights, and his ship would sail past, never to return. The woman reading the letter, the mother, asked the man she was reading to, the old, blind grandfather, the King, what he felt.

It gripped Peter. A letter. A fate, and the many fates that intertwined with it, with each other. Something, he felt, had taken control of his life, and the events it would cause were not for him to predict. His wife was suffering, and the anguish of preparing a paper she wouldn't have chosen for herself was only the superficial manifestation of a more important thing, happening deeper down. She was resisting, and she was concurring, though she struggled as she gave in. Morning after morning, after he'd watched the children go off to school, he went into

the house he and Brigitte had chosen, and renovated, and looked at his wife, in a sleep so heavy, so deep, it was hard to think that she would rise from it. I'm useless, Peter felt, and I love her. What use was love? The current running through her, the force reshaping her life, was beyond his control. He couldn't even say what it was. He could only wait, support, and hope.

A morning came when, gathering his things before driving to work, he saw something changed about the folder where she kept the drafts of what she was going to say. In small but heavily-pressed letters she'd written, with her dainty pen, 'A song of separation'. The words haunted his day. Bradman and his cricketers? There'd been so many tours of England, of Australia, so many matches, players, umpires, groundsmen rolling and mowing ... he wanted to say the two countries were together more than they were apart, but he suspected his wife had seen further than this. A song of separation? Suddenly he saw what Brigitte could see so easily: the great family line of matches had begun when, paradoxically, the people of Australia and England were still the same people, parted by half a globe which it took weeks, even months, to circle, and had continued into a time when migrations and their separate histories had made them steadily less like each other, though somehow still connected, if only by the habit, the compulsion, of playing the same games. The journey, once the people of the two lands, and their representatives, the players, had grown apart, took twenty four hours. One day. His wife's thesis, he assumed, would be that each side used rivalry and superficial difference - the caps, the colours - to reassert that they were the same, though they must have sensed, touring each other's countries, that they were moving apart. Was that what she'd seen, and wanted to say?

Then he saw that the key to what was happening lay in the word on her folder. It takes someone separated to see a separation clearly. He wanted to get out all his pictures, her pictures, of France, to live in the fogs of Bretagne, the streams of Provence, the regulated walkways of Versailles, because if she was leaving them, they would be lost to him too.

But he was late. He picked up his things and went downstairs, he looked at his wife, deep in her sleep, he closed the back door, and drove to work. Separation. So that was the theme she'd chosen, and it had chosen itself because it was a theme she found in her life. He wanted to mourn for her, to give his compassion, but it was not a retreat available to him. He was enforcing her separation. She'd come willingly enough to his country, thinking of it as a visit, an exploration, a homage, too, towards what had made him. A pregnancy began, she was delighted that it should be coloured by the strangeness, the otherness, of his land. Then a second birth, a house, the alterations that suited it to the family ... one step had been taken after another, but neither he nor Brigitte had until recently examined the chain of changes which first caused and then constituted what had happened. A separation had taken place. When she'd told him, weeks before, that she wanted to go back, it was already impossible, though neither had known it. The next stage, he saw, would be the realisation that even so fundamental and simple a request as the return of her ashes to France would never happen because it would mean that she, in death, would be apart, as she would never in life allow, from her children. Peter remembered the day of their wedding. It had been in the dark stone cathedral of Clermont Ferrand. A swirling wind had swept through the streets as their friends and families had approached the place of ceremony, and on the hills near the town there had been snow. As the priest began the service, some benignity had caused the heavens to send bright sunshine through the windows high above, and a radiance had fallen from the skies into the nave. 'Only in France could this happen,' he'd murmured to Brigitte, who stood deeply serious beside him; he'd seen, by the movement of an eye, that she'd understood. That was when they'd formalised their union and made it a contract before all who'd seen them. They'd travelled, in France and elsewhere, they'd visited - they'd said - his country, and ...

... now they were, whether they wanted it or not, permanently at home.

She would say he'd won. He would search for less damning, less incontrovertible ways of saying the same thing.

He wanted to weep for what had happened but the truth was it was what he'd wanted to happen, so she was right. He'd won.

Would it, then, be a victory too costly to be borne? Or would they both make lives out of their acceptance? That was the question.

He asked his wife if she would read him what she'd written; she said it was only a collection of paragraphs, not properly joined. 'As I get a part of it clear in my mind, I write it down. When I realise I will have to say something about a matter, I put a few blank lines where I will write something later. Computers are good, Peter. If this was being done on paper, it would all be a mess!' He laughed. He'd seen her folder often enough, and her briefcase when she'd come back from the library, and he'd forced himself not to look, to invade. When she wanted to tell him, she'd tell him. In his diary he drew a line under the day on which her talk was to be given, a day of sufficient importance to be called a red-letter day!

Morning after morning he got the children off to school, then looked on his sleeping wife before he too went to work. They only saw each other for an hour on either side of dinner, then she went to her books again. Two days before the talk, she declared her preparations finished. 'I'm not going to open that folder until they're all sitting at the table, waiting. I'm going to read, but I've left myself places to talk about tables and figures. I've left those bits to explain the best way I can. If they see what it all means, I don't have to say anything. But I know I will. Some of those people are frightened of numbers. I don't know why, but you can tell they have no idea what a column of figures adds up to. Stephen was talking about land settlement last week, and every time he mentioned areas he would give the figure in acres, then in hectares. Some of them wrote them down as two different things. They are so stupid, Peter.'

He said to her, 'Let's get out our pictures of France!' She frowned, but the children liked this idea, and said they'd help her choose. 'All

right,' she said. 'We'll all sit on my bed, your daddy's bed, and we'll go through them. They are in the bottom drawer of the cabinet on my side.' Her eldest, Jacquie, said, 'We know, mum, we know!', but the second, Charles, wanted to know how married people worked out which side of the bed they'd sleep on. Peter and Brigitte looked at each other, watched by their children.

'Why do you always sleep on the side next to the wardrobe, daddy, and mum on the side nearest the door?'

'Did you ever sleep the other way around? And then swap, I mean?'

'Do men always sleep on the one side and women on the other? Or are some families different from us? From you?'

'How did you decide? Did you fight over it? Or did you agree?'

Peter and Brigitte looked into each other's eyes. Both searched their memories. Then Brigitte laughed. The children's faces brightened. 'What is it mum?' Her smile remained, but froze; her thoughts were going inward. 'Do you know, daddy? Why won't she tell us?'

He shook his head. 'I don't know what your mother's thinking. It's a mystery to me too.' They looked from one to the other. Then Brigitte said, 'The first time your father and I ever got into the one bed, it was at my aunt's house in Angoulême. She was a very strict old lady. She felt she had to protect me. That meant making sure that no young men - no old men, for that matter - could get near me. She would ward them off. She would protect me. When I brought your father home, this night, she was out visiting somebody. I took him into bed, and he got in on the side nearest the door, and then when I got in, I thought I should be nearest the door, in case my aunt put her nose in to check. It was the sort of thing she might do, and I felt I should be on that side to protect him.'

The children thought this amusing. 'And did she?'

'No. She went straight to bed. She didn't look in. Very early in the morning, when it was still dark, your daddy got dressed, and he whispered to me, and I woke up, and we kissed goodbye, and we agreed to meet later in the day, and then he was gone, and I went back to sleep.'

On my side of the bed. There's the answer to your question. And when you get married, or you have someone you love, you'll have to make the decision too, though maybe it won't come about in the same way. Or maybe it will. I tell you one thing though.'

They waited, her husband as much as her children.

'What you do, that very first time, will be the way you will do it forever. If your father died, and I married someone else ...' she put her hands on the shoulders of Jacquie and Charles '... don't worry, I'm only saying if ... then I would sleep on the same side of the bed.' It was said so solemnly that Charles felt it had to be elaborated. 'Why wouldn't you swap to the other side? To make it different from the first time you were married?'

Peter knew that his children were watching him as closely as their mother; the adults were in that rare mood when they let out the secrets of their union. Brigitte answered, 'If I did marry again, I wouldn't want it to be different. I'd want it to be as close as it could be to the same.' Peter said, 'Am I to take that as a compliment of sorts, or do I fail to understand?' His wife said, 'You can take it as a compliment, I think. You haven't had many lately. I've had my head in work all the time. You've had to be patient with me.'

'The pictures of France,' Peter said. 'Let's have a look at them!'

The pictures were a jumble. 'You children have been in here,' Brigitte said. 'I had everything neatly sorted out.' Jacquie looked at Charles. Charles began to blame his sister. 'Don't go on with that,' their mother said. 'Maybe it's better if they're mixed up. Every time we pick one up, we get a surprise.' A smile appeared on her face. 'Close your eyes, Peter, and pick one. And you children, you can guess who it is!' They thought this would be fun. 'Go on daddy! Close your eyes!'

Peter closed his eyes, and lifted a photo from the drawer. Eyes still shut, he said, 'What is it? Jacquie? Charles?' The children didn't know. He opened his eyes. 'Good heavens! I'd forgotten all about that. That's my uncle Alex with his head in the engine and his backside in the air, trying to fix his car. It was a hundred in the shade, and the car had

stopped. Overheated. Whatever controls the temperature had broken down. My father took that photo. He thought Alex was a laugh. He thought Alex didn't know half as much about cars as he said he did. Alex used to talk about cars ... about everything, really, as if he knew all about them. I suppose he was just an old gas bag, but he was fun to be with. He let me have my first ever drive of a car, in a paddock out the other side of Bendigo. Mum and dad were back in the house, and Alec stopped the car and told me to get out and go around to his side. I wasn't sure what he was going to do ...'

Brigitte broke in: '... though you had a good idea and your heart was full of hope!'

'It was. And my idea was right! A minute later I was driving that car around the paddock as if I'd been doing it all my life ...'

'Which,' his wife remarked, 'had already lasted the grand sum of thirteen years!'

'Fourteen! And when Alec took charge again, he told me to say nothing about what we'd been up to to my parents ...'

'But when you got home ...'

Peter laughed. 'Mum and dad had seen the car going round and round, and they'd guessed. I could tell straight away!'

The children liked this. 'How did you know?'

Their mother said, 'Families are close, even if they don't want to be. You can never separate yourself from your family, even if you wrench yourself away. There's still a connection.' She picked up a photo. 'There's my sister.' They looked at a severe sixteen year old, in white blouse with lace, long dark skirt, and boots barely visible in the darkness at the bottom of the picture. Jacquie wanted to know if she was an older or younger sister. 'Five years older. Too close, and not close enough. She was old enough to think she was superior. I could do nothing - she thought - as well as she could. She could play the piano, and I couldn't. She could ride a bicycle very fast, and also elegantly, if adults were watching. She was good at that. I knew she did everything to create an effect, because I saw her when there was nobody inspecting her, and I

knew what was going on in her mind. So I was a danger to her. I might split her open and show her motives. So she was always ridiculing me. Nothing I did was good enough. We hated each other. If you'd said to me, when I was thirteen, would you like to kill your sister, I'd have said "Give me a knife and I'll do it!" The children were amazed. 'Did you ever try?'

'No. I was too scared. Maybe I never got a good chance.'

Something occurred to Jacquie. Pointing to the photo, she said, 'Is that our Auntie Madeleine?' Brigitte indicated that it was. 'But mum, when she was here last year, she was lots of fun! You and her did lots of things, and you laughed more than I've heard you laugh with anyone!'

Peter watched his wife. She said, 'We're not enemies now. We're not thirteen and eighteen any more. She never married, and I've got you.' Her eyes took in her family. 'She's curious about us. Curious about me. What happened? I went one way, she went another. People are mysterious.' Brigitte grew silent, withdrawing again. Charles pressed himself against his mother. 'Why are people mysterious, mum? Mum? What's so mysterious, anyway?' Doubting the mystery his mother spoke of, he showed he was caught in it. She took his hand, then held it where she could inspect it.

'This hand, this flesh, is mine. And your father's. And Jacquie's. You're made out of me, and your father. When you have a wife and children, they'll all be sharing the same flesh, the same bones, and hair, and looks, with you. That will mean they are sharing with me, and Jacquie too. These are the connections that bind people together. When people say they want freedom, I ask myself what sort of freedom they want. Don't they know they can never be free of the people who are made of the same bodies? Perhaps they don't know that, but if they don't, they are foolish.'

The children sensed rather than understood what she meant. Peter took her hand. 'Now Jacquie, and Charles, it's your turn to pick a picture, and tell us what you think it is.' The children smiled again; Charles

pushed into the heart of the pile, but Jacquie's eyes showed that there was one in particular that she wanted to find, and bring out.

'What have you got Charles?'

The boy brought out a photo, face down. As if possessed of strength because he held a mystery, he turned it slowly. They looked, passing it from hand to hand. 'My father,' Brigitte said, 'when he was a boy.' Her husband looked into the young man's face, seeking any resemblance. 'I take after my mother,' Brigitte said. 'So does my sister. Daddy never got into our faces, though Madeleine's got his skin, lucky woman. She doesn't have to worry about sunlight like I do. All those creams and oils, I wish I could throw them away! She doesn't use any at all. Even here, where the sun is so much stronger, you remember her walking down by the beach. Oh I was so envious!' Charles peered into the picture. 'What's that place behind him, it looks like a castle.'

'It is a castle,' his mother said. 'But not a real one. It's a reconstruction, which means someone said not "What was it like?" but "What should it be like?" and they built it, pretending to rebuild it, so it fitted their fairy tale, their romance ...'

Peter was listening to the underlying approval in her voice. 'You think there's nothing wrong with that?' Brigitte shook her head. 'If you're going to spend huge sums of money, you'd better get something you like. Suppose it was different? Suppose it was fanciful? Would anyone be happier if it was exact? One or two people, yes. Experts, who could use it to lecture on their ideas of a vanished age. But the people who put up money for these projects, they want something that confirms what they believe. The past was as big a mess, and as hard to understand, as our lives are today. So we have to simplify, and - yes - recreate the past so it looks like something we want. If we do that, we can set it up as a standard and we can measure the lives of people today against it. That's a good way to use the past, don't you think?'

'Are you going to say that in your talk?'

Brigitte said with some force, 'Don't make me talk about that bloody talk. What have you got in your hand, ma belle?'

Jacquie showed the photo she'd dug out of the drawer. It was a Great Dane, towering over a little girl. 'You were two, mum, when this was taken. You told me that once before.' Brigitte smiled on her daughter. 'You weren't much older than two yourself when I showed it to you.' Her daughter wouldn't have this. 'It was only last year, mum, when I was seven!' Brigitte made peace. 'Oh, your memory's too good. I can't deceive you.' Charles wondered how he stood in this, and clutched his mother's arm. 'Don't worry, little man, I don't deceive you very often. It's easier to deal with the truth than with lies. People don't always see this. They think they can get around some difficulty with a lie or two. They think the thing to do with a quarrel that's coming is to avoid it. They're silly. The thing to do is to have the quarrel, and find out where the truth is. It will come out eventually ...'

Her husband was shaking his head. 'Not always. Plenty of people have been caught out lying, it's true, but as many have got away with it. The lies they've told become accepted as the world's history. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*'

His children were amazed. 'What's that mean?'

He smiled. 'It means, if you want a monument to what I was saying, all you need to do is look around you.' This confused the children further, since they thought he meant looking around the room they were in. Brigitte told her children, 'It's a saying that sounds simple, but it isn't. Some people put up monuments, like the ones they have for soldiers, you've seen those, and they say the monuments tell you the truth. Other people know the monuments are not to be trusted, so they think it's better to look at the most obvious things there are.' The children didn't know how a child and a dog had led them to this thought. 'What was the dog called, mum?'

'I called him Milou, because that was Tintin's dog. My father called him Squelette, because he was bony. Skeleton. So he had two names.' She laughed. 'We don't know what his mother called him!' Charles thought this was silly. 'Dogs don't call each other names!'

‘In some way,’ his mother said, ‘perhaps they do. They must think of each other. They know each other. A mother dog knows her little ones in a pack of other dogs.’

‘That’s by smell, though,’ Jacquie said. ‘That’s how they know!’

‘Then,’ Brigitte said, ‘their smell is what we call their name.’ The other members of her family took this idea into their minds. A smell for a name? It was silly, but no sillier than knowing your own flesh and blood by the colour of their eyes or the shape of their nose. Peter pulled them out of their difficulty. ‘I’m still waiting to see all the pictures of France. We won’t have satisfied the reason that brought us here if we don’t dig them out!’ His wife responded sternly. ‘Then you find one, Peter! Find one, and I’ll tell you what it is. Go on,’ she said, watching him hesitate. ‘There they all are. You find one you want to hear about!’

‘That could take a while,’ he said. ‘They used to be in groups, with rubber bands around them, but they’re all muddled now. It might take ages to find what I’m looking for.’

‘Historical research,’ said Brigitte. ‘That’s enough. I’m going to close the drawer. We’ll play another time, but not till I’ve given my talk. I’ll be more relaxed, then.’

The night before her talk, Brigitte gave the children dinner early. She asked Peter to oversee their baths and get them into bed. He assumed she would have dinner with him, but, by the time the children had settled, she too had gone to bed. He looked into the darkened room. She said nothing, though he knew she was awake. He said, ‘Do you want me to bring you something?’ She shook her head. ‘No. I had a big lunch. I should have told you. Sorry. Get yourself something.’ He wanted to question, but he was afraid of upsetting her. She was tense, and, he could feel, resentful. ‘I’ll be back in a few minutes,’ he said. ‘I’ll have a bowl of soup.’ She said nothing. He could hardly remember her so preoccupied, so shut off.

When he returned, he turned off the light at the end of the passage, a signal that the house was closing down. When he sat on the bed to take off shoes and socks she turned over, facing away from where he would

lie. When he got in, she moved again, onto her back. He slid to the middle of the bed, and turned on his side to face her. 'If you insist,' she said, turning her head a little. 'I think I have to,' he said, conscious of the darkness as an element of her mood. Somehow she filled the room, and he was alien.

'I haven't let you read what I'm going to say. And I haven't told you. I can't stop you feeling hurt, but I'm not letting you come into the matter before I speak to those who are supposed to listen.'

He said, 'That's all right by me, but I can feel it's more than a matter of who gets it in what order.'

'It is. I'm still feeling wounded. I don't want anything to do with you until I feel whole again. I'm not coming to you when all I can feel is loss.'

'That could be years.'

'Yes, it could. I'm here now. I'm stuck. I thought I could go back when I pleased, but I can't. I don't think it's fair to blame you, but that's where the blame wants to stick. I'm sorry, but that's how it is.' She turned suddenly, and their two bodies were almost touching, all the way down, and their breath mingled as she spoke. 'There's no such thing as love without hatred, and it's hatred that I'm feeling now.'

He said, 'You want me to feel guilty, and I flatly refuse to do it. I feel awful, but accepting that I'm the cause, or I'm responsible, is something I will not do. If you want to hate me, then hatred is all I get.'

She thought of grabbing him and shaking him, but didn't have the energy to fight. 'You have to cop it until I change. If I ever do.'

'We can treat each other with the frozen dignity of aristocrats. The children will think us mad.'

Brigitte said, 'They will be right. Of course we're mad.'

A thought came to him. 'Let's swap sides. Our marriage has changed. The opposition's out in the open. I'll sleep on the side of the door.'

She sneered. 'You! You'd sneak out in the night with my photos!'

‘And paint moustaches on them! Especially your sister Madeleine. Why doesn’t she get a woman for a lover and be honest with herself?’

Insofar as accepting this made her receptive, Brigitte softened. ‘I don’t know. She’s as frightened of doing that as she is of giving herself to a man.’

‘She doesn’t know how to trust anybody except you.’

‘So?’ He said no more. ‘If that’s her condition, we have to accept her that way. You must know that.’

‘I do know it, and I do accept. All the time she was here she was considerate of me, but I knew, all the time, that I was only the man her sister Brigitte could bear to be with. That might be high recognition in her mind, but it felt belittling from where I was.’

‘Don’t be so prickly.’

He decided to take the plunge. ‘France. You can go there any time you like. With me or without. With the kids, or without. All you have to do is give a bit of notice so I can make whatever arrangements I have to.’

Irrelevant as it was, it was also generous. Brigitte said, ‘I know you mean that. I appreciate it. You want to tell me I’m not cut off, but you see I cut myself off. I wasn’t aware that that was what I was doing, I did it, and now I see where I find myself, and I cannot like it as much as where I was, a few years ago. I understand what’s good about being here, I try to accept, but if you have to try to accept, you aren’t accepting. Probably it’s impossible to accept. That’s the confusion I’m in at the moment.’

‘France,’ he said. ‘Talk about it. Tell me something about it. You must know a thousand things that are secret to me.’

She felt he was surrounding her. ‘If I tell you something that was secret, you possess me a little bit more than you do already. I have to be able to keep some things in reserve.’

He felt they were close to the heart of the matter. ‘If you do, you’ll never be happy. Never, Brigitte, never. When you’re back in France you’ll be restless, not sure what you want from it, and when you’re

here you'll be restless too, only from the opposite angle. Restless there because you're not here, restless here because you're not there. You know, you know in your heart that what I say is true!

She turned again, onto her back this time. 'Yes it's true. You can see into me quite well. When I'm feeling stormy I don't like you seeing into me, but the more I try to shut you out, the better it is that you know what's going on.' This time she did soften, and he knew that she knew that what had coloured her words was an awareness of love. 'Now, no more, Peter. We have spoken. No more of this thing until I am free again. That will be after tomorrow. You may take me out to dinner, or you may cook something special for me. That is as far as I will allow myself to go, tonight. Goodnight, Peter. You must try to sleep now. You must sleep first. I will not be able to get to sleep, though I want to very much, because it will close down my troubled mind, until I know that you, beside me, are sound asleep, dreaming of the cricket!' She laughed, a little sourly, but from a layer of her being acquainted with generosity, and he laughed too. 'All right. I'll turn my back on you now, so my mind can't look into yours when you don't want it to.'

'Goodnight Peter. Enjoy your dreams. Voluptuous women will slip into your mind and soothe you ...'

He snorted, and kicked her foot. He wriggled his body, settling it, then he tried to switch off what they'd been saying. It took time, but minutes later she knew his rest allowed her to prepare for what she wanted to do.

When Brigitte reached the tutorial room, she sensed, in the way the others received her, that they were wary; she, after all, was setting the standard for those who spoke later. Some of them wanted her to do poorly. This was unnerving. She felt a need for the husband's support she'd refused the night before. Stephen, their tutor, was expecting too much. It was in his interest to have her set a standard which the others would struggle to emulate. She put her things down and waited for the last to come in. Stephen looked around the room, then indicated that she should begin.

‘I have asked myself for some time what it means to symbolise something. To be symbolic. I have several answers. They will probably emerge in what I am going to say. Then I asked myself if sport is symbolic of anything, and I have three answers. Yes! No! And sometimes!’

She gave them a sharp smile. ‘Already you think I am talking in riddles, but my topic is a riddle, and it has been puzzling me since it became mine.’ Stephen knew that these words were a charge against him. ‘So I start at the other end. The relations between two countries. Australia plays cricket with England every four years in Australia, every four years in England. Allowing for the different times of summer, that means that every two years one team of cricketers plays the other. This is such a regular occurrence that it provides an opportunity for other forces - the politics, the money markets - to push in and express themselves, which perhaps means no more than this: when many things are going on at the one time, it is natural for people to interpret one event by the others happening at the same time. We have a good example of this in the cricket played in the summer of 1932 - 33. This was a time of great depression. The economies of the leading countries collapsed, and the lesser countries, even the wealthy colonies, like Australia was for England, they all suffered. Those who suffered knew that somewhere, back in the place that liked to be called ‘Home’, there were people who did not suffer because the financial system was of benefit to them. It operated according to rules that made them happy. Governments in Australia could not do what their suffering citizens deserved because they had obligations to repay loans made in better times by the wealthy people I referred to. So there was tension when the two cricket teams took the field. As usual, though, we must beware of simplifying. Money is not everything. There is also seniority, by which I mean status, or one nation’s place in the order of esteem when compared to another’s. Australia was junior to England because England created the colony. England was called ‘the mother country’; this implies that the colony was its child. As some of you know, the child always feels the need to grow up ...’

Brigitte lifted her eyes and found herself staring into the eyes of Marthe, at the opposite end of the table; she felt that for some reason what she was saying had a personal slant, or reference, for the younger woman which she, Brigitte, couldn't guess. 'The things I am talking about,' Brigitte said, 'are common knowledge, which means that all of us know them. This also means that we know them in different ways. When I finish, you must tell me what you think about the things I will describe. That will make us a little wiser, perhaps.' Marthe's eyes went dark; a closure had taken place. Brigitte looked away.

'In the previous cricket series, the child had grown up very swiftly. The Australian team won easily, because it had a new champion, Mr Bradman ...'

Sam grinned. 'Don!'

Brigitte glanced at him, intending to quell, if possible: '... who made more runs ...'

She paused. 'There is a psychological dimension to this which I cannot explore today. Why are all these men gaining credit by running? It is very odd, if you think about it!' Some of the group laughed, others were puzzled.

'Anyhow, he made more runs than anybody had made before. This is something he did for the whole of his career. How could the English stop him? They thought of an idea. Bowl the ball very fast straight at him. Frighten him. Frighten the Australians. I am sorry to say that it is an idea that would occur very naturally to a European power with an empire ...'

More laughter, mostly from Karl and Max; Stephen wondered where the thing was going. 'Years ago,' Brigitte said, 'I was teaching tennis to a girl who did not know how to play. It was pleasant. But she had more natural ability than I had, and once she had the idea, she started to beat me. Then she beat me easily. I found an excuse to stop playing. It was only a good game while I was on top! This is what happened to England. The colony became too good. It began to think it was superior. Now, you will say, this is only cricket. Was this also happening in

business? Was Australia thinking of starting an empire of its own? The answer is no. No. But a crack, once it is opened, can widen very easily. Cracks have to be closed. The English thought of an idea. They called it leg theory. I am sorry, there are so many terms that are strange to me, perhaps you know them better than I do ...'

'Bowl at the batsman,' Sam said, 'and put half a dozen fieldsmen around him so if he tries to hit the ball to leg, he'll get caught. They changed the rules to stop it, but that took a while!' He was pleased with himself. Brigitte listened, then tried to restart. 'The Australians were not ready for this attack, for that was what it was. The crowds who watched became angry. At least two things are happening at the same time here. The new self-esteem of the colony is not being allowed to grow as the colony wishes, because the mother country wishes to stop the colony's development. And the means used by the mother country to stop the development look, to the eyes of the people who go to watch the cricket, very like the means of the wealthy people in England to keep the colonials paying their debts. As we would say today ...' a smile flitted across her face '... they felt screwed!'

'A word with another meaning,' Max put in.

'I know. "Who is he *screwing*?"' A strange expression, because the word doesn't suggest the action it refers to.' Lou laughed. 'Good one, Brigitte!' Brigitte said, 'I must return to my path.' She took the edge of a sheet of paper. 'Now, what I have been telling you about is a family quarrel, I think I shall call it. But what about this? Here is something written fifteen years later, still about cricket, but there has been a huge war in the meantime. England has suffered. Its empire is breaking up. It will never dominate the world again, but it can still play cricket, if not very well. The Australians can beat it easily now.' She paused. 'What I am going to read is about the last time the two countries were close in the old way. After the moment I am going to describe, they grow apart. The maturing I spoke of has become a separation.' Some of them could sense a personal sadness in her voice as she read.

The nature of the welcome given to the Australian team in all parts of the country was quite remarkable. Conventional language scarcely does justice to it. It was, I believe, much more than the traditional welcome to our brethren from overseas; it was in some measure a thanksgiving that one of the great institutions of our common life had been restored. The great crowds that gathered wherever the Australians appeared did more than testify to their love of cricket; they did more than pay their affectionate tribute to a consummate captain of a great team; they did more than give expression to their joy in seeing that team once more in their midst; they gave utterance to their deep-seated satisfaction, after years of darkness and danger, that cricket had once more come into its kingdom in these great and historic encounters.

Brigitte paused, then tried to go on. She got a few more words out before she stopped. *For not the least of the deprivations of war is that the glory and ...*

Something prevented her. She raised a hand as if to touch her heart, then lowered it. The group looked at her. She swallowed. Something was wrong. 'Excuse me,' she said. She tried to cough. 'Give me a moment, if you please.' Stephen said, 'While Brigitte's finding her place, perhaps someone might like to comment ...'

'No!' Brigitte said. 'I am ready again. It is no more than this. A thought came into my mind, distracting me. It has been put away. I will go on now. Thank you for your patience.'

That night, when Peter got home, he was ready to ask his wife where she'd like to dine out, or would she like him to prepare something, but she had the card of a takeaway pizza place in her hand. 'I have been waiting,' she said. 'I couldn't ring until I knew you would be here. You have to eat your pizzas while they're hot!' He said, 'What? Pizzas? What's going on around here? You never eat pizzas, you hate them! Scraps, food of poverty, that's what you call pizzas!' She was smiling. 'I am among the Romans,' she said. 'I must do as they do. What used to be called standards, they are only the folk-ways of people who came to this country from Europe. They cannot be maintained here. Let us go hunting. I want to learn to dig yams!'

Peter looked at his wife, troubled. 'Had a big day, did we?'

'No. I told them about the cricket. It went quite well. I had one bad moment, just after the start, when I was overcome ...'

Peter broke in. 'Overcome by what?'

'I don't know yet. I haven't had the courage to tell myself. I think I do know, well enough.'

'Talking in riddles?'

She looked at her husband with some affection. 'You do understand me, Peter. It always surprises me.' He waited. 'In my talk today I talked about talking in riddles. Have you ever thought about the meaning of riddles?'

He shook his head, waiting for her mood, her reason, to display itself.

'Most questions tell you the answer they require by the way they're asked. A riddle is a trick. It tells you that no matter how clever you are, there is a special answer, and only the person asking the question knows what it is. They have the advantage over everyone else.'

'Just like you've got the advantage over me. Are we really having takeaway, sorry, dial-a-pizzas delivered here?' She smiled, telling him with her face. Peter said, 'Bugger me dead! Do the kids know this?'

'They are quite excited.'

'Well go ahead and ring in your order then. Far be it from me to spoil the party.' She went into the next room, and he heard her dialling, then giving her address. 'How much will it be? How many minutes?' The phone went down. She came to the door. 'Ten minutes, they say. It will be twenty. Play me some music.'

Before he could answer, the children came in from the garden. They asked their parents to come outside and see what they'd found, not saying what it was. Brigitte went joyfully, but Peter said he'd be with them in a minute, and slipped upstairs to get something ready, wondering if there would be a moment for what he wanted to do.

The pizza van arrived after half an hour, the driver put the boxes on the table, wished them good eating, and rushed away. The children

lifted the lids of the boxes, sniffing, and saying Yum! Peter got plates but Brigitte pushed them aside, replacing them with a box of paper serviettes - 'Don't you know how to do things properly?' - but when her husband pulled a bottle of Coke from the fridge she said, 'We don't have go that far down with our standards!' He put wine glasses on the table and started to draw the cork from a bottle which, she saw by his swiftness in locating it, must have been chosen some time before. It was a riesling from Margaret River. Knowing he wanted to please her, she stood beside him, considering whether or not they could find favour with each other again. 'You didn't play that music,' she accused. 'Does no one take any notice of what I ask?'

'It's ready,' her husband said. 'Shall we eat first, though? I'm afraid it won't go with these.'

Brigitte looked at her children. 'Food first. We don't want to keep little tummies waiting.' So they ate, the children pleased that their house could be like all the others, though curious, slightly, as to what had brought this about. Jacquie and Charles picked up the scraps of olive and salami with their fingers, licked them off, then wiped their lips and hands with serviettes from the box. 'Do these go in the rubbish?' Charles asked, looking at his mother. 'They do,' she said. 'We can't wash them!'

The serviettes went into the bin. The boxes sat empty on the table. 'What now?' Brigitte said. Her husband glanced at their daughter, who rose. 'That was a signal!' Brigitte said. 'What are you up to? Is someone going to rush in and drag me away? You think I have been that silly?'

'We do have a message for you,' Peter said. 'Let's have it Jacquie. You know which button to push. And leave the volume exactly where I've got it.' The child went up the stairs, leaving the study door open as she went in. A few seconds later a grave voice of great urgency filled the house.

'Voici ce qu'il écrit à son frère Pelléas: "Un soir, je l'ai trouvé tout en pleurs au bord d'une fontaine, dans la forêt où je m'étais perdu." (1)

Brigitte whispered the word: ‘*Perdu.*’ Lost. Her children were watching curiously; the situation set up by their father was about something in their mother that he seemed to understand. He said, ‘Everyone is.’ The music went on. ‘Je ne sais ni son âge, ni qui elle est ...’ (2)

‘What’s it about, mum?’ Their father said, ‘Sssh. Tell you in a minute.’ The voice in the music, coming from above, made it seem as if the house had decided to say something they’d been too busy, or too passionate, to notice; the singing, hardly more than conversation, spanned, deceptively, huge phrases as if presenting an unanswerable argument, until, satisfied that its message had been delivered, it asked a question: ‘Qu’en dites-vous?’ (3)

Peter nodded to Jacquie, who dashed noisily upstairs to turn off the intervention. Brigitte stood imperiously, said to her son, ‘Charles! Get rid of these boxes!’ and watched him leave the room. When he came back, he found his mother holding his father as if he were life itself, and at the top of the stairs Jacquie was calling out, ‘You want me to put on something else now dad?’ but the man and the woman in each other’s arms had nothing to say.

- (1) This is what he writes to his brother Pelléas: ‘One evening, I found her in tears beside a fountain, in the forest where I was lost.’
- (2) I neither know her age, nor who she is ...
- (3) What do you say to that?

Quotation on page 25 is from the Foreword by Sir Norman Birkett to *Brightly Fades the Don* by Jack Fingleton, Collins, London, 1949. Musical reference is to Act 1, Scene 2 of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892 - 1902) by Claude Achille Debussy.

Stephen

Stephen was looking at assignments when he became aware of music. He went to his daughter's room. 'What is it?' She handed him the CD case. It was Verdi's *Falstaff*. 'Could we go back a track? I'd like to hear it properly.' She put down the apple she'd been chomping and pressed a button. He noticed, in the moment before the sound restarted, that she had a score of the opera. As the baritone voice that had caught his attention began, she flicked the pages and settled on her bed, absorbed. He was soon as absorbed as she was, and listened to the end of the scene. 'There was a bit,' he said, 'not long after we started, that didn't seem to fit. It was different. It seemed to belong outside what was happening.' She riffled through the score, then showed him the place.

Quand'ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk, ero sottile, sottile, sottile, ero un miraggio vago, leggiere, gentile, gentile, gentile.

Quello era il tempo del mio verde aprile, quello era il tempo del mio lieto maggio.

Tant'era smilzo, flessibile e snello, che sarei guizzato attraverso un anello. (1)

He translated as best he could. 'He's trying to get off with the woman, and these thoughts come into his head?'

She regarded him shrewdly. 'Right on, pop. It's the heart of the opera. It's where this fat old bag of bullshit realises what he is, because he knows what he was. It makes him sad as well as silly, and it teaches us.'

'Teaches?' It was what he was supposed to do. Her voice made him wonder. 'It's never too late!' she said, smiling in a way she'd got from her mother, and he knew she saw him with the eye of amusement. 'I'm off to the gym now pop. Want me to put the next scene on?'

Disconcerted, for some reason he sensed he'd never locate, he said, 'No thanks. I ought to get back to what I was doing.' She got on her knees to pull her gym gear from under the bed, somehow conveying that her sense of humour had him in its sights, and that she wouldn't say what she was thinking. It was only when was in front of his assignments again that it came to him that the time in her room had been to his day the same insertion that the buffoon's realisation about himself had been in the music.

He looked at the top assignment. A boring student. He went outside, and saw his daughter on her bicycle, turning the corner at the end of their street. She'll be with me a few more months, Stephen thought, then she'll be off to the US; a new phase of her life will have begun, and one of mine will have ended. Parenting would be over. We go through one phase after another until there are no more left, then we make our exit. The only evidence that he'd ever lived would be a couple of biographies, papers published here and there, notes for lectures, those that weren't thrown away, and his existence in the memories of those he'd known: it wasn't a lot, and the memories were the most evanescent of all. He, for instance, remembered many people, but most of them were archived in his mind rather than flames in his imagination. Eight or ten people, perhaps, truly lived on, so important had they been to him. He went inside and made a list. No sooner had he written it than he dropped it in the bin; the city's garbage truck would bury it in a tip, like most of the world's memories. Historians are bent on reconstructing, though they know, as fallible if not failed mortals, that only the egotistical and the peacock-vain actually want to be sculpted in memory. Most are content to vanish.

When he went inside he sat by the box in the bedroom where he kept photos. On top of the pile was a group taken on a beach, beaming at a camera. The person who pushed the button had had six seconds to get into the picture; the camera had started to lean, the group, arms around each other, swayed with the lens, laughed as the button-pusher ran to the wrong end of the group, then cheered as he flung himself in front, out of focus. None of them were really sharp, but memory supplied what

he wanted when he looked at the slim young woman who'd been the first lover of his life. The attraction had sprung up at the beginning of the stay; then, as the rest of the group went home, a break-up that took days, they'd become more certain. They'd delayed their sexual conjunction until they were on their own, though that had caused something to happen. The last of the other campers had driven away, he and this first love were clinging to each other when a car came into their clearing. It was the people who'd just gone, back for something left behind. Stephen remembered pushing his face around the flap of the tent to see two laughing people tossing whatever it was into the back of their car, saw them slam their doors and drive off honking the horn in a riotous comment on what they'd interrupted. Barp barp! Baaaaaaaaarrrrp! He remembered that it had taken time before the two of them had re-centred themselves in the privacy of what they were doing. It was hard not to think of themselves being talked about, studied as the future couple they never became.

I might have married her, Stephen thought, though God knows what sort of life we'd have had. It's a path I didn't take. Where is she now?

He sometimes saw her face in newspapers, microphone in hand, addressing groups about environmental disasters that were ruining the world ... she said: she'd always been excessive, he thought, then looked further into his box. He glanced only briefly at the next pitfall, as he thought of it: this was the love of his life whose arrival had caused him to split with his wife; they'd agreed to live the rest of their lives together, he and this new partner, but she broke the arrangement, the promise, and stayed, however reluctantly, with the husband she'd been quick to despise whenever he'd come into their conversations. I'm where I am today because of you, Stephen said, burying the photo deep in images of other people, other pasts.

He put the lid on the box. It was, in its way, his history of himself, his reminders, nothing out of the ordinary to any casual observer, of moments, people, passions ... In some ways it negated history as people like himself wrote it, because it concentrated the observer's mind on moments that had been precious, however fleetingly, and that was not

the same as being significant in the telling of any tale except the one that mattered to most of us: how did I feel, how did I experience what was happening? The poetry of such thoughts could flash across historical narrative like flame in darkness, but only briefly. The saga went on regardless of the surging emotions of those being swallowed by events, constrained by forces they all too often didn't understand. Insofar as I'm a historian, he told himself, I'm impersonal: that means I make a career out of denying what I feel most deeply about the lives that have intersected with mine.

It was a problem that lay at the heart of him, and he'd long known that one of the reasons he enjoyed his university work was that it allowed him to slip away from the personal. He often criticised himself for avoiding something when he wrote: if he were describing a movement, he would want to know where it had begun, how high it had grown, what it had swept away, what it had left behind. That was history. People were interested, but if it was a wave that had moved through their lives, what they wanted was to know where they had been in the moment being described.

He thought of the music his daughter had played him: *Quand ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk ...*, a moment of personal truth in a narrative that any number of people could tell in as many ways: did we use scholarship only to verify these interpretations against each other, or to locate where the narrative had got to when the moment of illumination arrived? He knew, in the moment of posing the question, that his answer would always be 'Both!', and that it had never satisfied him, and it was why he was troubled by the recurring question.

He was sitting in the garden when his daughter came back from the gym. 'Having a lazy day, are we? I'll bet you haven't finished yet!' She said she'd make coffee: 'drugs to get you started!' He felt listless against her vigour; she did everything briskly. What it was to be free of doubt. When she brought the coffee, she said, 'What's eating you, pop? You're worried about something.' He was. It seemed beyond saying. 'You need to make a trip,' his daughter said. 'Go somewhere new, get yourself going.' He nodded, knowing he'd do nothing until new energy sought

him out. 'I haven't done enough with my life,' he said, 'and if I go on the way I've been going the last ...' he stopped to think '... thirteen years, I'll get to the end and find I haven't done anything worthwhile. I'd like to do better than that, but it isn't easy to see how to do it. Sorry to be so boring, but that's what's on my mind. Reading assignments, though I've got to do it eventually, makes me worse.'

His daughter gave him the advice she'd have liked to hear. 'Take the day off. Say fuck it, I'm not a slave, go for a drive. Don't come back till you feel good about it.'

He laughed. 'What if you never saw me again? I stayed away?'

'I'd be sad. I'd miss you, pop, but if I thought you were renewing yourself, and feeling great about it, I'd say good on you. Go for it. Don't come back till you want to. That's what I'd say.'

'Good advice, darling. I won't take it, but in another way, I will. I have to start a new journey while I stay in the same spot.'

She wondered why people got quirrier as they grew older. 'Not possible. You need to set out the alternatives, go for the best. It's as simple as that. Make up your mind and go for it!'

He said, 'Yes, that's the way to do things when you're young. But when you're not, and the reason why you became what you are today has run out of energy, you have to suffer ... languish, I think I mean ... until you see your way forward. I've looked at the past for so long it's hard to look into the future.'

She saw what he meant but didn't want any part of it. 'I'll leave you with it. I'm going into the city now, there's a couple of sales on.' A minute later she was gone, and he was at his desk, studying pages that interested him very little. He had a scheme for marking beside the pile, and he applied it carefully, telling himself that he must be able to function on one level while his mind searched for its salvation somewhere else.

He settled into the job, and was near the bottom of the pile when *Falstaff* re-entered his mind; he realised he couldn't actually sing, or whistle, the part that had caught his attention, and wanted to go to his daughter's room, but restrained himself. What was it he wanted? It was something about music that seemed to promise an answer. *Quand*

ero paggio ... It was as fast as the mind, and could flit anywhere in the universe of thought. What was an aria? That was what he wanted to know. No, there was something else. How did an aria fit in? A story was in the process of being told, and then the feelings, the hopes and desires that were being pushed aside by the swift movement of narration resumed control, stopped the story, and held time tied-up, trapped and still, so that feeling could express itself in song. Then, the world being the yin/yan place that it was, feeling stepped back so that story could rush forward, but story, from time to time, would give space for passion. Occasionally, if the composer had genius, the two could advance together, the opposing forces allied, and time itself, and endlessly approaching death, could be made the enemies. That was when humanity was most in touch with itself as it faced the inevitabilities bearing it away. When it's gone, Stephen told himself, when we're dust, in will come the historians, undertakers and revivalists, givers of comfort and those who make sure there is none, because all they can do is tell stories, and it's the nature of story to bring back something that's been ended for years, and the imagination, the mind, re-runs the story before letting the past vanish all over again.

I'd like to tell a story so that it was full of great arias, Stephen told himself, but what do I do? He looked around his room. Filing cabinets, shelves from floor to ceiling. More recently, a drawer full of disks from his computer, a few pencilled words naming their contents. He thought of his daughter telling him she'd accept his absence if she thought he was bringing himself back with an answer. How could he do it? Live in song? He forced himself into the papers until the last had been read, and comment written. I'm free, he told himself, and it's no better than being a slave because I don't know what to do with my freedom.

What freedom? He thought of all he had to do. Lectures, papers, meetings. Policy reviews. Reading, simply to keep up. In the course he was teaching he had his lectures no more than ninety per cent prepared; the only way to keep them fresh was to take a new angle each year, and the way to do this was to ask new questions of his material. He had to shape what he knew to the needs of an answer, and new things had

to be found. And there was his talk. His students gave papers in their tutorials and he demanded the same of himself; the same that wasn't the same, because, for all they knew, he might have repeated the talk for years. But he hadn't. He'd made it a rule to base his class paper on what was troubling or puzzling him most, so that he was struggling like his students. Sometimes it amused him to do this, and sometimes it was easy, once he put his mind to it. This year, he sensed, was going to be hard. The disquiet he'd partly revealed to his daughter was deep, and he didn't want it in view. It was painfully personal, but where it touched the surface of a publicly owned historical account, he couldn't be sure. I always said I'd search myself, he recalled, because I wanted never to become complacent, so I decided to compare myself with my students, every year.

This year would be no different from any other; only harder.

What would he talk about this time?

An idea came to him that made him groan. He took himself into the garden again and sat to think. The continent was big enough to have any number of minor countries, but it had six states, and they'd federated. Everyone took it for granted, but why had its evolution taken it this way? He could see the ramifications stretching in all directions. Why hadn't there been a Dutch settlement? A French? How important were explorers, filling in the blanks of maps? How different were the acts of the British parliament, setting up the states? Why weren't the transportation states, particularly New South Wales and Tasmania, radically different from the others? He saw at once the assumption underlying *that* question, that the transportees had been criminal while the slapdash and often brutal occupiers of other places were possessed of commercial virtue! He groaned again, then laughed. The thing was too big, but maybe he could find somewhere to start. He could almost hear himself explaining to his students the steps he'd taken and the decisions taking him to those steps. It'll sound logical, he told himself, as if I always knew what I was doing when in fact if I do something well I'm satisfied, not to say smug, and if it gets too much for me I'm in despair. I feel wretched and wish I'd never come near the thing. That's the full

truth and if I were talking about historical method I'd be saying that one should always be striving for the most complete version of events that evidence can support.

He rather wished his daughter hadn't gone off. He thought of ringing someone, but settled for taking the assignments back to his university. Travelling in, he realised how habitual his days had become - the thing his daughter had warned him against. His individuality was being lost. The trouble is, he thought, I've nothing to give, except a few skills in historical method, and they were the worst of his trap because they were his meal-ticket; without them he'd have to rediscover himself, start again. There's no escape, he thought. Going down the gurgler, and not even calling for help!

As he got out of the lift, he noticed someone at his door, knocking. It was Tung Li, who taught in Foreign Languages, and had adopted him as a giver of advice. He wanted to step back into the lift because she'd been pressing lately. She kept telling him about visa difficulties with her government and it hovered around her discussions that marriage to a local would give her residential rights. Stephen never went past the restaurants in the city where they dangled ducks from hooks without thinking of her unstated claim. 'Tung Li, good morning. There's no one there. He's just arrived.'

She turned. 'I thought you would arrive. I know your habits by now!'

He pulled his keys from his pocket. 'I've been cursing myself as a creature of habit. Don't remind me of that side of myself.'

'In my country we do many things to fend off bad fortune. You say you curse yourself. That is dangerous. Where you criticise, others may follow!'

'They wouldn't find much that I didn't already know. That's the problem! If we get to know ourselves too well, I mean.'

'If you want your life to be different, you must make decisive change!'

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. 'Go ahead, Tung Li.' She went in, but remained standing. He put his assignments on the desk

and sat in his chair. 'Sit down, Tung Li. I'll make us a cup of tea ...' Staying as she was, she asked, 'What are you going to do for the rest of the day?'

'Heavens, I haven't looked that far ahead! Record some marks, read my mail, do a bit of work ...' He knew the indecision was alluring to her.

'Let us drink tea in the Staff Club. You will be my guest today.'

A bit rich, he thought, since he'd been a member for years. Then he thought of the differences between himself and Tung Li with regard to private and public spaces. She wanted to display him as a companion. Formality was something she could manage better than the abrupt, decisive thrusts of honesty and perception that happened naturally in his room. 'Let's do that. But we mustn't be more than an hour. I really have to get some things done.'

She knew that it was an imposition. She'd been given an hour. An hour, then. So be it!

In the Staff Club he sat down while she went to give their order. Looking at her from behind, he perceived that he was passive in a situation she'd made, and that he didn't like things that way. Was that why women were wary and non-committal? They were used to being circled by males? He hoped never to reoffend. Tung Li came back. 'They will bring it over. They say it will not be long.' She looked at him brightly, then looked around. There was a reasonable number of people in the club, though it was far from crowded. 'I have been thinking of my homeland,' she said. 'I dare say it's looming,' Stephen said. 'At the end of the year, is it not?'

'Unless something intervenes on my behalf!'

It won't be me, he said to himself. 'What are you hoping for?'

'The university wishes to attract fee-paying students from Asia. Their approach is not subtle, however. It is necessary to draw wealthy people into advantageous relations. This requires knowledge of what will be desirable to the people the university wishes to attract.'

'Wheeling and dealing. It's been suggested before. It always gets back to guaranteeing places that the local population think belong to

them, or their kids. We've got a tradition in that regard. It's not a change that would gain acceptance here.'

'To make a change, it is best not to signal everything at the beginning. It is best to plan in stages, and each stage has a benefit for the local people. When the transition is complete, they are happy too. There are signs that they have accepted!'

He was puzzled by her brightness. 'What? Sorry, did I not understand?'

She was pleased to explain; it drew him in to her thinking. 'Both sides must gain advantage. You say *win-win situation*.' She thought this amusing. 'For the university, there is the advantage in the world marketplace of possessing a more varied student body. And! There is the benefit of a new building, or facilities it would not have had otherwise. Every three or four years, maybe two, there is a headline benefit. The transition proceeds slowly. People grow used to the changes.' She's as hard as nails, Stephen thought. This is her career line; what does she want from me? Something specific, or am I only a sounding board before she takes her plan elsewhere? It came to him as she developed her ideas. She wanted him to look at each step in her plan and anticipate resistance; she kept talking about 'learning by recollection'. 'You're in the wrong part of the university,' he said. 'You need to be in Overseas Development.' She was ready for this. 'If I go there, it will be to lead. Not to manage, you understand. If people think I am coming to manage, they will resist. It is the idea that wins the day. That is what I want to take with me when I move.'

He felt a grudging respect. 'Well, Tung Li, I could certainly cast an eye over anything you care to put down as a plan. I'm between books at the moment, I've got some time. But that won't last. I'll get a new project up and running pretty soon.' He tried to look seriously productive. She was curious. 'Another book? What will your work illuminate this time?'

He winced at her choice of word. 'I don't think I'd claim to illuminate much. I should have the drive and energy you've got! Ah ... if you

don't mind, I'm not really ready to say just yet. I'll let you know, though, when my plans have firmed up.'

He knew she knew it was bullshit. 'Any new project from you will be most interesting. Please speak to me regularly. We have much to talk about!'

Going back to his room, he decided that his daughter had been right. It was time he disappeared. Surprised himself. What the hell could he do?

Before he sat down at his desk, he closed the door, letting it lock. Only Tung Li knew he was there. He was alone. 'What the hell,' he asked himself, 'do I want?' He shook his head. He wrote it down. 'What do I want?' He wrote beneath it, 'What am I truly interested in?' That wasn't right either. He wrote again. 'What do I want to know?' He looked at the wall, the window, the trees outside. He belonged, he knew, to the optimistic strand of his country's life - those who believed that their nation need not repeat the horrors committed elsewhere. 'Our land is superior,' he wrote. 'How did this come about?' It struck him that to answer the question he would have to write a general history of the country. Nothing else would do. He might begin with articles, papers and talks, but those partial efforts would need to be put together if he was to make the statement that his life demanded, and which would, in turn, demand the rest of his life.

He thought of his daughter. Tears came to his eyes. If I can do it, he told himself, I'll have done something worth handing on. There is a difference, he saw, between one's descendants loving and one's descendants being proud of those from whom they'd received their life.

'Life is more than the individual,' he wrote. 'It forces its way into us and through us, and it leaves us behind.' Suddenly he felt at peace with his former wife, and the love of his life who'd left him. How could he feel let down unless he'd expected something too great for another to give? My gift will be the book I'll write, he decided. I'll plan it now.

He took the pad. For a moment he felt the nation looking over his shoulder, then he knew he was fantasizing. People had not so much to be convinced as to recognise. The thoughts put before them were

already inside them. He wrote. 'How to know what will eventuate when a move is taken? Can we know beforehand? No. Why not?' Good enough for a chapter, he told himself. He put 1. next to it, then wrote firmly 2.

'The condition of the continent at the moment of invasion,' he wrote. 'The search for a way of judging, without racial bias, the ecology of that condition. The impossibility of making such a judgment from within a capitalist economy which doesn't bother to include in its costs the things it doesn't want to recognise.' This pleased him, though he knew he was biting off a lot. He wrote 3. beneath what he'd written.

'The impulse in Europeans to go beyond themselves, to explore, capture, achieve the impossible. To change, to improve. To drive humanity forward. The glory, the wonder, of this, and its costs, its shame.' He added the word 'imperialism', then the phone rang at the side of his desk. He looked at it as if it had caught him in a crime. Who was it? Nobody knew he was in his office, he needn't answer. His pen fell out of his fingers and he knew he'd been made suddenly weak. He lifted the receiver.

'Stephen Macfarlan.'

It was the Dean. 'Ah, Stephen, I didn't know if I'd find you there.'

'I haven't been in long.'

'Right. Good. I wonder if you could pop up and have a word with me. Pretty well straight away, if you don't mind.'

'Of course.'

'I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Have you got anyone with you?'

'Nobody with me, Alan. Interrupting?' He looked at his notes. 'Nothing that I can't get on with, later.'

'Excellent. See you shortly then.'

He put the phone down. He knew his Dean's ways. Calls like this signalled that an order was about to be given, or a change made. Alan liked to catch people unawares. And I, Stephen thought, am climbing at this moment into a new awareness which I will share with anybody who'll listen, or read. The world's changed since the last general history

was written. Questions have died in people's minds and others have replaced them. Contemporary understanding puts its faith in an endless present, supported by carefully chosen snippets arranged to support the rhetoric of the day. Feeling resentful of his Dean, Stephen wrote 4. and added his latest thoughts, then, leaving his pen on the table, he left the room, letting the door lock behind him.

Alan Borridge, the Dean, was in good humour. He waved at a chair, pulled a submission closer. 'Something's come up which gives us an opportunity.' Stephen didn't like the pronoun. He raised his brows as if to say 'Ah?'

'Economics and Commerce are planning to set up an institute attached to their faculty, but they want representation from us. Especially in the setting up phase. They're quite clear that they want an arts perspective, specifically an historical perspective, in the creation of the thing.'

He wants to detach me from his faculty, Stephen saw, to join whatever it is. What's he got against me? How have I been a nuisance, a thorn in the side, to this man?

'What's the institute to focus on?'

'Globalisation. It's a good choice, I think. And it does belong with that faculty, though they're right, we should certainly play a part.'

Stephen felt his interest stirring. 'The history of Australia since white settlement,' Alan went on, 'is a study of early globalisation. It's interesting to see,' he went on, 'that our friends in Economics don't seem to know when it starts.' He tapped their submission. 'I should think it comes into being, at least potentially, when humans got it into their heads that maybe the earth was a ball!' He smiled, pleased with himself. 'Do you agree?'

Stephen considered, then said, 'Yes, that's where I'd start, I suppose. I can't off the top of my head think of any reason to go further back.'

'No. Our own history - our *whitefeller* history - is not, then, by any means the only local vantage point from which to view the progress of globalisation, but it's certainly, I should think, as good as any other. Indeed, an immersion in how the process has happened here, and is still

happening, would make an excellent starting point for the consideration of other countries. Distance, small population - the things that condemn us to unimportance - become advantages, I feel.' He was looking at Stephen, judging his level of acceptance.

'You're suggesting, I think, that I should represent our faculty in this new institute? If it gets off the ground?'

'I am. We can't vouch for its success, but it ought - *ought* - to produce lots to influence our own courses. A shot in the arm! Each and every arm, I rather think! Can I take it that the idea has some interest for you?'

The moment was vital. Stephen knew he had to be wary. He'd be at the mercy of whatever the other faculty wanted their institute to do. He mightn't be listened to at all. He might be entrusting himself to a slippery slide which ended far from where he wanted to be. 'It's certainly interesting, there's no denying that. And it's very timely, because thinking globally is something we have to train ourselves to do. Thus far, it's good. I need to consider, though, what it's likely to do to my work over the next few years. I was making the first notes for a new book when you rang. Attractive and interesting as the idea is, you see, I need to retrace my thoughts and see if the two are in harmony. Or the reverse.'

Alan stood up. 'Of course. Take the submission, have a look at it. See what sort of part you feel you could play. The others would be the directing influence, we know that, but you'd have a guiding role. They'd have to listen if they want to keep it as a joint operation ... well, not joint, but something pretty close to it.' A minute later Stephen was back in his office and the notes he'd been writing lay under the three hundred page submission which his Dean wanted him to accept as his future. Though he tried to read carefully, he found himself suspicious; he was excited, he wanted it, yet his instincts told him to be careful, that Alan was a salesman, that the other faculty wouldn't offer more than token interest to anything of his. He'd been bored, and rusty, he'd been offered a way out, it was a chance to renew himself ...

Yet he wanted to hold back.

He forced himself to concentrate. He lifted a pencil to underline things, then put it down, not wanting to let Alan have a path into his mind. Let him wait. He searched the submission's pages. There was nothing to say when it had been released. It could have been on Alan's desk for weeks until the Dean thought the time was right. And he'd been clever, Stephen saw; he'd hit him at exactly the most vulnerable, most accepting moment.

He wanted to ring Alan, and say, 'It's just what I've been looking for. Let's get working on it!' but forced himself to go through the thing carefully, looking for hints, traces, signs that gave away underlying thoughts.

By the time he'd skimmed through the submission, his uncertainty had deepened. The business faculty saw globalisation largely in terms of fortunes to be made, and the legal and organisational developments to make this happen. He scorned their unhistoric approach, but that, he knew, was for him to provide and, if possible, impose. His faculty, they'd say, had been asked. They'd also say that he didn't have the luxury of criticising later on; why hadn't he come in at the outset, and contributed?

Why not, indeed?

He took himself home, and found his house empty. Anna was still in the city, or wherever she'd gone after that. He tried to remember what he'd been doing at her age, and found it hard. Had he come straight back after visits to the city? He couldn't remember. Had he met friends, or made new friends, on outings like Anna's that morning? He couldn't remember. It seemed to him that if he couldn't recall his own history then trying to discover that of others was perilously uncertain. Globalisation: did he want what he'd been offered, yes or no? A thought occurred to him. A book. Where was it? He wanted to start at the start. He searched the shelves until he found it. *The history of Australia, it began, is a chapter in the history of migration. Until comparatively recent times, the great majority of its European inhabitants had come to it from elsewhere ...*

Stephen felt a deep sense of relief. Something had been localised, found. He had his springboard. This same springboard had given him his start, when he'd been a student himself, quoted in the first lecture he'd attended. *The seven seas may divide the migrant from his homeland, but he will never quite shake its dust from his feet. Colonial settlements were not, therefore, completely new communities beginning from nothing. Their people brought with them much invisible luggage, the known ways and the familiar ideas and institutions of another world.*

His fingers were twitching with the urge to set down his own assumptions and questions. The book was a statement of where he'd begun, and he'd moved on. In its way, what he was reading anticipated this.

Nevertheless, to migrate is to be uprooted, to be compelled to adjust old habits and assumptions to new circumstances. Because the circumstances are different from the homeland, one finds in all colonial societies a mixture of conservative habit and innovation. For where the new condition does not force adjustment, the migrant clings to his accustomed ways with all the force of the exile, even though those same ways may have grown old-fashioned with the passing times in his former home. But this nostalgic conservative must also be an improviser, to meet the challenge of unfamiliar conditions.

The argument allowed itself a new paragraph.

The most unfamiliar condition that confronted our forefathers was the land itself.

Stephen looked to the shelves on the wall, but decided he didn't need an atlas. The wide country spread itself in his mind. Then the phone rang. Anna, he thought, she's staying at a friend's. He picked it up.

'Congratulations!' He knew the voice, but for a moment he didn't know whose it was. Then he recovered.

'Tung Li?'

'I hear you are moving on to big new things!'

'Yes and no. Maybe. I haven't decided yet. How did you hear about it?'

'Someone saw you going into the Dean's office, and they knew a decision was to be made today.'

‘Someone?’ He was asking who. She grew cautious. ‘Someone who has been waiting. Watching for a development.’

‘Well, that someone is ahead of me because I barely knew about it until today. Some months ago I heard Economics and Commerce were looking at the idea, then it dropped out of sight and I thought no more about it.’

‘It has arrived on your doorstep.’ She used the vernacular, as always, with a wicked sense of satire. ‘My doorstep,’ he said. ‘Yes, well that’s as far as it’s got. I told Borridge I’d think about it.’ She said, as if explaining the obvious to someone who needed it explained, ‘He’s a clever man.’

Stephen repeated, ‘I haven’t made up my mind!’ He wondered if this was true. He knew his daughter would urge him to take something new. ‘What do you think about it? What would you do if you were in my position?’

She said, with a frankness and openness that touched him, ‘I would have no choice. This is not my country. I must pick up what is put before me.’

He saw that she was hoping he’d accept the offer, and then find her a role in the new institute. She’d thought far more about globalisation than he had. She was senior to him in the area, but had to watch as her ‘junior’ was offered what she wanted for herself. ‘It must be hard for you, Tung Li. It’s very good of you to ring. Though I must say the bush telegraph is working overtime if the word’s out already. The fact is, though, I haven’t made up my mind. Something else happened today. I decided it was time I wrote a new book, something that people are scared of tackling, namely a new general history of the country. Most of us like to burrow away out of sight, then bring something new to the surface once in a while. If you do a general history, though, every aspect of your work is on display, and boy, do you cop it!’

Tung Li said simply, ‘Write your general history as a history of globalisation. You can make this country your case study. That way, you write your book and Economics and Commerce get ... what do you say? ... a *free kick!*’ At another time she would have laughed, but Stephen

could hear she was close to tears. ‘Tung Li!’ he called, and he knew he was calling to her from parts of his being that had been quiescent since he’d been in love, ‘I know what you’re saying to me, believe me I do! I’ll have to make up my mind first! If I decide to take the thing, you’ll be the first to know. That I promise! I can’t give you any more at the moment. It’s not mine to give, as yet.’ She said nothing. He imagined her eyes looking down, lacking their lustre, the eyes of a miserable woman wondering when the lottery would give her a prize. ‘It’s been good of you to ring. It makes me realise what I’d like to forget, that there are other people watching events, wanting something from them, which means that those at the centre need to be quick. Decisive.’ He would have gone on, but she cut in. ‘I rang only to congratulate you. I have done this. I say goodbye now. I will see you again soon.’

She was gone. He felt shaken by the call. Tung Li didn’t have much. She lived her life on hopes. He moved back to his study, feeling that he’d been separated from his thoughts of a few minutes earlier. The land, he said to himself. What does he say about the land? He read the book that had given him his start. He found it moving because it had about it the air of belief long held, though hard-won. Globalisation, Stephen thought; it’s not the same as imperialism. The latter is a subset, an early version, of the former. What is globalisation? We can’t know yet, because the process is far from complete. My book, he saw, will report on a work in progress. How will I start?

He glanced at the notes he’d written earlier that day. Already they looked unsatisfactory. Won’t do, he thought. How shall I start? He stood up, walked around. He went into the garden and sat where his daughter had found him when she came back from the gym. Then he heard the phone ring again. There she is, he told himself. This’ll be Anna.

It was Alan Borridge, his Dean. ‘Stephen! Sorry to bother you. When I gave you that submission earlier today, I thought we had time for a patient, thoughtful consideration of the issues. Unfortunately, that’s no longer the case. The word’s buzzing around our faculty, everybody knows about it. Economics and Commerce are mightily displeased.

They didn't want it to hit the air waves so soon. They wanted the whole thing worked out in detail so they could go public with a fully planned project!

Stephen could tell from the energy in Alan's voice that he was going to be asked for a decision there and then. He said, 'How did it get out?'

'I was going to ask the same thing.'

'I haven't told anybody. Not even my daughter. She's not home yet. I've had my head in other matters. I wasn't aware that people were nosing around, trying to find out what was happening.'

'Well, they've found out. So ...'

'You need an answer. Quickly. Right. I'll be in your office at nine in the morning, ready to say yes or no. That all right?'

He knew that Alan had wanted an answer there and then, but he could hear him accepting. 'I suppose that'll do. I'll let our colleagues know they'll have an answer by quarter past nine. If you do accept, by the way, they'll be using you twenty four hours a day for the first few weeks because they'll want to get everything to the stage where they can announce it the way they'd like to do. So be prepared for a heavy schedule.' Stephen would have spoken, but his Dean was rushing on. 'So! Nine o'clock. I look forward to seeing you!' The phone went dead.

And he's contacting Economics and Commerce at nine-fifteen! Alan's mind is made up, all I have to do is accept. Stephen smirked; he had an idea he'd accepted. He wanted to go back to his notes, but his head was swirling. He went to the garden, and was sitting there, glass of red in hand, when his daughter came around the corner of the house.

'Hi pop! Had a day off, did we?'

He laughed. 'It's actually been a memorable day. I've only been here half a minute.'

It was her turn to laugh. 'That's your story.' He told her how he'd decided to undertake a new book, and how, on top of that, he'd been offered a change of job.

'Sounds good. Can you do both?'

‘I suppose so. I’ll be flat out on globalisation for a while, if I take it. That’ll slacken eventually though, I hope.’

‘What do you mean, *if*? Of course you’re going to take it. Aren’t you?’

‘It’s very attractive. It’s come at a good time. But something in me’s suspicious, and there’s resistance in there, somewhere.’

She was scornful. ‘Resistance! Put it out of your mind!’ She saw that he didn’t want to be rushed, that he wanted to be a cautious animal, sniffing around for the trap that might be concealed. ‘Really, dad. Seriously.’ The change in the way she addressed him had its effect; he said, ‘You aren’t as aware as I am of the games they play to shift people they’re not comfortable with. And sometimes they play these tricks for no reason other than they’re manipulative people who love to move people around and they don’t feel normal unless they’re doing it.’

She studied him. ‘What’s this new book? What’s it going to be about?’

‘A history of the country seen from a particular point of view.’

‘Which is?’

‘A huge place with a small population which, to survive, has to move in accord with forces in the wider world, initially England, but later ...’

She butted in. ‘Isn’t that what they’re asking you to work on? Your Dean and the other faculty?’

‘Quite close to it. They’re certainly capable of integration.’

She flicked her hair. ‘Game, set and match! Grab it! Who’s going to make a better offer?’ He smiled slyly. She knew she’d made him decide. ‘Go on, dad. You can’t give me a single reason why it’s not a good thing.’

‘No, I can’t. And part of me feels the same as you do. The other part? I’m cautious, that’s all, because I’ve seen some pretty smart tricks pulled on people in my time.’

‘Pull a few yourself, then, if you need to protect yourself. You must have learned how to make trouble for people by now. If you haven’t, what the hell have you been doing all these years?’ They both laughed.

‘As a matter of fact,’ he said, ‘you’ve given me an idea. You remember Tung Li?’

She didn’t at first; he reminded her. ‘Oh yeah, the Chinese woman. The go-getter that never gets’em! Don’t let her marry you pop! I don’t want her around the house!’

‘Fear not! I wasn’t planning to take her on as a ... what do they say? ... companion! But I know she’d love to get in on a thing like this.’

‘Is she any good?’

‘Smart. Interested in the area. Knows more about it than I do. I’ll have to look at their submission a bit more closely, but if they want someone as a day to day manager they couldn’t do better than Tung Li. Though they might have one of their own picked out already.’

‘Nose around, pop. They probably don’t want someone outside bossing them round. But maybe, once they get started, they could call for expressions of interest. That’d be her chance, if she’s as smart as you think.’

He accepted this. ‘You’re right. But I also think that if I’m to make something of it for her, it’ll be right at the start. In the terms of my acceptance. In other words, you can have three quarters of my time so long as you let me have an assistant to do the things I haven’t time to do. Something like that.’ He looked at his daughter, who was appraising him scornfully. ‘Dad,’ she said, swinging back to more formal address, ‘don’t you see what you’re doing? You’re planning to take this job so you can hand it over to Tung Li. You don’t really want it, for some reason. Or you feel you’re not allowed to have it while there’s somebody that wants it more. You’d say she needs it more. Whatever. And I’m saying, it’s there in front of you, it’s been offered to you, not anybody else, so clutch it in your hot little hands and do not let it go! If you want to help Tung Li, wait till a real opportunity comes along, and tell her about it. The rest will be up to her. She’s smart, you said. Now, next thing. Why are you so keen to help her? Because she’s alone. You feel for her. Why? Because you’re alone. You haven’t got mum, you haven’t got ...’ She knew he never named the passion of his life. ‘So you feel for her. It’s because you move onto her the pity you can’t help feeling for yourself.’

Get rid of that shit, dad! Work out what's in your own best interest and go for it, okay!' She said it with surprising vehemence, and he knew she was right. 'Thanks darling. You've convinced me. I'm going to do just what you say.'

'Are you going to ring your Dean now?' It was her next requirement.

'No. I said I'd see him at nine in the morning. If I do anything else he'll think it's a trick, a manipulation of some sort.'

She knew enough about the academic world from her years in his house. 'That'd be really new!'

'I'll keep things simple at this stage. Are you having dinner with me? I'll get something on in a minute.' But it was Anna who got the dinner that night because shortly after their conversation he took himself back to his room and started writing. He decided to keep the notes he'd written during the day; they'd be interesting to look back on when the project was complete. And he'd found what he was going to offer his tutorial group; he'd give them the opening chapter of the 1952 book, then he'd give them his own introduction, and they could compare: a history of a history; a tale of two stories. This pleased him.

He was busy for days. He gave out the 1952 chapter in a lecture and asked everyone to read it. 'You'll have to wait till Thursday for mine. I'm still working on it.' He went through heaps of folders to remind himself. He tried to break it into chapters, he went for long walks. Finally he decided there was no more preparation to do, he could only start. He'd started before, but this time he knew there was no way back. What he said committed him.

On the morning of the tutorial he entered the room a little earlier than usual. Most of the group were there - Brigitte, Danny, Sam. Karl, with his rivalrous air, Max, Becky. Lou, Neville, Elly. Marthe was there, indolently waiting, then Ti Chai, Angela and Kramme came in. 'That's everybody I think.' Stephen acknowledged Kramme closing the door. Looking around, he said, 'What I'm going to give you can be compared with what I handed out on Monday. It's by way of demonstrating that historical inquiry is determined by what you set out to do. There's

nothing remarkable about that. Everyone knows that if we stand in the middle of a town and walk in different directions, we'll see different things. And when we get together to compare these differences, we'll find there've been commonalities too. So some agreement can be reached, but there'll be areas of disputation as well. These are perhaps the most interesting of all.' He paused. They'd heard him on this before, and most of them were glancing at what he'd given them. 'This is yours, Stephen?' Becky asked. 'It is.' She looked at him as if he had changed by offering something written. 'Is this the beginning of a book?'

'It is.'

This aroused interest. Several of them were looking at him, or turning to the end to see how many pages there were. Angela said, 'How long's it going to take you?'

'Weeks to sketch it,' Stephen said. 'A couple of years, I expect, to fill it in. Check things, make it solid.'

'A couple of years!' Danny winced as if being forced to swallow something. 'I wouldn't know where I was going to be in a couple of years. I couldn't start a thing like that.'

'Well,' Stephen said. 'It's my job. Let's make a start, shall we? I'm going to read because I want to make a few corrections. If you want to say something, break in. It's okay.' He took up the top page, and began.

'Earlier writers on Australia have seen it as a creation of the British Empire. That this is so is obvious. The steady development in the country of an outlook, a character, of its own, has been a matter of considerable pride, celebrated in expressions such as 'the march to nationhood' or 'the end of innocence'. The creation of empires by the European powers, and the moves to gain or regain independence by the subject territories, have for long been discussed under the heading of imperialism. Again, the relevance is obvious. However it is becoming clearer today that what was known as imperialism was an early stage of something far more powerful, which we discuss today under a different banner, that of globalisation. This is more than the exchange of one word for another.'

Stephen looked up, then resumed. 'An empire has a centre, and a dominant culture. It exerts an hegemony over everything it controls. It exports its political and legal systems, sciences, arts, and above all, its language, hence its way of thinking. For much of Australia's history its citizens have celebrated the benefits, as they saw them, of what was brought from Britain to the other side of the world, and have alternately welcomed or struggled against the influence of the United States, which replaced Britain as the world power.'

'Globalisation, however, is a very different matter. Let us take time to consider the meaning of this term, and its origins, if we can find them.' Stephen said, 'I'll skip the origins; can we jump two paragraphs, please?'

'In a pre-globalised world, people were aware of themselves, and to some extent of their neighbours, but the worlds they knew were very different. To see the obviousness of this it is only necessary to compare island dwellers with desert people. Today, anyone in a desert knows that somewhere there is an island, while the islander, looking up from fishing, knows that there are deserts beyond the water. There will always be differentials of power, with some places more influential than others, but knowledge at least is shared. In the age of empires, imperialists applied a range of terms to those they conquered, among them being ignorant, primitive, barbarian, savage, et cetera. Contempt for the allegedly inferior is hardly likely to disappear, but in a globalised world, knowledge is available to all. The black man with a spear knows, today, what the equivalent of a rifle - a screaming, missile-laden jet, for example - can do, and may decide that to negotiate, to build alliances, is more cunning than to fight.'

'This may seem a strange way to approach the history of a country,' Stephen said, pausing to see if anyone wanted to comment, 'but it will soon be seen that this approach creates, or leads to, an account of developments on our land somewhat different from those that have been written before. More specifically, Australian history in the age of empire, or even of empires, will be discussed from the perspective of the interaction

of the local as well as that of the invader; the lesser will have a voice equal to - where the knowledge exists to support it - the greater.'

'Impossible,' Max said. 'You're contradicting the nature of an imperial hegemony, which is to wipe out the existing way of seeing things.' He looked at Stephen, challenge in his eye.

Stephen took him up on this. 'Even if we no longer know the language or the customs of a group that have been wiped out, it's still something to say that they existed. I don't know if you've ever seen the effect of a picture removed from a wall. The place where it was is lighter. You may not know what was there but you know something was there.'

They argued for some time, then Kramme asked Stephen to go on. He looked at his pages again. 'I'll jump to the bottom of page three. You can read the in between bit at your leisure. Here we go.'

'It is beyond the vision of this writer to know what the globalised world of a century hence will be like; it will certainly be different from anything we know today, except in one respect. There will still, surely, be a fruitful tension between the local and the almost- or fully-universal functions of humankind. The more widely any international company or authority operates, the more necessary it will be for it to gain strength - loyalty, perhaps - from a range of local cultures. The local will provide difference, the global will provide commonality. The local will always be a base, the global will provide movement. Airlines are a good example of this, operating everywhere, going to specific points where a service is called for.'

Stephen put his paper down and spoke to them directly. 'It's not common for historians to start by future-gazing, and I won't be surprised if you want to challenge this way of going about things, but I want to write a history which springs out of contemporary thought, by which I mean our situation today, and that is that we're in one -5world, we can pick and choose, people move from one place to another all the time, societies can cling to an old way of doing things or they can adopt another. It's truly an age of choice, an age of constant decision. How long will that continue? I don't know. But it's where we are, so, if I write an account of this country's tale, it had better be consistent with the way

its people think.’ He would have gone on, but half of the group were dying to have their say, and the argument was ready to begin.

- (1) When I was a page for the Duke of Norfolk, I was slender, subtle, fine, I was a floating mirage, delicate and light. Those were my greenest April days, the joyful May of my life. I was so lithe, slim and slender that you could have slipped me through a ring.

Quotation on pages 43 - 44 is from *Australia* by R. M. Crawford, Hutchinson University Library, London, 1952. Musical reference is to the duet between Alice and Falstaff in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Falstaff* (première 1893), by Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi.

Sam

‘If one of my men had done what I did,’ Sam said, ‘I’d have sacked him on the spot. I’d have told him you never get under an engine unless there’s somebody to winch it up if it falls. And you’re satisfied they know how to do it. Ah well.’ He rubbed his hip. ‘I had to pay for the lesson I learned. Some days are worse than this, that’s the only consolation.’ He looked at his tutor. ‘The night I spent under that thing was the longest night of my life, let me tell you. I wondered if it would ever end, or whether I’d end first.’ Stephen listened professionally, never having been near dangers of this sort. ‘It sounds awful.’ His student, the same age as he was, responded, ‘They say you shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Well, it wasn’t exactly a gift, but it brought me here.’ He glanced out the window at the university, its buildings, trees, and young people. ‘I never dreamed I’d come to a place like this. I was a trucky.’ The word was full of resonances which scarcely belonged in the room, but had evocative power. Their place of scholarship was surrounded by vast distances where other values, and forces unknown to scholars, swept through the air. ‘I’m a bit out of place,’ Sam said, ‘but I’ve got to make a new life. I’m lucky I’ve got goals to achieve. They keep me going.’

When he left the tutor’s room he walked, slowly, though it was one of his better days, to the library. Groups were lounging outside. He took himself to a table where he could look over the gardens. There was a statue which had been given a home by the university when its building had been torn down. ‘A bit like me,’ Sam thought. ‘There was nowhere else to dump it.’ This mood came over him in the library. The place was jammed with evidence of what had been done. You could even, if you had nothing better to do, read about past attempts to foretell the future. The bloody place, Sam thought, is like a cemetery, every book a slab. He

thought for the thousandth time of his decision to work on his truck on a Sunday night. The specialists had told him everything he needed to do to sustain his back if he wanted to keep out of the inevitable wheelchair. Recovery? They couldn't see it. Prolongation of mobility? Certainly - if he was careful.

He was careful. He was in the library, half dead. He hated it, because he hadn't found a way - yet, he told himself, desperation feeding his hopes - to turn what he was doing into life as he'd lived it for forty eight years. The mortuary, he called the place, reminding himself that only those who'd been written about were kept alive. The rest were forgotten; his fate unless he did something memorable.

He opened his folder. 'Recruitment and return of soldiers from the first world war.' He liked his tutor. Stephen had an objectivity that rested on judicial fairness. I can't fool him, Sam thought, therefore I won't try. He shuffled till he found his list of things to check. Questions, some to be answered, some to nag the edges of his mind long after the group had broken up. It seemed to Sam that tutors had one family after another, and as soon as they left, there was another to develop. I'm going to need a job eventually, he thought, I'd better get results!

He looked at the pile he'd pulled from the shelves. Stephen had told them to start with what interested them most, and to keep reminding themselves of what they still needed to know. He picked up two books about recruiting marches made by men from north-western New South Wales. He'd always assumed, when looking at monuments in the towns he'd driven through, that volunteers for the Great War had caught a train to the capital, to be loaded onto a ship. But it seemed that a number of groups had set off on crusades that stopped in every township, large or small, between their homes and Sydney, and had held meetings in these towns, persuading those in need of adventure, or challenge, to join them. He read, with a mixture of horror and admiration, of one of these parties passing a group of men doing some road-making, one of whom dropped his shovel, joined the marchers, and left his district, possibly forever. His life's direction had been changed in one impulsive moment. Sam went

downstairs and copied the page. He felt it had something to tell him; what, he didn't know.

Later that day he was in the kitchen when his wife came home. 'What sort of a day did you have?' she said to Sam, busy with beans and potatoes. 'Best I've had,' he said. 'Really good. Today made a lot of sense. When we've had dinner I want to tell you about it.' But a minute later he'd taken two cans from the fridge and opened them, passing one to her. 'Today, Ola, was a real big one for me. I think it was what I've been waiting for.'

She said, neutrally but expectantly, 'Tell me what you were doing.' He said, 'I've got to give a talk. You know about that. Recruiting fellas for the war, and what happened when they got back. Those that did. I went to see Stephen, I said I'd be doing him out of a job, I'd be lecturing for weeks. He told me to summarise everything except the bit I wanted to concentrate on, and work that bit really hard. Makes sense of course, but what did I want to focus on? The fact is, I wanted to work in a general way, I'm so bloody ignorant I want all the blank spaces filled in and that's going to take time. Well,' he said, looking fondly at his can, 'today it all arrived. Shit I'm feelin good!'

Ola prompted him: 'These men marched to Sydney? Where did they start from?'

'One lot,' Sam told his wife, in a sing-song which meant he was telling it to himself, 'started in Gilgandra. October 1915. None of them knew much about the war, just that it was on, and the Germans weren't getting beaten the way they hoped. Nor the Turks.' He laughed. 'Johnny Turk was making a mess of our boys. And up in Gilgandra they thought they'd better do something. So they drummed up thirty-five fellas, had a big send-off, and marched out of town. And everywhere they stopped along the way, people fed them, and they slept in the open sometimes, and in halls and places like that when there was something on offer, and they had meetings to persuade the locals to join them.'

'And did they?'

‘They did! This mob had thirty-five fellas at the start, but they’d reached two hundred and sixty three by the time they got to Sydney. Martin Place was packed. They really brought a bit of excitement to town! And another mob, they started in Narrabri, though some of them came on the train from Walgett and Wee Waa ...’

Ola butted in: ‘Did it put you back on the road again, Sam, reading this?’

‘It did. I know a lot of those places, even if some of ’em I’ve only been through at night ... yes, it did get me back on the road, but it told me that the road is a state of mind!’ He looked at her, expecting some effect from his revelation, but she said, ‘How many times did I tell you that, when you were driving? Every time you told me what you and your mates had been doing, I’d say to you, you wait till you’re not doing it any more, that’s when you might finally wake up to what it is you’re doing!’

Sam accepted this. ‘You did, Ola, and you were right. Well, I’m not doing it any more, and I’ve learned my lesson!’ His voice was positive and it occurred to both of them that Ola might have nothing to contribute, now that Sam had learned what she’d striven to drive into his head.

‘Tell me how you see it now, Sam?’

He thought. ‘Let’s wait a day or two before I get to that. I don’t want to go off half-cocked on this. This is big. I’ve got to get it right.’ He gave her a sneaky grin. ‘I’ve hidden those books, I don’t want anybody getting off with them till I’ve finished!’

‘Sam!’ she said reproachfully, then both of them laughed, their voices raucous with relief. Sam’s life had entered a new phase.

Two days passed before they talked about it again. Again it was when she came home, and again he pulled out cans. She felt that locating himself in the onrush of history had undermined his certainties. Others, too, might be right in ways that he’d never been willing to concede. Would they still love each other, or be reduced to need? She was working in a nursing home, propping up the frail, the feeble-minded; his body was failing him, it was a question of whether he could develop

his mind to replace the physique he'd lost, and whether, if he did, their link would remain. She didn't want to care for a husband she no longer understood. He had to take her on his journey or they were lost. 'Tell me some more about those marches, Sam. I want to know what you're thinking about.'

It was a relief to be asked. 'I'm thinking so much, Ola, it isn't true. All those years of driving, my head empty as a breeze.'

'You were thinking, Sam, you were making sure everything was right.'

He said, 'And what a mug I was. As long as my truck was okay, and I got there on time, I thought the world was okay! So bloody simple! And if I could keep things like that, everything was fine! Shit! I'm embarrassed!'

He looked at her, inviting her to condemn. 'The soldiers, Sam. The volunteers, marching down those bush roads, tell me about them.'

He chewed his thumb before he spoke, something he would never have done, once. 'The war was on the other side of the world. The Turks weren't going to invade us. Neither were the Germans. Most of these fellas I've been reading about ... they'd have seen an atlas, or a map, at school ... they weren't that ignorant ... but really ... this is the thing that's got me ... it was all going on in their imaginations. That's where the war was being fought! In their bloody heads!' He sucked his can, wiped his mouth and stared at her. 'That's my big discovery, Ola! Maybe you knew this all along, but I didn't. Shit!' he said. 'I am getting educated. Once I would've said I never!' She laughed. 'All right, I know I have to change, and now it's starting, half the time I don't want it to happen, and half the time I can't wait to see what the next change is going to be. By the way, that thing we're supposed to be going to on Saturday night, at Buzza's, I'm not sure I want to go, we could ring'em up and say I wasn't feeling too good, we'd try to see them next time they put on a turn.' Her eyes filled with reproach. 'All right, all right, we've got to go you're telling me. But honestly, Olga, what's the use of visiting people you're out of touch with?'

She suspected he meant her, and hadn't realised how much he was saying. 'You have to keep talking to people, Sam, to stay in touch. Me included. We mustn't take each other for granted. Tell me about these soldiers!'

Something in him slumped; he hadn't foreseen that his changing would affect the woman he was married to. 'That's a thing,' he said. 'You see, they actually *weren't* soldiers at the time I'm reading about. They'd had a medical and been accepted by the doctor, but as far as I can see, they didn't actually sign on until they got to a military camp. Sydney for most of them, though that changed when the state was broken up into zones ...' His voice tailed off and the furrows on his brow told her he was trying to remember something. 'You're a real academic, Sam! You need to have everything written down, don't you, or it doesn't exist!' He looked sheepish. 'It is a bit that way, sorry love.' He looked fondly at her and she felt he was still hers. 'I wish I was as horny as I was when I first met you, we'd stop talking for a couple of hours, I reckon.' She smiled softly. 'I do truly want to hear about the volunteers, is that what we have to call them?'

'Volunteers, that was the word. They didn't like conscription. If you were made to go, you were a lesser man, they all thought that. They had guts! And when they held meetings, in every little settlement, they appealed to men to volunteer. They might sneer at'em, and say they ought to join, but they couldn't compel anyone who didn't want to, and if you think about it, getting someone to join was like the bloody Christians getting a convert. If I can persuade you to do what I'm doing, that must prove I'm right!' His voice rang with a triumph reverberating back to the marches he'd been studying.

Cautiously she said, 'Did they all walk to Sydney? How long did this go on, I've never heard of it before?' He said, 'Bloody good question, Ola, I think we're going to make a historian out ofya! Never expected that, didya, when I enrolled? *Mature aged student!*' he shrieked; she could hear the change in the sounds he produced. When he'd been a trucky, he'd bellowed when he wanted to be heard. His roaring had been as

simple as his needs. Now his mind was taking on things it had no idea how to control, and there were cracks appearing. ‘Why are you lookin at me like that, Ola? Tell me what’s new, because I’ve never seen you look at me like that in all the years we’ve been married!’

She looked at him, trying to read the future in his eyes. This made him uncomfortable. He wriggled in his chair. ‘We’re in motion,’ she said. ‘When you had the accident, we did everything we could to minimise what happened, to find ways of making things the way you wanted them. We lived right on top of the accident, you might say. Then you decided to study, and that was the first step forward. You didn’t really want to study, you only knew you had to. It was that, or sitting around ...’

‘Propping myself on the counter of a shop, or pretending to be useful in some office where I didn’t know bee from a bull’s foot ...’

‘But,’ Ola said, ‘it didn’t catch fire in your mind. So what happened today? You actually got interested. What in? Some men who went to war ...’

‘It’s the way they did it,’ Sam said to his wife. ‘It was clear and shining! If the same thing happened today ...’ he got tangled ‘... it wouldn’t! They’d have smart-arses on television giving them reasons why it was a bad idea and the government ought to stop. Shit, they give me the shits, those people ...’

‘But,’ his wife said again, ‘nobody told them they were wrong, and they believed they were right. Someone should have talked to the ones that came back, and asked them how they felt ...’

‘That’s something I need to find out. I haven’t done any reading on that yet. Coming home, I mean. I need to find out how many of them went back to their towns and how many didn’t. It’s a sad thing, isn’t it. Think of it, Ola! You’re a young fella, all your life in front of you, and you go to war. You might be gassed, or wounded, you might lose your sight ...’ he lifted his hand ‘... or you might get back all right, but when you did, everything’s changed. The people who used to be big noises in the town you’d come from would be pathetic, somehow, if they hadn’t gone. That’d be the big distinction in your life: those who’d

been through what you'd been through, and those that hadn't. The ones that hadn't would never know what made you special. That's something to think about too. If you've got a lot of money, people understand it. Everyone knows what money is. If you're a good runner, or good with an axe, people understand it. But if you come back from war to a place that's peaceful, nobody knows what you've been through. You lead the rest of your life thinking that everyone around you is ignorant, and lots of fellas who might tell them are never going to come back.' He shook his head. 'This hurts me, Ola. It puts a strain on my mind, you know?' His eyes pleaded with her to understand.

'They took the risk of dying,' she said. 'Doing that would change them. It makes me wonder how much they knew about what they were doing. They were prepared to die, which means they were prepared to kill. I feel sorry for them.' She saw reproach in Sam's eyes. 'I really do.'

He tried to get over the difficulty. 'They were under orders once they joined. A lot of them had knocked around, doing this and that. Suddenly, they're under control, every waking minute.' Ola said, 'That was what they wanted, I think. They'd had too much freedom. More than they could handle. Most of them would never have known what the problem was, but they'd have recognised the way out when it came to them. Poor boys.' She looked away. 'What they went to was a lot worse than what they left.'

On the Saturday night they went to Buzza's, with Ola, at Sam's request, at the wheel. Sam had his stick on the back seat. 'Park as close as you can, love, in case I have to get my prop.' She was conscious of his psyche giving itself defences. 'You don't want to take it with you?' He shook his head. 'I'll come out if I need it.' She looked at the high brick wall that surrounded Buzza's Castle, as it was known. He'd built a fortune from trucking, and another from taxi companies in his wife's name, he'd bought up houses in the same block, he'd put a wall around everything, then he'd started pulling down dwellings. One by one they'd become flat land, first for the fleet of cars he bought, then for the trees

that his wife, Figgy, loved to nurture - 'My family,' she called them: 'if I can't have kids I can give myself substitutes!' Figgy and Buzza had employed burly men with bow ties to greet arrivals; something about them caused Sam to change his mind. 'I will take that stick, Ola. Just in case,' he said weakly, knowing she'd see into what he was doing, though he hardly knew himself. When they got to the gate, a security guard greeted them. 'Mr and Mrs Dennis, good evening. I think you'll find everybody's outside at the moment. Drinks are on the far side of the barbecue. Enjoy your evening!' Sam and Ola moved through. 'I know that fella,' Sam said to his wife. 'Dirtiest fighter you could find. He'd sink a boot in you without blinking. To hear him talking like that ...' His wife patted his arm. 'There's Buzza now. Over there, see? In the red coat. Where on earth did he get a thing like that?' Sam looked. 'Bugger me dead, what's the world coming to?' There were lights strung between the trees, and banners from Buzza's business swirling in the breeze which those on the ground, protected by the high wall, couldn't feel. The man in the red coat, Buzza, was talking loudly, but he stopped when he saw the newly arrived couple advancing. He put his glass down and turned to face them, some instinctive formality regulating what he had to do.

'My best and oldest friend,' he said. 'Friendzzzz!'

'Good to see you, Buz,' Sam said. 'Where's the Figgy?'

The owner of all that surrounded him pointed airily over his shoulder. 'Over there somewhere. Getting the party started. That's her special skill, as you know.' He looked at Sam. 'What's that you've got in your hand, mate? You got plans to dong somebody, or what?'

'Only myself for being a fool,' Sam said. 'Howareya Buz, pretty good?'

'Never been better,' the other man said. 'Things are lookin' up, despite what this bloody government is doing to the country. As you know, Samuel, I've always said that a few fellas like you and me ought to stand for parliament and get a bit of practical sense in that place. There's too many lawyers in there,' he announced, looking at Ola, this

time: 'Law, law, law, instead of go, go, go! Isn't that what we always said, Sam?' His guest said, in the way they'd always talked to each other, 'I don't reckon I could remember until I've had a drink or two!' Buzza thought this not only amusing, but appropriate. 'Step this way, my friends! We'll get you a drink, then we'll find Figgy. She'll be pleased to know you're here!'

He led them to a bar in a marquee that stood between two Lombardy poplars. Two young men, also wearing bow ties, looked out from an army of glasses, bottles, and a well-drilled line of refrigerators. They looked both insolent and servile, the effect, Sam saw, as once he would not, of being in the midst of money that wasn't wealth. 'A beer sir?' one of these youngsters said. 'What sort would you like?'

'I'll have a glass of that wine,' Sam said. 'Thanks.' He waited till Buzza had gone to get Figgy before he muttered to Ola, 'I'm starting to see a few things. Once upon a time, if everything had gone according to plan, this is what I would have wanted for us.' His wife looked at him sharply, examining his words for subterranean change. 'Save it till we get home, Sam. Here comes Figgy now, with Buz!'

Figgy came to them on the arm of her husband, hair jet black, in a white gown that wrapped her about, disguising her, yet enlarging on the theme of her body. 'Sam and Ola! You've made our night!' She flung her arms around them. 'Tell me everything you've done since we saw you last!'

A minute later they were a pair of pairs, two conversations overhearing one another. When Figgy heard Buzza mention his collection of cars, she broke in. Holding Ola's hand, as if inattention might lead her to disappear, she told her husband to take Sam to where the cars were kept. 'Displayed,' she said. 'They gleam. Even in the dark, they gleam, to me, but when Buz turns the lights full on, it's a sight for sore eyes! Take him down, Buz! Sam'd love to see what you've got! But Ola and I aren't coming, you men can do that together, I'm going to show Ola through the house!'

As Sam and Buzza moved to visit this display, Sam kept looking for a building, which, from the cars his host was talking about, must have been a veritable hangar, but he could see nothing but trees, paths, bushes, and arboreal alcoves. 'Figgy loves love nests,' Buzza said. 'She'd have a new one every day if I didn't manage to get a bit of sense in her!' Their progress was slow because Buzza kept bumping into guests who wanted to talk, and some of them had been drinking long enough to loosen tongues. They were the sort of people Sam had mixed with all his life, and his reaction told him how different he'd become. Behind him was a past he'd let go, and a parody of it was expecting him to talk as he had in years that were gone: his history had entered a new phase. He'd known this, but to have it rubbed in was disconcerting. He felt he was disappointing people, many of whom knew who he was, or had been, until the accident and change of life. 'Getting a few qualifications,' he told them when they asked him what he was doing. 'You can't get anywhere without'em these days.' They agreed, these friends of Buzza's, these invitees to the bizarre house and garden that was - again he thought of the distinction - the creation of money that wasn't wealth. What was the difference? He wanted to find out. Buzza, breaking off the umpteenth interruption to their progress, told somebody, 'Mustn't talk any longer, I've got to show Sam my collection.' He swept Sam away. 'Figgy calls it my gallery, but I tell her that's a silly name. It's just a lot of cars. You don't have to call them anything, all you need to do is enjoy them!'

Suddenly, in among the trees, there was a building. Buzza opened the door, then pulled another door across, and they were in a lift big enough to move vehicles up and down. 'We going underground in this?' Sam asked. 'To the kingdom of cars!' said his guide. The lift stopped, the door slid across and they were in a vast bunker filled with inexpressible gloom. Buzza stepped to a row of switches and lights came on, rows of them, until the whole space was a heavenly emporium, and on display, on low stands, attended here and there by shop dummies with period clothing, were Bugattis, Hispano-Suizas, an early Delahaye ... Sam was

stunned. 'What do you think?' his host asked. 'Ever seen anything like it?'

Slowly, because at least he was able to do this, Sam shook his head. An uneasy feeling ran through him, as if he was being buried alive, or sensed that it was about to be done to him. 'Why have you got them all ...' he wanted to say *buried* '... down here? You've got plenty of room up there, a whole block.' Buzza surprised him. 'You remember what it was like when you were a kid? You had things and other kids wanted to get them off you? Fight you for them? I put them all down here, but it's not hard to take'em up. Come around and I'll show you.' He led the way. 'I never put them all on display, except here. And nobody gets in unless I bring them down, I spent as much on security as I did on some of these cars. Have a good look, because I've got an idea I want to put to you, back at the house.'

Sam suddenly remembered the gathering. 'You don't want to be up there, seeing everything's okay?' He was uncomfortable, and hoped his host might want to return. 'No. There's people there to get things for them. We'll take our time. I want you to have a good, close look.'

They examined the gleaming cars. Some of them, Sam saw, had had no more work done on them than a surface polish. The interiors of many were as they must have been when acquired. Buzza remarked that some of the cars they were looking at weren't driveable. Yet. Something about the word told Sam what Buzza wanted to put to him. Buzza wanted him to restore what had still to be restored, acquire more rarities and work on them. Then there would be their display at motor shows, or other occasions when an attraction was wanted. There would be negotiations with other collectors, some of them in countries far away, investigations of claims, little more than rumours, hearsay, that some rarity was stored under piles of refuse: Buzza was too busy, too hands-on, to give the time his interest needed. He wanted someone he could rely on. An extension of his will. Buzza thought, Sam realised, that he was offering - he would be offering - something that Sam wouldn't be able to stop himself accepting.

Sam felt lonely and uncomfortable. He had his course to finish. He wanted a framed certificate to say he'd completed his mission. But what if Buzza was willing to wait? How would he feel about it then?

He looked at his friend, bent over a spot of rust. If he took the job, he'd be looking to him as long as he lived. He'd always looked up to Buzza, but he didn't want that to become a fixture. Could Ola get him out of it? Fend the wealthy - rich - man away? He hoped she could; then he felt he'd made a mistake in leaving her with Figgy, whose wiles he'd learned not to underestimate. She got you into conversation in which you agreed with her whole-heartedly, then she shifted the ground a little, keeping your agreement, making you say it, over and over, until, little by little, she brought you to the point where she wanted you. Then she encircled you all over again: 'the spiderwoman', Sam called her when he was angry, or had had a run-in with her, after which it took a call from Buzza to get him back on-side.

'Let's get back, Buz. Time to see what the ladies are up to.'

They were in an upstairs room, lit only by light from the garden below, where the guests Figgy and Buzza were ignoring were drinking with serious intent. Sam, on entering the room, wanted to be close to his wife, but she was seated on a small sofa, beside Figgy whose practised intimacy had had its effect. Ola was nodding at whatever had been said. 'Sittin in the dark?' Buzza said. 'No dear, just letting ourselves have a moment when people don't know where we are. It's nice to be quiet, sometimes. Ola and I have had a talk.' Ola nodded. Sam's heart sank. 'That's good. What you been talking about?'

'Oh, that'd be telling!' Figgy said, but Ola offered, 'Figgy's been asking me why I don't do more than work at Saint Bede's. She thinks I've got talent to do more than that.' 'A lot more,' Figgy added, now that it was in the open. 'Anything in mind?' Sam asked, wondering if there was to be a double offer. Both of them to enter service for the ... rich. He felt he was beginning to understand the distinction that had bothered him, earlier in the night. 'Nothing yet,' Figgy said, 'but I've promised

to keep my eye out for something. Ola's a wonderful woman, Sam, you mustn't let her hide her talents beneath a bushel.'

'A what?'

'A *bushel*! It's in the Bible. I know I'm old-fashioned but I still think it's a Good Book which should rule our lives.'

'Could be,' Sam said. Buzza took the initiative in the moment that followed. 'I've been showing Sam my cars,' he told Ola. 'Wonderful old things. The path we took to get us where we are.' Sam wondered where he'd picked up the expression, and how often it was trotted out. 'It's the basis of what could be a really good collection,' he stated, apparently talking to them all, 'but I haven't got the time. I'm at the depot at all sorts of hours, and just when I think I've got a day clear, something happens and I've got to fly interstate. If it depends on me it's never going to get anywhere.'

'It's come a long way already,' Sam announced. 'What you just showed me didn't happen overnight.' He was fighting for an independence he hadn't known he needed.

'True. But it's something with real potential. We're one of the most motorised countries in the world. What I've got in mind is a living history of Australia on the road. Sometimes I see little displays of tyres, or postcards, and I think they're nice, but not thorough enough for me. They don't go as far as they could.' Suddenly he switched. 'What are you earning, Sam? Or are you living on what you made on the road?'

'That, and what Ola brings home.' He didn't much like being asked, but dodging the question would be harder, and also, knowing Buzza, useless.

'I could put you on the same level as the highest paid man at my depot. I think you've got a fair idea of what that would be. Then you, Ola, wouldn't need to bring home the bacon every week, and you could stretch those talents of yours to the full. You could become another woman. This is the season for women, you're not locked up like you used to be. All you need to do, Sam, is tell me you're interested. If you are, we can work out the program we want to achieve, and the terms and

conditions, some time later. Because we trust each other, we can work it out as we go. How do you feel?’

Sam was where he didn’t want to be: at the centre of others’ eyes. Pausing, he made them aware of his disquiet. ‘Sorry,’ Buzza broke in. ‘One more thing. You’re doing a course at university. More than I ever did. Figgy and I admire you for that. You have to finish it.’ He paused, giving his grandiloquence room to resonate. ‘It’s going to be an achievement. I know why Ola’s working. It’s because there’s something you’ve got to do. You do it! I want you to finish it. Then come here and we’ll get this underway. Off the ground! High as the sky!’ He dropped the hands that had been cutting the air. ‘How do you feel?’ His voice was quiet, and it died away, leaving Sam spotlighted, trapped.

‘I have to admit I’d been postponing any decision about what I’d do until after I finished the course, because I didn’t want to think about it. Starting the course was a big enough change, after the years I spent on the road.’ He gave his stick a tap on the floor, by way of reminding them of his injury, and the special claim it allowed him to make. ‘It’s a great offer, Buz. I can see the possibilities ...’ He had his mouth open to say that he’d almost decided to work in a museum once he’d graduated, but that would deliver him into Buzza and Figgy’s hands. He stopped. Ola broke in. ‘You need a little time to think about it, Sam. It’s a beautiful offer.’ She looked deferentially towards those who were making it. ‘Why don’t we say that you’ll ring Buz and Figgy in a couple of weeks, we’ll have some dinner at our place, or maybe we’ll go somewhere special, and we can settle the thing then?’

The thing. Sam knew that Ola knew he didn’t want what had been put in his lap. He knew that she was wondering why he was unwilling. He knew that he didn’t know. He wondered if a couple of weeks would be long enough to ... not so much decide, as know why he’d decided as he had. ‘Good idea,’ he said. ‘I need some time to think. It’s a fantastic offer, mate, but I suppose I need a little time.’ Again he paused. Why? ‘I think I need to see it against the backdrop of the rest of my life, because if I take it up, that’s what it’ll be. The rest of my life! It shakes you a

bit to think of it.' He looked to his wife. Ola said, 'It lets you know that time's moved on, doesn't it?' Figgy agreed. 'It gets away! Slipping past without you noticing!' Buzza too was affected. 'What's a couple of weeks? What's a couple of years? We'd all like to think, though, when they bury us, that we've done something worth remembering.' The others looked at him. 'All right then, is that an agreement? We'll get together when you decide to call us. It's over to you, Sam, and Ola, and now, I suppose we'd better go down and see what everyone's up to!'

In the days that followed, Sam buried himself in work. Though he read to fill gaps in his knowledge, and marshalled information, there was still, he feared, a dimension missing, and the marches were at the heart of it. Why had those men done what they'd done? Ola knew her husband was troubled, knew that he'd buried Buzza's offer under a problem he couldn't solve. 'I wish this was a bloody engine or a fuel pump,' he said to his wife one night when he crawled into bed. 'I'd know everything was there for a reason, and I'd work it out. But if you put a problem in front of a fella, and it's why human beings are silly enough to do something fatal, what'm I supposed to think? Why do people let themselves get caught in something which is going to chew them up and spit them out in pieces? You tell me!'

Ola could only put her arms around him, caressing that hip as if, weakness that it was, it might be the centre of his life for the years remaining. 'Soothe me darling,' he murmured. 'Nobody's ever done it the way you do. I feel sorry for people who aren't well married, they don't know what they're missing.' 'Perhaps they do know, deep inside themselves,' Ola murmured, 'and that's why they do foolish things.'

The next day, he checked. Some of the volunteers - only a minority, but a significant one - had been married. They couldn't all have been unhappy in their homes. Why had they gone away? One of them had been a clergyman; he'd joined his march at the beginning, but he'd never reached the war; he'd been struck by lightning at the Maitland military camp. The incident caught Sam's attention. He read what they'd said about the man in burying him. *I can hardly realise that our*

devoted Brother Wilkinson has been so tragically stricken into victory. This was from a fellow cleric. Death was victory? No, the gate which humans had to pass through to gain the victory the minister believed in. Sam didn't like it. This way led to madness, and only the mad would follow it. He read on. *It is very mysterious. Doubtless his noble purpose of service, and his self-sacrificing spirit up to date, have been accepted as enough by the Great Taskmaster. And now he has heard the glorious award come up higher.* What did the man mean? It was what Sam had always thought of as blather. Bullshit. Words making things muddled instead of clear. He suspected that the men he was studying had all been in states of mind as muddled as his own; what had driven them on? He searched himself. Would he have gone? He supposed he might. If he'd been listening to those speeches, would they have got him worked up? He supposed they would. But if he'd had the sense to go home to his wife, not letting himself be inveigled into stepping forward and signing - writing one's name on a piece of paper: why was that so crucial? - then surely he'd have decided, in the light of morning, that he'd been silly? Surely he'd have harnessed the horses and got himself to work? He wasn't sure. It was easy to say the men were weak, or had nothing better to do, but that couldn't have been true for many of them: some other dimension in their minds had opened, and to step forward was the way to enter it, even though a likely death lay at the end of their road. Had they been brought, then, to prefer death over life?

He supposed they had.

The day before his talk he was nervous. He fidgeted with his stick. He shuffled papers until his wife told him he needed to get drunk. He laughed sadly: he was committed, he had everything he needed for his talk, it was only a matter of putting himself into the heart of the experience. 'I don't know why I'm being so cranky,' he told Ola. 'Imagine those fellas the night before an attack. Trying to sleep when they knew that by dawn they might be dead. Sleep!' His eyes appealed to her. 'We *will* go down for a drink,' Ola said. 'What's the name of that place near the uni? McAdam's. That's where we'll go. Two glasses, that's your

limit! Get the car out, I can't stand any more of this, we have to do something to settle you down!'

He was quieter in the morning. Ola gave his bottom a rub as he left. 'Thanks, darling. At least I'm not going to war, I'll probably come back!'

Stephen Macfarlan, his tutor, could see he was tense. 'Take it quietly. You've got a topic that everyone's interested in. The sort of thing you're talking about doesn't happen very often.'

Sam was first in the room, smiling weakly as the others came in. Angela, Lou, Marthe. Danny, Ti Chai, Neville. Stephen coughed. They looked at him, waiting. In the silence he gave his nod to Sam.

'This might seem a straightforward topic,' Sam began, 'but it hasn't been easy. I've got numbers here, and I'll pass'em around in a minute. Numbers of recruits for each month of the war, with my attempts to give reasons for the bumps and dips in the rate of men joining up. What I've found hard, though, is to get into the minds of those people. If we're fair-minded we have to do that. We're the same as them, and also we're not the same because their lives are over and we know what happened to them. Or we can know, if we can be bothered finding out. Which is what this course is all about.'

He looked around. 'All right, let me get started. By October 1915 people in Australia began to see that winning the war was going to take more than they'd thought. The Germans and Turks were looking like they might win. The war wasn't discredited in people's minds the way it was later. People saw that more effort had to be put into it. You might say that out here in Australia we had no need to worry. The war would never get this far. But that's to forget that most Australians at the time thought of themselves as an offshoot, a branch, of England. Their safety, their security, came from the idea, the belief, that they were part of the Empire. So when people told them they had to fight for the Empire, the King, that wasn't silly to them as it might be to us.'

He developed his theme, struggling to recreate the hysteria of a fearful, thinly populated apology for a nation whose connection with the

greater world was a thing of its imagination, and the way that what he was describing was an imaginative response to a situation that existed too far away to be seen for what it was.

He opened a book. *We had no haversacks, no water bottles and no spare boots or socks. But we had lots of youthful enthusiasm and we stepped it out with a will ... The halt for lunch was at Marthaguy Siding. We were met by a couple of residents bearing flags, and marshalled to a picnic ground, where, under shady trees, a long table on trestles had been set up and it was loaded with a sumptuous lunch of cold turkey and all sorts of mouth-watering desserts.*

‘Turkey is something that comes up all the time. Eating turkey was a way of killing Turkey, I suppose.’ Sam lowered his eyes again.

Nearby was a bench with basins of water, soap and towels laid out, so that we could freshen up before eating. The long table bore a sign proclaiming it as ‘Gallipoli’, and after we had cleaned up turkey from one end of the peninsula to the other, the British flag was hoisted to celebrate our achievement. It was a quaint bit of humour and gave us all a good laugh, as well as an excuse for hoeing into the food.

The others could hardly believe it. Becky said, ‘Are you serious? Is this a comic strip or something?’ Max said, ‘What’s your source for this?’ Sam waved the book at them, and read them the title, author, publisher and date. ‘Okay? Anybody want to doubt me?’ Nobody spoke. Sam resumed, shaken a little by their reaction. *Six miles along the dusty road was Balladoran, where we were to camp for our first night on the track. As we approached the little pub we could see quite a crowd of people waiting with the best of intentions, to shout for us, but we had been briefed on this situation. Sam grinned. There was to be no breaking of ranks and no drinking in the ranks. We were strictly a teetotal column, and had been told that during the march we would ‘Follow the King’, King George V having pledged that until the war was ended he would drink no alcohol.*

The whole room laughed. ‘Wowsers!’ Karl called. Someone hissed. ‘It was only the first night,’ Becky observed. ‘And it said “in the ranks”, so they could drink once they’d been dismissed. Did they have days off?’

Sam said, 'Yes they did now and then. Sundays, mostly, though I'd have to check.' He felt the thing slipping away from him. 'They'd have got a drink if they'd wanted one,' Max said, 'in those little bush towns. Where did you say they started, and what was their route?' Stephen intervened. 'Can we save the questions till later? Sam hasn't finished yet, in fact he's hardly started.'

'Three hundred and twenty miles,' Sam said. 'We've got a way to go.' He pulled his notes from under the book and put them beside it, looking from one to the other. 'It took'em just over a month.' Max butted in. 'I'm sorry, Stephen, but I need some sort of overview. How many of these marches were there? Where did they start and end? Why haven't any of us heard of them? Sam says they were big events, how come they've been forgotten? Sam? You can't leave it the way it is!'

Stephen looked at Sam. 'Do you want to respond?'

'There were nine recruiting marches. The first one, the one I'm telling you about, started in October 1915. The last one started in January 1916. Then they cut out. Eight of them were in New South Wales. There was one in Queensland, finishing at Brisbane. All up, they recruited 1 545 men. Why did they cut out? I'll get to that in a minute. They were spontaneous. The army wasn't ready for them. Also, the fact that men joined up together didn't necessarily mean that they fought together, though they sometimes did ...'

That afternoon, when Ola came home, Sam was preparing vegetables. Carrots, beans and potatoes. She looked at him, trying to read his mood. His face was blank and his eyes had no lustre. She put a hand on his shoulder. 'How did it go?'

He kept his knife moving. 'Fair enough, I suppose. They're so young. It's not easy to involve them the way you'd like.' She twigged. 'Did they ask silly questions?' Displeasure crossed his face, whether from things he recalled or simply from having to recall, she couldn't have said. 'They thought it was a pretty crazy thing to do. And it was. But that's the point! A madness swept through those blokes ...' he paused, uncomfortably '... and the people in my group - the kids - seem to think

it couldn't happen to them. That it's not happening to them when I can see it happening all the time. They're into fads and fashions. They accept them as normal when I don't. I have no idea why they do some of the things they do, and nor do they. It's just what everyone around them is doing, so they do it. They're not in control of their lives ...' He concentrated on gouging a spot from a potato, mumbling something which Ola didn't catch. 'What love?'

He banged the knife on the table. 'Corks in the bloody ocean, that's what I said!' His hostility was general and she knew she wasn't excluded. She wanted to remind him that now his talk was behind him he should return to the offer he'd been made by Buzza, but it would be foolish to raise it with him in this mood. 'What did Stephen have to say, after you'd given your talk?'

'He seemed pretty pleased. He's the least of my worries.'

'Why are you talking about worries? What's on your mind?' He shrugged his shoulders restlessly, angrily. 'What is it, Sam? Did someone say something that annoyed you?'

'They did and they didn't. Nothing in particular, just everything they said, really. Let's put it this way, none of them said anything that helped.'

She studied her husband. 'You're going through a change. It's connected to those men you've been studying. What is it, can you say?' He looked at her, stress in his face. 'If I could say it, I could deal with it. I can't though. Something's got to me, that's all I can say. I don't like being in a shitty mood when I shouldn't, but that's how I am. When the tute was over I could hardly wait to get away.'

'What did you do?'

'I went through the city to the Shrine of Remembrance, up on the hill.'

'You went in?'

'Yes. It's very impressive, but it didn't do me any good.'

'So it's not really the soldiers at all, it's you?'

He said savagely, 'It's me!'

‘Do you want to go for a drink again tonight?’

‘Loosen my tongue, you mean? It wouldn’t do any good.’

‘Is there anything you do want to do?’

‘Nothing that I can think of.’ She could tell he was hiding something. ‘Maybe something that sounds a bit silly, or embarrassing? Something you don’t want to talk about, though you know you’d feel better if you did?’

He swung in the chair, tense and restless. ‘I’d like to do what those blokes did. There you are, is that mad enough for you?’

‘Pretty loopy,’ she said. ‘So what’s the problem? We fly to Sydney, we hire a car. We drive where they marched. You want to be on your own, you get out and walk, I drive the car. You want to drive, you leave me somewhere ... no! It won’t be real until you’ve got it in the open! You want to do what those men did? I want to know what that means. You don’t want to go to a war, and you wouldn’t be accepted anyhow. Since the hip. It’s not really the war at all, or is it? You want to do something decisive, isn’t that it? You want to wager everything you own on one throw of the dice. I think. I’m not sure, I’m only guessing, Sam. Sam? Start talking. Don’t leave me out. You’ve turned yourself into a clam. You want to be open again, don’t you?’

He stood up. ‘This is driving me mad! How do I bloody well know what I want? Or why I want it? I want somebody to tell me! I want something to happen, and all of a sudden, everything’s clear-cut and I don’t have any problems any more!’ He looked at her. ‘How does that sound? Anything silly about that?’

She sat on the other side of their kitchen table. He stayed where he was. A battle of wills developed, then he sat down, sullen and angry. She said quietly, ‘No, there’s nothing silly about it. It may be impossible, however.’

‘How’ll we know?’

‘Do exactly what you said. Fly up. Drive, walk. Put yourself in their position. Camp where they camped. And watch this space.’ She tapped her head. ‘This is where everything happens, you said that your-

self, quite early on. Remember? Of course you do. When do you want to go?’

He snorted. ‘I’d like to do it tonight, but I don’t need to. If I know we’re going to do it, I’ll be able to hold on a while. Put the problem on a shelf till we’re ready to tackle it. That okay with you?’

‘It’s okay by me, Sam. Samuel. Buzza called you Samuel, you remember?’

He chuckled. ‘He does sometimes. Silly bastard.’

‘You want to work with him?’

‘No. But I might. We have to do this other thing first.’

‘Are you going to tell him that?’

‘No. Do it. See what it tells me. Then tell Buz. That’s how it’s got to be.’

They flew to Sydney and drove a hire car to Gilgandra. Sam walked about with photos. He identified where he thought the marchers had been farewelled, and where they’d left the town. Ola, walking with him, could feel the vehemence of whatever was driving him. They got in their car again, Ola checking that everything was with them, Sam not bothering to look. He had a map on his knee. ‘We haven’t got a war to go to, only Sydney.’ Ola was trying to read his intentions. ‘Isn’t that an improvement?’ His mood was dark. ‘Depends.’ She leaned over to look at the map. ‘Where are we going to stop, Sam?’ He touched the map, naming places. Most were towns that had dwindled since their days of hope. ‘Where do you want to stop for the night?’ It was something he hadn’t thought about. ‘Anywhere you like the look of.’ So it was up to her? She felt an inflow of fear. The current she was in wasn’t taking her anywhere she wanted to go.

She was aware of her husband, now, as a man who would end himself and her if the impulse took him. He was dicing, in a corner of his brain he hardly knew about, with their lives, uncertain of whether he wanted to go on, wishing, if it were possible, to find the courage to stop, to throw himself away. She wished she’d never allowed him to come on

this search, but, in the cabin of their car, she saw that she was bound to his will. 'Drive on,' she said. 'Let's see what we'll see.'

They stopped in little towns, talking to anybody who could tell them things. They peered in showground sheds, imagining what it would have been like to sleep there, eat, or wash, at the end of 1915, when the horror of Europe was neither admitted nor understood. An old man in Wongarbron showed them where he thought the marchers had spent the night. 'There used to be a lot of trees here,' he told them. 'This is the only one left.' He offered them tea if they came to his house; Ola felt sure Sam would want to go on, but he seemed to be drawing out the day as if its end needed to be delayed. He wants the night, Ola realised. It represents a comfort he can't find in himself, nor in me. She became afraid, and still, hardly speaking, even to the old man's wife, who wished them well as they resumed their movement to the road.

They stopped in more tiny towns, seeking out places where the marchers had camped, the points where flags had greeted them, or children had stared. 'They listened to a sermon here,' Sam told her, pointing to a drowsy church. 'It must have given them hope.' She felt that no word ever uttered, or written, could have redeemed those whose fate was trenches, and screaming as they twisted on entanglements of wire.

They had dinner in a roadside hotel. Sam wanted to drink, but Ola let him have two glasses. 'That's your limit,' she said, and he stared at her, not bothering to reply. She sipped once, but left the glass standing; her lips felt too dry. She wanted to go on, but he wanted to wait until it was dark. She sensed that if she hadn't been there he'd have drunk himself silly and driven into the night to find his end against a tree, a telephone post, the wall of something near the road. She was with him, wanting to restrain, knowing that if she exerted a force on him he'd fight it, and her end would be as certain as his.

It was dark when they left. She dared not ask where he'd stop because there was no answer. It could only be when a process inside him reached its end. He drove reasonably for the first half hour, then speeded up. He put the wireless on, something he'd rarely allowed

himself, even in his driving days, because it didn't help his concentration. His agitation showed in the endless pressing of buttons to change stations, sending the figures on the dial in crazy sequence until another burst of booming sound came through the speakers. 'Sam!' she said, in a moment when she lost control, but it only excited him: he wanted her fear to help him overcome his own. There were cars and frequent trucks; Sam overtook them wildly, veering in front of them to express contempt. 'Letting them know I'm leaving them behind!' he yelled. The changing of stations speeded up, then his probing fingers led him to something that mirrored the frenzy inside him: drums were rolling, attacking the minds of listeners, and orchestral protests cut across; a quarrel of gargantuan proportions was being argued in their ears, the drums releasing destructive energies that expressed themselves in the rabid fury of the car. Ola saw a small, poorly lit car some distance in front; Sam pushed his foot down to consume this wayfarer, but as he was swinging out to overtake, a truck came over the brow of a hill, storming forward without thought of swaying from its path. In an ecstasy of destructive rage Sam took them in front of the truck, flicked the wheel so their tail dodged the car they were passing, in which a terrified man took his hands from the wheel and covered his eyes - Ola saw this, looking away from what was rushing at them - and, late in returning to their side of the road, forced the mighty truck to wobble, its multiple wheels straining to react properly, to remain stable though almost over the edge of track, the music, all this time, roaring in its quarrel - civilisation faces the darkness it carries within itself, and surges when it senses triumph, the madness of war giving way to purposeful, intelligently-driven life.

Ola felt her husband go limp. 'Pull over,' she told him. 'Not here, on the highway. In the next town. Turn down a side street, so nobody knows who we are! We'll stop. You've come through. You don't deserve it, but you have!' He was weeping, wiping his eyes, slowing down. 'I'm not going to drive,' his wife said. 'Keep going, fuck you Sam!' She hadn't sworn at him for years. 'Concentrate. Have your breakdown when we stop. Not on the road. The road is for people who are going

somewhere. As of tonight, you're not! Hear that, Sam? Not! N,O,T! Not!' 'Denial!' he sobbed. 'What sort of a life is that? Saying no when you should be saying yes? Who wants their lives controlled like that? It's better to do something wild and take the consequences! Ola! Ola! Hear what I say?'

'I hear what you say,' she told him. 'You had a stab at it, and you didn't bring it off. Now drive me to the next town and get off this highway. Get us to a motel and we'll face the night together. It's going to be awful ...'

'What do you think it's going to be like for me?'

'You,' she said, 'will be able to sob your heart out while I have to listen, and in the morning, when you start to face yourself, I'm going to hear you telling me what you've been through as if I haven't already been through it with you! You fool, Sam! You fool! Can't you learn? Well, you're going to, if it's the last thing I achieve in this life. Get into the next town, Sam, get that foot down till we can afford to stop, and then you can start facing what you are instead of trying to run away!'

Quotations on page 70 - 71 are from *The March of the Wallabies: the definitive history of the north west route march* by David Dial, published by R.H. Kerrigan, 'Marooan', Lochinvar, New South Wales, 1990, and on page 73 from *The Coo-ee March, Gilgandra - Sydney, 1915*, by John Meredith, Macquarie Publications, Dubbo, New South Wales, 1981. Musical reference is to the final movement of Symphony No. 4, *The Inextinguishable* (1916), by Carl August Nielsen.

Elly

‘One of us is leaving tonight.’ Elly had been with Tim for three months and now he was saying this.

‘I’m not going anywhere. Where are you going?’

‘That’s not what I mean.’ His voice, though quiet, was firm.

‘Tell me what you mean then.’

Tim had never learned to articulate, and now he wanted to cloak himself in mystery. Suddenly she saw what he was planning. ‘No! You’re staying with me!’

Confident that his was the central speech of the world, he said, ‘For a few minutes. Then we’ll go voyaging. Come with me some of the way, and turn back.’ He smiled distantly. ‘When you get back, I’ll be gone.’ She studied him, trying to sense the depth of his absorption. ‘Why tonight?’

‘Good as any other night.’ Then he went silent, and she knew she’d not hear him speak again. ‘Put on some music.’ He shook his head. She started to get up, but he pulled her arm. She sat again, starting to shake, but he ignored her reaction, pointing, instead, to the little wood-box where they kept their supply and needles. She pulled it to them, he rolled up a sleeve.

He gave himself a huge dose, she took a small one. Lying on the floor, Elly felt the loosening of lust, but he was quiet already, away inside himself. She moved to lie touching his body all the way down, then she gave herself to her flow of sensation.

He was cold, in the morning. It took ages for her apprehension to move onto the plane of an outsider, recognising the outcome. When she understood, she put on her sandals and ran, as best she could, to Meg’s squat, a few doors down. There was nobody there. Elly lay on Meg’s

bed, groaning, then banished Tim from her thoughts, punishing him for leaving her. ‘Bastard!’ was the only word her mind could produce. ‘Bastard!’ She didn’t want to be left, hooked and helpless. The people she knew were useless. Then she thought of one who wasn’t. She found the phone, and dialled.

‘Brigitte!’

It was Brigitte’s husband. ‘I’ll get her.’

She waited. ‘Ello?’

‘Brigitte, it’s Elly. Can you come quickly? Something’s happened.’

It seemed like days before she heard the door pushed open.

‘I’m in here.’

Then Brigitte was with her, wiping her face, pushing the hairs from her eyes, caressing her until she had the ability to speak. It was only one word - ‘Tim’ - then she closed her eyes. ‘What’s happened? Has he left you?’

‘Sure did.’ The voice gave Brigitte an idea of what had happened. ‘Is he at your place?’ Elly’s face was a mask. ‘Don’t move. I’ll see how he is. Wait there!’ Elly lay still, having handed over control. Brigitte was back before long, sombre and silent. She lay beside Elly on the grubby bed and put her arms around her. ‘You can come to my house. We’ll take care of you.’ Elly, afraid to return to the world she’d left, let the older woman put warmth into her. ‘I don’t want to know anything,’ she whispered. ‘I never want to be told.’ Minutes later she said, ‘My mum couldn’t face it, she did it too. I suppose I’ll go the same way. Pity,’ she said, then lapsed. Brigitte kissed her forehead. ‘Lie still darling. I’ve got to ring my husband. We’ve got things to do.’

She went out of the room. Minutes later, Peter, her husband arrived. He’d taken the children to his mother’s and rung a doctor. He too went to the other house. He had a whispered conversation with Brigitte, who said Elly wasn’t ready to be moved. She shouldn’t be rushed. ‘You handle the doctor. Get the funeral people organised. I don’t think his family live in this country, he’s a visitor.’ She challenged him. ‘Like me.’ Reading her husband’s mind, she knew he was thinking, ‘But he’s

going to stay here now!' Life was singing its triumph over death - those foolish enough to want it. 'Try to keep the police out of it. It's none of their business. When you've got all that done, go home and tidy the bungalow. She'll stay with us if I can get her to agree. I don't think she's got anywhere to go. Okay?'

Peter took the children's things out of the bungalow, moved a cabinet in front of some scribbling on a wall, changed the bedding so that it didn't look like a child's haven, and studied the only picture in the room, a photo of New York shortly after World War 2. He'd never liked it, and now it was relegated to the garage. What would he put in its place? He had no idea what Elly liked; he'd only spoken to her once or twice. He put a towel and a hand towel on the bed, wondering if she'd ever use them.

She stayed with them two nights, then, on the day of Tim's funeral, she disappeared. 'I won't be at the tute this morning,' she said to Brigitte. 'Give my apologies. Tell them what I'm doing, and tell them I had to do it on my own. I tried to ring Tim's family. Maybe they're travelling. I'd write to them if I knew where they were. I'm representing them today. I have to see things through their eyes. I don't want to talk to anyone, and, sorry about this, I don't want to be comforted. It'd make me weaker than I am.'

And that was very weak, Brigitte saw; Elly couldn't afford to carry the needs of anyone apart from herself. 'Where's the service?'

'Kew.'

Brigitte thought there would surely be more said, but when she offered to drive Elly to the church, the cemetery, the funeral parlor, Elly shook her head. Brigitte looked at her watch; she needed to get on the road if she was not to be late for the tutorial. 'What time's the service?'

Elly said only, 'Later this morning,' then watched as Brigitte got ready to go. When she came back to the kitchen, Elly was standing by the table, as she'd been two minutes before. Brigitte put her arms around her to give her strength, but felt that something vital in her ... patient?

Charge? Friend? ... had gone. Held by the tenacious Frenchwoman, Elly said, as if to unclasp the arms around her, 'Don't worry about me. I'll be here when you get back.'

Something told Brigitte that the opposite was true: Elly would have disappeared. What would she do? Brigitte released her, moving her head back so she could study the younger woman's eyes. 'Take care, *ma chérie*, I will be thinking of you all the day.' A moment later she was gone, leaving the way clear for Elly to plunge further toward destruction.

At the tutorial the following week there was no appearance from Elly, nor the one after. She missed the lectures too. Her presentation was four weeks away; Brigitte was certain that if she didn't give it, she'd be dead.

Morte.

Then there were sightings. She'd been seen at the State Library (Karl), and in the library of another university (Becky). Karl had gone up to her but they'd only spoken briefly. 'She said she was getting stuff for her talk.' Karl was too self-centred to notice Elly's state of mind. 'What mind? She's not all that bright you know!' Becky said she thought Elly had set herself a standard and was out to achieve it. 'She's really interested in how the Vietnam war was stopped. It's a period that's right for her, really.' They were talking before their tutorial began. Stephen, coming in to get things underway, sensed the atmosphere. Kramme said to him, 'Stephen, can you get Elly's address from Student Records? Her parents' address? We need to get in touch, see how she's getting on.' Brigitte warned him, 'It has to happen in a way she wants. She left my place after two days. She could have had anything she wanted, but she's getting ready to slip away. Sorry, that's the truth of the matter.' Some of them looked at the empty chair at the corner of the table, as if something was haunting from the last time she'd been there. Stephen said, 'I can inquire. Student Records don't like handing out what they hold, they think they're the guardians of information people mightn't want given out. They prefer it if you ask them to make the contact.' Sam's years on the road reminded him: 'Typical bloody bureaucrats! They have to get

in the way of something, just to show you how important they are! Ah, Jeezus!’ They looked at him. ‘When I was running a business,’ he said loudly, ‘I used to run into this. The fellas who did the work, they’d help you all they could, no questions asked! But the people who kept the records, or issued the licences ... the paper people, we used to call’em, they’ve got screens under their noses now ... they loved to make you beg! They knew deep down they were useless, so they forced you to bow down, and beg and scrape, any way they could!’

Brigitte said forcefully, ‘Sam, you are making too much noise. You are useless as me. The only one of us who is any use is the one that can find her and make her want to go on. We will make two approaches. Stephen, you must approach on behalf of the university. Say to her she is too valuable to throw her life away. And ...’ she looked around the room, deciding, ‘... *Neville*, you are the youngest, and it’s got to be a man, you must talk to her.’ Some of them expected him to flush, or become awkward, but he was composed: ‘We need to find her first. If any of us runs into her, she won’t give an address, I feel sure of that.’ They sensed a change had taken place in him. ‘There’s only one thing we can say, if any of us run into her, and that’s simple. What are you going to do, Elly? That’s the only thing we can say.’

Kramme started to grumble: ‘Arrr, *Neville*, I hope I don’t have you looking after me if I get into trouble ...’ but Brigitte broke in. ‘He is right.’ She studied *Neville* with interest. ‘Something has changed lately. I think you have a woman in your life that we have never met.’ *Neville*’s eyes didn’t move. Brigitte smiled. ‘It is a good thing. You have to share it. Not with us! I will drive you to where she was living, and you can ask around. Somebody may have seen her. Perhaps she has been back to get her things.’

Stephen put his hands together with a dull plop. ‘Can we sort out the details later? I don’t want to sound heartless, but we really ought to make a start.’ Before he could do so, Donna, the department’s secretary, came into the room with a sheaf of papers in her hand.

‘I’m sorry Mr Macfarlan, I was supposed to give you these before you came in but I must have been on the phone when you went past. I’ve just got off.’ She was flustered. ‘These sheets are from Elly ... I’m sorry, I forget her second name, she’s a member of this group and she wanted everyone to get them today. She said this is the contemporary document she wants everyone to look at when she’s giving her talk, on the moratorium marches, was it?’ She handed the sheets to Stephen, who glanced at the top page, took it, and handed the rest to Becky, on his right. Becky took one and passed them on. Brigitte said to Donna, who was about to make her exit, ‘Is she there, Donna? Is Elly in your office?’ Donna found herself under everybody’s attention, something she did her best to avoid.

‘No. She brought these in yesterday. I was actually locking the office when she arrived.’ She looked at them. ‘She asked me to see that they were given to you.’ Donna didn’t want to be accused of anything. Sam said, ‘What did she look like? Was she okay, did you think?’

‘She was all right. A bit drawn. A bit tired, maybe, but that’s common when people are working hard. I asked if she wanted to say anything to Mr Macfarlan, but she said no, just get the pages handed out. She was only with me a moment, because I was in a hurry, and she didn’t want to talk. In and out again, really.’

Stephen said, ‘All right, thanks Donna. Thanks for getting them to us. She didn’t leave a phone number, a person to contact, or anything like that?’

‘No Mr Macfarlan. Nothing. She was here and she was gone.’

Stephen nodded, then turned to the table, wanting to start, but several of the group were reading Elly’s document for her talk.

Battle Hymn of the Compulsory Crusaders

Onward conscript soldiers,

Marching as to war;

The comrades you are leaving

Were lucky in the draw!

*Fight like Christian soldiers -
It's OK with God -
The path you tread ten million dead
In ages past have trod.*

*Onward then ye conscripts,
On to Viet Nam.
Why and what you're there for
You could not care a damn.
Slay the yellow heathens,
Burn their fields of rice -
And by this feat we'll sell them wheat
At twice the normal price!*

*Earth's foundations quiver
To bombs on Viet Nam;
A first class dress rehearsal
For Mao and Uncle Sam.
Flourish freedom's banners,
Praise dictator Kḡ,
One in faith and politics,
And in democracy!*

*Onward conscript Christians
Through the smoke and flame;
Hide the cross of Jesus,
Lest He blush with shame.
Forward then ye conscripts,
Fail not Holt nor Ming,
And day by day with L.B.ḡ.
Your requiems we'll sing.*

Some read it more quickly than others. Karl chuckled at several points. Max said, 'Where did she get this from? It's very slack of her to distribute a document that isn't sourced.' Brigitte shuddered at the word 'requiems' in the last line. Marthe lifted her head, waiting to see if

anyone felt the same as she did: that it was a gesture made in front of them, using them as her audience, rather than a contribution they might like to debate. Kramme obviously felt the same because he swept the paper into his folder, saying gruffly, 'G'bye Elly.' Stephen wanted to get his session underway but the ground had been taken from beneath his feet. He looked at the sheet Elly had dropped on them; she was the same age as his daughter - no, younger by a year. Sickened, he pulled his diary to him. It was two weeks until she was supposed to give her paper. Looking up, his eyes caught Brigitte's eyes; she was plainly asking herself the same question, and getting the same answer. Elly wouldn't be giving her paper. She'd given it. They had it in their hands. Stephen said, 'I think we'd better give some thought to how we're going to handle this in the event ... ah ... of some eventuality.' He tried to make it sound considerate, yet firm. 'If Elly doesn't show up ... and I'm not saying she won't ... but one can't help having doubts ... we should be in a position to look into the topic. I can't drop extra work onto you because you've already contracted to do a presentation. I suggest we spend a few minutes asking ourselves all the questions we'd like to have answered, and then, if you're agreeable, we can take one each and spend a couple of hours - maximum - on it, and bring back what we've found. What do you think? Is that acceptable?'

It was what Max would have called a courteous dictate; they accepted. Stephen opened the topic. 'The move to pull our troops out of the Vietnam war. What do you think should be the main lines of inquiry to gain an understanding of that?' He looked around.

Brigitte was first. 'Things take different forms in different parts of the world. I'll compare it with the students and workers blockading Paris in 1968.' Kramme looked at her. 'Yeah. I'll do the same. Kent State University, Ohio, May 1970. Good one, Brigitte.' Stephen's eyes wandered. 'Danny? Are you ready?' Danny said, 'Conscription, or, how they own your life and you didn't know till they told you! How it was done, the methods, laws, stats, that sort of thing.' He looked at Neville, who said, 'I suppose I'll look at the effect on the Australian sol-

diers of the turnaround in public opinion back home. I'd be curious to know when it affected them; when it happened, or when they got back.' Stephen nodded, Lou lifted a finger to claim a moment. 'The anti-war movement and the counter-culture. Making love, not war.' There were smiles, and Kramme was seen to be beaming. 'They don't have to be alternatives, you know, Lou. If you're in a war you're usually pretty desperate for something else.' She smiled faintly. Ti Chai spoke. 'I will contribute an Asian view of what was happening in Vietnam. Here in Australia we study the history as if it is central, but it is only central here, nowhere else. What we do here is usually a response, or a continuation, of ... to ... what has already happened somewhere else. Also, I would like to point out that while Australia was fighting communism, it was getting ready to accept Asians. Vietnamese people who fought on the same side as Australians began to come here, and since then many other Asian people have come here. Old Australians are slowly having their grip on the country loosened. The war played a part in this.'

They looked at her, feeling that what she was going to tell them would be right, and that they'd have to re-recognise their country. Stephen looked around. 'Marthe? Angela?' Marthe said quickly, as if long prepared, 'What did the US fear? What did Australia fear? And I suppose my subtext is, are they still afraid?' She glanced at the others, but none of them made a comment. Angela said, 'I suppose I should talk about uniforms! Just joking. Ah, a simple one for me. What took place on the day. Days. I'll try and recreate the events of the day, zzz, and see what questions come to us. That okay?' Stephen nodded as if he was grateful and she grinned, thinking of her lover, Carlo, and the experience they'd had that morning. 'Max? And Karl?'

Max said, 'I think the movement of the electorate over three elections, 1966, 1969, and 1972. A momentary radicalisation, or was it?' He turned his head towards Karl, who said, 'I'd like to ask myself where is the point, the moment, when we can say that an examination of the Vietnam war would give us the best idea of what was happening. Two questions really - in Vietnam, and here in Australia.' Stephen put his

biro down. 'Good. I'll say a few things about the leadership of the anti-war movement. It's a nice test case as to whether in fact there was much leadership, or whether it was the movement that did the leading, and the nominal leaders were, perhaps, little more than organisers who made arrangements and not much else.' 'The people,' Max said wryly, as if they might be capable of anything except principled action. 'Don't knock us,' Sam put in. 'We sometimes know a great deal more than experts think we know.' Stephen took up his biro again. 'Sam. I'm sorry, I skipped over you.' He raised his eyebrows, calling for a topic. Sam wasn't inclined to forgive. 'Took me for granted, I think. It's not good when that happens. It means people think they know what's going on inside you without having the need to find out. Not good!' He added, with significance in his voice, 'Knowledge of what the war was like, that was surely the turning factor. People couldn't delude themselves for long because the war got saturation coverage, and it looked very nasty to people back home in their lounges. That's one bit of learning that's taken place.' He looked at Karl, as if inviting him to join it. 'That right, Karl?' The young man wasn't to be drawn. 'Certainly is.'

Something in Angela's eyes conveyed a warning to Stephen. He thought. 'And Becky, ah ...' She said firmly, 'Why couldn't the Americans win? What did it mean to win? Our foreign policy was to involve them in Asia if possible. Was that a deluded policy? Then? And now? And two questions. What did we reveal about ourselves in wanting them to be there? Did we think of the communists as being the same as the Japanese in the earlier war? That's what interests me, I have to say.' She looked at Angela, who found her unnerving. 'Quite a range,' Stephen said. 'Should be interesting. Thank you.' He reminded them of the date. He sensed that Brigitte had something to say. He looked. 'No, no, it's nothing.' Then she changed. 'I suppose I should.' She lifted her head in a way that commanded the room. 'We are doing it for Elly, not for ourselves. We are making a little memorial, each one of us, for our friend who is lost. We are fortunate, she is not. That is what I had to say. Stephen, you read my mind.'

In the two weeks before they returned for Elly's topic, each of them did some reading. Nobody imagined that she would appear. Two possible sightings occurred: Angela was in a city shop, waiting for her purchase to be wrapped, when she saw Elly - she thought - in the street outside. Shaken, she told the shop attendant she'd be back, and ran into the street, but Elly, if it had been her, was no longer in sight. Lou, also, saw someone in a nightclub, dancing wildly, but didn't get a close look; it might have been anybody who happened, under swirling lights, to resemble the one they'd lost.

They gathered, on the day, with heavy hearts. Stephen stood outside the room until ten minutes past the hour; a number of the group stood with him, holding a broken conversation. Others waited around the table. When Stephen said, 'Better make a start, I suppose,' and left the passage, Kramme, who was last, left the door open, and sat where he could watch it. Then Brigitte, normally punctilious, came in. 'I was at the tram stop,' she said. 'I knew the tram she would be on. It stopped, it went away. A lot of students got off, but she wasn't there.' She shut the door firmly, and most of the group were relieved. If Elly couldn't look after herself, it fell to them to do it for her. They looked to their tutor.

'A few facts first,' he said, looking at Angela. 'The big day. The first moratorium march. What can you tell us?'

'There's a man living opposite our house,' Angela said, 'who was the same age I am now on the day it happened. He said it was the biggest thing that had happened to him, and he still feels the same way. He wrote notes about the march as soon as he got home, because he was excited. He said I could copy them. I'm going to read from them, but feel free to butt in. Okay?' She began to read, treating the writing as evidence, something de-personalised by the use she was putting it to, yet precious too, because it was experience still raw from the living.

'Photo of Nixon with flannel singlet and pitchfork (take-off of 1930 painting *American Gothic*). An Asian impaled on one tyne of the fork; red spot where the tyne came out of his body. Effective banner!'

‘Students jogging along blowing whistles. “Like birds in palm trees at the end of the day,” said a man behind me. They were chanting, “One, two, three, four, NLF will win the war. Five, six, seven, eight, US will capitulate”.’ ‘Another student troupe in white with a large tin drum; one wearing a fireman’s helmet as a mock Roman gladiator.’ She paused. ‘The war-making tradition in the country’s history was being challenged, but with good humour.’ She went back to the notes. ‘What do we want? Peace! When do we want it? Now! Someone yelled at the chanters, “How’re you going to get it?” and they laughed. They laughed!’ She looked up. ‘I like that. It gives me hope.’ Stephen chuckled, thinking of his daughter’s confidence. Sometimes the human race gave itself hope. Angela read on.

‘Voice calls, “Three cheers for the coppers for not causing any trouble.” The cops took that stony faced, but couldn’t stop themselves grinning after the cheers when the same voice said, this time, “Three cheers for the coppers for not shooting us!” Banner waving in front of me, “Bring the troops home!” Sign in window, “Night spot, fully licensed till 3 am.” Girls looking out window onto us. Man beside me waves to them. No response. Banner: “Stop the draft!” Mounted police with dung around their horses’ feet trodden down because they’d been there a while.’ She looked around. ‘Anybody want to comment?’

‘It sounds pretty orderly. No brawls, nobody getting bashed up.’ This was Neville. Angela waited a moment, then resumed: ‘Trade union official addressing crowd in Treasury gardens, “We will destroy those who want to destroy us!” His high pitched voice, starting impossibly high and having to drop down instead of rising with his words. Woman next to me. “I don’t listen to a word above high C, and that’s where he started!” Angela turned a page; Karl was growing restless. “Sheer size of crowd demonstrating gave feeling of safety. Larger than expected turn-up gave marchers heart and confidence.” He describes,’ Angela said, ‘the crowd sitting down and observing a minute’s silence. I’ll read that in a minute, but at the end of his notes he says, “As we sat I felt sure that the photographers would be taking pictures of the vast line in

the street and it struck me that there would be a day in the near future when North Vietnamese leaders would be looking at our protest and feeling pleased. Bill Crow, cleaner at work, says the war'll be lost by demonstrators acting the way they do. That, I think, is why I feel so satisfied tonight. I don't know that I want the war lost so much as stopped. As the banners said, over and over, "Give peace a chance!" I've got a lot more,' Angela said, 'but I'll stop for the moment, and give someone else a go. We can come back to this if you like, later.' She looked up, and found herself staring at the chair they'd left empty because Elly had made it hers. Angela shuddered, and everyone noticed. 'It's hard to avoid, isn't it?' Marthe said. 'I can't shut her out.' They looked at the chair, they looked at each other, they looked at the chair.

Stephen, seeming worn and unable to help himself, said, 'Sam?' The one-time trucky said, 'Winning a war is all about will-power, which is another way of saying how much you believe in yourself and what you're doing. The longer a war goes on, the more certain it is that any weakness will be found out. You can't ask people to give up their sons for a war without them wanting to know what it's about. And when they know, they're going to look at it pretty hard. My wife and I haven't got any kids but I know that if we did, and someone wanted to take our son away to fight, well, if I didn't think the war was right, I'd do anything to save him. We all would. Draft dodgers was what they were called, and it was a dirty word, as if it was dishonorable to dodge fighting. But who wants to die for something rotten ...'

Again the room felt the presence, the shadow, of the one whose work they were doing. Sam said, 'Sorry about that. You want to say one thing, but another thing slips into your words. It's as if it refuses to be left out.' He was troubled, then he spoke to the gap in the faces around the table. 'Come in, Elly. Listen. You know what we're talking about. It's your topic. It's you, in a way.' He looked around. 'I know I sound gaga, but that period, the Vietnam war, the hippies ... sorry Lou, I won't steal your thunder ... lots of things got loose, and one of them was drugs, which is why we're talking today, and she isn't.' He pointed at the chair.

‘Sorry, Stephen, I’ve got off the track. Could someone go on while I get myself back on the rails? Sorry about this.’ Stephen wondered who to ask. ‘Karl? Would you like to carry on?’

Karl drew a deep breath; he couldn’t refuse. ‘We’re running into an old problem, the nature of historical inquiry. Describing the past is a time-consuming but essentially simple task once you’ve closed off enough options in your mind and have decided, clearly and firmly, why you’re looking and what you want to see. For example, we might ask why inter-war German society broke down to the extent that it allowed the rise of Nazism, war, the destruction of the country, et cetera. If we put the question in that way then we’re telling ourselves that the problem lies within the boundaries of Germany, and people from other nations can examine it in comfort.’ The word caused some heads to lift. He said, ‘Yes, comfort. We don’t like to be made uncomfortable, we avoid it at all costs. We shape our inquiries in subtle ways so that personal discomfort isn’t likely to be an outcome. If we’re subtle in doing this, we don’t even wake up to it.’ He paused; Max was making notes of things he wanted to take up.

‘So how should we look at Vietnam?’ This was Becky.

‘Do we *want* to look at Vietnam?’ This was Karl. ‘I’m not sure that we do. Brigitte saw our anti-war marches as connected with the student/worker alliance in France. Kramme wanted to connect with anti-war movements in America. Ti Chai, I know, wants to give us another view of events as seen from Asia ...’

‘I will say what I think in a minute,’ Ti Chai put in. ‘Do not try to guess. You will put wrong thoughts in people’s minds.’ She was stern.

‘I’m sorry, Ti Chai. I beg your pardon. I was doing that, and I shouldn’t have. What I was trying to describe is a form of breakdown in the ruling, the dominant, way of thinking. American dominance, for example, is always shadowed by fear that they’ll lose their dominance. That fear, that shadow, is something that governs much of what they do.’ Kramme was glowering at the door that had been closed when they knew the last chair wouldn’t be filled. ‘History,’ Karl said, ‘doesn’t

concentrate on how we make tomato sauce. Or press slabs of metal into mudguards. The study of history takes such things for granted. History examines things that by their very nature give us difficulties. Now that brings me back to where I began, that is, talking about people shaping their inquiries so they don't produce findings that make them uncomfortable. It might be said, then, that history is a process of identifying the troublesome, the disturbing, and then pouring syrup onto the problem so it doesn't frighten us any more.' He could tell that Stephen was going to cut him off, so he kept talking. 'Lou said she wanted to talk about the slogan, make love not war. What a concept! What a change!' He couldn't stop himself from giggling, and suddenly they were all laughing. 'I told you, it's a great idea,' Kramme said. Lou had her head down; Ti Chai was trying, unsuccessfully, to look prim. Neville, newcomer to the field of love, was secure, and Max was bursting to talk. Stephen tapped the table, but Karl burst in. 'Let me finish! If you don't mind, Stephen! This is important! It's periods of unspecified ... sorry, un-understood change that give us most trouble. We're not even sure of what's changed, so we can't say what we're trying to explain. That's why Vietnam's hard. It's probably why Ti Chai gets exasperated with us, because most of our difficulties are internal to Australia and the US, and relate only distantly, as projections really, to events set in train long before in Vietnam. We appropriated a process taking place in that country - and it had been going on for decades, and nobody had been bothering about it much - when it began to have, or seemed to have, relevance to things that were happening in our own societies which we couldn't understand, and which, therefore, were out of control, the very thing that rulers hate, because it unsettles them, and the general public fear, because they can't drone on, baa-ing like sheep, without knowing what's happening from a larger perspective!'

He stopped, having driven home his point. They looked at each other. Marthe got in before Max. 'I think Karl's given us a good place to start, but I don't want to talk about comfort so much as discomfort, because I want to ask the question of what the US and Australia feared,

and also, if you remember, the other question, are they still afraid? Fear is a permanent factor in politics, just as it's a fundamental part of us. We need fear to keep ourselves safe and healthy, but if we've got too much we destroy our health and safety. Odd, isn't it. Now I'll say something else that's odd. It's normal to say that America feared communism. But it's just as true to say that communism could be defined as anything that America feared.' She sensed that some of them hadn't grasped what she intended. 'Let me put that another way. A nation like America has a great need to project an image of itself. It does this in many ways, including film and television. If it sees that a minor nation - say this one - submits, shows the films, greets celebrities, turns out in force when there's a few warships in harbour - that kind of thing - then the big power tells itself the little power is no threat. But suppose a little power doesn't send back the right messages? Suppose the little power is thought to be spreading subversion? It's a danger! It's a threat, not because it's got a powerful army, but because it's spreading a gospel the big power can't tolerate. Power's in the mind, and a powerful nation can't tolerate people thinking in a way that isn't the big nation's. You follow me?'

Stephen said, 'I think we do, Marthe, but can you tie that a little more closely to our topic? She looked around. 'What I'm trying to say leads me to the conclusion that we in this country probably can't understand what happened in Vietnam - beyond realising, as people showed they did with the marches, that we'd somehow got things wrong - because, very simply, we're not Vietnamese. So let's look at things from a Vietnamese point of view. You've lived beside the Chinese for centuries, you're colonised by the French, you're occupied by the Japanese, and then, when the Japanese have been driven out, the French try to come back. You beat them off, you think you're getting somewhere, and then the Americans step in.' She took encouragement from the fact that Ti Chai was smiling. 'Let me imagine what the effect of all that would be.'

Ti Chai said, 'You are treading in the right direction. Go on, please.'

'It's not easy, but thank you. If I was Vietnamese, I'd have the advantage of having been forced to deal with no less than four powerful cultures within a century, and I think I'd have analysed them pretty thoroughly, looking for weaknesses.' Ti Chai broke in. 'And what is the weakness of America? Strength, that is its weakness. It knows it is strong, and nobody warns it. Some countries, like this one, Australia, don't warn it because mostly they can't see the danger. The countries that can see the weakness, they don't tell Americans, they don't warn them, because it is the only advantage they have in their struggle.' Her eyes were filled with zeal: the tutorials had brought her moment at last. 'Perhaps you think what I say is silly, but consider. America has great stocks of bombs, and it has planes that can drop them from so high that nobody can shoot down those planes. Power!' She lifted a clenched but still dainty fist as if reaching for clouds. 'Power! How could it be brought low by little people who dig tunnels and hide? Precisely!' She laughed. 'Those little people are powerful because they know the real strength, the real power, is in the mind. The emperor rules the people because the people have the emperor in their heads.' She unclenched her fist as if to show them.

Kramme said, 'Can you put that in a way that makes sense to me? Americans think in a rational way. If you talk in riddles, I don't understand, and I'd like you to know that I'm proud of that, it's no apology I'm making.'

Ti Chai was quick. 'You speak in a way that compels obedience. This tells us that master/slave relationship is your preferred model. There are many other ways to think. If the situation you have to deal with is very involved, then master/slave is bad way to think. It offends people, and they will not tell you, but they will turn against you in their hearts.' Her eyes showed no fear, yet they felt she understood it better than her listeners.

Marthe said, 'You've answered my question, anyway. America feared to be found out. Feared to find there were limits to its power. Feared to find that power can be three-dimensional, not two only. Australia ...' she pondered '... was, as usual, afraid that it might have to think for itself, instead of simply believing what the powerful outsider told it to think. How quaint that it took a war to teach that!'

'This is very interesting,' Neville said, 'but we really are all over the place. Can we get back to what happened on the day?' He looked at Angela, whose papers were still open in front of her. She looked to the tutor, who nodded.

Angela glanced at her papers, then looked up. 'He describes the atmosphere as this crowd sat down. He comments on how strange it feels to sit on the tram lines when normally you'd get run over. But being in a crowd makes things possible. Also he describes what people did when someone said "What's the time?" They all looked at their watches, even though they had clocks above them, like the one at the post office. He says that going for the watches on their arm was introspective, and showed a failure of belief in the public sphere ...'

'Oh what rubbish!' Max had broken in at last. 'People will say anything!' Angela stared at him, giving him rope to hang himself. Max went on about the trivia she'd been feeding them; when he stopped, she said, 'Our lives are full of small things. Calling them trivia is no more than a put-down. Why not accept them for what they are? The leaders of this march said there were a hundred thousand people there. The police, speaking for themselves, perhaps, or the government, I don't know, said there was only half that number. Both statements are revealing. That's what makes them interesting. Both statements are claims on the record, claims to the understanding of those who come later, like us.' She could read Max's thoughts in his eyes. 'Yes, I know, the clocks. Think about it. Someone asks the time. There are clocks in view. The Post Office, the Town Hall. People look down, though, not up. They look at *their own* timepiece, not the public ones, though they're there.' She pointed into the air. 'And,' she said decisively, 'this man, who lives across the road

from me, noticed it and it felt significant. I know what you'd like to say about that, Max. You'd say it was a feeling he had inside him which he wanted to locate in the world around him. He wanted external evidence of something that was internal to him. Well, he found it ...'

'Hang on a bit!' Sam had broken in. 'There is a real world you know. Things are not just interpretations and theories and possibilities and hints and suspicions and doubts and uncertainties. I didn't always sit in rooms like this listening to people talk. I drove a truck. Let me tell you there are some certainties. You get under the truck and inspect every tyre because if one blows at the wrong moment, you're in deep trouble. There's an edge to the road and if you run off it, you'll probably roll. Roll! You know what I mean? Not very nice if you wreck the truck and you still owe a quarter of a million dollars on it! Banks think there are realities too, mainly to do with money coming in when you said you'd pay them. There are certainties and they're certain because you have to contend with them every moment you're in action. If you forget that, you're *yesterday*! So don't let's forget it!'

Max was tapping the side of the table. 'Yes, there are certainties. Nobody would dispute where the marchers assembled, or what time they started marching, or the fact that they marched down this street then that one. Angela's been quoting this man who says there were banners saying this and that. I'd be very surprised if those statements were wrong. But politics is about meaning, which is to say about how people understand things ...'

Angela lifted her arm as triumphantly as Ti Chai had done, with a finger pointing to her watch; her smile told him she thought he was beaten.

'... and yes, Angela, I accept that your neighbor thought in a certain way about people sitting in the street, but I don't accept his interpretation of the actions, which is that they showed a breakdown of belief in the public sphere. Heavens above, what else were those people doing, if it wasn't demonstrating ...' he chuckled '... sorry about that, I don't normally allow myself puns ... that they felt an important change could

be brought about by action in the public sphere? If they weren't trying to change government policy, what on earth were they doing? Tell me that!

Brigitte spoke for the first time since the tutorial had got underway. 'It is always interesting to see where people want to argue, because it is usually at the point where they feel secure. We are dealing with the wrong questions.' Kramme rumbled. 'Certainly are!' Brigitte's eyes flashed in his direction. 'If we do this, it speaks a lack of confidence. Of certainty. A large crowd of people gathered in protest. If we had asked them why they marched, they would have told us various things. Some would have said, we want the war to stop. Others would have said, we want conscription to stop.' Her voice changed to indicate that she was speaking for others again: 'Bombing of civilians to stop!' Her eyes searched the room, as if looking for a mind, an outlook, she didn't already know. 'If we move to Paris, two years earlier, we find different things being said. I'll get to that in a while, if you'll give me the chance.' They were being rebuked, and for some reason it amused them. 'If we move to Kent State University ...' she inclined her head towards the American '... we'll find some of the same things being said, and some different. People feel that the three things I've mentioned are somehow connected. I'm sure they're connected. In the case of the Vietnam protests, it's obvious, but it is also misleading because, you see, I think that protest about fighting in Vietnam was part of a manifestation - is that the word? - of deeper changes taking place, all around the world. Power was moving about, and people were uncertain, which makes some people noisy, while others go into themselves, and think.' She held up her watch, too, and Angela smiled, delighted. 'What I am talking about,' Brigitte said, 'is like the movement of the plates that make the earth's surface. When they move, there are clashes and quakes, some of them minor, some of them huge, and frightening. Cities can be destroyed. In some places, nothing is left; in others, the changes are small and people get back to where they were before. That is how I see history. And the last thing I want to say before I let others speak - some of us have not

had an opportunity yet - is that people who are at the epi ... epi ... what is your word? ... *epicentre* ... of a shiver ...' she made her body shake '... can't tell you what it was like. You have to take notice of what they say, naturally, but it is only when you put together reports from many sources that you can form an idea of what happened. I don't think we have done that yet.'

When she stopped, her eyes went to Elly's chair, empty as it would be, now, until the end of the semester. Others using the room would have no tabu about it, but for the group she'd belonged to, it would always be hers. Neville said, 'I wonder if we'll ever know where she is? It's strange to think of a person disappearing and nobody knowing anything about it.' Stephen said, 'I spoke to Student Records. They've had nothing from her at all. She's still unchanged on their system.' He looked at Neville. 'Did you find anything?' Neville had to admit he hadn't been to her former address, but said he'd go on the coming weekend. He looked to Brigitte, and she nodded, meaning she'd take him where he needed to go.

On the Saturday afternoon the two of them drove to where Elly had lived. They decided that Neville would knock on the door of what had been her place, Brigitte would question Meg, if she was about, and then they would door-knock. Neville was met by a bright, talkative woman of his own age who said she'd never known Elly but that she and her partner had had to clean the place because it had been filthy when they'd moved in. 'She must have grabbed whatever she wanted and cleared out! Which reminds me, we've got a couple of boxes of her stuff. If you know her, maybe you could take them with you!' Neville couldn't get out of it. He took the boxes to Brigitte's car; it was locked, and Brigitte was inside at Meg's. Neville lifted the lid of one of the boxes. There was a pair of bright green shoes he couldn't imagine Elly wearing, two books from the university library, one on conscription and one on contraception; he riffled through them as if it was incumbent on him to know what she'd been reading, then told himself he was being silly. There was some lipstick in a package labelled *nuée*; he wondered what it meant. There

were some letters, an incense burner, some paper flowers twisted about thin wire ... It's only trash, he told himself; we can't rebuild her from bits and pieces. Suddenly he wanted to cry, and clutched the box closest to him on the bonnet of Brigitte's car. When she came back from Meg's, he was subdued. She made no comment, but said, 'That woman is a liar. She said she hadn't seen our friend, but I could tell it wasn't true. The trouble with people like that, though, is that they lie to themselves as well, they really don't know any more what the truth is. What a way to live!' Then she said to Neville, 'Why are you crying?' He felt that compassion was part of her strength. He patted the box with his hand. 'The people in Elly's flat gave me these things. They didn't want them. They could offload her detritus on me because I knew her. "We'd like to think she got her stuff," they said. Bullshit! They wanted to be rid of it. And now I want to be rid of it too. We aren't going to find Elly and one of us has to store this stuff. Rubbish, really. Oh.' He showed her the lipstick. 'What's the name mean?'

Brigitte looked. 'It means a storm cloud. Ugh! They gave it to you? That means the one who found it didn't want it.' Neville said, 'Nobody wants you when you're down. Elly never owned anything worth having, I'd say.' He looked at the older woman, whose husband and children he'd met that day. 'We'll have to go through this stuff when we get back to your place, but if I'm honest, I have to say I want to throw it away as fast as I can. I'm not suggesting we do that, but it's what I find myself wanting. And if I did that, it'd be a protest on my part against her. She's let herself down, so I feel we've been let down too. I hardly knew her, really, but she's a part of me I can't renounce. She's inside me now, and wanting to throw this stuff away is all about wanting to get her out!'

Brigitte said sternly, 'Since we can't get her out, we have to ask what it is she wants, and I think it is privacy, so she can destroy her life without anybody making her feel bad.' Neville said, 'So what are we doing here?'

'Being foolish, interfering friends, because that is all we can be.' She studied him. 'Tell me about your lover.'

'She's a woman ...' he flushed '... about your age. Born in Spain. Her husband's away, he's on a fishing trawler off the coast of South Australia. She's not sure how long he's away for. She's taken a fancy to me. She's everything I ever dreamed a lover might be. She's made me realise what it takes to turn someone from a boy, as I was, into a man. I've ...' he searched for words '... I've grown up in her arms!'

Brigitte said, 'I thought so. I could tell. That is the best news you could possibly give me. You won't fail, now, if she's taught you well enough!' He could feel her warmth extending to take him in. He said, 'When you've been loved, and you've learned to love in return, you can't shut yourself off from other people.' His finger was pointing at the boxes. 'We're all connected, even if we don't want to be, because we need to be connected. If we couldn't connect, how would love flow, one to another? It's the most important thing in the world. I know I've got a lot of growing up to do, but I can see that!'

She said, 'You are doing well. We'll put those things in the car, then we must do some door-knocking. We aren't going to find her, but we are compelled to try.'

Nobody knew where Elly was. A few remembered her flowing hair, her way of walking. One old man said she was like a little bird in a hurry, with dancing, uneven steps. A woman told them, laughing, 'She knocked at this door, she was standing where you are now. She'd been living over there for three months when she came to ask me what night to put the rubbish out!' She laughed. 'Three months! I shudder to think what it was like inside.' They thanked her and moved on. They knocked on enough doors to give them a feeling that they knew Elly's district better than she would ever have known it. Neville's willingness flagged, but Brigitte, it seemed, could go on all afternoon, then, suddenly, she capitulated. 'I want to go home, Neville, if you don't mind, and start my mourning. We have lost her. We have tried. We are becoming as lost as she is. Tell me ...' she examined him '... do you mind if we stop?'

Neville said he thought they should go back to her place, taking the boxes he'd prefer to leave in the street. He was relieved when they got

to her house to hear her say, 'Leave them in the car. I'll get Peter to put them in the shed. I don't want to touch a thing until I'm ready.' He knew that she would choose something from Elly's rubbish - her relics, he thought - to give him, and he'd have to keep it, perhaps for years, until Elly was a memory, so distant, so evanescent, that he could let her go. How long was that going to be? He didn't know.

She took him in, and he saw, all over again, how much energy, thought, love and commitment a family requires. Peter, Brigitte's husband, sat him down and talked to him, yet, Neville knew, his host's senses were attuned to the other sounds of his house - doors closing, opening, the amount of force in children's voices, the quality of his wife's voice, shaped by the language of another place. Occasionally, he noticed, the children's replies to their mother contained echoes of the sounds she made, deep in her throat and shaped by lips pushed forward. 'How did you and Brigitte meet?' he asked, and Peter took him through the years of his association with his wife. 'I was walking around the ramparts of a place called Angoulême. It had been a fortified town for much of its history, built on a bend, a loop really, in the river. I could see this young woman on a path below me, and I liked what I saw. So I found a way to get down, and I asked if I could walk with her.'

Neville smiled. 'What did she say?'

'She said ...' Brigitte came into the room. Peter smiled at the sight of her and spoke more loudly. 'She said, "I do not walk with strangers. But I will be here tomorrow, and we can say we have already met".' He laughed; his wife, recognising the words, said, 'Silly man! He doesn't need to be told how to meet a woman.' Neville marvelled at the love filling their house. Why weren't all houses the same? If they were, of course, he wouldn't have the opportunity to share his lover's bed that evening, as he was going to do. He stood. Peter stood at the same time, but only because he wanted his wife to come to him. She turned to them, appraising, then moved beside her husband and put an arm around him. 'It is a good life,' she said to Neville. 'I know you will find it for yourself when the time is ready.' She knew he wanted to be released,

that he'd found the afternoon trying, that he wanted the heady swirl of love to wash over him, reassuring him that he, unlike the young woman they'd been seeking, was not alone.

Brigitte was quiet over dinner, and left it to Peter to see their children through their baths. 'I am going up to the study. Send the children when they are ready to say goodnight.' He heard music soon after, a tenor voice, a light, French voice, but ringing as if cast into emptiness. Some time later he heard it again, and after another interval, a third time. He knew his wife was extracting the essence of the music. She's thinking about this girl Elly, he told himself. Is she calling to her, through the man who's singing? He thought about it, but that didn't seem right. How could he find out, and did he have any right to find out if he could? They'd always given each other privacy. When he went up in the morning, the CD would be back in its cupboard, hidden in the rows of discs, no sign indicating which of the boxes had given voice. The music sounded distantly through the house again. The children wanted to say goodnight to their mother, but he told them to wait. They got him to read to them until he felt it would be right for them to go up. They scrambled up the stairs and knocked as they'd been told they must. 'You don't walk through a closed door,' their mother had told them. 'You have to ask if you can come in. That's what shutting a door means. Australians are very careless about doors, but I want to train you properly.' The children knew their father respected the door policy, as they'd come to call it. Brigitte opened the door but blocked the entry. 'Kiss me goodnight, my loves. Hold me. I need you.' The children hugged her. 'Now I give you one last squeeze,' she told the children, 'and you take it down to your daddy. You are lucky to have such a good father.' Peter was touched, but curious. What exactly was happening inside his wife? The children came down, they hugged him. Peter could see his wife considering them, before she closed the door. He saw the children into bed, talked with them, then said goodnight one last time.

Back in the living room he could hear the music above him, swelling through the house, much more loudly than before. This will be the last

time, he told himself. She's saying goodbye. It was up to him to listen, but not to ask. The tenor's voice rang out, imploring, knowing he'd never be answered; then a noisy chorus rushed in: events were gathering, swirling, decisions were being made, history was being shaped: then two baritones, common men, Peter decided, took over. They're trying to get used to what's going to happen, he realised. All they ever do is cop what others do to them. It's the fate of the powerless. He felt he too was connected to the missing Elly, the girl who'd disappeared, taking a little from each of those she'd known. A robber, really, but only a petty thief, beside the international money men. Their memorial is the financial pages, and Elly's ...

... is the sound of voices dying above my head, where my wife is cherishing what can be held, and letting the rest follow its owner into oblivion.

Battle Hymn of the Compulsory Crusaders, (pages 86 - 87), was read during debate in the House of Representatives, Canberra, on April 21, 1966, and is quoted in *Conscription in Australia*, edited by Roy Forward and Bob Reece, University of Queensland Press, 1968. Musical reference is to the song of Hylas and duet for two soldiers at the beginning of Act 5 of *Les Troyens* (1856 - 1858) by Louis-Hector Berlioz.

Kramme

Kramme had a map hanging from a hook. ‘The Japanese fleet was coming through here’ - he touched a spot with his pointer - ‘heading for Port Moresby. Most people these days believe the Japs’ account, which is they wanted to get to Moresby, but had no intention of invading Australia. I take that with a grain of salt. Maybe that’s what they were thinking at the time, but what if they’d taken Moresby, and started to look around? Events have a way of prompting other events to happen. There’s a chain in history which nobody in particular controls, but it’s damned hard to stop.’ His voice was rollingly American, and its lack of consideration for what they might be thinking annoyed them. Max butted in.

‘You shouldn’t say that unless you’re prepared to give us your line on the war crime trials at Nuremberg. Your country was represented, and everything that happened assumed that people had individual responsibility for their actions. Do you want to dispute that?’

Kramme glared at the younger man. ‘I’ve got a lot to get through. I’ll ignore that, if you don’t mind.’ He swept on. ‘What I want to draw out of the naval action that followed this thrust - the battle of the Coral Sea, and the later battle of Midway - is that events are often determined by things that happened long before the outcomes on which people focus! And the other thing is to remind ourselves of how we have to judge events by what people thought at the time, even if we, with hindsight, can see those people were wrong, or maybe partly wrong, in what they thought was going on!’

He tapped the pointer on the map. ‘I want to bring the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, into the story, because he thought ...’ he paused ‘... he thought his country was about to be invaded. Why the hell else were the Japs coming south?’ He looked at Ti Chai, who nodded.

‘Okay?’ he said. ‘Let’s get started. I want to talk naval power. The Japs knew it was the key to dominating the Pacific. That’s why they let all hell loose at Pearl Harbour.’ He sketched in the effects of the attack in ships sunk or incapacitated, and the psychological reaction. ‘A victory in war can sometimes be worse than a defeat. A victory can make you smug, while a defeat can sting you to greater effort. The Japs thought they’d weakened their enemy. They had, but not for long. The hornets really started to stir, once they realised their nest had been knocked down.’ He was pleased with this comparison. ‘The US fleet - I’ll give you tonnage and aircraft numbers in a moment - knew it had one simple task: find and destroy the Jap fleet. They did so, in two great battles I’m going to describe. But there’s always a hidden factor, lying deeper than the weapons involved. I said we had to find our enemy ...’

Stephen coughed.

‘Okay, sorry, *they* had to find *their* enemy. The Pacific is a mighty big tub of water, as you’d know if you’ve ever crossed it. It’s well worth doing, it gives you a sense of the scale of this globe we’re on ...’

Max broke in again. ‘Can we keep the travel talk out of this? I want to hear what your thesis is, so I can see how well you’ve backed it up.’ Karl agreed. Kramme looked at them. ‘I thought I’d draw fire from you two. Just listen for a while, you’ll get all the thesis you want. I was going to get onto codes. In wartime, ships and planes send messages in code, and when the action’s getting hot they don’t send messages at all, because they tell the enemy where you are. Not a good idea! A bit further on I’ll tell you about Japanese planes trying to land on an American carrier. I know that sounds crazy, but they were lost and they thought it was one of their ships. Now, back to codes! About a year before the battles I’m talking about, the US Navy had broken the Japanese signal codes. The Japs would talk to each other in what they thought was total security, but their messages could be cracked by guys sitting back in Honolulu with headphones. Think about it! If you’re sending out a fleet to destroy another fleet, it sure as hell helps if you know where they are and what they’re going to do next!’ He looked around. ‘I’ll pause at

that point in case there's something you'd like to ask. The point I want to establish, as I'm sure you can see, is that the big battles, when they came eventually, out on the broad blue ocean, were in large part decided by decisions that had already been taken. Back on the east coast, some admirals decided to create a unit whose job it would be to investigate the codes of nations with fleets of warships, and, on the other side of the Pacific, the admirals of another navy never got around to creating a unit like that. Result? The Japs went into action with a hell of a good chance of losing, and they didn't know it. Sure, there'd've been people in their fleet that would have realised the danger, but if the top brass can't see what's coming, everybody gets a broadside!

Becky said, 'You're pausing, Kramme?' People laughed. Kramme smiled sheepishly. 'Okay! I know you think I'm talkative, well I am! It's a lot better than not getting your message through!'

Stephen said, 'It might be best to keep going, I think. Sketch in the events of the Coral Sea and Midway battles so we've got something to focus on. I don't think people can see, yet, what they're being asked to consider.'

Kramme nodded. 'Okay Stephen. Sorry, sorry. The Coral Sea first. Let's get back to this map.' He tapped it with his pointer. 'This is where the Jap fleet was. The American ships were spread from here to here, blocking the enemy's path. And ...' he smiled '... there were a couple of Aussie ships *here*. I was talking about radio silence a minute ago. The Aussies were out of contact with the US fleet. They went on patrolling several days after the battle was finished. They knew something was going on, though, because they heard snippets on the radio, mostly from pilots who couldn't find their carrier, or they were running out of fuel, or the carrier had been damaged by the Japs, and, one way or another, they knew they were on their last flight, and when they came down it would be in the sea. That's what the Aussies could hear.'

He looked around. 'Sometimes I have nightmares and I hear those American pilots sending messages to their mums, their wives and girlfriends, knowing they're close to their end, and there's nothing they can

do to avoid it. It really gets to me!’ He swallowed. ‘Sorry. Let’s get on with it!’

‘One of the things about the Coral Sea and Midway battles that people today don’t realise is that the two fleets never set eyes on each other. Each fleet was over the horizon from the other. The searching, the spotting, was done from the air. The ships never fired at each other, except via their planes. It could be argued that the whole Coral Sea battle only lasted forty three minutes. That’s how long the US planes were in attacking the Jap carrier *Shokaku*. Now there’s another interesting point! The Japs heard that they’d sunk two of the US carriers. Well they hadn’t, or not at that stage, as far as we can tell, but, believing they’d had success, they ordered the *Shokaku* back to Truk for repairs.’ He tapped the map.

Becky interrupted. ‘Sorry Kramme, but I’m getting lost in all this, despite that stick of yours. I can tell I’m not the only one that’s confused. Do you think you could go back a little, please, and take one thing at a time?’

Kramme grinned. ‘The fact that you say that exactly proves one of the main points I’m here to make! Confusion, right? Confusion! Mostly, the Japs and the Americans didn’t know what was going on. They were letting all hell loose, bombs, rockets, torpedoes, anti-aircraft shells and everything else you can think of, but nobody knew who was winning. They couldn’t be sure who held the advantage. It’s like a heavyweight boxing bout. You might have your opponent on the ropes looking groggy, but if he can still land one blow between your eyes ...’

He jabbed his upper nose with one of his pudgy fingers, making a point that was vital to him, if not to those listening.

‘... then you haven’t won at all. Not till you’ve stood over him for the count of ten and you know the ref won’t let him take another sock at you!’

Stephen said, ‘That’s very colourful, and I suppose it’s an appropriate comparison, but can we move on? Is there anything you want to add

about the end of the battle, because we need to get onto its effects here at home, and in America too, of course.'

It was a directive that Kramme recognised. 'Yes sir. One moment, I want to do just that.' He found the papers he was looking for, put them in front of him, and looked at his audience, confident of his superiority. 'Yes sir. The Australian public, of course, knew there was a fight going on, or maybe I should say that they found out that the Japs were close to this country only after the Japs had been forced to turn around. That's called ensuring public support for the war effort! However, they were far from realising the implications of all this, except they were scared out of their pants by the little they did know. But the leader of the country, Prime Minister Curtin, even though the British didn't exactly have him as informed as he might have been, John Curtin knew that decisive things were happening near the homeland of his people. He,' he said, looking solemnly at them, 'was your greatest leader!'

'Oh come on now,' said Sam, 'you let us judge that for ourselves!' Others were grumbling, or looking at Stephen. 'I think at this point,' the tutor said, 'it might help to remind us how he became prime minister. It's not something we've covered in lectures yet.'

'Happy to oblige,' Kramme said. He sketched in events from the declaration of war in September 1939 until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, and the efforts of the Australian government to get its troops home. 'Churchill didn't want to do what Curtin asked for, but Curtin insisted. Churchill wanted to drop them off in Burma; Curtin said no. Nobody knew about this at the time, mind you. There's a tale told by a man called Frank Green. He was Clerk of the House of Representatives. John Curtin's chauffeur came to Green to tell him the Prime Minister wasn't sleeping, but was walking around the gardens of the PM's lodge all night. So Green went up to the Lodge, after the House rose at midnight, and there he was, the Aussie Prime Minister, walking in the dark. Green asked him what was the matter. Curtin didn't say anything for a while, then he said to Green, 'How can I sleep with our men in the Indian Ocean among enemy submarines?' Green asked him to go to

bed but the best he could achieve was to get the PM to have a cup of tea. Green says Curtin never went to bed until the ships got through to Fremantle.’ Kramme looked at them. ‘It’s a strange thing about leaders. They have to suffer on behalf of their people as well as collect the glory. Curtin, as you all know, died in office. July 1945. The war was won but not quite over.’ He picked up the rumblings from around the table. ‘Okay, okay, I’m going to quote John Curtin. Here’s the statement I think he’d like to be remembered by. Two statements, actually. On New Year’s day, 1942, with the Pacific war only three weeks old, he spoke to the nation, beginning with a poem:

*That reddish veil which o’er the face
Of night-hag East is drawn ...
Flames new disaster for the race?
Or can it be the Dawn?*

Kramme looked up. ‘The PM then set out to answer the poet’s question, and his argument led him to a statement which is often quoted. He said: *The Australian Government therefore regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies’ fighting plan. Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.*

While Kramme turned a page, the members of his tutorial exchanged glances, feeling uncomfortable. The big man found his place, and looked up. ‘That was New Year’s Day, 1942. On March 15, and the Coral Sea battle is still almost two months away, he spoke to the “Men and women of the United States”. He began with those words, and he went on to say that he was not speaking to the US government, which already knew the things he was going to say.’ Kramme looked at his notes: *It is to the people of America I am now speaking, to you who are or will be fighting, to you who are sweating in factories and workshops to turn out the vital munitions of war, to all of you who are making sacrifices in one way or another to provide the enormous resources required by our great task.*

As he read on, Max and Karl began to whisper. Sam found his acceptance of war as men's business starting to waver. Several of them looked to Stephen; couldn't he get Kramme to stop? Angela sat back, recording his posture and the sound of his voice, then she looked around the room, studying them all. Marthe, too, and Lou, sensed that a crisis had been brought on by someone who didn't realise what he was doing.

Be assured of the calibre of our national character. This war may see the end of much that we have painfully and slowly built up in our one hundred and fifty years of existence. But even though all of it go, there will still be Australians fighting on Australian soil until the turning point be reached, and we will advance over blackened ruins, through blasted and fire-swept cities, across scorched plains, until we drive the enemy into the sea.

I give you the pledge of my country. There will always be an ...

Even Kramme was aware of the feeling stirred up by what he was reading. He stopped, glaring sullenly at them. 'What the hell's wrong? This is your own Prime Minister, at his peak of desperation, and also of greatness, making a call to my nation and to yours. He's shouting from the rooftops that both countries need to wake up if they're not to be overwhelmed. He knows his country's vulnerable because it's not prepared. He sees powerful forces sweeping south, I was telling you about them a minute ago. Why are you looking at me like that?'

He was a big man, a man of war, and he was angry. Karl thought him ridiculous. 'You're just raving. This is a history class. We're concerned with *how* one studies as well as what's being studied. You remind me of a Western film where all these guys ride through the mesa, is it? The sagebush? I don't know, and they're all hollering and firing shots into the air. They're crazed. All they want to do is shoot cattle rustlers, or Indians, anybody really. They're out of control. That's why we're resisting you. I think Stephen ought to end this tutorial right now. There's no way we can recover after that.'

Stephen hated challenges dropped in his lap. He sat back, wondering what to say. Kramme seized the moment. 'You and your *method!*

You're so scared of life you need tongs to handle it. You tell me one thing, one sentence, I defy you, one statement in all I've said that isn't relevant to my talk. Go on! Let's have it! Let's hear it from the method-mongers!' There was a pause. 'Nothing to say, Karl? Nothing to say, Max? Nothing new about that, is there, really? You talk a hell of a lot but you don't have anything useful to say, do you? Ever!' He banged the table with his fist.

He was still sullen when he got home. Jennifer, his wife, heard the rumbling of their rubbish bin being pushed over the bricks that paved their drive, and knew what to expect. Her husband was in one of his moods, and she knew how to manage them because each of them had a sticking point when he could be defiant, which meant helpless, or he could be helped through the dark spot, into the next stage. Jennifer had asked herself what Kramme's mother had done wrong to leave her boy so helpless, but the old lady had died, years before, in Nebraska, and Jennifer didn't occupy her mind with speculation unlikely to bring a desired result. When Kramme came into the house, Jennifer would say, 'Coffee darling?' and when he nodded, she would say, 'Sit down and read the paper, I'll bring it in.' He would grunt, and sit in the lounge. He would fiddle with the paper, then take up the remote control. He would flip through the television stations, then he would turn it off. She would bring his coffee into a room full of brooding. He would thank her with another grunt, and ask if she'd added sugar. 'Of course,' she would say, and stand beside him respectfully. This phase lasted no more than a minute. If he remained silent, she slipped away. Sometimes, though, softened by her presence, he would say what had caused his mood. When she came in, he was watching.

'Any sugar?'

'Two spoons. Already stirred.'

'Thanks Jen.'

She waited.

He said, 'I sometimes think we'd be better off back home.'

She knew he would feel her attention. ‘There’s a lot of good things about living in this country.’

The big man said, ‘I know. But we always said we’d review our decision after we’d been here two years. That’s why we never sold the house.’

He had still to say what had put him in one of his moods, which came, more often than not, on the day when he went to university, trying to ‘learn about the place.’ This morning he’d been scheduled to give a talk; he’d report on that when he was ready. ‘The people leasing our house have got a twelve month lease.’

‘Runs out at the end of the year.’

So he was thinking of going back. ‘They’re good tenants,’ she said. ‘If we decide to stay here we’d do well to keep them on, if that’s what they want.’

He said sombrely, ‘If. That’s the question, isn’t it?’

‘We don’t want to jump into anything. Though we can do what we like, if we’re sure it’s right.’

He knew he was being managed, and it was what he wanted. ‘I keep getting disappointed.’

Her technique was to give him back his own ideas. ‘There’s so many things you think they do well, out here, but ...?’ He sipped his coffee loudly. ‘They never respond the way they ought.’ He looked at her. She said, ‘When we first came we thought they were like us. Perhaps it was only on the surface. There could be things going on that we can’t see?’

‘Sure are!’

His mood was starting to shift, she sensed; he’d make a bold move in a minute, fling down a challenge and give himself the basis for a decision. He was a man who didn’t know what it was he didn’t know, and it was for his wife to see him both protected and able to keep his confidence. He mustn’t lose, Jennifer felt, and therefore he mustn’t be allowed to start a battle he couldn’t win. ‘Tell me about your talk.’

He sipped more coffee, not without satisfaction, she noticed: that was good. 'The mafia fired a few shots, but I had them covered in what I had to say!'

'Great!'

'The people of this place don't like to admit they were dependent on us to fight off the Japs, and they've been dependent ever since. You remind them, though, no matter how round-about you are in the way you raise it, and they get prickly. Fact is, they want their cake and they want to eat it too.' He chuckled. 'Well, I suppose we're all like that. It's just that I can see it, I tell'em, and they don't like it.'

'Did they get nasty?'

'No, niggly's a better word. They were prowling around looking for a weakness but I didn't leave them any openings. I nailed them by quoting their prime minister, back in world war two. He was in a tough spot, he didn't mind calling on the US. It was better than licking the boots of Nippon. What they wanted - or some of them anyway - was to be able to say, thanks for very much for saving us, now we'll go on as if it never happened. But it did, of course. We speak the same language, give or take a few expressions. We can't cut ourselves off. Once we noticed each other, and I mean back in the war against the Japs, we were plugged in to each other, and it's simply a fact that the more powerful signal prevails over the weaker one. The flow of ideas goes from us to them more than it goes from them to us. Here to back where we belong.'

His wife broke in: 'Do they try to make you feel you don't belong?'

He thought, his fist thumping softly on his knee. 'They do, really. I don't think they mean to be nasty about it, or most of them don't. You know, if I hadn't decided to take that subject at uni, I'd never have picked up the hostility I'm talking about. I'd have thought it was all pretty sweet between the two countries, but when you get with intellectuals you find a lot that isn't obvious. The people I'm talking about, Karl and Max mostly, aren't comfortable with their own people. I'm more comfortable with ordinary people than they are, so they need to make me feel an outsider. And of course they can! There's always some difference

in the way we look at things, or the importance we give to one thing over another, that those guys can point to and when they do, they think they've put a wall between me and the others. I tell'em, you guys are looking for ways to create differences that aren't there. I say to them, it's all one world these days, little national differences don't matter. One world! And it's up to us to make it work! But they wriggle out of that concept, because it gives them nowhere to hide!

He felt proud of himself for nailing his opponents. His wife moved back a step, placing herself near a chair. He said, 'Okay, I know what that means.' She sat down. He said, 'Body language really talks. What's he done now?' He was referring to their son.

'I don't know. He may have done nothing. All I know is that up until a few weeks ago, I could read him like a book. Now he's closed.' Kramme was waiting. 'Something hit me today,' Jennifer went on. 'A flash. I know he's dividing his friends into those he brings home and those he doesn't. He's showing us one set of friends and hiding another. I know that's what he's doing.'

'Shit,' said the big man, sombrely. His wife added, 'I even thought of asking you to set it up so his email messages come to your computer as well as his own. I wouldn't like to do it but there's an exclusion zone, and we're in it. We're *it*, in fact.'

Kramme answered sharply. 'It can't be done without him knowing, and anyway, hell, I couldn't do that. Deceit chasing deceit. No!' He looked at his wife, who was as determined as ever. 'Jennifer!' His voice tried to convey his command, but she knew his weaknesses. 'If there's something wrong,' she said, 'you *sense* it before you *know* it. The moment you feel something's changed, it has. I've talked to people whose children got hooked on drugs. They say they spent months denying something that a part of themselves knew. They slammed the door on their fears because they didn't want to know. I'm talking about caring people who made one big mistake; they didn't admit what a little voice was telling them. Something was happening right under their eyes.' She looked

at him, her eyes as commanding as any symbol of military rank. 'Tell me if what I just told you was true.'

Kramme unclenched the fist and grasped his knee. 'It was true.'

'Therefore?'

'We gotta do something.'

She studied him. 'Not something dithering. Something decisive.' Kramme looked at his wife. 'You want to take him home?' She said, 'That's your answer. It might be a good one. Mine's different.'

'You want him followed? Spied on?' She said nothing; he added, 'You want to catch him out with something? Drugs, or money he got illegally?' Sadness had entered him because he was dealing with a world of ambivalence. War was better so long as the side you were on believed in itself, right fighting wrong. 'Hey,' he said, 'I just thought of something. It's ages since we been to church. It's something we ought to do. Get ourselves back on track, if you see what I mean.'

'I half see what you mean.'

This confused him. 'Half? How can you half ... Just a minute, you haven't answered my question. Do you want to catch him with something, is that what you want? Put him under observation so we can catch our son red-handed, is that the idea?' His voice, cracking with strain, confessed how little he liked the plan, if this was it.

'No. None of the above.' Kramme was relieved. 'So what do we want?'

'It's for you to say. You're his father. What do you want him to be like?'

Kramme thought only briefly. 'Open. Straightforward. Honest. Fearless. Ready to die for what's right, and ready to live for it too. Willing to listen, but only to find out about the people that are talking to him, not to hear any argument about taking some other path. I want him to speak truth and never to tread the path of unrighteousness.' The words made him stronger; he looked at his wife, who said, 'That's what I want. I don't want anything invisible, or hidden, in his life. I want everything clear and in the open.' She knew, as perhaps her husband did

not, that this was a method of controlling the ones you loved because they were not allowed to have temptations, or even secret thoughts. 'When he gets home,' Kramme said, 'we'll have this out with him. He's got to be clear about what's required. If there's anything been going on under cover, it's got to stop!' He added, 'Maybe I'm making things out to be simpler than they are, but how in hell else are you going to bring up kids so they know what's right?' His wife looked at her watch. 'He'll be home in half an hour, if he's running true to form. Anything more than half an hour, there's something going on. I know his habits and believe me, I know!'

Kramme looked at his watch too. 'Half an hour? I'm feeling nervous. You know what? When I was in the navy, I wasn't nervous, ever. The tougher things got, the more determined I was. Why? Because I had my own standards to meet. It's a hell of a lot more complicated when you're dealing with somebody else's life, and the somebody is your own son, whom I share with you.' He looked tenderly at her. 'Like I share everything. Having someone you can trust in a partnership is better than being single, but it's harder. It's simpler to be single, with only yourself to care about. Okay! I know what you're thinking! We're in this together! When that boy was born, we were bonded so deeply we couldn't be pulled apart! That's how it is and that's how I want it. But!' He paused, impressing himself more than his wife, who repeated his word.

'But?'

'I said something in my talk today that's come back to me.' She was waiting. He said soberly, 'Events have a way of prompting other events to happen.' She studied him, apparently considering his words. 'And I went on, I said, "There's a chain in history which nobody in particular controls, but it's damned hard to stop." You see why I'm worried?'

She shook her head, in wide, slow movements.

He said, 'I know why those people tried to bury their heads in the sand. To ignore what was going on. It was easier to deny what was hap-

pening than to face up to things that might occur once they started down the new path that was before them.'

She said, 'Don't tell me you're frightened! Whoever would have thought that Kramme Lording, the man I married, would ever say to me he was too scared to do what he knew he should?'

Kramme said, 'Kramme Lording will do what he has to do. He's not so scared he can't act, let me assure you of that, wife of mine! But he is not entirely stupid, your husband. He knows, because history teaches him, that once we leave this moment behind ...' he tapped his knee again, decisively this time '... there will be no returning. We will not pass this point again!'

Jennifer said, 'I hope I've made it clear to you that I am not at all happy with our son as he is, right at this moment. Now. Here!' Though she made no gesture, the sharpness of her voice cut the air as if it were stone to be shaped. 'We are talking about what we are going to do because the way things are is not tolerable. I sensed it, I told you, and you can't tolerate it either.' Something outside caught her attention; she stood, and looked through the window nearest her. 'Here he is. I'll call him in, then the ball's in your hand, pitcher!'

Kramme moved his bulk uncomfortably, saying nothing. Jennifer went into the kitchen, welcoming their son. She got him the bottle of Coke he'd left in the fridge, then she told him she wanted him in the lounge, because she and his father had been talking, and couldn't go any further without hearing what he had to say. Sensing trouble, the boy became quiet, but followed his mother, taking a seat that placed the three of them in a triangle. Jennifer and her son both looked at Kramme.

The big man, the ex-pilot, began. 'Bobby. Your mother and I have been talking, the way that parents will. We think there's something changing, maybe something going on, that's not clear to us. That, maybe, is being kept from us. You're only fifteen. You've got a long way to go before you've got the qualifications you need and a good job and

the road to your future. It's not easy to lead a good life, because there's plenty of pitfalls. You know what a pitfall is?'

Bobby said, 'I sure do. It's a bear-trap. Somebody digs a hole and they cover it with branches and leaves. The bear falls in and he can't get out. Am I in one now?'

'Don't get smart. Maybe you are and maybe you aren't. If you're going to catch up with that good future, you're going to need all the support you can get. Your mother and I don't want to give that support to somebody who maybe is using it to get himself down a different road from the one his parents think he's on. Are you with me?'

Bobby, starting to close his defences, said, 'I'm listening.'

'Not the right answer,' his father said. 'I asked if you were with me. *With* me. It means in accord. If you're only waiting to see if I'm saying what you want to hear, then you are not with me. Okay, here's my question again. Are you with me?'

Bobby was better prepared than his parents expected. 'That's too simple. You're not with yourself. You're going to give me a talk on family values, but the world's moved on a touch. There's hardly anybody any more who's with you, and, like I say, you're not with yourself.' He added, 'Dad!' and then, 'Same with you Mum. You want to run the rule over me, but the trouble is, it's out of date. It doesn't measure anything any more. It's like if you go into a shop with the old money, pounds and pennies, that stuff, and they say, "Nobody uses that any more!" And you wonder how it is everybody's moved on, and you're where you used to be.' He looked at his parents and they realised he'd been expecting the encounter they thought they'd dropped on him. Kramme said, 'We've hardly started and already I'm twice as worried as I was a minute ago. Anybody who can talk smart like that has sure as hell got something to hide!'

Bobby was equal to this. 'You said you were worried. You know what that means to me? It means you're going to drop some restrictions on me that I don't want. I want to fight them off if I can. It's natural, because it's my freedom I'm fighting to defend.'

Kramme hated the word freedom used this way, and even the boy's mother was upset by the swiftness, the preparedness, of his response. They looked at their son uncertainly. He went on. 'Maybe somebody's been putting ideas in your heads. Whatever they are, they're wrong. I have done nothing ...' he sounded like someone taking an oath '... that I wouldn't be prepared to tell you about.' He put his hand on his knee in just the way, Jennifer noted, of his father. 'Bobby,' she said, 'nobody's accusing you of doing things. If you say you haven't, then I believe you. I hope I'll always be able to believe you ...'

'Hope!' said the boy. 'Hope. It's supposed to go with faith, the way I've been taught. I can hear the faith is starting to waver. What's been going on?'

Kramme found himself admiring his son's dexterity. 'That's the question, the same question for the three of us. What's been going on? Your mother says you're closed to her these days. What's blocking the connection? Are there thoughts in there you don't want your mother to know you have?'

Bobby said, and his parents felt he was doing it a little too easily, 'I'm turning sixteen next month. Show me anybody the same age who hasn't got a few ideas that might make their parents blush. You ought to see the magazines that some of the kids at school pass around. I wouldn't want to tell you.' He flushed a little, his own fascination showing through. His father said brusquely, 'I know those magazines. They've been around forever. They're just a phase! You grow into it, you grow out of it.' He added, awkwardly, 'I do recall a few guys I flew with who never did grow out of that stage. I had to clean up guys' things, occasionally, if they didn't come back from a mission. Usually it was the chaplain's job, going through the personals, but once or twice it fell to me.'

His son was quick. 'How did it make you feel about those men?'

Kramme waved a hand feebly. 'I think I felt sorry for them. That they'd never found a grown-up way to think about sex.'

'Was growing up a long process for you, Dad?'

‘It took a while,’ Kramme said. ‘Let’s not get off the track!’ His son, and his wife, felt, on the other hand, that the track had been found, and was being explored. Jennifer said to her son, ‘Have you made any mistakes yet Bobby? Thought about things you’d like to do? Things you’d like to happen to you?’

The boy said, ‘I’m only human, Mum. That’s what you say yourself.’

She said, ‘Bobby, I think you’ve learned a skill that your father’s never had. Only a few people have this skill, and it makes them very hard to deal with. They pick the ground they want to fight on, and then they make the party they’re going to fight feel that they picked the ground. Then, when the fight’s over, and even - even - if the clever one’s been beaten, he hasn’t lost much, because he wasn’t defending something that mattered to him, only something that mattered to the other side. It’s an awesome technique for self-defence. The fighting is all over a bit of make-believe, and the thing that’s worth contesting is kept protected. I’ve always wanted you to be safe and secure, but not in that way. It troubles me deeply, Bobby, my son.’

Bobby rose to this approach also. ‘Tell me anything I can do to convince you there’s nothing wrong in my life.’

They talked, the three of them, and came back to Kramme’s suggestion that they should attend church. They agreed to ‘shop around’ until they found a church where they were satisfied.

Saint Leonard’s in Malvern, two blocks away, was Kramme’s first choice but when, on the Sunday they went there, Bobby commented that it was a Uniting church, and that this should appeal to an American family, Jennifer asked herself if their mission had any hope. Kramme told his son that he had fought for the United States, and that any attempt to make merriment out of its name, or any disunity under its outspreading flag, would lead to swift reprisal. But Bobby was equal to this too, managing to look so pious that it discomfited his father. There were a dozen people in the church when they entered. Most were older than Kramme and Josephine, though two were girls whose faces spoke of

inner torment. Bobby studied them and Kramme studied his son. They were the sort of girls, Kramme would have said, who resist everybody's attempts to be lively, and then get pregnant the first time they do what everyone around them has been doing for ages. His son knew this, he knew. Jennifer could read both their minds, and felt her husband had made a mistake by taking them down the path of Christianity; what was needed was not so much faith as an unwillingness to let anything reach the intensity that called for battle. The minister's sermon was about the inwardness that only humans could experience. Many of God's creatures, he said, could love; some could even laugh and cry. Only mankind, he told his tiny congregation, could love and know that he loved, laugh and say why he was laughing, cry and be able to tell others the cause of his sorrow. This made mankind's position in the ecosystem - the word he used - unique: God had offered mankind a greater opportunity for a richer life, and a greater burden of pain and responsibility. It was trite, Kramme thought, but fair enough, and he glanced at Bobby from time to time to see what the young man's face was telling him. Bobby, well aware of these inspections, showed a blameless blank. Kramme thought his son was a clever little bastard who needed to be taken down a peg or three. They stood when the minister called the final hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, and they sang, the minister, the organist, and the scattered souls in the church that had been built for a more solid demonstration of faith. When the service was over, the minister moved to the door, and he greeted Kramme's family with cautious respect. Kramme said they'd come because they needed reminding of deeper verities, and they'd be attending regularly while they were in their present phase, which the minister interpreted as having to do with the son. He and the boy studied each other, the boy revealing a pleasant insolence which the minister understood to be making his parents despair. 'If you ever want to have a conversation,' he told Bobby, 'you're welcome to come down and see if I'm free.' This amused Bobby, who said, 'Free? Your church is something different! There's not much else that's free.' The minister smiled, having, he felt, won the first round. He had a feeling

Bobby would be down to make a fool of him, if he could, and that way the minister would get a chance to see inside his heart and mind in a way his parents couldn't. 'That's why it's special!' the reverend said, letting them move away as his outstretched hand suggested. The Lordings walked home in silence. Kramme sat on the back verandah, gazing at the vegetables he was proud of: zucchinis, tomatos, broad beans, three types of lettuce. Bobby went to his room. Jennifer made coffee. She called her husband but he asked if he could have it outside. Jennifer brought it on a tray, and looked at the empty chair beside him. He touched it, inviting. She went inside for her coffee and brought it beside him, waiting.

'That last hymn,' he said. 'It didn't satisfy me.'

'They left out two verses.'

Kramme shook his head. 'Not a real problem. Some of those hymns've got too many verses anyway. No, it just didn't have any fire.' He looked at his wife as if it was her responsibility.

'Darling, there was hardly anyone there to sing it. If the church had been full of people, all singing their lungs out ...'

Kramme shook his head. 'Something's missing from today's world. Call it faith. I don't know where it's gone, it slipped away without my noticing. Bobby's right, in a way. The little bastard. What sort of woman's he going to marry? I suppose he won't get married at all. Plenty don't. He's making me feel like I'm an old dinosaur, tramping around with teeth that are too big. And the modern animals are driving them out because they're quick, and bloody ruthless. We sang that hymn when I was a boy in college. The freshers' service, first Sunday of the year. We made the rafters ring! Dum, dum, dum-dum-dum, da-da da, da, ta!' He looked distant, somewhere back in his memories. 'We sang the same hymn at my graduation. And not long after I joined the navy, we sang it often! How can you fight if you haven't got faith? The two have to go together. If you're gonna fight, it has to be for something. If you've got faith, you've got to be prepared to fight for it. The two go together. What sort of a world is it where people wheedle their way between their

faith and the things they're prepared to fight for? What sort of a world is it where people aren't prepared to die for things that give them honour? Who wants to live in a world that doesn't believe in things?

He said glumly, despair not far away, 'Unfortunately, there's millions of people who are prepared to live in a shit-world that doesn't know what honour is, and our son's one of them. I don't even blame him any more. You know, Jennifer? I was angry with him and now I see he's sensible. He's doing what the human race has always been good at, namely, adapting. That's why we top the evolutionary scale. We're smart enough to adapt. Now I'm frazzled and he's getting ready to move on. It's his right, Jenny, you're his mother, you know that.' He looked at his wife. 'Tell me what you think about this. How do you see things now we've reached this point!'

Her concentration deepened, and Kramme could feel her moving parts of her personality, the sources of compassion and support, out of the way so she could, as he would have put it, trundle some big guns into position. 'It's not good for a young person to see their parents defeated. It makes them over-confident, no, I mean ignorantly confident, which means that one day, probably fairly soon, they'll be defeated too. Then, when they look into their background for guidance, they discover that the acceptance of defeat has become their family's habit. They're stuck then, aren't they?' Kramme grunted his agreement. 'So he's beaten us,' Jennifer went on. 'That doesn't mean we have to be relegated to the background. It means he's come forward. We're going to make him our equal in this family. It's going to have three partners now, not two and a child. He's in on all decisions from this moment on. How do you feel about that?'

Kramme's head bobbed up and down, though he couldn't get any words from his throat. Jennifer looked at him, made a decision, and called, much more loudly than was usual for her: 'Bobby! Here please! We need you!'

Bobby was curious to discover his parents' next move. He'd already begun to think of trick questions to put to the clergyman. What he

wanted to do was force the man to admit he had no faith to back up the things he said in his sermons, but how to do it? It might take a while, Bobby had decided, but it was worth a try. Now his parents were calling; what was it with them?

But he found, when he joined them, that his mother was in charge of the terms and his father, the man of war, had gone quiet, reconsidering. ‘What is it, Mum?’ Then he added, deferentially, ‘Dad?’

‘Your father and I have been talking,’ Jennifer said. ‘About you. Your growing up is well underway. We have to recognise that in the way the three of us live together, and make our decisions. We’ve cared for you all your life so far, but one of these days you’ll have to care for us. Not for a while yet, God help us, but it’ll come. You have to be ready for it, and so do we. That means we have to become a partnership. Like a business.’

She paused. It did not escape Bobby’s notice that she brought in the business comparison, because in the past she’d held that personal values were not the same as those of a business, and had to be higher by far. ‘This is our salvation as a family?’ he said. ‘It is,’ his mother told him. ‘One for all, and all for one. Not a big corporation but a little cooperative, that’s how we’re going to be. So pull that chair around here so we’re all looking at each other, and tell us if you’re prepared to come in and make it work.’

Bobby sensed, though he couldn’t, for all his smartness, have expressed it, that there is no more powerful way of taking someone over than to give them more than they’ve been after. The victor, in receiving the spoils, gets obligations that were unwanted and possibly undreamed of. He moved his chair to form a triangle with his parents’ chairs, and somehow he knew that this was by no means the same arrangement as they’d had in the lounge, a few weeks before, when the idea of church-going had been brought to the surface. He looked at his mother, and then his father, feeling that they were somehow getting the better of him, and that what he’d begun as a carefully staked-out rebellion was somehow enclosing him; it might have been better if he’d played it another

way, but it was too late to start again. It was as if the suit of adulthood had been brought out and he was going to be made to wear it. His mother developed the proposal.

‘Three votes, equal rights, equal responsibilities, different roles. Your father’s still the main money earner, I’m still in charge of the house. You’re in charge of the future. You can see further into it than we can. You own more of it than we do.’ She paused. ‘Okay to this point?’

Playing for time, he said, ‘It’s very hard to know.’

His mother answered him. ‘Don’t imagine, because you’re young, that it’s any easier, or any clearer, for us. To put it simply, all that happens as you get older is that you learn not to make some obvious mistakes, and apart from that, all you do is to realise that you must make decisions. Courage is what you need because knowledge is what you don’t have.’ She looked at Kramme, taking his agreement for granted. ‘You, my son,’ she said, ‘have to start to pick up the burden of being responsible.’ Bobby could see no way out of the situation being created around him. ‘Welcome to the club,’ his mother added, and then, to the boy’s amazement, embarrassment, and yet also his pride, his father held out his heavy, crinkled hand. Bobby saw that not only was it there to shake, and be shaken, but that it embraced him in every aspect of his being. He felt tears wanting to flow, and wiped his eyes. When he moved his hand away, his father’s hand was still there, waiting, and his mother’s eyes were on him. He put out his young, white hand and took the hand his father offered. The grip of the older male was powerful; Bobby said, still held by his father, ‘What have I done?’

‘You’ve accepted me,’ Kramme said, ‘and I’ve accepted you. We’re partners now, and your mother’s in it with us. Anyone that tries to harm our interests, we take them on together. Nobody’s going to split us. And you’ve got another important right. One of these days you’re going to bring someone else - your partner - into this relationship, and we’ll make that person as welcome as it’s possible for us to do, have no fears about that!’

‘Just like that?’ Bobby said. The tears were close to starting again. ‘I feel heavy, Mum!’

It was his father who answered. ‘So do I, son. I gained you today as a partner, not a secret rival. We’re allies now and it’s great. But I lost my faith today when we went to church, instead of regaining it. The truth is, I don’t believe a word of it any more. It’s been like a backbone all my life, making me strong when I had to fight, and now it’s gone, and I don’t know what took it away. The faith that divided everything into earth, heaven and hell, is gone. God’s own judgement can’t be heard any more. We’ve made so much noise down here that God disappeared. Maybe He took a holiday and decided not to come back.’ Bobby had no idea what he was talking about, but Jennifer knew the loss her husband was experiencing. ‘That’s why we have to stick together,’ she said. ‘There’s nobody else.’

‘John Curtin,’ he said, and this time she didn’t know what he was talking about either, ‘had the United States. We’ve got nobody, nobody at all to turn to, except ourselves?’

It was Bobby who spoke. ‘I feel terribly exposed. This is scary!’

They looked at each other, knowing that admitting their fears was bonding them, making them stronger because they’d admitted how weak they felt, alone. ‘I used to be a kid,’ Bobby said. ‘I’m not sure what I am now.’

Kramme would once have made reassuring noises of the old bull, or power-filled senior, variety, but he too had been stricken by the day, and the losses it had brought him. ‘Things change us,’ he said. ‘When you face the things you feared most, they make you concentrate. You get smaller, because you’re a harder target to hit, and you get harder. Everything lines up somehow and you get a strength you never knew you had.’

‘That’s why we need faith,’ Jennifer told her husband. ‘Without it, we can never get ourselves all together, except out of fear, and that’s a negative. I want a positive to pull the best of me together. I need it, I can’t live without it!’

‘Faith?’ Bobby said, and his parents were listening carefully. ‘That minister was quite a decent man, I suppose, but the service ...’

His parents were waiting; it was the first meeting of the cooperative at which he’d spoken.

‘... seemed to have forgotten what it was about.’ Kramme and Jennifer laughed. ‘Good one, Bobby!’ Kramme called, and Jennifer said, ‘That really makes me yell! There we all were, the people at that service, and all of us, even the minister, couldn’t have told you why we were there!’

‘Searching,’ Kramme said. ‘It’s pretty pathetic, isn’t it. You know what? Not long before the Coral Sea battle, the thing I had to give my talk about ...’

‘Yes, how did it go? And what did you say? You haven’t told me about it!’ Jennifer broke in.

‘... oh it was all right. More or less. But what I was going to say ... these planes took off from their carrier looking for the Jap fleet because they thought it was somewhere not far away, and it was cloudy and they couldn’t see a thing. And then there was a gap in the cloud, all of a sudden, and they could see the Jap fleet ... well, some of it ... down below them. Then the cloud swallowed them again, and they flew back to their carrier. And a day or two later the action got going! Which all goes to show!’

Bobby looked doubtful. ‘Goes to show what?’

Kramme looked expansively on his son. ‘That’s a very good question! What’s it show? You know what it shows me? It tells me there’s no meaning in anything. We think there’s a meaning, because it’s our input. We think there ought to be meaning in things, so we supply the meanings. We can’t stand ... what’s the saying? Nature abhors a vacuum! If there’s a vacuum of meaning - and there is, all the time, because there’s no meaning in the universe - if there’s a vacuum, our minds supply what we need to be there. We’re so used to doing it that we think it comes from outside ourselves. Imagine if there were no clouds in the sky, but we thought there ought to be, so we supplied them to make things feel

right for our eyes ... that's what we do with meaning. Thank God I got that out!' he roared. 'I needed to say that, and it just came out, all by itself!'

They knew, when their discussion ended, that they'd not be going to church any more; there was no reason. Bobby felt the loss more than his parents because if he couldn't at least partly believe, then he couldn't mock, and he needed to. It was a part of his growing up he'd been denied. Some days later, Jennifer bought her husband a CD of Bach's Greatest Hits, for which he thanked her solemnly. He played it through once and put it away, feeling no need to revisit. Jennifer felt the world was poorer for what it had given up, but couldn't find any need to reclaim what had been lost. She wrote to her friends in Nebraska, giving them the feeling that she was turning her thoughts and perhaps her family's intentions towards their home. Kramme finished his university unit, gaining the distinction he felt he deserved. His tutor had a barbecue to give the course an ending, and Kramme took Jennifer and a slightly reluctant Bobby to the gathering. The women in his father's group found Bobby amusing and interesting for his age, and asked him if he would try to keep his parents in their adopted country or whether they'd go back to the superpower for his adult life. He told them this depended on his dad. He told them, to their surprise, that he was a voting member of the family council, but that he and his mother deferred to their family's 'head' when it came to the central decision. 'I think Dad will take us back,' he told them, 'and now that I've met you people, I know - I don't know how I know, but I know I know - that when he makes up his mind it will be because of you.' These unexpected words were murmured around and reached the ear of Stephen Macfarlan, their host. Stephen, seeing the ex-pilot's glass empty, took a bottle and stood beside him, offering to fill up for his guest. 'What plans for the new year?' he asked affably, looking for the chance he wanted.

Kramme looked around him. He said quietly, 'I don't belong here. Sometimes I wish I did, and sometimes I'm glad I don't. You guys have got a lot to be grateful for. Beaches, sunlight, space. Freedom, a lack

of pettiness. I like the spirit you people have. I admire it, but it's also the reason I don't fit in. There's something in the air, here, that doesn't agree with me. I come from a land founded on faith, and it's what I want as the basis of my life. Out here, my faith has been washed away. Eroded. I'll never rebuild while I'm here. If I go back home, it'll come to me ... or I'll find a new one. Sounds silly, doesn't it, looking for faith at my age, but I can't do without it. You guys ...' he indicated the guests, '... seem to thrive on its absence, somehow, and that really puzzles me, but it's how you are, and me, I'm not built that way.' He smiled wanly at his tutor, whom he respected, and Stephen told him how much he'd enjoyed the variety of personalities and ideas in the group Kramme had belonged to. The big American listened tolerantly, then broke in. 'I think maybe the big thing, the underlying one I don't like to bring up, is that you guys somehow refuse to recognise who we are! That's what bugs me most, I think. Whenever I said anything in the group this year, I could feel the others telling themselves, "He has to say that, he's an American, that's the way they go on!" They didn't really listen, they just put me in a category - Yank - and that category was my cage. I don't want to be in a cage, Stephen. That's why I'm taking my family back home.' Stephen had it on his lips to say that he was exchanging one cage for another, but refrained. He liked the big man and wouldn't be seeing him again; there was no need to wound when the country had done that already.

Quotations on pages 112 - 113 are from *John Curtin*, by Alan Chester, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1943. Musical reference is to the opening and final choruses of Cantata No. 80, *Ein' Feste Burg ist unser Gott* (1730), by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Becky

Customers drove up in their cars, but only a few in the mornings, when Becky's love for the plants was freshest. Some knew what they wanted, others needed advice. 'We've got funny soil on our block ...' 'We get frosts ...' 'How much sun is too much for a thing like this?' She'd started at the nursery as a girl; not many questions were new to her now. She wondered if her answers came too easily, but people went away with her advice, and nobody complained. Ben, her boss, said it made him happy to think, as he drove through the farflung suburbs, that there were people nurturing trees and flowers, who knew that life was about growth, decline and replacement in the proper season. 'That way,' he liked to say, 'things keep looking good!'

Becky looked at the plants set about in circles, one for each type. Ground cover. Water plants. Trees. Small bushes ... Each plant, some of them no longer than a finger, some taller than she was, sat in a plastic tub, and each had a label. The names sang in her mind. *Brachychiton acerifolius*. *Telopea speciosissima*. *Grevillea excelsior*. *Banksia verticillata*. *Stenocarpus sinuatus*. *Hakea bucculenta*. In the soils and climates of her land, each had a range they could fit in, and areas bigger by far where they didn't belong. Even the coarsest weed couldn't invade every place; the finest displays of growth and flowering sprang from conditions that suited them. Things reached their best when everything was right, and that meant that those with knowledge had to concentrate all they knew on the welfare of the plant going into the soil.

Each planting is a birth, she understood, and it made her happy to know that somewhere beyond her daily world there was a place where the plants in their little black tubs belonged to the soil, sunshine, the clouds and rain, the cycles of wind and stillness that brought them to

their best. Each little tub, she knew, imported to her city the demand for a home where its kind belonged. The rightness of these demands contrasted, for her, with the silliness of humans, who appeared, those not garden-educated, to have the spiritual failing of a man with eyes bigger than his stomach.

To have too much was to invite sickness, yet some part of her knew that one had to explore the stupidity that had been implanted before her arrival in the world. It troubled her, and she knew that some at least of those who worked at the nursery - Ben, Lecky, Tricia, the cheery Johnno, Ruth, Merrin and Bill - sensed an uncertainty, an incompleteness, that she hadn't found a way to outgrow.

She felt she was a package that didn't want to be unwrapped.

As long as she'd worked at the nursery she'd noticed an edge to the warmth of her male customers, a curiosity, an appraisal, that she hadn't understood until the day when she overheard two men talking about Ruth: 'What do you think she'd be like?' 'I'm only sorry I'm not going to find out. I'd be happy to tell you if I did!' They'd laughed, these men, and she'd gone away squirming, knowing that eyes were looking through her clothes. She'd hardened, gone cold, and started to read her way into the field she served,. Knowledge became a type of fanaticism; a store of it was a declaration that her currency was valuable, and wasn't available.

Then she noticed a deference among the younger men who came with wives and babies; if they'd already submitted, they didn't mind giving her what was due. She took this confidence to older men, and saw that if you claimed something with certainty, they were likely to concede. Most of the time they were only trying on, which meant looking for easy captives.

She wasn't going to be easy, but she didn't want to be trapped between that and becoming hard.

She wanted a middle way.

It came to her, oddly, through a boy the nursery employed, as once they'd taken on Becky, to do odd jobs after school. He was fourteen and

his name was Gil, an abbreviation of Guillaume. His name embarrassed him, but Becky told him to be proud of it. She told him about the plants - their habits, soil requirements, their places in a well-planned garden. One afternoon when Ben and Becky were to advise a client with an old house he'd inherited, they took Gil with them. Gil was delighted by the neglected garden, and relieved that Ben and Becky weren't advising what most people would have offered: that the whole lot be ripped out. 'It's enchanting,' Becky said to the owner. 'All it needs is to be cut back so you can move about easily, and there's a few things that are dead or dying; we can put something in to replace them. I think it's exciting! How many years since you saw it last?'

Gil heard the new owner tell Becky and Ben that he hadn't been near the house for seventeen years, three years before Gil had been born. Becky and Ben moved about with the owner, then asked to be taken inside, so they could see the garden from the vantage points of the windows. The house felt as if someone had left it only a few days before. A recent newspaper sat on a table by the fire. 'Do you know what, Becky,' Gil said. 'I reckon if you touched those ashes they'd be warm!'

'You'd like to live here, wouldn't you Gil?'

'I would if you'd live with me,' the boy said.

'What would my role be? The cooking and the cleaning?'

'No,' said the boy. Touching her sleeve, which meant an accession of courage to his heart, he told her, 'I'd like to be married to you.'

The enormity of it, this confession, this offer of sweetness, silenced them. Gil felt he should take it back, but it had come out unexpectedly and was in some way more true than he could deal with; and Becky found herself wondering when someone more desirable, more possible, would say the same words. It was what she'd been waiting for. Whoever wanted to claim her had to give everything, or they wouldn't be considered. Putting her hand on Gil's crew-cut head, motherly-fond, Becky said, 'It's lovely of you to say that Gil. But if you're going to get married you need a house to offer your wife. You and I couldn't afford this one.' And so the corner was passed, but from that minute on Becky was no

longer troubled by a feeling that she should disown her demands. A new firmness underlay her willingness to serve. Ben could feel it, and sensed that it should not be discussed in front of Gil. A few days later he told Becky, when no one could hear, 'I'm starting a new nursery, Beck. Down beyond Frankston. Lots of new homes going up. I think I should manage it myself. I'd need a hand to get it established, then I'd need someone to look after this one. How do you feel about taking on the job? Some of the others are older than you, but you've got the experience. And you're more committed, somehow, than any of them. What do you say?'

Becky felt rejoicing in her heart: what she'd wanted had been brought to her. 'I'm saying yes, Ben. Yes. When you're ready, I'm ready. Today, tomorrow, or whenever it comes. Yes!'

Ben saw what it meant to her. 'Great! Don't mention it to the others just yet, if you don't mind. I want to get the whole deal set up, and then I'll announce everything at once.'

It took weeks, a time when Becky nurtured a secret joy: she wished only that someone shared her life so her secret could be shared, and yet, lonely as she felt in her happiness, she realised that her experience of loneliness was defining her requirement for taking on a partner for life.

The others - Ruth, Merrin, Johnno, Tricia, Bill - knew that something in their companion had changed. They thought she might have a boyfriend they hadn't heard about, but it was much more than that: she'd found the terms on which she'd marry. Whoever wanted her must approach and be examined.

It happened on the day that Ben told his staff about the changes. Johnno and Merrin would work with him at the new nursery. Becky would take over the existing one. She was reducing her university load to cope. She would take on casuals and they'd train the best of them for one or the other nursery. He asked them to support her. Then he invited her to speak.

She was thanking Ben in her simple but determined way when they noticed a man entering the nursery with a small girl, no more than three.

He picked up a trolley and wheeled it to the groundcover section, where the little girl chattered about the flowers. Becky heard the man say, 'We're going to make it look like that outside your window. You'll be able to peep out and see them!' It made her smile. She stopped, and they all looked at the man and his daughter as if he'd added something to their day.

Becky was at the counter when he came up to pay. The child called out, so her father lifted her from the trolley and sat her on the bench. Becky looked at the girl, and her father's face. 'She takes after her mother, not me,' he said. 'Lucky, eh?' Becky considered him more closely. Lucky? She thought she saw what she called vision in his eyes. To the child she said, 'What's your name, darling?' The little one said cautiously, 'Susan', then turned her eyes on her interrogator, returning the demand. 'I'm Becky,' she was told. 'How long have you worked here?' the man said. 'A few years now. And the week after next, I'll be in charge. It's what we were talking about when you arrived.' He said, 'I could see there was something going on. Was the announcement made this morning?'

Becky said proudly, 'It was. I've known for a number of weeks, but the others weren't told until this morning.'

'So I'm the first customer since you've been in charge!'

'Not unless you come back on Monday week. That's when I take over.'

He said, 'We'll be back. These are only a first instalment. We've got a long, long way to go.' When he left, after buckling his daughter in her seat, Becky heard the words in her head. 'A long, long way to go.' Why did she like them? Did they apply to her? To the child, Susan, more than any of them? To the man who hadn't said his name? Was he doing it on his own? She tried to imagine the mother of the little girl, the immature face grown older, but couldn't see it. She found herself wanting the future to approach more quickly, and couldn't have said whether it was because of the promotion, or because the man with the girl had said he'd be back.

He returned on the day Becky took over. She sensed that this was deliberate. She met him at the entrance and showed him around. Susan, the little girl, called her by name. 'She remembers!' Becky said, delighted. 'She won't forget,' the father said. Becky asked Susan how her flowers were doing. The child said gravely, 'Good.' Becky said to the man, 'Tell me about your garden.' She was dying to know his name, but had a feeling he was keeping it back deliberately. Why? She listened to his description of the garden; something told her that the man's wife wasn't there. Was she dead, or in hospital? No natural mother could leave a child so beautiful. Becky found herself wishing Susan was hers. She wanted to pick her up and make a smile come across her face. She wanted to deepen, to unearth that thing in herself which made her available to the needs of a child. This was the only way to full humanity, and the nameless man, she saw, had travelled to where this richness was found. She envied him. They walked about the nursery, talking about plants; she had knowledge far beyond his, but he had the child. He put plants in the trolley, he wheeled them to the counter. He paid. She helped him lift them into his car, prolonging the contact. He closed the boot with a click. 'You help your daddy plant them,' Becky said to Susan. Then he made the concession she'd wanted. He wrote on a page of his diary, tore it out and gave it to her. An address, not far away, a phone number. 'If you've got time to come and see what I'm planning, you'd be welcome. I could do with lots of advice.' No name. I have to ring, she saw. He's formal enough to answer with his name, not 'Hello?' She had to make the approach, but then he'd taken the prior move of indicating that an approach was welcome.

Was desired.

Formality was very much in her mind in the few hours when she was at the university, or using its library. She'd contracted to talk about the law and the land, and she found herself wishing she'd chosen something else. Her tutor had made it clear that choices, once made, had to be held to. 'We shouldn't be able to duck a difficulty,' he'd told his group.

‘We should face up to it. If there’s a problem we have to find a way to solve it.’

All very well for him, Becky thought. He’s had years of practice. The law and the land. She took books home from the library because it was the only time she could get for reading. She studied into the small hours, snatched sleep, and drove to the nursery an hour before the gate opened to the public. The law and the land. Late one night, brooding over coffee, she saw why it annoyed her. The law belonged to the whites. Native law was wiped away without thought, or handed to anthropologists as an object of study. Where’s the respect in this, she wanted to know. It was almost a joke among the people in her group that history belonged to the victors. Something stubborn surfaced in her. How could she put the two laws, the two ways of embodying the accepted, beside each other so that comparisons, evaluations, could be made? How could she do that?

She went back to the library, when she could find time, and looked for another set of readings, and they were hard to find. That night, as one day passed into the next, she realised that the people in her group might not be as convinced as she was about the equality, the comparability, of civilisations. That would have to be established first. I have got one hell of a problem, she told herself. I don’t know if this can be done.

What she wanted, she decided, was a good example of aboriginal resistance to the conquerors who called themselves settlers, and then, as the crimes of dispossession changed in their memories like the colour of their hair, they came to know themselves as pioneers. They had been courageous, venturesome, true. Bullshit, she wanted to shout, I need examples of blacks fighting back. There were a number, even in the earliest days at Port Jackson, but she settled on a man called Pigeon, from the Derby region of the far north-west. She summarised his campaigns, making sure she didn’t glorify him because he seemed to be feared as much by blacks as by invaders. His death was the moment when she could make her point about there being two sides to every story. The

whites said their police had cornered Pigeon for a shootout. The blacks said he was discovered by an aboriginal tracker. They had more to say than this:

Pigeon's body could not be destroyed. It was already riddled with bullet holes from his many encounters with the police. Any man would have died, but not Pigeon. He was indestructible, almost immortal, for his life was seated, securely tucked away, in the fold between thumb and finger of his left hand. Only when the police were wise enough to bring in an aboriginal witchdoctor from the Pilbara could the tide be turned against him. The clever doctor, suspecting the truth about Pigeon's seeming immortality, shot Pigeon first in the right hand - without success. Then trying the left hand and aiming his magical weapon, a death pointer, carefully at the specific spot, the desired result occurred: Pigeon died instantly. However shortly after the assassin was himself killed by lightning.

The black hero could only be overcome, in stories passed around by blacks, by a man who had their magic, cunning, their insight. Whites only succeeded when they enlisted those qualities! I'll tell them, she told herself, that white law only prevailed after black law had been exterminated like those who'd adhered to it.

What then?

I need, she decided, another lengthy, living example, a story that's simple to tell, but drawn out, lasting a lifetime or more. The next phase of her search began.

She rang Ben and told him she had a paper to give, that it was proving harder than she'd expected, and that she needed to get to the library early enough to give herself time to work when she got home. Could she leave a little early, when things were quiet, and let Bill or Ruth close the nursery? Ben wished her luck. I'm lucky to have him, she thought. He understands. Understands what? Her history training was hard at work. What did he understand, exactly? She thought, not of Ben's statements, which were few and far between, but of his way of lifting his eyes if some difficulty was brought to him, of pausing, picking something up or putting something down, searching for the long view, the place

of what had been put to him in some larger scheme of things. 'It takes time for things to come clear' was one of his sayings; the younger ones, Merrin, Bill, made jokes around this saying, a secret way of accepting whatever he meant while laughing at it too. Time is what I don't have, Becky knew. I've got a deadline.

She decided to base the second stage of her talk, following the prelude about Pigeon, on the travels of Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell, because he was cautiously respectful of the people whose lands he was invading, yet everyone in his party travelled with a gun. He was articulate enough to let her probe his writings for examples of the two cultures colliding. So far so good, but what did she want from Mitchell, and where did her talk go after that? There had to be some end-point, some understanding reached, did there not? She felt she should be able to see it, yet couldn't.

She cast about in her mind, searching for someone whose mind might reach further than hers, whose thoughts could be accepted without resentment. She was proud, and knew it was a problem. She knew this when she realised who she wanted to ring.

She rang him. The phone rang for a long time. He was asleep, no, he was reading to his daughter. He picked it up.

'Simon Johnson.'

He would have said the same two words to anyone, but she felt she'd had his heart presented as an offering. It was up to her to do as well.

'Rebecca Bridges. Becky. You gave me your number at the nursery.'

'I was hoping you'd call.'

Excitement set her tingling. They'd begun. 'I've got a problem. I want to talk about it.'

'Tell me. I'd like to hear.'

She told him what she was working on, and where she'd got stuck. 'Would you like to come around? We could talk.'

'That'd be wonderful. Is Susan in bed yet?'

‘Yes she is. I think she’s asleep. We’d never get her to sleep if she knew someone was here.’

Becky chuckled. ‘About five minutes then. See you soon!’

Heart leaping, she put her notes in the car, knowing she wouldn’t be needing them. It was fresh insight she wanted, the experience of a new, exciting mind behind her, pushing. She’d been alone for ever so long.

He was at the door when she arrived. ‘I heard you pulling up. I knew it was you.’

‘How did you know? I tried to drive quietly. I didn’t want to wake anybody.’ She did, of course, but it was what you said.

‘I just knew. There’s an answer inside yourself, when someone’s coming for you and nobody else.’

That was true. ‘Let’s sit down. I’ve got a mountain of stuff to talk about. It won’t come into shape. I know how I want to start but I don’t know where it goes after that.’

‘Come through.’

They sat. He’d made coffee. ‘You must have put the jug on the moment I hung up on the phone!’

‘I did!’ They were both excited. She said, ‘I know I’ll talk too fast and say too much. Just let me rave on a while, so you can see what I know and what I don’t. I need somebody to stand back and tell me what it all looks like. What’s there and what’s missing. I’m too close to it.’

He listened. ‘There’s one question you didn’t touch on in what you said.’

‘What’s that?’ This was exciting for her, and there was desperation as well as restrained desire in her way of speaking.

‘It’s the matter of what backing a system of law has got behind it. We’ve taken our legal system from the British. The history of the British people for centuries has been about power. Who holds it and who wants it. Rivalry to be king. Jealousy over titles, those who want to be lords, or dukes, those who have to be content with being knights. You know what I mean?’

She nodded, hanging on his words.

‘As far as I can see - and it’s not much - the people of this country before the whites arrived didn’t have any systems of power as we know them. Why not? They certainly had status, that’s what their initiations were about, and they certainly allocated roles according to their age, gender and kinships. There were complex systems they had to obey, but they weren’t legal systems in the way we understand things.’

It flitted across her mind that she mustn’t leave without taking a look at the sleeping Susan: she said, ‘You’re right. The aborigines weren’t organised hierarchically. I’m reading about Thomas Mitchell and his travels. He sees a lot of the blacks, but he’s never ushered into the presence of a chieftain. He’s either got a whole tribe around him, or one or two of them, watching what his party’s doing. Getting to know the white man’s ways. It’s interesting, that’s a good point. So where does that lead us?’

‘Don’t let your coffee get cold. It’s waiting !’ He smiled. She wanted to say, ‘Like I’ve been waiting for you!’ She sipped, eyes fixed on his face.

‘So in our system, there’s law, and behind it, backing it up, ready to punish if we don’t observe the law, there’s power. They go together. Also, we understand our systems of power. Certain people hold office. They depend on others ...’

‘The power behind the throne!’

‘Exactly! We’ve got a fair idea of how it all works. The early settlers in this country had no idea how the black people managed power. They appear not to have had systems of power. Maybe they restrained it via their kinship systems, I don’t know, but what I was getting at is that the invaders, the settlers, not only couldn’t work it out, they didn’t try. They said, these people don’t have what we have, so they don’t have anything. So they felt free to do what they wanted to do, namely, walk in and grab what they liked.’

‘Did they ever! Up in Queensland ...’

He lifted his head. ‘Sorry. I thought I heard her calling, but I didn’t. You were saying?’

She was shaken, disturbed quite deeply in her being. ‘You’re lucky to have a child. I’m sorry, I can’t stop myself asking, where’s your wife? Susan’s mother?’

He told her a long, sad story of illness, of a woman not allowing chemotherapy for a cancer because she had a child within her. ‘She said she wasn’t letting her body be treated in a way that might affect the baby. It was tremendously brave of her, she knew exactly what she was doing, and she made the choice.’

‘How long did she have with Susan, after the birth?’

‘Almost a year. Then she became very weak.’ His voice became faint.

‘And I think I’ve got problems. How much help have you had, carrying on alone?’

‘Lots. Her family have been marvellous. My parents have been terrific. I’ve got plenty of back-up, but I decided, quite stubbornly, really, that I wouldn’t shed any of the load. My wife didn’t die for Susan so I could let go my responsibility. That’s something I have to carry on my own. I want to carry it, though I don’t mind admitting it gets heavy at times. It’s not easy being mother and father, both. But it’s what I’m going to be. When she goes to school I’ll work part time. I’m already doing a bit from here. As they keep telling us, it’s the electronic age.’ He smiled faintly.

She studied him, admiring, yet chilled. Chastened. She wanted to offer herself, but knew that if she did she would sound ... not so much immature as premature. Like Gil, who at fourteen had thought of marrying her. ‘I can’t tell you how much I admire that decision,’ she said, ‘though I will tell you, I hope, when the circumstances are right. Can we get back to my talk?’

She went to Simon’s twice more in the week that followed, arriving after his daughter was asleep. Both times they looked at the child from her bedroom door, needing the intimacy that she gave them. Becky felt that when she was looking on his child with admiration and love she was already joined to him; it was a meeting place they could reach without

awkwardness or uncertainties of approach. She took him through the sections of the Surveyor-General's travels that she planned to quote, asking him to comment on the excerpts as she read them. Once or twice he commented that he'd driven in the areas Mitchell mentioned, in the days when his wife was still alive, and Susan within her. Becky asked him to mark these places on her map: 'I'm going to go there, one day,' she told him. He knew she was inviting him to return to places of the most tender memory, and that she was not proposing to substitute herself for his wife, but to follow her, in a process of accession to the dead one's status. 'I need to learn,' Becky told Simon. 'I'm learning ever so much through doing this work, especially since you've started to share it with me ...'

'You're sharing it with me,' he said. 'It's very precious.'

This gratified her. They might still find a way to each other's heart. He knew he had to grow, and this meant that his bond with his former wife, much as it needed to be maintained, had eventually to be added to by something new that would preserve the old. He knew, too, that it would be Becky who made this happen, and that both of them, eagerly as they wished to rush forward, had to move slowly. One night, as she was leaving his home, they looked into each other's eyes, and he said, 'If we become lovers, you'll still go to your own home until Susan's taking it as natural that you're here.' She gripped his arm. 'Has she ever stayed at anybody else's house?' Simon shook his head. 'Only with her grandparents, and I've been there too. So she hasn't slept away from me. Not yet, anyway.' It was in his voice that he never wanted her away from him. Becky said, 'Maybe she can stay at my place one night. If you're comfortable about that.' Their process of finding each other, two souls locating, had progressed a further stage. Simon said, 'I'll be comfortable. Before Lorraine died she said to me that I'd need to remarry, and that I should do it quickly. That was her word. "Quickly." I don't know why she said that when she might have said "eventually," but she did. Maybe she wanted a woman around to look after Susan. Maybe she wasn't sure I could do the job. Either way, she said "quickly". Do it "quickly".' Becky ran her hand along his arm. 'And we're moving

awfully slowly, aren't we. Well, that's how it seems to me, though maybe it isn't really.' She looked at him. 'Going to put your arm around me before I go?' He moved to her, she felt his arm around her, he murmured something, then they withdrew, she to drive home, he to tidy up, and she knew that in showing each other their fears and uncertainties, they were showing their needs. Restraint was a way of measuring what the other wanted, and it showed them that each trusted the other's capacity to give. They were asking each other how much they wanted, and they were hearing the same cry from within: everything!

On the weekend before her talk, Becky worked furiously, determined that its preparation shouldn't force her to take time off work, to which she felt as committed as to her course. History, love and work were cramming her life. Those she worked with commented on her energy: 'How much more can a person do in a day, Beck?' She laughed at this. There was more that she could be doing, and she wondered when it would happen. She wanted Simon in her arms, all barriers forgotten in an ecstasy of release. It's harder for him than it is for me, she thought, because he's scared of giving up anything of what he's been, in case it damages him. In case there's loss. Whereas I, I know, want to undergo that restructuring of self, that personality change, that happens when love overpowers you. She trembled when she thought about giving herself, because she knew how absolutely her gift would be made. The night before her talk she rang Simon and said she wanted to be with him. Could she come around?

He was nervous, but he said, 'It's time, I think. Yes, please come.'

He let her in, he took her to his small lounge, where she was surprised to find there was no light on. The room was lit by the flames of a gas heater. The curtains were drawn. She noticed, not for the first time, how empty his bookshelves were. She took his hand. 'You've got room for hundreds of books. Shelves shouldn't be empty, Simon. They should be full of things you treasure, and things you're keeping until you're ready.' He took her other hand. 'We're talking about books, we're talking about ourselves.' He drew her closer. 'I've agonised about this,

but I'm not afraid any more. Nothing stands still. We have to move on. Excuse the clichés but we're only doing what millions of people have done before us.' There was yearning in his voice and she knew he longed to be free of what had happened to him, and knew he could not. 'You're only in a cage,' she said, 'if you want to be away from where you are. If you want to be here more than you want to be anywhere else, it's called home. That's why I'm here tonight.' She put her hands to his face, and whispered his name. 'Simon.'

Tears ran down his cheeks. 'Lorraine used to whisper like that.' This brought her deep satisfaction. 'So will I. As long as we're together.'

They loved until the small hours grew larger, then she said, 'I'll go now, I'll snatch a couple of hours sleep, because I've got to give my talk. I'll ring you when it's finished. I'll have more time to devote to you then, until the exams start. Oh well, I'll only have one this year. When I'll finish my degree I've no idea.'

Simon said, rising on an elbow, 'We never finish, except only once. What I mean,' he said, 'sorry I'm not too clear at the moment, is that once we get underway, there's no stopping until we break down. Ended. You and I aren't there yet.'

'Not by a long way,' she called, crushing him to her. 'We've got ever so far to go. Oh Simon!' The love in her wanted to flood out of control. He squeezed her, gasping as she squeezed him back. 'Ring me darling. The next bit's up to you. Ring me and tell me how it's gone!'

The others in her tutorial could feel her energy as she entered. She put her papers down and looked around impatiently. 'Even people who are sympathetic to their cause make the mistake of talking about aborigines as victims. Obviously, it's easy to show how they've been victims, but that's not the right way to see what happened in our early history, or things which are still going on today.'

Max, the most difficult of her group, said, 'I thought your talk was going to be about the land. And the law. Isn't that what it's supposed to be about?'

‘It will be. Give me the opportunity to set out the terms on which I mean to deal with it. Those terms may not, at the moment, be present in your minds. What I’m about to say will change your thinking. It would have been conceptually simple, though I know there would be complexities enough if I’d gone that way, to talk about the legalities of land ownership, and titles, within the British legal framework. I have to respect that, of course, but I’m putting it aside.’ Her voice, and her eyes, were full of challenge.

‘During the white occupation of Australia, over many years, and in thousands of places, one law overcame another. We don’t think of legal, belief and morality systems engaging in warfare, but they’re there when the guns are firing and the poison’s being laid, you mark my words. After the battle’s over the victors impose their rules. The contents of one set of minds overpower the contents of other people’s minds. The defeated lose their beliefs. Their systems don’t describe anything any more, and they die. Sometimes they want to die because the things in their minds aren’t true any more. Humans can’t live without truth, and if the old truth falls apart, then the old way of life isn’t possible any more.’

Max butted in again. ‘The land! The law! Talk about those, for goodness sake, or stop this tirade. If I wanted a land rights demonstration, I’d go to one!’

Becky glared at him. ‘If I wasn’t in a wonderful mood, I’d call you a brickhead.’ He laughed, half pleased, half exasperated. ‘Never mind what you want to call me ...’

Stephen broke in. ‘Could you link the various pronouncements you’ve made, Becky, to the theme of the talk? I don’t think we know how to judge what you’re saying yet.’

She looked at him, then at the group. ‘That’s because patterns of thought like to control most areas reached by the mind. We like disputed territory to be at the margins so we can restrict contention to things that don’t matter. But what if contention is at the centre?’ She paused. Stephen said, ‘For example?’

Becky said, 'Have a look at this.' She passed a pile of papers around for everybody to read. 'This is about Pigeon. He was a black man, an outlaw the whites called him, in the Derby area late in the nineteenth century.' She told them about the battles between Pigeon and the police. 'They overcame him. How did this happen? There's more than one account. If you have a look at the page I passed around, you can see what the local blacks think happened.' She saw smiles, smirks, on faces before her. 'All I ask is that you be fair-minded enough to realise that a white person's account would be just as amusing to black people around Derby today. This is what they think happened.' She tapped the page. Karl said, 'It may be what they say, but it's silly. We can enjoy it, but it can't have any credibility.' He sat back, the matter dealt with. Becky was annoyed. 'You don't seem to have accepted the idea of cultural relativity. Things may be true, or thought to be true, within a culture, but have no credibility ...' she smiled, impressing her superiority on him '... inside another culture. We speak of truth as if it's omnipresent. It's not. Truth is a local thing. If you don't live in the locality, it's not your truth. I hope everyone can see that?'

Stephen lifted his hand. 'How does that affect the presentation of history? You need to give us your view on that.'

'I'm not sure that I know. But it's useful to realise that the further we go along a line of thought the less certain we can be of our footing. A point is reached where even our proudest assertions are no more than conjecture.' Stephen's lips tightened. 'I think you told me that this material about Pigeon was only an overture to your main presentation. Could you develop that?'

She was happy to do this. 'I want to do two things now. The second one is to take you along with one of Thomas Mitchell's explorations of the places beyond the Blue Mountains where whites were thinking of settling. Had already settled in many cases. The first, and it has to be first, is to go around the room and ask where people stand on this piece about Pigeon. We can't have an honest discussion of the next part of my

talk unless we let each other know where we stand on the first. Is that okay, everybody?’

Some of the group looked troubled. Some of them looked at their pieces of paper. *Pigeon’s body could not be destroyed. It was already riddled with bullet holes ... Any man would have died, but not Pigeon ... Only when the police were finally wise enough to bring in an aboriginal tracker ... Then trying the left hand and aiming his magical weapon ... shortly afterwards the assassin was himself killed by lightning.* Stephen said, ‘You want to know where people stand on this? In what respect? What do you want us to say? Is this a race with invisible hurdles? I’m not clear about where we’re going.’ He looked at her firmly. She looked back. ‘That passage raises most of the questions I want to raise in the next stage of this talk. I don’t want to be in the position where I’m putting something to a group of people who sit back deciding whether they’ll swallow it or not.’

Angela said, ‘You want to find out if we’re believers. We want to know what we’re being asked to believe. That’s how I see it, anyway.’

Stephen was agreeing. ‘It seems irregular. I don’t know what your methodological ground plan is. I feel you’re asking us to do something without letting us know what it is. Frankly, I can’t place what you’re doing, or not so far.’ He looked worried, trying to be fair, but certain that she was up to something he’d call no good. ‘Has anyone else got a view on this?’

Danny, who didn’t say much, spoke up. ‘I think Becky wants to stir us up. I’m feeling pretty stirred up already. She wants us out in the open so we’ll be honest. I think that’s good. I’ll say what I think. The thing that’s obvious in this passage is that it takes a black to bring down a black. It’s the witchdoctor who beats Pigeon, not the cops, though the cops were smart enough to get the witchdoctor on the scene. Next thing is that the witchdoctor is a bastard for what he did to Pigeon, so, whacko, lightning strikes him. It was retribution and it was from a natural source. So, again, the whitefellas didn’t cover themselves with glory, in fact they were pretty irrelevant in the tale as the blacks tell it.’ He paused. ‘Except ...’

The people in the room looked at him. Marthe gave him the cue he wanted. ‘Except?’

‘... if you notice, the blacks’ story doesn’t deal with what happened afterwards. The whites got the land. The blacks only tell the part that gives them credit. It’s done by selection. You see what you want to see and turn your back on the rest!’ He looked at Becky, confidence in his eyes. ‘How’s that? That what you wanted?’

‘Yes! You met the challenge. Now everyone else should do the same.’

She wrung it out of them eventually and they gave their reactions to Pigeon. Then they listened to her analysis of the Surveyor-General’s journey along the Lachlan, the Murray and the Glenelg to Portland, and his return through Wagga Wagga to Goulburn. She described Mitchell as a man who could see the humanity of the black people, but didn’t understand the effects of what he was doing. ‘It was legitimate in the eyes of his society so he went about his business feeling legitimated. Which brings us to the question of when and on what matters a society considers itself. By 1836, the colonists were taking control of the continent, so self-questioning was uncommon, and unpopular. The whites knew there was land out there to be taken, they didn’t indulge in doubts, they went for it!’ She took the Mitchell story past the completion of his journey and into the lives of the descendants of the little girl, Ballandella, whom Mitchell had found beside a fire at one of his camps. She felt there was much to be drawn from the later stages of this tale, but Stephen asked for the talk to close, and invited the group to comment on the issues. Becky was none too happy with this, but had to listen as the others probed the interpretations she drew from the tale. As soon as the clock in the tower struck twelve, she stood up, bade them a cool farewell, and took herself back to work. That night she rang Simon.

‘Come around, Beck. I’d love to see you. I want to hear all about it.’

She went to Simon’s. The light was on in the lounge. They sat in front of his gas fire. ‘You don’t seem very pleased.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Before you take me through what happened, I want to foreshadow something.’

‘What’s that?’

‘We have to do something to celebrate being together. You’re part of my life now, and I’m part of yours. We have to do something to demonstrate that.’

‘Simple. When I need someone, I come to you. Or you come to me. As you did, at the nursery. What else is there to do? I’m here because I need you. It wasn’t much of a day.’

‘We need to tell ourselves what’s good about being together. It’s why people married, once. Most of my friends don’t do it any more.’

‘Marriage? How come we’re talking about that? I’m ...’ She felt blocked in what she wanted to do, and offered something too large, too frightening, to want to think about.

‘I want to hear, Beck, everything that happened today. Everything you can remember. We’ll spend as long as we need to get a real understanding, but eventually we’ll put it aside and make a journey of our own ...’

Suddenly she was in accord. ‘A journey, yes! I’ve been thinking about that, when I didn’t have my head in that man’s journals. I’d like to retrace ... well, it doesn’t have to be Mitchell’s journeys, it could be anybody’s, though he’d be a good one ... I want to make a long trip with you, and we’ll each keep a journal, and we’ll read our entries to each other, so we get to know each other ever so deeply!’

He began, ‘And in years to come, when Susan’s growing up ...’

‘She can read what we wrote. When she’s discovering herself, she can find out how her dad and her step-mum got to know each other. How we told each other all about ourselves, so we’d have nothing hidden.’

‘It might scare her out of marrying!’ They both laughed. He put his arms around her. ‘I want to know all about today. Every word they said.’

‘Turn out the light. It’ll come more easily in the dark.’

She told him about her talk, things people had suggested, stupid ideas, some that were perceptive. She said she didn’t expect a good assessment because her tutor wasn’t in sympathy with what she’d attempted. Then she confessed that she wasn’t properly in sympathy with it herself. Though she was in love with him, she told Simon, her self-discovery was far from over, and the things she said in a tutorial, even the things she said to him, had no more than interim status. She wasn’t settled, she was still on the way ...

Simon asked her if she could get leave from the nursery so they could go camping along the inland rivers, walking about the places the black people had known, seeing if they could rediscover the spirituality, the meanings, that had been lost. Simon said that if ghosts could cling to castles where they’d been murdered centuries before, then there must be presence, aura, atmosphere in the places that had once been sacred, if the white word had relevance. Becky was stirred by this, but reluctant to ask Ben to release her from the nursery while he was getting his new one going. ‘He’d have to put Johnno in my place, and he needs him where he is.’

They put this aside, then they opened an atlas. In the light of the flame, they imagined excursions, from Adelaide in the south to Darwin in the north, along the west coast from Perth to Broome, inland in New South Wales, following the tracks of Mitchell, then, the explorers having captured their thinking, they fingered the paths of Sturt, of Stuart, Giles, Grey, all the men who thought they were discovering when, in the eyes of those whose lands they were traversing, they were revealing their ineptness. ‘I’d like to write a different story,’ Becky said. ‘One that’s about true discovery, the discovery we haven’t made yet because we see the land with the eyes of finance, which could hardly be sillier, because if you suck the wealth out of something without putting anything back you’re nothing but a parasite.’

They sat by the heater, uncertain which journey they’d make, but feeling their way towards what mattered most. Becky agreed, just before

they went to bed, that she should talk to Ben about taking leave, not straight away, but when the second nursery was established, and she would promise to photograph the flora wherever they travelled, and send back cuttings of anything new and strange. 'He'd like that! He's always on the lookout for new things!' Simon was happy with the enthusiasm that had replaced the displeasure with herself that she'd brought to his house, and before they went to bed he took her to look on Susan. When they pushed the door and peered in, Becky felt more strongly than before the envy she had for him, possessing a child while she, as yet, had none, but knowing that she would have children when and as they wanted it to happen.

Then, finally, they lay in each other's arms, with the fullness, the frankness, of being open wide, each to the other. It was the second time, for him, the first, for her, but, for Becky, Lorraine's was not an off-putting presence; more like an earlier form of herself. If there's love, she saw, there could be loss, and if there was loss, there was an opening which might, with time and circumstance, be turned to gain. She was the recipient of that gain, and its embodiment. She rolled herself onto her lover and shuddered with sexual joy: 'I *must* do this,' she whispered, and you *must* be what I ask!

Weeks passed, the university year ended, the second nursery took shape. Ben employed people from a nearby school to work on weekends; he found it very moving when Becky, who had once been his apprentice, asked him to let her go for a few weeks. She wanted to travel. She had a list of trips she and her companion might make, and asked him what he knew of these places. He put his map of the country on the bench after he'd put the phone down, and it seemed to him that he was not so much looking at a piece of two-dimensional geography as the representation of a life. Becky had said she was as good as married. Becky had told him about her partner's little girl. Becky had said she wanted to collect plants to propagate. Becky, he felt, was growing, at last, out of the stiffness that had chafed her, and the trip would be an act of self-discovery, as perhaps the efforts of the explorers she scorned had been for them.

Ben, folding the map, felt love for Becky and wondered why it was that the years looked different when you looked back instead of seeing them before you, enticing, promising so much.

Weeks passed, then the morning came. The car was crammed, they did last minute checks, then together they lifted Susan and told her to pull the door closed. She closed it with a click, then she rattled the handle. ‘Good one darling!’ her father said. ‘Into your seat now and pull on that belt!’”

Becky told him to drive slowly as they made their way out of the city because she wanted to experience the place they were leaving. ‘This,’ she said, pointing, ‘is our first diary entry, tonight. We won’t be all that far away, but we’ll already be somewhere else.’

They drove for a time, then Simon swung onto a side road, leaving the trucks on the freeway. ‘Bye bye Sydney,’ Becky said, and Susan, not sure what was being farewelled, joined in. ‘Bye bye!’ Her father laughed. ‘Who’re you saying bye to, Susan?’ The child thought it a silly question. ‘Becky said bye bye!’ Becky turned to look at the child. ‘I was saying bye bye to my past. It’s all new up ahead.’ It looked very old and worn when she turned around; the houses contrived to look settled, even when they were new. The sheds and fences, trees and horses, had a stillness that made them as if they’d been formed years before, and had never learned the pace they were required to move at. Becky felt a frustration that the land didn’t seem transformed, merely humdrum, then she realised that this would change, and the changes, as they came, must be recorded in her notes. She began to look for trees and rocks that would be significant to those traversing the land on foot, measuring everything by their effort, or the proximity of forces she didn’t yet know how to feel.

They crossed the dividing range, and the sky changed. The blue that some thought pitiless was above. Becky said they should light a fire and make tea. Simon thought they should wait until the land was flat. They settled on a slope, barely discernible, which stretched out of sight, as if it had started somewhere but forgotten its intention. They made tea in

a billy. They drank from mugs. Susan, sipping first, said it tasted different. Simon said she was right, but couldn't say what it was. 'Because it's new, probably.' Becky went to sip, but her hands shook, and she spilled some on her jeans. Simon looked at her. 'All right darling?' She felt his concern. 'It's so huge, what we've started.' She looked down the almost invisible decline. 'It goes nowhere, you know. Nowhere. This is the only place there is, in my thinking. I'm so lucky to have you. I'd be completely on my own.' She looked around, as if spirit people had shown themselves. 'That's the first lesson, isn't it?' The spirit people, if they were there, must have supported her, because she added, 'And there's going to be more. So many, many more.'

For the first few days they made a point of stopping at the same time, then they found a rhythm of waiting until a place pressed on them, as if a message had been relayed ahead for it to notice them. In such places they stopped, lit eucalyptus debris, and boiled water. For some reason, perhaps because of the ritual, this making tea seemed more significant in receiving messages from the land than where they slept. They pitched their tent in many places, occasionally they stopped in bush pubs so remote that it seemed rude to pass. They felt that their chatter, their observations, and recall of places they'd been through, brought life to those who'd stayed put, and they felt, in return, an advent of strength from those whose knowledge of place was so certain that they'd felt no need to be away. Some travelled, some walked close to home. Anyone, Becky wrote in her notes, might do the one for years, then switch to the other. One was enslaved only if one couldn't switch, but a change, made in relation to the life of everything around, however purposeless or inexplicable, could renew the current that one needed.

The current. What was it, where did it come from? What did it do as it passed through? How long could a person live without sensing it? Did it switch itself about, so that you had to be inconsistent to stay within its call? It occurred to her, and she wrote these things in her notes, that the major ideas, the building blocks, of her civilisation might be nonsense, because foreign, where they were. She said to Simon, 'We

should start reading our notes to each other every night now. I think we should read them from behind, though. I mean, on Thursday nights we read what we wrote on Tuesday, so we can't be too close to each other's ideas. Also, we should listen and not argue. I think we could ask each other questions, but we mustn't allow ourselves to divert ... I mean influence ... each other's thoughts. Something that sounds silly today may make sense after we've seen something else. We should try to notice the words we don't use, out here. We're shedding all the time, and if we don't think about something, then it's because we don't need it. Out here it's not important.'

They travelled. They wished they knew the stories of the places they went through. They felt they should make them up, but hadn't learned to trust imagination. They stopped one day in sight of a rocky hill. Susan wanted them to climb it, so she could get to the top on their shoulders. Becky was keen, but Simon, urging them to go, said he had no interest. Becky and Susan set off, walking until the ground under their feet began to rise. Becky let Susan climb on her shoulders, then set off, groaning loudly, and Susan laughing gleefully. Half an hour later, they looked down. Simon and the car, their fire, a few puffs of smoke, were the only things they could claim. 'This is a bit scary, Susan,' Becky said, clinging to the little girl's legs. 'I don't want to go down,' the little girl said. 'Can we camp up here tonight?' Becky laughed. 'We'd never get the car up, it's too rocky. We'd have to carry everything. Oooh, gosh!' She hoped the child would see the point.

They sat for a long time, scanning the world, before them and behind, then made their way down, Susan complaining that they were losing their good sight, as she called it, but Becky found herself wondering why Simon had stayed with the car. He must have wanted to be alone, yes, but she felt sure there had been something else. He'd wanted to do something without them knowing what it was. He was effusive but wary when they returned. She mustn't make it obvious that she was looking for evidence of his actions, his thought. It was thought, she decided: no, belief. He'd tested himself, uncovering the breakdown of

some idea, while they'd been on their way up the hill. Was he lighter, more free, or weighed down, burdened, by the action of his thinking? She posed the question in her notes, wondering what he'd say, two days hence, when she read them. Then she noticed that he had some tapes in his bag, separate from the ones strewn near the car radio. What was that about? The following night, as they made camp, he said, 'I can tell you're aware of something. It's a gap between us. Let's start reading our notes the same night we write them.'

She said no, she didn't want to.

He said, 'Then only have one day's delay till we read them. Hear each other's words.'

She said no, she thought the two days gap was right. She knew it was cruel, but couldn't find it in her to give what he wanted. 'Is it so hard to keep part of you to yourself for forty eight hours? We did it easily enough the first two weeks.' He said, 'It's a loss. It's hurting me. I need to share it. It's surprised me. I never dreamed it would happen.'

She said, 'All the more reason it should wait. Let's keep to the agreement. I worked out you'd been listening to something and you needed to be on your own. I worked out that it was something fundamental, and that it had caused you a loss. But who knows, Simon? Maybe tomorrow you'll see something to fill the gap? The country's big enough, isn't it? Whoever thought the only ideas that were any use had to come from outside? I think we've worked our way through that trap by now, haven't we?'

He looked dismal, lost, uncertain, but had to deal with someone whose firmness was a matter of her scale, rather than her hardness. 'All right,' he said. 'Tomorrow night it is. Who knows what we'll see tomorrow?'

Quotation on page 140 is from *The Noonkanbah Story* by Erich Kolig, University of Otago Press, 1987. Musical reference is to the *Matthew Passion* (1666) by Heinrich Schutz, beginning at 'Und alsbald krähet der Hahn' (And straight away the cock crew) and ending at 'Sie gingen hin und verwahrenen das Grab mit Hütern und versiegelten das Grab' (So they went and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch).

Max

Max was sick. Esme knew, when she got up, that she'd have to feed him for another day. Spoon into his mouth anything he'd hold down. It was no good trying to boost his confidence. She had to let him sink to the depths, and lie there in misery, before the faintest flicker of something hopeful would come out of the crevices of his mind. He hated her to use the word 'normality', because, he said, it implied abnormality and affixed that word, with its load of disapproval, to him. It was what he feared most. Just because you're paranoid, he used to say, doesn't mean they're not out to get you! He laughed at this when he was happy, feared it when he wasn't, but never lost sight of the saying: it was like a flag, or streamer, above his life. 'Life's not an endless protest, you know,' was what Esme said to him when she found him in one of his benevolent moods; 'No,' he would reply, 'but between one campaign and the next you have to build yourself up for what you've got to do. Everything,' he would say, 'is about the position you decide to take up!'

Politics, she thought, provide one dimension of life, but since it's the one he understands best, he tries to pretend that he's living on that plane alone, that others don't exist or can only be understood from the political plane.

She put her pillow under his, and took herself to the bathroom. She turned on the shower, dropped her robe to the floor, and looked in the mirror. Steady running and long bike rides had made her lean and fit. She looked over her shoulder, pleased to see that the flesh on her thighs had dwindled since she'd last weighed herself. She stepped on the scales. Minus two kilos. She took her soap into the spray of water; bodies were easier to keep well than minds. She wanted Max strong and certain, and she knew that he clung to his weakness because

while it threatened him he could back away from the public action, the challenges and policy formulations that he said the society needed. He could confine himself to bitter arguments with those who'd thought they were his friends, and contempt for those in the political processes. His weakness protected him and was used to do so. Therefore, she thought, if he's so sick he can't get up, he'll only leave his bed when whatever he's feared has gone. Our sicknesses are cleverly chosen, she thought, then, decisively, she turned off the taps and began drying herself. It occurred to her, at the moment she dropped the robe on the end of their bed, that her thoughts were dangerous to their relationship; if he sensed that he'd been seen through, then he might quarrel with her so that this dangerous perception was pushed out of sight. Or would he welcome the way she saw him as leading to a deeper and more skilfully devious game?

She dressed, she stroked his cheek, she strolled to the shops to get a paper.

When she got back, passing the bedroom on the way to the lounge, she saw her lover's face in the mirror that he'd placed so nobody could go past without him being able to see. This time it was the see-er that was seen. Flickering on his lined face was a glimpse of a state of mind: anguish giving way to hope; relief; and a new world to replace the darkness he'd been through.

Esme knew that the next twenty four hours would be magical, and that the relief, the changed world, that they brought would be transient. In Max, when he abandoned himself, something innocent and loving was born, but he could never sustain it, and drifted back to the suspicions, fears - the paranoia - that had brought him low.

A cycle, she thought, so different from her own. It was his way of mastering her, and if she left he'd use it on whoever followed: the reproductive cycle must not be allowed to prevail over the things in his mind. If that ascendancy were to be lost, Max himself would come to an end; he knew the dosages of drugs to finish a life and she suspected that he had them stored with friends who could be relied on to guard what they held from her. That's how he masters me, she thought: with

uncertainty. He spins it like a web, all the time he's laying down the Marxist and Freudian systems which he uses to describe the outer and inner worlds in ways he's comfortable with. Comfortable? She went to the door of their room.

'Max?'

He inclined his head, still smiling in a strained sort of way.

She was going to ask if there was anything he'd like, but she sat on the bed to observe him. It would be better if he didn't speak. 'The juice of an orange,' she offered. He lifted two fingers, a few centimetres apart, to show how much he could deal with. 'I won't be long.'

It was while she was squeezing the fruit that it came to her: she wanted to have a child. In the pregnancy, and after the birth, the things he tried to keep at arm's length - 'normality' - would infiltrate their lives. In fathering, Max would find common ground with ... the child first, the mother, then all the others whom loves, lusts or accidents had made parents. His common humanity would reveal itself. He would see the clay in himself that he saw in others. A child. It would need to be conceived in strength, but announced ... she paused to think about this ... in a moment of weakness turning into recovery such as she'd witnessed a few moments before. If he discovered that he was to become a father when some acceptance of himself was coursing through his veins, he could make it a positive thing. That meant he had to sense the oncoming birth without being told. How to make that happen? She shook her head, not knowing, poured the juice into a glass and took it to her man.

He sipped from the glass she held to his lips. His eyes were closed. He was concentrating on the sensations in his mouth. The trickle of juice in his throat was an acceptance after a long spell of rejection. Max rejected himself, disembodied his mind so that it could watch the process of which it would be the last and final victim. Now the wand had been waved and the wish to die turned around. Esme looked at the lids that closed his sight. He didn't know what she'd decided; her power was greater than his, in the way that women's bodies carried more, did more, than men's. Even death, she decided, is a delusion, a blight brought

on by the negativity of men's minds. Women overcome it every day by putting new life in the very place where death claimed its most recent victim. Age overcame those that death hadn't snatched early, but age, too, was faced by a joyful negation when the brightness, the newness, of children could be heard. He must accept, Esme told herself, or he'll decline without hope of rebirth.

When the juice was finished, she put the glass on the floor. She touched his brow, then flicked a finger across his cheek, as if striking a match. 'Can I get you anything? I have to go soon.' He shook his head. 'You're not going anywhere.' It suited her to agree. 'I'll have to ring in to work. They understand. They won't be expecting me. But is there anything I can get you?'

'I see very clearly when I'm in this state,' he said quietly. 'I think I'd like you to read to me.'

'What would you like me to read?'

'I've got to give a talk. I should be preparing. First I have to see it in my mind. I need a background. I need to know that I'm imagining it correctly.'

'I've always thought that was a funny way to approach research.'

He said weakly, as if anything that separated their minds at this point was a threat, 'You're bold and careless. I'm suspicious. The moment someone puts something on the table, I wonder what they've got behind their back. What they want to make sure you can't see. The major truth is always the truth that's suppressed, and you may be sure if anything's important, then its main features will have been rearranged. Redrawn, so to speak.'

She pursed her lips. 'I'll get your stuff, and while I'm doing that, you think of what you want me to read. We'll give the morning to reading.' He smiled, and Esme, leaving the room, had the satisfaction of seeing him kiss the pillow she'd put under his head. He loved her when she was his.

She went to the room they used as a study and found his papers. Riffing through them, she knew what he'd want, but took them all back

to their bed. ‘A celebration of the shearers’ strike; is that the one you want?’

‘There’s a piece in there written by William Lane. Under an alias, I forget the name he used. Read that, please Esme. “At the conspiracy trial”, that’s what it’s called.’

She had it in a moment. *In the courtroom at Rockhampton.* Is that the one?’

He’d relaxed ever so slightly. ‘That’s it. Go slowly, I need to know what he says because he’s an important commentator. I think it’s going to make me furious, but he’s one of the few people who’ve ever written while claiming to be on their side.’

‘Spare us from our friends, is that what you’re saying?’

‘Friends like these, certainly. The trouble with friends is that they think they’re supporting you when in fact they’re tearing down what you want to build. Enemies are simpler to deal with.’

‘Okay, here we go. *A close drowsy afternoon. A wearied listless audience being lulled into greater listlessness by the droning charge of the judge. For the great conspiracy trial is drawing to a close and tonight, apparently, the jury will retire and the prisoners will know their fate ...* She watched his face as best she could, while she was reading, and marvelled at the scrutiny she could feel pressing on the words; he listened for every nuance of what was said, and every echo, however muffled, of things left out. Max, with surprising strength of voice, broke in: ‘Does he say anything about the judge not letting the jurors have any meals? She stopped, running ahead with her eyes. ‘Just a moment, I’m trying to see what he says ...’ Max said reassuringly, as if she was the sick one: ‘I’m sorry, I was thinking aloud. Don’t let me break in. I’m sorry darling. Please go on. Go back to where we were.’ Esme finished her glance at the pages ahead. ‘I don’t think he says anything about meals. Maybe he didn’t know what you know. Did you get it from somewhere else?’

‘I think I must. A bastard of a judge! He abused his powers. Dictatorship of the law, that’s all you could call it. Sorry darling, *the prisoners will know their fate ...* She took up the sentence that he, and

she, had left unfinished. *Or rather Society will know its fate, for it is evident on the face of it that the prisoners are not on trial at all. A paradox, this, is it not? Ah, well, life is full of paradoxes, as you would think if you were sitting here in the Rockhampton courtroom and began to ruminate over things as I have just begun to do.*

She read steadily through the journalist's condemnation of the trial and its presiding judge, knowing that her lover, at some stage, or perhaps at the end, would attack it on a level she hardly understood, for all that they shared; Max had some sort of finality, some willingness to go to extremes, that others lacked. Too much courage takes you too close to death, she thought, but realised that courage of his sort was rare enough to win anybody's respect - anyone who could understand it; she feared for Max if he ever faced a judge as ready to condemn but not to sympathise as the man the system had put in front of the shearers. She read slowly, but the well-crafted prose worked on her, and she found herself stirred by events nobody could alter now.

I saw them in a dark, windowless, ill-ventilated cell, two hours or so ago, wherein they were waiting the re-opening of the court and they looked a pretty rough lot ... Max snorted; she read on: If you were to see these men out West, as I have seen them, camping under the starry sky and gathering in on horseback to the great bush meetings, free handed and free hearted, open as children and true as steel ...

Max broke in, tossing his head on the pillow. 'Stop for a moment, Esme, please! I really can't stand it. William Lane is worse than the shearers because he's educated. He ought to know! He gave up! He went off to Paraguay on that hare-brained idea of setting up a perfect state! Which of course broke down in chaos! What could you expect from a fool like that?'

'Would you like me to read something else?'

'No. Finish this. I need to see it in all its awfulness. But get me some more juice, please Esme, I'm starting to feel strong, I'll be ready for the rest of it when you come back.'

She looked at her lover, his eyes still closed, self-absorbed, courageous because prepared to follow his insights, weak as his failings insisted he be. What would their child be like, when it came? What characteristics would the baby draw from him? From her? Everything depended on that disposition of things that made the child, and her happiness, the pride that it would be natural for her to feel, would be there, or it wouldn't if the weaknesses in the one that followed them, came out of them, weren't in better balance than they were in the man before her. Patiently, with a sweetness he found amazing, she said, 'I'll get your juice. While I'm doing it, try to think of what Lane's going to say, so you're ready, and it doesn't hurt you so much you have to break in.' Max laughed. 'You think I'm a heckler! That's all I am to you, darling, aren't I?' She smiled, and he burst into a cackle that broke up in coughing. 'Don't say anything till I get back with the juice,' she said. 'You're not strong enough yet!'

She spent the morning with him, reading, listening to his responses, then, when he needed sleep, she went across the city to his mother. Mrs Quinlan was in her hothouse when Esme arrived, labelling the cuttings she'd put in the potting mix she swore by. In her passionate, impersonal way, she told Esme what she wanted her to do. 'Then we might think about some lunch. I don't suppose you brought anything, did you?'

Mrs Quinlan unsettled Esme because she made no pretence of putting her first, or even second after her son. Mrs Quinlan failed to register that others saw the world differently. They were fools if they pressed against her verities. Most of the difficult things in Max had come from his mother, Esme knew; Max's father had died when he was small. If she went ahead with the conception, Mrs Quinlan wouldn't acknowledge it until the baby came; then it would be hers, Max's somewhat later, and only then would come the mother who had unburdened herself to produce the adored, the central child. There would be a contest for possession; Esme had no intention of losing. A smile appeared faintly on her lips; Mrs Quinlan, eyes on what she was doing, didn't notice. Esme put the cuttings in their mix, hundreds of them, in tiny plastic containers,

then they were settled in rows in a box, ready for the water that would settle like misty rain after the women left. When the box was full Mrs Quinlan declared they had enough. She ran her eyes over the plants-to-be, pushed a few deeper into the mix and pulled a few up; she liked them to be of even height when they started, because she felt that any patchiness in their development should be investigated. It wasn't good enough to say that some did better than others. They should all proceed at the same pace to the point where they could be sold. It occurred to Esme that she'd never seen anybody else at Mrs Quinlan's on her visits, though Mrs Quinlan was always referring to people who'd just left, or had been there the day before. She's isolated, Esme thought. She wants it that way. A little boy, a little girl, will be a wonderful renewal, so long as it's she who rules. Esme was still smiling faintly as Mrs Quinlan packed up; if I need to I can take the child with me, far away, and they'll follow because they won't be able to do anything else. She had no trouble being obedient because she had over Mrs Quinlan the greatest advantage of all.

Lunch was two large servings of apple pie, eaten outside because Mrs Quinlan didn't want to be in the house. 'When you're working you don't want to slip back into indoor ways. You should have something simple, then get back to what you were doing. I'll make some tea in a minute. What did you come to tell me, Esme?'

It was not meant to disconcert; Mrs Quinlan assumed that people were honest enough to let their motives show. How else could people deal, or treat, with each other? 'I haven't heard from Max,' she went on. 'I presume he's in the doldrums again?'

'He's very weak. Though we worked together this morning. He was asleep when I left.'

'He was a strange child. He's never forgiven me because I didn't let him rule the house. He was my rival, from an early age.'

'Your rival? What a strange ... Are you sure you weren't ... ah ... imposing that on the relationship?'

‘Goodness no! I only existed to give him what he wanted. I suppose most mothers realise that, but most of us find we can train the child. Max wouldn’t be trained, though. He was impervious. It was most unusual.’

Esme wondered what sort of mother Mrs Quinlan had been. Max said she’d been inattentive to his needs. ‘She thought I was a mouth, not a person. My personality was of no importance. There’s a dimension lacking in my mother.’ That was what Max said. What would his mother say to that? She could hardly put it to her, so how to find out?

‘Was he rebellious?’

‘He was far too clever. Rebels are easily picked out. Rebels are trouble-makers, so they run into trouble with everyone. No, he was much more cunning. He got sick, and if you wanted to make him better, you had to give him what he wanted.’

Esme grinned ruefully. ‘He’s still like that.’

‘The only way to change people’s tricks is to make them realise their tricks aren’t working any more.’ Mrs Quinlan looked at the woman who lived with her son. ‘Are you strong enough to do that? I’ll bet you aren’t. The last one he lived with wasn’t up to doing that.’ She felt she had Esme where she wanted her.

‘No, that wouldn’t work,’ Esme said.

‘Tell me, my dear, what you think will work.’ Mrs Quinlan for the first time that day - perhaps the first time ever - was truly interested in what Esme might say. But she was disappointed, because held away.

‘A trick has to be met with a better trick.’

‘You have one in mind?’

The younger woman looked at the older, above an army of cuttings whose serried ranks, and disciplined lines, might be taken as a refutation of what was being said. ‘Let’s say,’ Esme offered, ‘that I think that sometimes - perhaps only occasionally, but I’m confident - sometimes the moment senses the need, and what’s wanted appears!’

Mrs Quinlan didn’t think much of that. ‘Mystical mumbo-jumbo. Max is clever. You won’t outwit him with that nonsense.’ She thought

a little longer. 'If you outwit him, you'll destroy him. That's the trap he wants you in. I don't see how you can get out of it, frankly. Now. Let's do some work!' Mrs Quinlan meant it to be final, but Esme was pleased. She'd found a blind spot in the mother; it was the son's turn next.

Two days later, a Thursday, Max said he was well enough to go to his tutorial. Esme made him promise to come home as soon as it finished. 'I don't want you hanging around, getting weaker because you're too stubborn to admit it.' Max said he wouldn't start any intense discussions, but he didn't want to miss the development of the series of talks, because each was a precursor to what he would say himself. Esme was there by a quarter to twelve, listening to the voices, people's underlying respect or otherwise for each other. She wanted Max, if possible, to have a supportive context. The dangers she overheard were primarily Kramme, the American, Stephen, the tutor whom she felt to be innately conservative, and possibly the three women she found hardest to read - Marthe, Lou and Becky. She knew virtually nothing about them from Max, who noticed only those whose arguments he found challenging, and they were the quiet members of the group. Standing in the passage, keeping back to avoid being seen, Esme tried to estimate how these three would react to what Max was likely to say, and that was something she didn't know, although she knew that the creation of a revolutionary, or pre-revolutionary, consciousness among the shearers was the thread binding his thoughts together.

When the tutorial broke up, Esme was greeted by Karl as he came out. 'Are you the chauffeur? Max said he was going home afterwards. I offered to drive him, but he said he had a lift.' Esme led the conversation to the hints, if any, that Max had given about his talk. 'No clue,' Karl said. 'I'm expecting big things, though. There's too much fact-grubbing in that group. Not enough respect for methodology. We had to listen to Kramme today on the subject of the Coral Sea battle.' His brows went up. 'Every time he told us about the US firing a torpedo, he thought it was an idea! Truly hopeless!' Esme saw what an unyielding, because doctrinaire, young man he was. In a sense he was a second Max, a little

younger, a little later in the theories that sustained him. This disconcerted her because she thought Max was inherently lovable, despite his prickliness and dogmatism; the others, though, saw only the product of his mind, and the unyielding, often ungracious way he presented it. 'Max has been sick,' she said, 'but it hasn't stopped him from working. Sometimes I read to him for ages, and you'd be amazed if you could see - no, *feel* - the concentration he brings to anything he's thinking about!'

Before Karl could reply, the rest of the group began to come out. Most of them knew who Esme was. Becky looked at her suspiciously, sensing that she had a reason for being there beyond picking up her white-faced partner. Esme, for her part, knew that Becky was going to talk about the land and the law, making her, potentially at least, an opponent of Max's views. 'How's it going?' Esme said. 'You're talking next week?' Becky's face tightened. 'I've got stuff spread everywhere at home, but it hasn't simplified yet. It's just a collection with no order to it. There's going to be a crisis, I'm not looking forward to it.' She added, as if it absolved her, 'Here's Max now.'

Studying her man, Esme saw that attending the tutorial had taken him to the limit of his energies. 'The car's across Royal Parade,' she said. 'We'll walk slowly.' But Max insisted they have lunch in the cafeteria; he wanted to take her through his notes of Kramme's talk. 'He's a blustering, bombastic fool, but he's got a brain, which he keeps hidden, and he'd dug out things that surprised me. I suspect ...' he laughed '... I might have learned a little! Yes, really. He made connections I wouldn't have thought of. Even though I doubt if he knows himself how good they were. Oh well, let's get something to eat, I need to keep my strength up!'

She knew, as they walked, that he'd located responsibility in her; if he weakened, it would be because she hadn't looked after him. His mother is right so far, she thought, but that pregnancy, that child, is his long term salvation: how do I get him close to the line, let alone willing to cross it?

Men found it hard to bear the fact of their own unimportance, whereas women, to their loss, took it as a starting point. Life was in fact a relay race that never ended, and the only moments that mattered were the closely scrutinised, desperate handings on of the baton which gave runners their momentary importance. Racing as a metaphor for life! It seemed to her that people lived, these days, in a sea of metaphors, clinging to this one then that, faith having broken down into what might be imagined as component parts. Nobody could put it together. The heightened moments were the acts of handing on, and that, she was sure, would be great for her, because she would carry meaning within her, but her partner, the man striding with an energy he shouldn't be wasting, might not, unless she managed his moment of illumination, making him see that his hour had come and wouldn't come again.

She slowed her steps. His mind would be prowling through the felicities - apparently - of the talk he'd heard, and its foolishness - no doubt - and he'd have no realisation of the thoughts about him, both gainful and subversive, in his partner's mind.

He looked over his shoulder. 'Why are you lagging, Esme? It's me that's supposed to be sick!' He was proud of this, amused as well. 'I was thinking, Max, trying to cast my mind ahead.' He heard a caution in her voice. 'Tell me when we sit down. I can't stand here with all these people rushing past, just to listen to something subjective!' This amused him too, and he took her hand as if he was giving strength, and she was in need.

Over lunch, he said to her, 'The thing that fatso did well was to show that the crucial decisions that decided the battles he was talking about had been taken long before. Other things being equal - that's to say, so long as nobody made a disastrous mistake - the battles were decided before they began.' He looked at her, pleased, but puzzled too. 'What I want to know is how I can apply that idea in my talk.' He saw she had no idea. 'The shearers lost. The pastoralists, and the banks behind them, won. They were quite sure they were going to win. Does that mean they understood the coming battle better than the shearers? I'm

afraid they did. My sympathies are with the shearers, but they disgust me too. Yes, disgust. How could they be in such a strong position and yet lose? It beggars belief.'

Esme broke in: 'How can you say they were in a strong position? The other night you were telling me ...'

'Think about it. The pastoralists are sitting ducks. Their value, their capitalisation, is fixed. They've got sheds and homesteads and fences, they've got dams ... and I'm not sure if they had water pumps, windmills I mean, at that stage ... I'll need to chase that up ... and above all they've got sheep! The sheep produce the wool. The shearers, though, aren't very smart. They think the pastoralists are most vulnerable at the time of shearing! Well, they're just as vulnerable at any other time because the things they depend on can be destroyed!' He gazed on her, pleased with himself.

'And,' he went on, 'the shearers had a lot of sympathy among the people of the little towns that served the outback. They probably spent more in those towns than the men working on the stations, because the stations were separate economic entities. So we have a classic revolutionary situation; in Mao Tse Tung's terms, the fish and the water were in position! So we have to ask, why didn't the fish, that's the shearers, see their advantage?'

Esme said, 'If I know you, the answer will be that they lacked courage. They weren't sure what to do, then someone told them, and they didn't have the guts to go on with it! How's that? Did I get that right, Max?'

If he'd known about her underlying plan for the child, he'd have sensed better than he did the importance, to her, of what she'd been saying. He said, slowly, scrutiny in his eyes, 'Some of them knew that to win, you have to work out a plan and stick to it. Not many people know that eighteen or nineteen - perhaps more, we can't be sure now - woolsheds were burned over four years.' He looked unsure. 'In two waves, as if the men did know what to do at least twice. The campaign that would have won their victory was actually begun twice, but they

backed away from it. It's sad ...' he thought about it, seeing something new '... no, it's more than that, it's a turning point in the country's history, and what really *shits* me,' he said vehemently, 'is that everybody ever since, but particularly historians of the left, has been pretending that no such moment presented itself. Well I'm going to make them fucking well realise that it did and the labor movement, such as it was, wasn't up to the challenge it presented, and hasn't been, ever since!'

Suddenly he looked weak. Strong, and weak. Vulnerable, ready to collapse, yet possessed, as of a demon, with truth that others feared. Esme thought him magnificent yet doomed. She would take the best of him and re-enshrine it in another person, better able to carry the dangerous vision. Feeling softened, she took his hand. This surprised him, but he let her rub him tenderly. 'Nothing's easy, Esme, you and I know that.'

They ate, they went home. As the days passed, Esme noticed how his work added energy rather than taking it away. He seemed to grow in strength and surety. When he came to their bed at night he was full of desire; on the second morning, while he was in the shower, she picked up the contraceptive pills she'd been taking, pulled one from its silver package, and flung it in the bin. Her destiny was looking for its next stage. She began going to bed early, while he was still at his desk, so she'd have slept before he got in beside her, his desire only just a match for hers. One night, as they lay in each other's arms, he said to her, 'You're so full of energy! You've never let yourself go like that before. What's happened?' She didn't tell him. In his ear she whispered, 'I'm really happy about what we're doing!' This fuelled his vanity as a lover; if she pleased him so much, what did it matter where the energy came from?

The morning arrived. Esme woke first, showered, weighed herself (still going down; that would change!), then made coffee for Max, tea for herself. She took them in. He opened his eyes as she put the cup on the filing cabinet beside him. He smiled faintly. 'Thanks, darling.' Then he remembered. 'Oh goodness. It's the day of my talk. I'll have

to get myself some toast.’ She laughed. ‘I’ll do that.’ He studied her when she came back. ‘You’re looking radiant this morning, darling. Truly wondrous. How did it happen?’ The compliment enriched her. ‘Things are going in a good direction, that’s all I can say.’ He thought so too. ‘A few days ago I was so far down I wondered if I’d ever get up. Now here I am, as good as I’ve been in years.’ Esme extended herself to include him on a psychic level, as she’d taken him in every night the past week; tenderness overwhelmed her. ‘This is a very important time in our lives, darling. When we look back, we’ll remember this time, I know that. Can you feel it too?’

She saw from his face that though it was a special time for him, this was brought about by reasons that were not hers. ‘Share, darling,’ she said. ‘Lean against me and kiss me.’ Slipping her nighty off her shoulders, she let her breast touch his face. He nuzzled, then using his lips, he pressed the nipple in a way she loved. After moments of contentment and satisfaction he rubbed her thigh with the palm of his hand. ‘After your talk, darling. Tonight. Every night. I’m so pleased we’re together.’ He moved his head back. ‘I’ll think of you when I’m told to start this morning. You’ll be bringing me luck. A few minutes after ten. You’ll think of me, won’t you darling?’

‘I’ll be thinking of you. I promise. Promise, promise, promise.’

A few minutes after ten, Max looked to his tutor, and Stephen inclined his head. Max, who, despite his selfishness, understood courtesies, returned the gesture, then engaged his peers. ‘I’ll start by giving you a map. I’ll explain it on a simple level, because it’s the other levels of meaning that I want to talk about. Here it is. Could you pass them around?’ He gave Becky, sitting on his right, a wad of pages. She took the top one, then passed them on.

‘What you’re looking at,’ Max told them, ‘is a map showing woolsheds burned down in Queensland between 1891 and 1894. Those were the years of shearers’ strikes and industrial fracas in the eastern states. I won’t be saying much about the other states, apart from their provision of so-called freedom of contract shearers to replace unionists. They

were also known as scabs, and blacklegs.’ The way he said the words conveyed his view of them. ‘So my discussion will focus on Queensland; it’s not a state that most of us know about, down here. Working on this topic has made me realise how different its history is from ours, and it affects the way we see things. But I’ll put that aside.’

He held up his copy of the map. ‘Notice the huge area affected. Naryilco Downs is in the corner where three states meet. Morstone Downs - that name “Downs” occurs five times, it’s an interesting footnote on the British need for Australian wool - is almost in the Northern Territory, and the others are scattered around some of the inland towns of Queensland. Many of them had newspapers, and there were telegraph connections, but I think that to explain the connections between the shearers camped near these stations - and others; these are only the ones where the shed was burned - we need to think of the shearers, many of whom had horses, riding from one district to another, spreading messages. The unionists didn’t use the telegraph much because they became aware that the government, which was hardly more than an arm, a very powerful arm, of the pastoralists, thought nothing of intercepting messages, either to read them or to stop them getting through. It was a very dirty fight, I have to say.’

He looked around. Suddenly he noticed that Kramme, the American, had a copy of his map that was larger and tinged with colour. He’d arrived at the tutorial armed with what he’d found for himself. ‘I see you’re prepared,’ Max said to him. Others looked up. Kramme was poker-faced. ‘I didn’t expect I’d agree with your interpretation, so I thought I’d better find out for myself. Go ahead, Max. Be our guest!’ He beamed, hoping the speaker would trap himself. Max felt his courage harden, like steel under load. ‘If you hold the view I think you hold, the others should find this interesting.’

Kramme said, ‘I haven’t prepared a view. That’s your job. I’m prepared to test it. So let’s get underway, shall we?’ Stephen, the tutor, looked warily at him, then at Max, who said, ‘Since you put it like that, I’ll revise the way I was going to give my talk. I’ll start with my conclu-

sions. Sorry everyone, but if I'm under judgment, you'd better know what's being judged.' He took a moment to rearrange papers. 'Here goes.' Becky, beside him, interrupted. 'Stephen, are you happy about this? No one's had to talk like this before. I got a good hearing last week. I didn't expect a boxing contest.' Stephen said nothing. Becky spoke again. 'Stephen?'

The tutor said, 'Kramme appears to have prepared himself to test what we're going to hear. You can't object to that, surely? I can't, because I ask you to do as much of the reading as you can find time for, with exactly that purpose in mind, namely that we should be in a position to question what's offered to us.' He looked apologetically at Becky. 'If you're asking me to intervene, I don't think I can. Certainly not at this stage.'

She looked troubled, but Max was ready for a fight. 'My thesis is basically this. The pastoralists, and I'm speaking of them both as individuals and as companies, many of them British-owned, deliberately picked a fight with the shearers over the use of non-union labour. They won. They won in 1891 and again in 1894. In my view they should never have been allowed to win, but leave that for the moment. They won, but they must often have been worried, because large bands of strikers were camped not far from their stations, sometimes doing fairly feeble imitations of military drill. I say feeble, but the pastoralists weren't sure what was being prepared, so they were worried. They took extraordinary measures to control the strikers. They got the Queensland government to send, not only huge numbers of police to the threatened areas, but also soldiers and some quite powerful and for the time very up to date guns. Yes, guns. The pastoralists refused to negotiate with the unions because they wanted to break them.'

He looked around. 'That's the first point. Now the second. The shearers knew perfectly well what was going on, so what were they going to do about it? Some of them tried to persuade the scabs, when they arrived, to join the strike, and some did. More of them, unfortunately ...'

Kramme butted in. 'Or fortunately!'

Max glared at him. '... did just what they were asked to do, and at the property owners' price. The strike was failing. So some of the shearers decided to take sterner action.' He waved his map; some of his listeners glanced down at their copies. 'As you see, there were five sheds burned in 1891, another the following year, one the year after, and eleven - eleven sheds! - burned in three months in 1894. That's almost one a week!' His voice had become shrill. Kramme spoke again. 'Point three?'

'Point three is that although four unionists were convicted of burning one of the sheds, the efforts of the police to fix the blame for these fires was strangely lacking in intensity, and point four ...'

He paused; Kramme commented, 'Admirable brevity!' Stephen looked sternly in his direction.

'... is that in all the years since then, virtually nobody has ... not only have they not claimed these acts as providing a base for their own political position, they haven't even bothered to investigate them. Who burned the sheds? Why was so little done about finding out? What did the pastoralists think about it? Were they collusive for reasons of their own? We don't know! There's been the most enormous historiographical silence. Why? Because it suits neither left nor right, Liberal, National or Labor, to touch the hot potato. The workers, for once, and only once - I'm sorry, there were two bursts of shed-burning, but I'm treating them as one - decided on some effective action, despite the filthy tricks of the government siding in the most blatant way with the pastoralists, in other words taking part in the class war going on, and all commentators, historians, union spokespeople and everybody else that might have become involved have participated in a conspiracy of silence!'

His fists were clenched. He said softly, 'It's one of the great disgraces of our history that we haven't even paid those men the compliment of taking what they did seriously as a feature of our past.'

After allowing this ringing pronouncement a few seconds resonance, Stephen said, 'I think we'll treat that as an exposition, or summary, of

your thesis and ask you now to support it, perhaps point by point, as you've outlined.' He hoped he was being tactful enough. Kramme looked smug. Max said he'd be pleased to do it, separated some papers, and began.

'I said the pastoralists deliberately sought a clash with the unionists. I don't think there's any disputing that. Let me explain.' As he went on, the group expected Kramme to break in, but he radiated the good humour of a man biding his time. When Max felt he'd proved his assertion, he announced, 'Point two!' and looked at his adversary. Kramme was beaming. When Stephen asked, 'Anything anybody would like to say at that point?' the American said, 'No no, very good!'

'Point two then,' Max said, again. 'Winning over scabs and burning sheds.' He outlined the movement of men by trains, their reception in the tiny towns that had grown up around the stations, the watch kept on these moves by unionists, the sometimes rowdy reception offered the scabs - nobody rejected the word - and the brushes with the law, including, Max said, trumped up charges against union leaders who may or may not have been present at the events they were accused of being involved in. 'There's no doubt the government was out to break the strikers' spirits by locking up their leaders. A dozen men were given three year jail sentences after a trial that was a parody of justice. I'll leave that till last, though, if we've got time, because it's what I'm going to say next that needs most development.' This was throwing out a challenge. Stephen said, 'Anything there? Before we go on, has anyone got anything they want to raise?'

Nobody spoke, though the room was tense. 'Go ahead then, Max, please.'

'We come now to the burning of the sheds, and I have to say at the outset that unless you've had access to all sorts of newspapers published in tiny little towns a hundred years ago - and I haven't; it'd take months to find them and plow through them - then what strikes you is the very dearth of information that I spoke of before ...'

‘You don’t actually know anything,’ Kramme said, ‘except some sheds got burned. That right?’

‘Half right,’ Max conceded, fighting back: ‘If you recall my opening remarks, you’ll remember that it was that silence, that absence of willingness to comment, that was the focus of my accusation.’

‘*J’accuse!*’ Kramme said. ‘It made Zola famous, it might do the same for you?’ He was grinning, to the irritation of those who’d never liked him. Kramme, though, sensing that their tutor would challenge him, started his main attack. ‘What you’re about to do, and I’m giving my outline of the case now, by way of replying to yours ... what you’re about to do is to attempt the impossible, namely to prove a negative!’ He looked around the room triumphantly. ‘Now listen carefully everybody please. Think about a court of law. Think about our whole notion of justice, crime, proof and guilt ...’

Karl broke in. ‘Oh for heaven’s sake! And motherhood, God, the origins of the universe, the big bang and the cure for the common cold! What else are you going to pull out of your hat and try to prove you know something? This is ridiculous!’

‘It may be to you,’ the big man said, ‘but if you keep that mouth of yours closed, you might learn something.’ He swept on loudly. ‘Max is going to try to prove something that’s impossible to prove. He is going to tell us that there were strikers who wanted to seize an opportunity to get a revolutionary movement underway. He won’t be able to produce a shred of evidence to support this, so ...’

He put his two broad hands on the table before him, a metre apart.

‘... he is going to tell us that the absence of evidence proves what the evidence - if it existed and could be shown to us - would, he says, prove. And that, my friends, is the most deceitful sort of argument anybody could possibly advance! I kid you not. I’d call it intellectual treachery because it disowns the very standards which the intellect has to abide by if it’s to deserve respect!’

Max was furious, and fired up. ‘That’s a dishonest caricature of my last and main point, namely ...’

Stephen said, 'Now just a moment, I think ...' but the situation was too disturbed; voices were raised, people were talking across the table and to those next to them. Stephen tried to impose an order by saying loudly, 'I'll treat that as an outline of the counter-case, as it were. I don't think we can allow it to be developed any further at the moment, provocative as it is. You gave us as your third point, Max, an assertion that little effort was made to bring the truth of the acts of arson into the open ...'

Before he finished Max was blazing again. 'Arson! What a revealing word! Arson is a crime, as defined by the state. But what if you reject the state because it's not impartial towards you? It's deliberately and actively involved in repressing you? Are you saying to me, to all of us, that we can't reject the tyranny - yes, tyranny - of the state? Are you? Are you saying that the state can do whatever it likes and not lose the moral imprimatur which is its claim to exist? Are you saying that citizens - an old-fashioned word, but not necessarily a bad one - cannot make a judgment, and act on it, when the state is being misused to injure them? Surely, Stephen, you're not going that far, are you?' Before the tutor could manage a reply, Max was off again. 'It's common for history to side with those considered rebels in their day. Joan of Arc. Jesus Christ. How many more people disgracefully executed do I have to name to make my point? The state can do evil! The state can be evil. Power misused is evil! Evil exists, and people who won't succumb to it have the right to resist!'

When he got home that afternoon, Esme could tell that he was poised to slide back into the depression and weakness he'd been in not so many days before. She got him into bed early, and lay beside him, listening, before she urged him to sleep and tell her the rest in the morning.

She was up before he was, showered, and dressed. Her weight had stabilised. Her period was due. She wondered if it would come, hoping that it wouldn't. If the pregnancy had begun - she felt it had, but wasn't sure - she would tell Max, of course, but the timing would be crucial.

The news must lift him, not push him down. She watched him all day, listening when he wanted to talk, respecting his long introspections. He hadn't had the triumph he'd wanted; had he been beaten? With his photographic memory he repeated to her things Kramme had said, his replies, and the comments of others. For a man with almost no interest in character he had an uncanny ear for the voices of those in his group: their vocabularies, hesitations, circumlocutions, their awkwardness, occasional eloquence. He knew he'd made them consider things they didn't want to consider, but had he shown them that revolution was a worthwhile, even a necessary, path to take, on occasion, or had he simply forced a modicum of respect from people who were essentially like the Labor Party that had been forming before the shearers' battle and had entered parliament soon after?

He didn't know, and his moods see-sawed. Esme watched. Two days passed. A third. Her period hadn't arrived. She felt that she could feel changes in her body; the process had begun. Then there was a moment when she felt certain; it was a feeling that her body was telling her something that she'd been ready to hear. 'I am!' she told herself, stepping from the shower. 'I am!' When she went to the bedroom she shared with Max, even he, preoccupied, noticed. 'You didn't bother with your dressing gown. What's happened? What's different?' She laughed. 'Too much of a hurry today. I wasn't thinking. All my habits flew out the window!' She laughed again. Max, lying weakly in the bed he wasn't certain if he'd get up from, said, 'Be careful Esme! Habits protect us. They're systems that allow us to focus our minds on other things. Not too often, not all the time, but when we need to. So watch carefully, don't abandon what's looking after you!'

Still naked, she jumped on the bed. Caution and restraint abandoned her. She took his hand and rubbed it, using her hands, across the bottom of her stomach. 'Feel me, Max. Feel us. All three of us! That's right, one, two, three! Isn't it the most wonderful news you've ever heard?'

He put the other hand, the one she wasn't holding, to her body too. A weakness appeared in his eyes as if he'd been struck. Then some joy. Fear. Uncertainty. Amazement. A feeling of incapacity. A feeling of virile strength. An awareness of responsibility, a determination to act as he should. An awareness of her happiness, and a matching happiness that he'd contributed. A sense of miracle descending, fluttering down, down, down, depending utterly on accepting hands uplifted, the holy spirit coming to earth. 'Oh good heavens,' he said, 'I wonder if I'm strong enough for this.' She was smiling. It brought him joy. If he'd caused, or played a part in such happiness, he wasn't unacceptable. Something might be said for him. 'I need to think about this Esme. It's a bit much. I don't know how your reaction can be so sure.'

She said happily, knowing that her moment had won, 'Your reaction has shown itself to me through your eyes, to you via self-knowledge. You're happy, darling, you're uncertain, but you're happy! I think it's wonderful. It's the way our lives go on after we're dead and gone.'

This sobered him. Something dark showed in his eyes, and she wished she hadn't said it. 'It's all right,' he said. 'I'm not going back on anything, least of all you. The child. Sorry, us!' She felt the strength of his affirmation, and something else. 'I have to see my mother,' he said. 'Today. At once. There's something I want from her. It's to do with what you've told me. I don't know what I want. I can't say it because I haven't located it. It's been so sudden. But I know I don't know something. Get dressed, darling, and let me have a shower. There's something I've got to do!'

When he got to her house, Max expected his mother to be in the nursery, perhaps in the potting shed where she spent so many hours. But there was music coming through the door as he opened it, much more loudly than in the years when it had been his home. 'Whatever is this about?' he called, but his mother didn't appear. He strode to the lounge, where the sound system was housed. At the very moment he entered, a man's voice, with star-quality, a refined but heroic voice, said, as if attacked in the core of his being, 'Oimè.' Mrs Riordan, skulking in

the corner of the room, looked at her son as if he was the cause of the singer's grief. 'Why are you looking at me like that, mother? If it comes to that, why aren't you working? You never play music at this time of day. In all my born days I can't recall you inside during working hours. Music! Whatever's going on?'

Staring at him, she took time to answer. A sombre soprano filled the silence, explaining, presumably, whatever it was that had caused the singer's grief; Max tried to ignore it, though it was biting into him. 'Well? Mother? Can't you answer? Say something, don't stare at me like that!'

Mrs Riordan whispered, 'The serpent struck down his happiness! A minute later, she was dead.'

Her son said, 'Who? Whatever are you talking about? Have you taken to living in a fantasy world mother? Have you forgotten where reality is?'

'It's in the mind,' Mrs Riordan said, getting something of herself back. 'Reality!' She laughed bitterly. 'That's good, coming from you. Your father left me when I needed him, now you bring a message I don't want to hear. Your visits are never good for me!'

Max felt he had the trump card in his hand. 'Well this is an exception. I've come with news you're going to welcome.' He'd no sooner said it than he disbelieved his words. 'Perhaps you won't. Perhaps you'll want to cut yourself off from us.' He struggled for the strength to say it. 'My family.'

The word seemed, to Max, to resonate through the universe as far as its alleged and putative boundaries. The soprano, still insistent in her misery, said, 'E te chiamando, Orfeo, dopo un grave sospiro, spirò fra queste braccia; ed io rimasi piena il cor di pietade e di spavento.' Other voices then took up her grief. Max said angrily, 'Get this music off, mother! I don't know what it's about but it's taken you over. You can't hear what I've come to say, it's ridiculous. Get it off!' His mother did nothing. 'Get it off!' Max shouted, and when his mother made no move he crossed the room and pressed the control that pushed the disc

out. 'Thank heavens for that! Come outside mother. Into the nursery. That's where I remember you. It's not good for you to be inside at this time of day!'

Mrs Riordan allowed her son to compel her from the room, following meekly, until they were among the melaleucas and helichrysums from which she was taking cuttings. There was a bench. Max pushed a shovel and a rake away, brushed it with his hand, and pointed. His mother moved to the bench, but didn't sit until Max had sat down first. 'This is better,' he said. 'I must say that was an extraordinary way for you to greet someone with good tidings.' He felt awkward about the word, but it was what he'd said. 'Tell me why you didn't want to hear me. Why you tried to block me out with noise?'

She said, simply, sourly, 'You've come to destroy me.'

He said, anger swelling in his voice, 'I've come with news that will renew you.'

'No news could do that. Unless you've found your father alive again. You could hardly do that. I buried him. You were too small to remember.'

Max didn't remember, though he felt he knew his father, if only from the negative influence of a person not there when he was wanted. 'We all have to go some day. Sometimes it comes too early. I replaced him, though you've never really accepted me for what I am.'

Mrs Riordan said, with disarming frankness, 'You've never been what you might have been. You've had your head full of silly ideas since you were small. You've never been what I wanted.'

'Be that as it may,' her son said, 'things are about to change. For Esme, me, and you. Esme's begun a pregnancy. And no, I didn't know about it. That's a grievance I can legitimately carry, but she says I'll want to let it pass. She says it in the way she says things when she's sure she's right. For some reason which escapes my powers of analysis, she's never wrong when she speaks in that way.'

'Your powers of analysis,' his mother said, 'are nothing but the means to delude yourself.'

His anger was increasing. ‘Mother, would you be good enough to respond to the news I’ve brought instead of vilifying your son who’s had more than enough of it down the years!’ She flashed at him, ‘And what have I had from you down the years? Tell me a part of it that’s been good!’ A few moments came to his mind, but he pushed them aside. ‘You had that music on,’ he said, ‘because you sensed that I was coming. You also sensed that I was bringing news that could make you happy. That I wanted to make you happy. So you put it on as a denial of happiness, and of me. That’s what you were doing! If I hadn’t lived with you all those years I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t even believe that anyone could react like that. But I know what my legacy is. It’s rejection! You’ve nothing more to give! Well I’ve got a surprise for you mother. There’s more to life than rejection. There’s happiness, and continuity. I’m bringing them to you, whether you want them or not!’

Quotation on pages 163 - 164 is from ‘At the conspiracy trial’ by John Miller (pseudonym for William Lane), written 1891, reproduced in *The Shearers’ Strike 1891 - 1991: a celebration*, edited by Rick Palmer, University of Central Queensland, 1992. Musical reference is to Act 1 of *Orfeo* (1607), by Claudio Monteverdi, from ‘La tua diletta sposa è morta’ to ‘All’amara novella rasmembra l’infelice un muto sasso, che per troppo dolor non può dolersi.’

Danny

Danny knew his maturing had stalled because he avoided churches and priests, while other places - anywhere his failings weren't challenged - were safe.

The history tutorial was in between. Both. He'd been given a choice of topic to present to the group and had gone for the arrival of the contraceptive pill, and the effects, disputes and dialogues attaching thereto.

It flung him into the chaotic centre of his identity. He knew that he, like most people, lived lies, but didn't know how you found the truth that made things simple. So he talked, whenever he wasn't buried in libraries, with anyone who'd talk, and preferably drink. He practically owned a table at McAdam's, a pub across the road from the university. He lunched there. He had a nose for groups that were going across and he attached himself to these parties till the last of them had gone home. He seemed unaffected by hangovers and was at the doors of the library by opening time, when he would chase references he hadn't explored. 'I know all about life except how you live it!' he used to say, teetering on the edge of drunkenness, as McAdam's began to empty. Someone drove him home, or he got a taxi, until he decided it would be better to live on the job, as he put it; younger people in his tutorial were amused to note that the rooms he'd rented were within strolling distance of two red-light establishments. 'Danny needs to do research,' they laughed. 'They're his laboratories!'

Danny found that his reading on contraception gave him the sure-fire means for capturing people's attention that he'd always wanted. People could not stop themselves listening to anything about sex. It was the one subject that all people wanted to hear about. The old reminisced. The young wondered. The active listened, comparing. Men laughed,

women dreamed, Danny liked to say; the men in his tutorial, though, wondered if he wasn't the greatest dreamer of them all. They wondered if, or how often, he passed under the red lights in his street, and made jokes about how they planned to put Danny under surveillance. Bells should ring, they joked, when Danny passed through the door of a brothel. Their humor ran amok. The climaxes of bishops should cause cathedral bells to ring. National leaders should have their ejaculations announced by volleys of shots. After all, Kramme used to say, the ex-US Navy pilot now studying among them, sex is an innately random business. It affects every living being and nobody gets control of it. 'It uses us!' was Kramme's concept. But Danny's research produced the wayward scraps of knowledge which he felt the subject demanded. 'In the middle of the nineteenth century,' he told a gathering at McAdam's one night, 'there was an American surgeon called Ewell.' He looked at Kramme, making the others wonder if he was making up a story to pull the American down: 'I kid you not,' Danny said. 'Ewell. Surgeon to the US Navy. Did they talk about him in your time, Krammie? Or was he decently buried by then?'

Kramme said he'd never heard of Ewell. 'Who was this guy?'

'He somehow conceived ...' Danny used the word deliberately '... the notion that conception would not take place - that is to say, the woman would not become pregnant - if oxygen could be withheld from the uterus when sperm was passing into it. Oxygen, I suppose he thought, was life! No oxygen, no quickening! So he proposed that intercourse should only take place inside a large vessel of some sort filled with nitrogen or maybe carbon dioxide. I don't know whether the people doing it on those terms, as you might say, were supposed actually to breathe the nitrogen or CO₂, or whether they had their bodies in the big box, or ball - you could have different shapes, depending on your fancy, couldn't you! - while their heads poked out the top so they could breathe, but by gee, they'd be panting pretty hard if they were trying to do it at the same time they were struggling for air!' He laughed wildly, then panted like a man who'd run a mile on a hot day. 'Huh, ahuh, ahuh, ahuh, ahuh,

ahuh, ahuh, ahuh!’ He beamed on his circle. ‘Maybe it’s best to keep things natural,’ he said. ‘Imagine if the only contraception available was to fuck in a contraption like that! There’d be fights to get in it, and fights to get other people out! Or people’d have to buy one for themselves and roll it everywhere they went, in case they suddenly felt a need!’ And so the hours went by at McAdam’s, and groups came and left, and Danny slipped away eventually, to the quiet little flat between the red lights, leaving the others to wonder about him, puzzled, and perhaps troubled, by what might lie beneath the surface.

A few weeks before the presentation of his work on the arrival of *the pill*, as everyone called it, Dannie went to the corner store to buy a lettuce. He was bent over the box, looking for the least tired one, when someone brushed against him. When he’d chosen, he looked up, and saw a heavily made-up young woman reading a paper in the window of the shop. She seemed to be looking for something. She turned her eyes on Danny. ‘You know where they put the lottery results?’ Danny didn’t, but he told her there was an index at the bottom of the front page. She nodded, turning pages. Danny studied her. Beneath the make-up was a face full of feeling, an expressive face, he felt. She looked smart. He felt she could tell him things, and they would feel right. Fill a need. Surprised, he wanted to talk to her.

‘What’s your name?’

She looked at him. ‘Call me Ruby.’ He could tell it wasn’t her real name, but it was what she offered ...

... in the brothel where he suddenly realised she worked. He gulped, and said, ‘Where are you from?’

This time she looked at him shrewdly, inclined her head, and pointed. That meant she was from number twenty nine, to the south of his place. Not number eighty seven, to the north. Twenty nine was a two storey terrace, rebuilt behind its Victorian facade; the ornamental features told a lie of respectability but its purpose could be discerned in grilles over the windows and a red ball around the light above the door. She studied him studying her. ‘Tell me your name now you know mine.’

‘Danny.’ It sounded bare, almost innocent, and devoid of any daring. A helpless name, really. He waited.

‘Danny,’ she said. ‘Your mum called you Daniel when she expected you to behave. And you wanted to misbehave, but you weren’t sure what they’d do to you, so you were a pretty good boy. Am I right?’

He nodded.

‘One of these days you might want to change. Have a little breakout. Knock on the door of number twenty nine. Hey!’ She paused, looking at him more closely. ‘That’s your age, isn’t it! Twenty nine years you’ve been on this earth. Am I right?’

He nodded again, sucked in by now.

‘You’re twenty nine,’ she said, ‘and you’re wondering when something big, and good, is going to happen for you. When the breaks are going to start going your way. Am I right? That’s what you’ve been thinking?’ He nodded, feeling that tears were close. She folded the paper. ‘Give a knock on the door. You’ll need to bang hard because we’ve got the music up loud when there’s nobody around. You have to make us hear.’ She added with a secretive smile. ‘You have to make us want to hear, really.’

Then she was gone, and Danny’s world had changed.

For four days he studied the door of number twenty nine with longing, then he plucked up the courage to knock as loudly as he’d been told to do. Ruby opened the door after studying him through the spyhole. ‘You don’t have to bang that hard,’ she said. ‘We’re not deaf.’ Danny thought it best not to argue. He was taken to a lounge where he was introduced to Dee and Vila; they studied him, saying nothing, so he asked them how they got their names.

‘I took it from a place where I had a great time once,’ Vila said.

‘It’s an initial I use to keep everybody out,’ said Dee.

‘I’m the only one in the room with a real name,’ Danny said. Dee said, ‘You’re the only one with balls, but it doesn’t make you anything special.’ He grinned feebly. ‘You’re playing Scrabble, I see.’ Two words had caught his attention: kokabura and sugery. ‘What’s that word?’, he

said, pointing. 'Surgery,' Dee told him. 'Where you go to have an op. Reading not too good? Ruby told me you're studying at the university.'

'I am. The history of this country, among other things.'

'What other things?'

As they talked, Danny had the feeling they were summing up how useful he might be, though what need they had nobody was saying. After half an hour there was a rhythmic knock at the front; Ruby said at once, 'I'll let you out the back. You can come again, though. Knock the way you did this morning, so we know who it is. We have to be careful, sometimes.' A moment later he was in the lane, walking past the bricks that filled what had once been openings for toilet pans to be removed. A saying of his father's came to him: 'You sit on your shit unless you keep moving.' Unless you pay someone to move it, Danny reflected, then he wondered why the women had been studying him. He felt sure they had him in mind for something: what was it going to be? He crossed the road to the university. Sitting in his tutorial that morning it amused him to think that he had a secret life; nobody in the room - not Angela the Angel, not Karl the Klever, not Becky the Broad (because she wasn't), not Max the Malign - none of them knew where he'd been, and where he was going again, when he thought the time was right.

Three mornings passed, then, as he was walking to the first of his classes, he noticed a taxi arriving at number twenty nine. Vila got out, and then a girl in school uniform, with a striking cascade of blond hair running down her back from the point where it was gathered, a little above her collar. Vila and this girl went inside, but the driver waited: they must be getting something, Danny thought, before going somewhere else. Why wasn't the girl at school? Was Vila her mother? Her aunt? What relation? He had a feeling that this girl, whose face he hadn't seen, was poised to enter his life: why, and how, he couldn't say.

He made himself wait two days before he returned to twenty nine, as he'd begun to think of the house. Vila let him in, saying, 'Good timing Danny, I've been thinking of you.' Danny thought this a hopeful sign; they were an attractive trio to a man on his own. Vila took him

in to where the Scrabble board sat on its table. The letters were spread all over the floor. 'Had a few cross words, did we?' Danny said. 'Scuse the pun.' His brow wrinkled. 'Actually, that wasn't a pun, just a play on words.' Vila wasn't interested. 'I saw you eyeing off my daughter the other morning when she got out of the taxi.' Danny felt a lift in his heart. 'Your daughter was it? She's got a fine head of hair.' 'It'll get her into trouble,' Vila said. 'I want to shave it off!' Danny looked shocked. 'Crowning glory,' he said. 'You mustn't do that!'

Vila looked at him. Into him, really. 'She's been living with her father, but he's getting too interested in her. He thinks if he can't have me he might have her. That's the sort of bastard he is. I'm not having her live here with me, but I want her close by. What about a room at your place? She's got to study whatever the nuns tell her to, and she's got to be able to get to the bathroom without anybody looking at her.' She waited for Danny to answer. He thought. 'There's three bedrooms,' he said. 'I use one as a study, when I'm there. Mostly I do my work in the library. As for being in the passage, well, I'm pretty good at keeping out of people's way. But hell, you don't even know me and you're thinking of trusting your daughter in my care?'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' Vila said. 'I want her near me. She's at an age when she needs to be watched.' The wariness, the suspicion in her voice made Danny wonder how Vila put things together in her mind. 'You don't trust your ex-husband,' he said, 'but you'd trust me?' The look in Vila's eyes told him she didn't even think of him as a threat: that was how little of a man he was. He flushed, humiliated. 'What makes you think I want a boarder anyhow?'

'You're desperate for the company of women,' Vila said. 'Anyone can see that. You wouldn't refuse me because you wouldn't be able to come in here as a friend. If we let you in, you'd be one of those that pay.' It was clear to Vila. She wasn't asking a favour, she was extracting a right. 'Next thing you'll be reading my mind,' Danny said, and he could tell, from the way she took her eyes from him, that she felt it wouldn't take long to do that. He was being reduced to serve, and it struck him

that a position of weakness can be inverted, if cunning and good timing can be brought into play, to a position of strength. 'Come and have a look,' he said. 'See if it's what you want.'

A week later, Juliet - that was the name of the girl with the golden hair - had moved in. 'She's not sixteen yet,' Ruby warned Danny. 'Understand? You're her guardian. And we're your guardians. Everything will be fine as long as everything's fine. If there's any trouble, there'll be lots of trouble. Whenever you want to talk to us, come in the back door.'

'You're letting me in without knocking?' Danny was amazed.

'You're part of the family now. One of us.' There was a heavy load in Ruby's voice; Danny wondered how much he was giving away, and what he was getting in return.

Juliet, like Danny, was an early riser. Sometimes she had first shower, sometimes he did. If he showered first, he was in the kitchen when she got there, and he had breakfast cooking. Sometimes, at the end of the day, he made dinner, and sometimes, again, Vila brought a casserole from twenty nine. 'Your kitchen's better than ours,' she told Danny; he told her to cook whatever she wanted to cook at his place. She smiled, and he knew that he'd offered what she'd been angling for. She talked with her daughter a lot, and Danny was surprised how much Vila knew, in a scattered sort of way, and how disciplined the lissom Juliet was; despite the danger, the sexual threat Vila had discerned in the girl's father, she had a detached, slightly unworldly air, as if things around her were only there to be watched, and would have no direct effect. She's a force without an object, Danny told himself, but he never brought anybody from the university to see how he lived. When the young men made jokes about his sex life he told them to drop in at twenty nine - that was the way he spoke of it, now - and ask the girls what sort of man they thought he was. Nobody took him up on this.

The girls treated him as a useful, if uninteresting, brother, and began to spend their spare hours at his place; 'It feels more off duty down here,' Dee said one day, as they drank gin in his kitchen. 'Having Juliet to

look after has done you good, Danny!’ He said it had, but it took him time to work out what had happened; the women from twenty nine took seriously only those men who threatened them, or tried to master them in some way. He was an ally, and therefore didn’t count. He fitted in with their arrangements, he wasn’t a problem, and wasn’t, therefore, a real man at all.

He wondered whether Juliet had absorbed this attitude from the older women, or whether she was awaiting her time of emergence before revealing what she thought. He wasn’t sure. Then one afternoon, late in the day, he heard a scream at the front of the house. He rushed down the passage and opened the door. A suave young man with trendy clothes, mane of black hair and powerful jaw was wrestling with Juliet. Danny picked up a paling that had fallen from the fence and held it high. ‘Let go mate if you don’t want your head smashed in. She’s my sister and she lives with me. Let her go!’ The wrestling stopped. The young man was sizing up Danny. Danny knew what to do. He stepped forward and presented the jagged piece of wood to the fellow’s face. ‘Off! Or we’ll make you so you won’t want to look in a mirror!’ Juliet’s assailant made a grab for the paling but Danny, expecting this, was quick. The paling was above the attacker’s head again, ready to crack down.

‘Off!’

‘When I come back,’ the beaten attacker said, ‘there’ll be more than you can handle mate. We’ll lay you out quick fuckin smart, then we’ll give you ...’ this was to Juliet ‘... a different sort of treatment. Cunts!’

He stormed off in the direction of eighty seven. ‘One of our rivals, it seems,’ Danny said. ‘Come inside, Juliet. What brought all that about?’

She told him that she’d noticed the man when she got off the tram, then he’d followed her to the street where they lived. ‘He got in front of me and tried to block my path. This was in front of a house with the door open, I knew he wanted to get me inside.’ Danny broke in. ‘Eighty seven.’ Juliet said, ‘Could be. I didn’t look. I stepped around him and I walked as fast as I could. I was listening to his footsteps behind me.

I'm a good runner. I thought, if he gets too close, I'll sprint! I thought I could beat him home. I thought you'd be here.' She paused, and for once Danny felt that she saw him whole and complete, and wanted him as he was. 'It was a relief when you opened that door! He grabbed me as I reached the gate. He was strong. He wasn't very quick, but he was strong and I knew I had to get someone else. I knew he wanted to drag me to that other house ...'

'Eighty seven.'

'... whatever, because he couldn't do much in the street. Not that there was anybody around. That was when you came, Danny. You saved my life!'

'Juliet, he wasn't going to kill you, you know. He wanted to ... ah, let's say he wanted to use you in a war against your mother and Ruby and Dee.'

'He doesn't want to put them out of business,' Juliet said. 'He wants them as part of his business. Under his thumb. Yuck! Imagine working for him.'

Danny was surprised at how clearly she understood. How much had her mother handed on? 'Well, the question is, how safe do you feel, after that? Hang on, don't answer that! Let me think. We've got to make you feel safe. I want you to stay on. It's close to your mum. While you're here, they all come down to talk, and drink ... I've got to make it right. Ah, I know what to do! I'm going to push a note under his door.' He laughed. 'I think I might enjoy this. Dear Crocodile Face!' Juliet giggled. 'That jaw!' A tear or two came from her eyes, out of danger, and grateful. 'Come into the study!' Danny ordered. 'We'll write it now.'

A minute later the note was sealed in an envelope made out to Crocodile Face, with a cartoon added by Danny's none-too-skillful hand. 'When's the best time to push it under the door, do you reckon?'

Juliet was decisive. 'Now's always the best time. Are you ready?'

'Sure am.' She got up too. 'You coming with me, Juliet?'

'Of course I am. Why not?'

He liked the girl's spirit. 'Why not indeed? Let's go.' They walked out, leaving their door open, and carried the envelope up the street. They pushed the gate of eighty seven, then he restrained her. 'Next bit's mine. Watch, and be part of it that way.' He pushed the envelope into the mail slot, then he reclaimed her at the gate. 'Good work, Juliet?' 'Good one, Danny,' and they went back, pleased with themselves and with each other.

Two days later, Danny was drinking at McAdam's, something he'd almost stopped doing, when Juliet came into the lounge. He was amazed. She came straight to him, excused herself to the others, and told him her mother wanted him to come at once to twenty nine. Someone had set the building at the back of the block alight. He told the eye-catching young schoolgirl that he'd be there as soon as he finished his drink. Juliet was no sooner out of earshot than the young men he was with wanted to know who she was, and how she came to be bringing Danny messages. 'She's my tenant,' he said, trying to sound proud of her, but having a sinking feeling that things he didn't know about himself were on the verge of being exposed. 'Tenant?' they wanted to know: 'What does somebody like you have to rent?'

'A room in my house,' Danny told them, sensing that his situation, or rather its secrecy, was about to unravel.

'How long have you had her?' they asked, letting the ambivalence of the question do its work, until one of them added, 'What's she like?'

Danny took a grip on their attention. 'She's good to live with. She's sure of herself, knows ways of doing things ...'

He could feel their imaginations working. 'What's she like in bed?'

Danny made his face deprecate this idea. 'That's not the sort of thing I should talk about with blokes in a bar. I think that should stay between the people involved, don't you?'

They thought the opposite. Nothing would satisfy them but hearing every detail of the love life of Danny and the girl who'd leaned over them. 'You won't be able to hide this, Danny. Every detail of your life is going to be examined!'

Danny drank the last of his beer, grinned feebly, and stood up. 'I respect your privacy. You guys have to respect mine!' They laughed. 'If you're not sleeping on your own, Danny, you don't have a private life! The thing is, you're going to share it with more than her. We're going to have a little look at what's going on. Get ready for inspection!' They laughed some more as he left the hotel, and went to the back of twenty nine. Vila, Dee and Rose were beside a blackened shed. 'It didn't get very far,' Dee told him. 'We turned the hose on it.' 'After we found the hose,' Vila added. 'And worked out how you clamped it on the tap.' Danny glanced at the hose and tap. 'Did you see anybody?'

The women hadn't seen anybody, but they knew it was the men from eighty seven. 'Trying to soften us up. There's only one thing to do,' Vila said to Danny.

'What's that?'

'Hit back straight away. They think they're calling the shots, and we're sitting inside, trembling. They've got another think coming.'

'The Empire's going to strike back!' Dee said gleefully, more excited than Danny had seen her. 'Where's Juliet?' he said, suddenly aware of her absence. 'Guarding your place,' Vila told him. 'There had to be somebody there. They'll probably have a go at your place too. We told her to ring the cops if anyone came close. Now. We want a blast, right at their back door. There's no need to do it so the street can see. Not yet, anyway. That'll only happen if they don't back off. You ready, Danny? Ready to do it tonight? What are we going to use?'

Danny felt his mind wobbling. 'Tonight?'

Vila thought he was stupid not to see the need. 'If people take a swipe at you and they get you frightened, they've grabbed the advantage. Right? You have to take it back again. There and then! You mustn't leave them in any doubt about who's on top! That way, they're struggling! And whatever they do, you up the ante a bit further!' Danny could see that Ruby, at least, was unsure of this; Dee's face was as hard to read as ever, but she'd already declared herself for action. 'This might take a bit of planning, don't you think?' he said to Vila, but she wouldn't

have it. 'Straight away. Well, I suppose we have to wait till dark. Get yourself ready, Danny, and come back here as soon as you're set to go. All you'll need is a can of petrol. Get yourself down to that BP station. No! That's stupid of me. You don't foul your own nest. We'll buy the petrol somewhere away from here. Somewhere on the Ballarat road would do. You drive him Dee. If that old wreck of yours is still going!'

'It'll get us that far, no worries,' Dee said. 'Ready Danny?' He felt his life had been taken from him. He could only escape by refusing everything they offered, as well as asked. Really, he thought, desperately scurrying in the mental spaces he'd been restricted to, I'm only doing this for Juliet: what if she doesn't want it to happen? I have to know what Juliet thinks, he realised: that's the key to it all, and - he saw - that means she's got the keys to any action I might or might not take.

A girl not yet sixteen had his heart in her hands. Her mind. Her wishes. How had he surrendered so much, so easily? Could he ever regain what he'd somehow let go, and lost?

He could, if Juliet should love him, yield to him, bring her richness to him and offer it, wanting him to accept ...

'Ready Danny? Having a little daydream? Come back to earth, Danny, we've got things to do!'

Danny said to Dee, 'One moment, my friend. I need a minute to myself. You'll have to control your excitement the way I'm controlling mine. Sorry if that's too hard, but it's how it is. I'm going back to my place. I'll be back in five minutes, and in your hands for what you want to do, or ...'

He couldn't finish, so Vila finished it for him. 'Or you'll prove yourself what I've always thought about you. Weak and fuckin useless!' Ruby shouted, 'You can't just take over somebody's life because you want it, Vila! It's something you do all the time! He's got to think about it. Maybe he thinks it's not his business. We want to get him involved in our battle, but maybe he wants to stay out of it! People have to be able to make up their own fuckin minds!' She pushed Danny roughly. 'Off you go, Danny. Take your five minutes. Ten, if you need it! Decide for

yourself. Don't let us boss you. Whose life is it, anyway? It's yours, Danny! You decide for yourself!' She put herself between Danny and Vila, and she pushed him again. 'Take your time! Come to your own decision! And let us know what you want to do. We'll be waiting for you to say!'

Danny staggered away, amazed. When he reached the door of his house, he found it open. It wasn't like Juliet to leave it like that. He paused, wondering. Into his head came the word 'portal', as if to tell him he faced a judgment, and possibly more than one. If he firebombed a house and the police caught him, he could be jailed. If he did nothing, the women at twenty nine wouldn't want him any more. Vila would move Juliet out of his ... out of his imaginative life; and what did Juliet want him to do? He went in, and knocked on her door, which was half open. She was listening to a tape, something classical that he didn't know. 'Juliet?'

She didn't answer. He said it again, a little more loudly. She turned the tape off; the silence felt strange, after the cultivated sounds. He took a step, a question all over his presence at the entry to her room. She'd been crying. Her hair was in a mess. 'Don't ask me what to do,' she said. 'It's up to you. Whatever happens, it's not what I tried to bring about. I'm the one that's stuck in the middle. Fucking firebombs!' He'd never heard her use the word before. 'I don't know who put me on this plane of existence, but it's not where I want to be!' She rolled on her side, looking away. Danny withdrew. Events had taken on a life of their own. He was going to throw the firebomb, for no better cause than that strong wills wanted it thrown, and he couldn't find a reason to resist. He walked down the passage, closed the door behind him, and went back to twenty nine. They were inside, now, telling some man he'd have to come back another time. They'd had a death in the family. He didn't believe them, but he left. They looked at Danny.

'Well?'

'Start your car, Dee. We've got a little trip to make.'

They drove until they were out of their area, as Dee put it; they bought petrol. They bought three litres of milk at a supermarket, then drove back to twenty nine. Danny emptied the milk cartons, washed them, then filled them with the petrol. Using the lane, he carried the cartons to the back of eighty seven. 'Two problems,' he said to Dee. 'I've got to get the petrol to their back door, and I've got to ignite it. You're a smoker. I'll use a cigarette to fire the petrol. I need something ...' he thought '... a bit of curtain rod should do the trick. Hollow, and about this thick.' He presented a finger. 'About this long.' He held his hands apart. 'See what you can find for me Dee.'

She was back quite soon. He put a cigarette in the tube of curtain rod, took a deep breath, and puffed sharply. The cigarette landed a few metres away, Danny watching closely. 'Should do.' He studied the fence. There was a stretch where the palings were missing. 'Not maintaining their defences,' he said. 'Bad mistake, if you're going to start a war.' He wriggled through. Dee handed him the cartons. He sneaked silently to the back verandah, where clothes and sheets had been hung on a line. He put two of the cartons under these clothes, and spilled the third on the boards. Then he slipped back to where Dee was lighting cigarettes, took one from her and puffed it towards the fuel. The second one hit its target, there was a whoosh, and flame filled the back area of the house, laundry, storage space, toilet, kitchen door. 'Right up their arse!' Danny cried to an exultant Dee as they scampered along the lane. He felt a terrible pang as he passed the back of his place, but went with Dee to twenty nine. Dee's face told Vila and Ruby all they needed to know. 'Well done! Triffic!' Vila patted Danny's arms, Ruby kissed him, Dee put an arm around his shoulder. 'No evidence!' he said, exultantly. 'Nothing left behind!' Then the pang that he'd felt at his back gate returned. 'You'll have to excuse me, ladies. I've got a house of my own to defend.' He wavered. 'I'll enter by the front door, as any respectable citizen would expect!'

They let their unlikely hero take his leave. It was dark, there was no sign of activity in the street. He walked quickly to his front door,

and the feeling that it was a portal of judgment returned to him, more strongly than an hour before. He opened it, and closed it behind him, feeling that the actions, simple as they were, were expressive of what had happened in his life. Juliet was in the lounge, with some other music on her tape, playing loudly as if to shut out what was happening. She'd made coffee. Danny helped himself as of right. He looked at her, a question in his glance. 'I heard it,' she said. 'Now you know what you wanted to know.'

He felt that permission had been given, and that she was his. He went to her chair and put a hand on her shoulder. She inclined her head so her cheek pressed his hand. He slid the hand around to her neck, sending a directive through his fingers. Shuddering, she stood, put her arms around his waist, and her head against his chest. Lowering his head to hers, he found himself looking down the cascade of hair that had caught his eye every day since he'd seen her. Was she his? She lowered her arms so she could rub his thighs, and she tilted her head, eyes closed, lips open, waiting for him to kiss, and then to possess.

The portal of his dreams was open, inviting, but he recoiled. Something about his position was wrong. She was yielding to the man who'd set the petrol alight, the man who'd taken vengeance for her mother, the man of violence who really had no reason, apart from weakness, for what he'd done. He'd been overcome by stupidity, had let it have its way with him, and he'd escaped, thus far, the possible consequences. Juliet was available to this man of madness, because he'd defied her wishes and imposed his own: or so she thought; he'd done no more than Dee and Vila had wanted him to do, Ruby too, though she was ambivalent. Were these women, who'd set him up to protect the girl, were they to help him violate ... invade ... there wasn't a word that felt right to him ... were these women to use him, now, to do the thing they'd said was not to be done? Was Juliet to be entered by the thing she'd wanted to stop?

No.

He felt the energy, the tension, of his body draining away. Whatever happened next, it was not to be the sexual union he'd long desired. There has to be some other path to reach that goal, he knew, though what it was, and when it would be found, were beyond the possibilities of his thinking. 'I have to give a talk,' he said to Juliet. Her eyelids lifted. 'About this very thing.' A question appeared in the dark eyes. 'About what men used to do to women, and still do, all the time, if they can get away with it. I mustn't do it to you,' he said, unhappy to the point of wretchedness. 'We're not going to marry. One of these days your mother will get it in that head of hers to charge off somewhere, and off she'll go, taking you. And I'm going to love you the rest of my life, and I'm going to hope for years and years that we'll run into each other again, and that this second time it'll be right for us to come together.' He searched for what it was he needed to say. Her head was back against his chest now, but he could tell she was listening, because her heart was throbbing in her, in him too, it felt, they were so close. Rejection, denial too, are intimacies as strong as humans can express. 'We've been brought to the point of wanting each other,' Danny said, 'but we got there by the wrong route. Sorry about that word. R,O,U,T,E. If this was Scrabble, it'd be worth nine points, I think. I forget. The letters are all over the floor at mum's. Twenty nine.' His nerves were attacking him. He let her go, then he seized her again. 'Sorry, Juliet, your turn to talk. Tell me what you feel about what's been happening?'

The girl's words went into his armpit. 'There's no words to describe what's been happening. An experience like this is like a flood that comes into your life, sweeping everything along the way it wants to go. That's how we get to have children. Some of us are smart enough to stay on the bank and dive in when we want to. Most of us aren't that clever, we're simply in the stream when the wave comes along, and it catches us. After that, we spend the rest of our lives trying to control what's happening, but we can't, because we lost control at the start. I wanted to lose control and now you're making me take control. I don't know that

I want it. It's simpler when you can blame the wave for your situation; the wave, or the person who caused it.'

'Me.'

'You.' She looked up. 'It would have been you, but now it's not.'

'The saddest words I've ever heard. It would have been you. The title of a song.'

She wriggled away from him. She picked up a tape from the book-case and put it on. Eighteenth century aristocrats and their servants were playing out *their* comedy. An ever-so-knowing melody played itself, over and over, reminding these figures of how silly they were being. She watched him, seeing that it was a language unfamiliar to him, then turned it down, still faintly audible. 'You're studying history,' she said. 'This is a past that'll never die. Or perhaps it will one day, there'll be a world that hasn't heard of Mozart, but that world hasn't existed yet.' The dainty sounds came from her speakers. 'Before all this happened,' Juliet said, 'mum was talking of going to Broome.'

'Broome!' Danny snorted. 'Who in God's name wants to go there?'

'She says the tropics are kinder to women than cold climates.'

'Bullshit. What's the difference?'

'She wants to believe it so she doesn't believe it's bullshit. The trouble for me is that I'll have to go with her. I have a mother!' she said loudly.

'She means well,' Danny said, then decided she didn't. 'Well, that's what I thought I was supposed to say.'

Juliet looked at him. For all his weakness, he had the advantage of being able to let truth come through his defences. 'If we go up there, will you come and see us?' Then she too let truth slip through. 'To see me? I'll be sixteen then.' It was an invitation with a delay built in. 'It's a lovely idea,' Danny said. 'Let's see how things turn out. Neither of us seems to be managing very well at the moment.'

The next day he attacked his class paper with renewed energy. He had a feeling that everything but this one pathway of achievement had

been removed. Events, in conspiring to rob him, had put something in his path as compensation. When he sat in McAdam's, notes in front of him, the young men asked him where his blonde 'boarder' - they filled the word with envy, and unsatisfied lust - was, he told them, 'Getting my dinner ready, what else would she be doing? Oh sorry, she might be combing her hair, she knows I like it when it's all out, fanning across those naked shoulders. Sometimes,' he told them, 'she brings it in front of her ...' he covered his chest with his hands '... so I can't see till she pulls it away again. Or sometimes, when she smiles at me, I do it for her, then I bend down and kiss her tenderly ...'

'Bullshit!' the young men would say, knowing they were being mocked. 'Don't give us that! Don't push your luck too hard, Danny-boy!'

'Whatever you say,' Danny would reply. 'Just trying to give my audience what it wants. It's the secret of becoming a star, you know that?'

On the morning of his presentation, Juliet was up first. She showered, dressed, and made scrambled egg for Danny. He looked up, watching her making toast to go with it.

'Sit down, Juliet. I can do that.'

'It's a big day for you. I want to get you off to a good start.'

'You've done it. Don't forget, I get a good start if I give you a good start. It's called doing things for others.'

She said, with finality tinged with delight, 'Me too!' They laughed. 'Got your notes?'

'On the desk. Everything's in order.'

'Going to read it to me tonight?'

'If you're still here.' This was a reference to Vila's increasing tetchiness; there'd been no counter-attack from the men who ran eighty seven, but Vila was convinced that the police would be set up to raid twenty nine, and without men to play the corruption side of the game, they'd be charged with something: drugs on the premises, it could easily be faked. 'Time's running out,' was all she'd say. Juliet, knowing that she'd be snatched from another group of friends, another set of circumstances

which she'd made comfortable, felt that gypsiness, as she called it, was to be her fate. Danny's house had become precious.

'I won't be leaving unless I'm dragged away.'

'Then that's what your mum'll do, I suppose. I'll be sad when it happens, Juliet.'

'I'll be sad too. We shouldn't be talking about it. You've got a talk to give. I want it to go well.'

'Thank you,' he said, and at last he felt free enough to add, 'my love.'

He entered the tutorial room nervously, but confident that everything that could be prepared had been. He put his notes down, and riffled through them, as if somehow they might have got out of order. Stephen waited for everyone to settle, then nodded. Danny looked around the room.

'My topic's the arrival of the contraceptive pill, which was available on a nationwide basis in this country in January 1961. In the US, it was approved by the Federal Drug Agency on May 11, 1960. You may not be aware,' he said, 'that it was first developed as a fertility drug. Yes,' he said, looking at the women he liked most - Angela, and Lou - 'a fertility drug. I'll go into that in a minute, but, briefly, it was tested because it was believed that if you took certain substances, basically the ingredients of the pill as we know it today, and then you stopped taking those substances, then you improved your chances of becoming pregnant. So that's how the pill was shielded from the puritans in America. It was developed under the protection of what you might say was the opposite purpose, to help women become pregnant when they hadn't been able to.' Serious though he was determined to be, he couldn't help a grin. 'Funny, isn't it.'

He coughed. 'Like most inventions, or break-throughs, it was the outcome of numerous people's work. I mean that almost every invention is usually credited to somebody, like Edison and the telephone ... sorry, the electric light ...' he grinned again '... but its development is

really a result of some wide-ranging processes. The time has to be ripe, and when it is, the thing seems to spring naturally into being.’

He fingered his notes. ‘We need to remember that two very strong-minded women were leading a birth control movement in America at the same time, and they were pretty desperate. Margaret Sanger and Katherine McCormick. McCormick had the money, and Sanger the passion. Her life was changed when she saw a woman called Sadie Sachs die before her eyes because ...’ his eyes began to water; this was not lost on those surrounding him, whose strength he needed ‘... she’d gone to a five dollar abortionist. Margaret Sanger had already seen Sadie nearly dead because she’d tried to perform an abortion on herself, but didn’t do it very well. She gave herself septicaemia and it nearly killed her. When she recovered she asked the doctor what she could do to stop having babies, and the best he could think of was, “Better tell Jake” - that was the husband - “to sleep on the roof.” Three months later, Sadie was dead. Another abortion, or attempt at one. Margaret Sanger was very affected. This is what she wrote.’

He pulled the page he’d been fingering out on top. He coughed, and tried to find the strength to read. *I walked and walked and walked through the hushed streets. I looked out my window and down upon the dimly lighted city. Its pains and griefs crowded in upon me, a moving picture rolled before my eyes with photographic clearness, women writhing in travail to bring forth little babies; the babies themselves naked and hungry, wrapped in newspapers to keep them from the cold; six year old children with pinched, pale, wrinkled faces, old in concentrated wretchedness, pushed into gray and fetid cellars, crouching on stone floors, their small scrawny hands scuttling through rags, making lamp shades, artificial flowers, white coffins, black coffins, coffins, coffins interminably passing in never-ending succession. The scenes piled one upon another. I could bear it no longer.*

As I stood there the darkness faded. The sun came up and threw its reflection over the house tops. It was the dawn of a new day in my life also ...

I was resolved to seek out the root of the evil, to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were as vast as the sky.

Danny wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He put a hanky to his nose. 'Sorry,' he said. 'That gets to me. It'd been going on for thousands of years and somebody had the strength to say it's got to stop. My God I admire her.' Stephen said, 'Will you be moving the account across the Pacific fairly soon?' Danny said, 'I sure will. It's just that many things in this country begin outside our borders, and find their way here. This is a good example. We needed the pill just as much as American women, but they developed it first, like they do so many things.'

'Did you say *we*?' This was Sam.

'I did say *we*. We - and this time I mean men. Us - we like to think responsibility belongs with women. It's up to them whether they do it with us or not, and it's up to them whether they get pregnant, and it's up to them whether they go ahead with it ... we can't leave it all to women and say it's your worry, not mine, seeya love, let me know what you're going to do. We can't do that any more.'

Karl was young, and ignorant, enough to ask, 'What's brought about the change?'

'The change has happened because Sadie Sachs died, and Margaret Sanger saw it happen, and she said to herself this is not going to continue, and she told the world it had to stop, and she wrote it down, and now you've heard her words, if you hadn't heard them before ...' he was getting wound up '... and words can change the world, because they're our passions trying to spread themselves around, and ...'

Stephen intervened. 'That's a bold start Danny. Can we move the account closer to home now, please?'

Danny finished his talk, he stayed to discuss it afterwards, he was relieved at the praise he got from some of the women, mystified by the silence of others. On a high of feeling, and knowing that there would be a slump, he went home. He was sitting in the kitchen when he noticed a feeling of emptiness. He looked around the room suspiciously. Something felt wrong. Had the men from eighty-seven been in? He felt sure there were things missing, but couldn't say what they were. He went into the lounge. A few of Juliet's tapes were scattered on the table.

He went to her room, knocked, though she'd be at school, and entered. Her things were gone. Her wardrobe and drawers had been cleaned out. She'd taken her sheets with her and folded the blankets. In the spare bedroom, the one they'd shared as a study, her books were missing. He wondered if she'd left a note. He looked in every room. No note. She'd gone. That meant Vila had left. Dee? Probably. Ruby? He wasn't sure. The phone rang. He went to the lounge and picked it up.

'You there Danny? It's Ruby. I came looking for you before. Where the fuck were you?'

'At the university. I had to give a talk this morning.'

'A pity you never talked in that bitch's ear. She's taken her kid. They're going to Darwin. She says. The kid was crying. And fuckin Dee's gone with them. What are you doing?'

'What am I doing? Trying to take this in, I suppose. Fuck, what else am I supposed to be doing?'

'Hang on. Stay there. I'll be right with you.'

'Are you at twenty nine?'

'It's a fuckin morgue. I'm coming down.'

He put the phone down, went to the front door and stepped out. Ruby was already in the street, energy and anger in her stride. When she got close she called, 'Did you have any idea they were going to do this?'

He cast his mind back. 'Funny you should ask. At breakfast this morning I said to Juliet I thought her mum would zap off one day. I didn't think it would be this soon though.'

'Clairvoyant,' said a sarcastic Ruby. 'You didn't tell me that. You left me to find out for myself.'

'I don't know that I really believed it. I suppose I did. You sort of know things but not when they're going to happen. They're in the air, waiting for their time to come.' He realised it was something he'd meant to say in his talk, and wasn't sure if he had.

'Vila went through the place like a cyclone this morning,' the aggrieved Ruby began, needing to make sense of it, 'and she announced,

“I’m off! I’m heading out to make a fresh start! Somewhere far from this shitty dump.” Shitty dump! She was the one that chose it! There’s some people you can’t make sense of. She must have come down here and grabbed the kid because a minute later we had Juliet sobbing her heart out in our kitchen, and her mother’s storming through the place tossing stuff in heaps. Half of it’s still there. I’m supposed to get it sent by a carrier. Bull-fuckin-shit! I’m not wasting my time on her. She can make her fresh fuckin start in whatever she stands up in! She cleared out on me! Nobody gets away with that!

Danny said nothing. Vila had got away with it. He wondered what life would be like without Juliet. ‘You’ll have to hand over the lease to someone else. Or pay the rent till the lease runs out.’

Ruby hadn’t thought of this. ‘You want to lease our house? For yourself, or some working girls?’

Danny felt a time in his life was ending. ‘No Ruby, thanks. I’m going to get out of this house. It’s going to be full of ghosts for me now.’

Ruby studied him. ‘You loved that girl, didn’t you?’

Danny said he did.

‘Ever screw her?’

Danny shook his head.

‘Pity, isn’t it?’ Danny felt she was touched by him in some way. ‘You wanted to?’ He nodded. ‘Why didn’t you?’

‘We never reached a point where it was a possible, sorry, I mean a right thing to do.’

She took his hand. ‘That’s sad, Danny. Sad, sad, sad. Maybe the day’ll come one of these times. Somewhere far from here. Fuck, I sound like that mad bitch, rushing around, throwing stuff in corners ... Hey!’ He looked at her. ‘Guess what!’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘I’m moving in with you till I get rid of twenty nine. Then we can both move out on the same day.’

He wasn’t sure what she meant. ‘You want to be with me?’

‘Just for a week or two. Till I shut up shop down there, find a new place and someone to move in with. I hate being on my own. You’re OK. I know you pretty well by now.’

So Ruby moved her seven suitcases of clothes to Danny’s, her collection of tapes and CDs, her rings, bracelets, shoes, make-up compounds, her photos in frames that screamed, her pot plants, and, largest and most space-consuming, her brightly coloured ceramic leopard, a snarling thing which Ruby put in the lounge, facing the door. ‘If anyone comes in, they’ll see Congo! They’ll wake up pretty soon that he isn’t going to jump on them, but it might make them think twice.’ Congo was her protective token, Danny decided, and accepted the beast in his house, which was now waiting for a message. Only something from Juliet could rescue him from despair. Where was she, what was she doing, had hope been torn from her by the crazed departure, or was she recovering? He longed to know.

Weeks went by. At the university, people began to prepare for exams. Letters went up from companies seeking graduates as trainees. Danny began to cherish the people in his history group, and to ask them if they were coming back the following year. Most were, and they were picking subjects, which meant asking around to see how those who’d done them had felt about them. Lecturers were discussed, units that were easy and those that were hard. As classes drew to an end, the system was preparing to roll over for the long vacation, and the semester that would follow, when summer had come and gone. ‘I need a job,’ Danny told Ruby, ‘to keep up the rent if I stay here, or to pay for somewhere else if I move. Maybe I should say when,’ he said. ‘I’m starting to lose my way.’ Ruby had got herself a job as a make-up consultant at a city store. The kitchen was full of magazines about how to make yourself attractive, how to have multiple orgasms, which of the female figures of the day said they wanted to have babies, and how many, and who they’d prefer as the father. Or fathers; some thought that multiple babies meant multiple men. Fidelity was a virtue that filled only occasional columns. Infidelity was what sold. ‘Those girls that come into the shop,’ Ruby told Danny,

‘they’re changing. They know what make-up is. It’s a mask. If you want to do something risky, you need something to hide behind. That’s what I sell’em. That’s what we talk about. How much longer are we living here, Danny? Aren’t you going to make a pass at me? Juliet’ll never know.’

He’d thought of it, because Ruby had a good body, and a way of advertising sex in placing herself, whether close or standing back, but he felt - he believed: he had faith - that Juliet was thinking of him, and that she’d write. She wouldn’t know any other place to write to, she didn’t know any of his friends and, come to think of it, he didn’t have friends any more because he wasn’t drinking at McAdam’s or anywhere else. He was waiting. He couldn’t leave his house, between twenty nine and eighty seven, until she’d released him.

Then it came. A pink envelope and handwriting he knew well. The postmark was Darwin. He put it in his pocket and went for a walk. Something guided him to a park in process of revegetation with native trees and grasses. He took himself to a monument to some explorers, hardly more than a pile of rocks, but possessing a lingering craziness that seemed right for their adventure, and he sat at the bottom, his back against the stones. ‘I’m putting craziness behind me,’ he told the air about him, and, worried, relieved - scared, really - he opened the envelope. It was only a page, nothing on the back, her name written at the bottom. ‘I love you, Juliet’.

‘Dearest Danny,’ it began. ‘I’m so far, far, far from you but we both know we’re close. How can that be? According to the nuns, Jesus said, “I am always with you”; that makes sense to me. Mum - how does she manage it every time? - found a nuns’ school for me, even here, but they only run it, the teachers are, well, half normal. They live in the top end and they work for nuns! I have to study and pass, and go on to study some more and if I keep passing one day I’ll be free. It’s getting closer, I know I’ll last the distance. I want you to last the distance too. I’m sixteen now, Danny. That’s the main thing I wanted to tell you, and the other is ...’

He read her last three words, and her name. He whispered them to the air, then he stood up and shouted them to the city he could see at the edge of the park, the powerful skyline surrounding him. 'I love you, Juliet!' He shouted it three more times, holding the letter scrunched in the grip of his hand: 'I love you, Juliet! I love you, Juliet! I love you, Juliet!'

Quotation on page 204 is from *The Pill; a biography of the drug that changed the world*, by Bernard Asbell, Random House, New York, 1995. Musical reference is to Act 2 of *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, beginning at Antonio's 'Vostre dunque saran queste carte che perdeste.'

Lou

She turned from infinity and said to her driver, 'How do you keep your concentration?' He covered a yawn. 'By not trying. I let my mind roam where it wants, but my eyes stay on the road. And my ears stay on the job. Any change in the sound, something's wrong. We're a long way from help. You and I, Lulu, are the expertise available.' She snorted, looking at his radio. 'If you fall back on that,' he said, 'you failed. It's there for one purpose. To report that everything's okay. Anything else, you're dead meat.' He added, 'Nothing against your dad, but he's gotta keep us rolling.'

They drove. She knew she was privileged. The company had a policy, feebly enforced, against picking up hitch-hikers. If Ken had found her at a roadhouse, she'd be travelling on his terms, which would mean sharing his sleeping bag - big enough, she'd noticed on the first night they'd spent beside the road. She wouldn't be doing any cooking, though, because the gas stove and its folding table were his preserve. All you could really do, travelling with Ken, was be passive, listen and watch. This was what she wanted, but she could see that for many it would be a restriction. They'd want to share, and that meant to impose, to release their personalities; many people needed to exercise their lusts, their whims and their whole bagful of characteristics, and became almost mad when frustrated. Humans like dogs, needing not to be cooped up, Lou observed, realising how well suited she and her driver were. Her father had chosen Ken as the man to show his daughter the country. 'If you want to make a trip,' he'd said to her in his office, twenty floors above their city, 'make the longest and most extreme trip that's there. People will say to you,' her father had said, turning his chair so he could look at the city beneath, 'that a journey moves from A to B. Rubbish. The real

journey takes place in here.’ He tapped his skull. ‘Another thing. There are a few born travellers, restless souls who never want to put down roots. Most of us, though, only ever make one journey. It’s usually the first big shift we make after we’ve grown up. We find a new place that doesn’t belong to our parents. We own it with a passion, because it’s ours. In a sense, it’s all we’ve got, and all we’ll ever have.’

That had been her father. She looked at Ken, staring at the horizon, or at his dreams, perhaps. He knew he was being examined, but felt also he was in control. Well, almost; he knew that her father’s presence was in the cabin, holding her to the proprieties of his position. Ken felt he’d like her to squeeze him between those deeply tanned legs, but she wouldn’t, because somehow, inevitably, it’d get around, and his - the boss’s - position would be reduced. Honour among truckies! He grinned. She felt sure she knew what caused his smile. ‘I’m going to lie down for an hour,’ she said. ‘Go for it,’ he murmured, and she wriggled onto the bench behind their seats, put a head on the pillow, and slept.

When she woke, the engine was still roaring beneath her. To her inexperienced ear, nothing had changed. Yet she felt different. She kept her eyes closed, waiting. The huge truck was rushing across the Nullarbor. They were on a good stretch of road; there were hardly any bumps. She thought of Ken’s, ‘Straight? It’s so straight it drives you silly. You want a bend to give you something to do.’

That was the point, surely? The land left you nothing to do except to keep yourself alive. The black people had lived like that. She thought of the terrain outside the rushing cabin. It made you tiny, but if your mind could float with the winds and dust, the seeds of grasses and desert plants, you could be as vast as the world about you. The black people had stories to fill the space; so, too, did the truckies, who were always talking about tracks to the ocean, whales, shipwrecks, mad tourists in clapped out cars, laughable to the professionals, as the roadmen liked to think of themselves. Most haunting of their stories were the ones about caves under the desert, where animals had fallen down and died, unable to get back to the light, the huge flat desert that people said was boring.

The bones in these caverns had lusted for that boredom as for life itself. Lou lifted her head. Ken said over his shoulder, 'How are we? Get a bit of sleep?' She murmured, then slid to the seat again, changed, she felt, by something in her thoughts. 'Ken?' she said, her voice implying a question bigger than anything she'd be able to say.

'Mm.'

'Ken?'

'What is it Lou?'

'Ken, do you like this desert?'

'I can't live without it Lou. I brought my wife out here once, not long after we were married. In our car, not the truck, and we went camping. Down by the sea, I'll show you the turn-off, and we had a look in one of the underground caves. There's quite a few, as you probably know. Tina's got a lot of spirit, she was game to go down, though she knew even less about it than I did. I made all the mistakes in the book! However, luck was on our side, we didn't get into any trouble, but when we'd done the cave, swum in the water down there, done a bit of exploring with torches, all that, and came back up, she said to me that it wasn't her thing. All our holidays since then have been in places where there's people. She's very social, my Tina. Now that's all right, but she said to me that day when we were back on the surface ...' he paused, and this time his eyes roamed the horizon, as if looking for a trace of what had happened '... she said to me, "Ken, I want us both to be happy, but I know I have to be careful how I make that happen." Notice what she said? I have to be careful how I make that happen. Then she said, "I don't want to reduce you, Ken." Reduce me. I asked her what she meant, but she couldn't say. But she's given me my freedom, though I know she's lonely a lot of the time. The kids are starting to lead lives of their own, it won't be long before they've left home.' He looked at her through his dark lenses. 'I don't know if they're going to study like you, Lulu. Maybe they will, after they've had a wild time, a lot of young'uns do. Here's hoping, anyway.'

His eyes were back on the road. Lou said, 'Do you feel big out here, Ken? Increased? That's the opposite, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'I do and I don't. I have to say I'm selfish. That's another way of saying I'm lucky. I've got what I want. An enormous space with nothing in it except me and my rig to give me something to do. So far so good. It's the life I always wanted, but it broke Tina's heart when she had a look, and saw that it was ... strange to her. Distant. It didn't touch her. It didn't give her what she wanted. We bought a good house after I'd had a few years on the road, she's made it look nice, I feel proud of her when I'm home, but I think she'd give it all away if she could take possession of this cabin.' He paused, as if he'd said too much, but, Lou felt, it was as if she'd been allowed a space in his mind when she was allowed to sit in his truck.

'Men like to be isolated. Women hate it.'

He nodded. 'Most of the truckies I know think the same. They all say you can't live with women and you can't live without'em. Bloody silly, isn't it?' Again, he looked to see what her response would be. She nodded, as she felt he wanted, then she said, 'When I was lying up there a minute ago, I was thinking ...'

'Whoops,' he said, looking at some tyre marks veering into the sand, 'someone went to sleep for a minute. Not too bad, by the look of it. Buggers think they can drive on pills. Fuckin ridiculous. Sorry Lou, you were saying?'

She smiled faintly, looking at the road for evidence of other mishaps. 'I was thinking about the discipline you drivers impose on yourselves. You have to keep the truck in order. You have to load it properly so things don't shift. You have to load in reverse to the way you're going to unload.' He was beaming; he didn't realise she'd thought of that. 'You have to drive fast, you have to know when to fill up with fuel. You have to know how many times you can afford to rest on one crossing, and where. While you're driving, it's got to be at top speed, not a second wasted. You're like athletes, really.'

‘Too darn right we are. Not many people understand that. They think we do whatever we like whenever we feel like doing it. Whereas we go like stink to get there, and the same thing heading home!’ She could feel in him a blaze of justification for the way he lived his life.

‘Yet,’ she said, ‘it’s as if you’ve pushed aside the restrictions of ordinary life so you can have the most restrictive pressure of all placed on your backs. I’m going to do what you and your wife did, Ken. I’m coming out here one day with a group of friends maybe, and I’m going to explore those caverns, and the side tracks to the water. I know we all have to have discipline, but I don’t think I could live with as much as you do!’ She looked at him and she knew he was glad that her father had asked him to take her west. Her father had said to Ken, in her hearing, ‘If you get sick of each other, Lou can catch a plane back!’ The three of them had laughed. ‘Got some money in your pocket, Lou?’ Ken had said, and she’d told him, ‘Plenty!’ He said reflectively, ‘You get used to it. To put it another way, I think that if you really need something, you find it eventually.’

Lou had a feeling, there in the middle of the Nullarbor, that this might be the zenith of their trip.

Another day’s driving passed, then, as the afternoon wore on, Ken swung onto a side track. Lou looked at him, wondering. ‘There’s a nice little spot down here for a sleep. Fear not, I’m not going to ravish you. I want to go through the night so I need to have a nap. I like to get off the road when I’m taking a rest. We’ll boil the billy and then I’ll climb into the bag. You guard me with your life, Lulu!’

He stopped the truck in a low-lying spot. ‘It’s lower than it looks, and with the trees, such as they fuckin are, you can’t see the rig from the road. Believe it or not, I’ve checked with mates who’ve been past while I’ve been here. Never saw a thing. Not a bad spot, eh?’ Lou felt he was creating a chance for something to happen, though what it could be, she didn’t know. When he finished his tea he flicked the dregs from his mug, and said, as he headed for the cabin, ‘Two hours, Lou. Don’t let me go any longer. It’s all I need.’ Then he thought of her. ‘If you go

for a walk, don't get lost. I'm serious. Some people get their directions muddled. Fair fuckin dinkum, it's easier to do than you'd think. People who think they're bright do it all the time!' Laughing loudly, he climbed into the truck, pulling the door closed behind him. He can't sleep with it open, she realised: a self-protective habit. She looked at the scrawny trees, Ken's words 'such as they fuckin are' in her mind. She felt disconcerted. Wondering where this unease was coming from - or was it simply displacement, dropped in a place she didn't know? - she circled the depression, a couple of hundred metres from the truck. My fixed point of reference, she told herself, is a thing that's made to move. What effect does that have? She waited. The answer, when it came, was that you wouldn't know where you were until your movements crossed the path of something else that moved. If your world was a cycle then it had to intertwine, somewhere, with another, known or partly known, cycle. Have I got the mind of a nomad, she wondered? Halfway around the depression - the lake, Ken called it, though there was no sign of water - Lou decided to test herself. She entered the battered, wind-torn scrub. I'll walk for half an hour, she told herself, then I'll go back to the truck. She made herself take a curving path through the low bush, she even looped back on her tracks and headed in a new direction. The truck, her temporarily fixed point, burned in her head. She knew where it was because she was clinging to it. After a time she spiralled in another, inward direction, until she was in sight of the curvaceous, gently unobtrusive lake, which held, briefly, its slab of steel geometry brought there, as it would be taken away, by an imperious diesel engine. 'Ken,' she whispered. She had a feeling that she was going to sadden her driver, and waited, wondering; then she realised that when they got to the western shore of the continent she was going to leave him and fly back.

Why?

The question burned, as the sun must have burned on hotter days.
Why? Why? Why?

What would she say to Ken? What would she say to her father, who'd certainly ask? Had *something* happened between his daughter and his driver? No dad, it wasn't like that at all ...

Why?

She looked at her watch. She had an hour before Ken was to be woken.

Why?

It was something about the path she was taking through her life; then it came to her. The return journey was the rest of her life. The rest of her life was the answer to what had shown itself in the last few days. The nothingness was demanding her response, powerfully, and ever so silently, secretly, but demanding too. The sternness was unbearably sweet, the sweetness stern; there was a balance in things that she'd discover only if she lived in accord, letting it reveal itself when it willed. This discipline, which she was accepting, was as stiff as the drivers' law of the road: keep going, don't deviate, get the maximum out of yourself and your vehicle. Hers was not to be like that. It would, by comparison, be ambulatory, dilatory, but strict, generous in its seasons of giving, stern in others. How did my life's character find me in this desert, Lou asked herself, to drop this message on me? She wondered if she should take photos of the spot, but knew she'd never forget it. Her life had been brought into focus. She'd discovered what an arduous life was like, and it was easy, natural, if you had the right cast of mind ...

... and she had. She had a feeling she should give thanks, and another feeling that she'd given enough for one day. She walked to the truck, put water in the billy, and lit the flame.

A fortnight later, back in her city, she completed enrolment, bought a few books, and rang around, wanting to catch up. After all that desert, she thought, I have to be somewhere where it's happening. She was told that Lecky, a girl she'd known the previous year, was having a party in her flat, overlooking the water. 'You can go, Lou. Just turn up. There'll be lots of people there you know. If you want to know anybody. It's easier with strangers, sometimes. They're *strange!*'

The strangest was a pale young man, slender as a pole, with a comb of crimson hair standing from a shaven pate. 'My friends call me Steggles, darling,' he said, passing her in the hallway of Lecky's flat. Lou heard him say, as he went down the passage, 'Stupid girl doesn't understand! It's always my fate!' She watched him. He stood in darkened places, shadows crossing his face. He stood under lights so they featured the red comb, and the white pate. He drank very little, needing control to carry through his act. As the party grew noisier, he took a chair to the balcony, refusing to compete. Lou flung herself into the group that was dancing, but looking for a break from noise - the desert had entered her - she retreated to the balcony, finding herself alone with the man who'd called himself ...

'What did you say your name was?'

'Joke, darling. Joke that failed. Forget it. Ignore.' She saw that his effort would go into presentation of himself, which meant drama, and her role would be to understand. Admire. Laugh. She thought of Ken, her driver, and her father, who delivered more than demands for admiration. A revulsion for the cockscomb went through her; he picked it up almost before she did. 'Hate me. It's quite usual. I'd much rather be hated than ignored. What's the good of having feelings you don't express?' She felt an arousal of interest. Again, she sensed that he knew this change was taking place. How quick was he? And what did it make it like to be with him? He would be hard to talk to until you knew his mind, because he'd hate the trite, and anything that wasn't centred on him had to be trite: he alone embodied interest. 'You shouldn't go home,' Lou said, 'until the rays of the sun are striking between the buildings. Looking for you, I mean.' He feigned weariness, but was pleased. 'Shut that door behind you, darling. It'll close off the top twenty decibels.' She pulled the door, aware that until her crossing with Ken she would never have put herself in the position of being alone with someone she didn't know how to trust. Had she, then, gained strength? Or foolishness?

‘Stay till the dawn,’ he said. ‘Walk me home. I don’t live far away. I’ll get to know you. It’s foolish to be afraid.’

Lou said, ‘It’s crazy not to be afraid, most of the time.’

‘We must spend our lives in fear, then?’ It was said idly, the noise inside was overwhelming, she barely caught his words. ‘I’m afraid that’s true,’ she said. He looked over the lights at the edge of their bay, the lights of ships at anchor, and into the dark. She sensed that they were backdrop for himself, and nothing more. His style of existence - was *style* the word, or *presentation*? - contradicted her experience with Ken. Night was more than a curtain, it was a time when other forms of life were active, out of sight of human eyes. How far would ... what was his name? ... go to maintain centrality, his importance? She decided that his spirit must be unsure of its existence, and need the response of others. She felt sorry for him, and wondered what she could do. But that must be what he depended on; those who became aware of him had to contribute. She said, a strange utterance after silence, ‘When you’re on your own, I think there’s no one there. So, how do you bring yourself into existence again? How do you make a start each day, in the morning?’ He stood without looking at her, left the balcony, and swept to the middle of the dancing group, enveloped in their roaring sound. Furious, but relieved, Lou went in, grabbed a drink, and took it back, leaving the balcony door open. She was available, if anybody wanted to be with her.

Minutes passed; a young man came to where she was. ‘Taking in the view?’ Lou thought him silly. ‘Not much of that.’ He said to her, leaning against the wall, ‘There’s plenty to see if you know what you’re looking for.’ He pointed. ‘See that dim light, to the right of the tower? That’s an Afghan’s wife, waiting for Abdul. I kid you not. Abdul. He runs a brothel. She knows and she doesn’t know. She waits for him. She works while she waits, making clothes. When she’s tired, she lies on their bed with a light on, and she drowns.’ He sensed that he had her attention. ‘She doesn’t undress till he comes home, somewhere close to dawn, usually. Then she turns the light off, and they undress in

the dark.' What he was telling her amused him. 'Whoops!' The young man's voice registered the light going off. 'Abdul's early tonight! Maybe he's got an assistant so he can ...' he started to laugh '... spend time with his wife!' He tapped her shoulder. 'What's your name?'

She told him. 'And yours?' He said it was Brett. 'B, R, E, double T. Give us our daily Brett.' He thought this funny. 'Why are you on your own, Lou?'

'If you can't have what you want, it's the best way to be. Or maybe it's the best, full stop. Why are you out here, asking?'

The sound in the room behind them achieved a high for the night; he bent so his lips pressed against her ear. 'Whoever was out here sent a very energised Christopher inside to swing himself like crazy. He's going wild in there.' There was the cock-a-doodle of a throat in fullest cry. 'Hear him? That's the call of lust. I came to see what set him off!' He ran his hands along her shoulders. 'Why's a girl like you on your own?'

'Good question,' Lou said. 'I don't feel I'm lacking anything. Who needs another person, apart from someone to talk to? It's not a state I want to be in, thanks very much.'

'You're welcome,' Brett said, moving back a little. 'Let's shut that door.' He pushed it with his foot. 'He knows I'm here. Jealousy should do the rest.' He was right. There was a heavy pummeling on the other side of the glass, then the door was pulled back and Christopher, his red comb flaring in a streak of light, was shouting at them. Lou pulled back, hating this clash, but she realised that Brett's cries of pain as he appeared to struggle with a violent and impetuous ... Christopher ... were a disguised version of mockery. In some way he had the measure of Christopher's act, and made the cockscomb ridiculous. He scrambled along the terrace until he was behind Lou's seat, and he called, 'Come and get me, rooster, and I'll put you over! Feel like a plunge? Roosters flap as they fall. Want to try it?' Despite the truculence he was gripping her chair. The cockscomb quivering, Christopher took Lou's hand and pulled her; she got up, hating to be caught in others' dramas, and he wrenched her into the room packed with dancers, the doped, and those

who didn't care where they were. In the roaring he started to sway, to tremble as if the music was a convulsion originating in his pelvis, and the world no more than an imagining he wasn't ready to discard. Lou swayed with him, noticing that Brett had left the balcony to watch them in the crowd. She put him out of her thoughts because she could do nothing with his presence, and then she gave herself to the current of energy flaring from the thin young man who'd claimed her. As long as he danced she was tied to him, and his energy was boundless. They danced till darkness began to fade, then he stopped. 'You have to leave with me,' he said. 'What you do after that's your business.' As they crossed the road, Lou felt that night had made day surreal. Walking beside the cockscomb was an act of faith that what they'd been in could exist somewhere else. She saw some aborigines shuffling down a lane; it reminded her of another world, far away. 'Look!' she said, but he was caught up in himself. He walked as if his footsteps set a pace for the world. He led her to an Edwardian house, palms and creepers masking its presentation to the street. He raised a hand, showing his palm in a gesture of making an offer. Wondering how much it would hurt him, she looked back to where she'd seen the black people. 'This is my way home,' she said. He said scornfully, 'You're only taught rejection. You don't know how to give.' She could feel his persona pressing on hers, wanting to overpower her. 'I'll see you again,' she said. 'At Lecky's, perhaps.'

Days went by, lectures began. She discovered that she was required to give a presentation for Australian History; she considered the course, and decided to talk on the explorer Ernest Giles, because Ken had taken her through country Giles had covered. She borrowed his journals from a library and spent days poring over them, and maps of central Australia. A theme that caught her interest was Giles' mixed regard for the people whose territory he was invading:

After breakfast, the little girl and her protector, the quietest of the two spies, made their appearance at the camp as composedly as though nothing disagreeable had occurred to mar our friendship, but my personal antagonist

did not reappear - he probably had a headache which kept him indoors. I had given the girl a shirt when she first came to the camp, and Peter Nicholls had given her protector an old coat, which was rather an elongated affair; on their arrival this morning, these graceful garments had been exchanged, and the girl appeared in the coat, trailing two feet on the ground, and the man wore the shirt, which scarcely adorned him enough. I gave them some breakfast and they went away, but returned very punctually to dinner. Then I determined not to allow them to remain any longer near us, so ordered them off, and they departed, apparently very reluctantly. I felt very much inclined to keep the little girl.

The last sentence troubled her. She imagined the laughter it would cause if she read it to a class. Dirty old explorer! She tried to think her way into his mind. Would the child have been a trophy? Or did he think of the acquisition as giving her a promotion into the world of the white? Another passage confirmed this idea: Giles had been so attracted to a piece of country that he labelled it Fairies' Glen:

Here also of course we saw numbers of both ancient and modern native huts, and this is no doubt an old-established and favourite camping ground. And how could it be otherwise? No creatures of the human race could view these scenes with apathy or dislike, nor would any sentient beings part with such a patrimony at any price but that of their blood. But the great Designer of the universe, in the long past periods of creation, permitted a fiat to be recorded, that the beings whom it was His pleasure in the first instance to place amid these lovely scenes, must eventually be swept from the face of the earth by others more intellectual, more dearly beloved and gifted than they. Progressive improvement is undoubtedly the order of creation, and we perhaps in our turn may be as ruthlessly driven from the earth by another race of yet unknown beings, of an order infinitely higher, infinitely more beloved, than we. On me, perchance, the eternal obloquy of the execution of God's doom may rest, for being the first to lead the way, with prying eye and trespassing foot, into the regions so fair and so remote; but being guiltless alike in act or intention to shed the blood of any human creature, I must accept it without a sigh.

Lou was troubled by Giles. He was a man of sensitivity yet he was a Darwinist prepared to bring his civilisation - superior, he thought - into the territories of the blacks because improvement was the order of creation. Why couldn't he have seen, Lou asked herself, that the black people had lived, well enough, for thousands of years in places where he and his men almost killed themselves? She thought of the explorer carrying water while the people he said were doomed knew where it was lying, ready to drink. She thought of Gibson, dying because he couldn't use a compass, and following the tracks of horses: the horses were lost, and Gibson died in what he would have termed a 'waste', a desert, where the inferior beings lived well.

The blacks must have seen their stupidity, Lou thought, just as they suffered the cruelty of the invaders. The wrong side won, she decided. The fools came out on top because they had stronger weapons, and because ...

Why did indigenous civilisations buckle before the brutal Europeans? This line of thought made her uncomfortable about accepting the inheritance of invaders. In her mind she examined her father, and Ken. Both were devoted to her. She'd been given every privilege. Did that mean she was as silly, as oppressive, as the explorers who thought they were opening land that had been open for millenia?

She knew she was.

What was she going to say when she gave her talk? She wanted to do well at university, so she had to swallow the ideas of those who marked the exams. This depressed her. She turned Giles' pages. He and those like him who ventured into wilder parts of the new land were only heroic and purposeful until you saw through them, and she'd seen through Giles. What he'd been doing wasn't what he'd said. There was another way to see it; she'd realised this other way and her perception couldn't be changed, now or ever.

She felt lost. She'd expected the country's history to be a tale of progress from prison camp to democracy, chain gangs to parliaments, the lash to the spur of pride. The journals of her explorer made her

feel that the whole history was wrong-headed; Europeans couldn't or wouldn't see that it was possible for a civilisation of considerable delicacy to exist beyond the edge of guns and science. Is it a restriction of the human mind that it wants to see itself replicated? It was. She thought of the blacks who'd come to Giles' camp; the wrongness of their garments troubled them not at all; in some way, by showing them as quaint, and humorous, it added to their humanity.

She began to take long walks, for exercise, she told her parents, but she knew she'd been made restless by her response to Giles, coming so soon after her trip through territory he and the blacks had known. 'Such as they fuckin are': the scrub surrounding Ken's truck came to her mind: ragged, unkempt, with no purpose of pleasing the eye, but only of surviving, monotonous, boring, but persistent, eloquent only if you stayed with it long enough to see where it began and ended. Tracks and trails replaced the formal geometry of cities; animals had them, while the birds, the winds, and the clouds they chivvied, had other pathways, and the people who'd been replaced had their minds running along those paths of nature. She wished she was back in Ken's truck, but she'd chosen to leave him, and she felt he'd understood why she'd wanted to fly back: the rest of her life had to be begun.

And here she was beginning it, and why was it so hard?

If she couldn't say what she wanted, could she at least say what was wrong?

She grinned. She could. It was a skinny young man with a flaring cockscorn. He was caught up in himself in a way that wasn't healthy. She had an urge to save him, foolish boy.

She rang Lecky and said she'd like to see her. They met in a café where they could look over the water. They talked about Lecky's party, and when she was going to hold another. 'When it blows in the door, I think,' Lecky said. 'I'm not all that much of a planner.' Lou sensed that she, whatever she'd been in the past, was organised, unwilling to let chance have much of its way. She led the conversation to Christopher, trying to remember what he'd called himself at their first encounter.

‘Steggles,’ Lecky told her. ‘They run chook farms. Battery hens, that sort of thing. The chickens you see in supermarkets. He must have been in a good mood if he told you that.’

‘He doesn’t like the name?’

‘Hates it. Thinks it’s an attack on his dignity, which it is. Mind you, just about everything is an attack on his dignity. His bloody dignity! If anyone so much as speaks when he wants to talk, they’re provoking him! *Provoking!* He sees everything in relation to himself. It doesn’t occur to him that maybe they blurted it out without thinking. Like it happens all the time. He’s such a pain, Lou, really. He wants to know what everybody’s doing, and when they’re going to have parties, and who’s on with who, and he treats it as an insult if something happens before he’s consulted, even if it’s nothing to do with him. And yet,’ Lecky added, slowing down, ‘underneath, there’s a really nice person. It’s just that he’s so unsure of himself. Anyone who could give him certainty would get their reward, I think. Hey! What about you? You left my party with him, I forgot about that. How did it go?’ Her eyes filled with curiosity, and a delight in being close to a story.

‘I left with him, I crossed the road, but that’s all I did, Leck. I caught a taxi home.’

‘Damn! I thought I might hear first hand what he’s like in bed.’

‘You want to know?’

‘I want to know that for everybody, you included. If you’d slept with Cockscomb, I’d get it out of him some way. I’m really good at it. Most people are dying to tell someone what they’ve learned in bed, it just takes a bit of winking out. But it’s worth it when it comes.’

‘What have you found out about Christopher?’

‘There’s not much to tell, yet. Not among my friends, anyway. But there’ll be something, and I’m going to find it. Like to act as my agent, Lou? Eh? All expenses unpaid!’

Lou thought. She was interested in the young man, but in a different way from Lecky. ‘Tell me about his friend Brett.’

Lecky shook her head. 'I don't know. The night of the party was the first time I'd seen him. Brett's a buyer for a chain of music shops, and Christopher works in one of their branches. That's all I know.' She made her habitual request. 'Anything you find out, make sure you let me know.' Lou felt it had been a good twenty minutes. 'Will do.'

The next day Lou approached the shop where Christopher worked. Its sound claimed the street in front and the arcades on either side. She kept back, wanting to see rather than be seen, until she caught a glimpse of the cockscomb, which didn't seem so fanciful with rock stars on every wall, clutching the microphones which were their only power. When did singers need voices? Before amplification; music had changed in the electronic era, no longer depending on its social circumstances because they could be changed to suit. Selling was the point, that had led to commodification, and music's nature had been changed by the process in which it was itself processed. Lou's heart sank; she hadn't realised how conservative, how old-fashioned, she was. The musical world that seemed right to her parents was the one that flourished in Vienna at the time her nation was settled. Suddenly she noticed Christopher look in her direction; then he was out of sight. She felt she had to go in.

Why?

He was looking at her; she allowed him a fleeting smile. He advanced. 'Good morning, Lou.' 'Good morning. I didn't realise this was your territory.' He knew it was a lie. 'My empire,' he said, letting his eyes turn. 'Is that the same word as emporium?' Lou had no idea. 'It'd be too simple if it were,' Christopher said, 'and simple people can't be allowed to reign. Our thinking's too weak.' He was being challengingly distant; then he whispered fiercely, 'Mind you, any thought at all would be subversive in this shop of slaves. Look at them!' His eyes flicked left and right, and Lou looked at the young consumers, vacantly browsing the shelves, or attached by wires to the sounds for sale. 'What does that make you?'

Christopher said sternly, 'A seller of slavery. But there are no whips, only cushions. It's the musical equivalent of a brothel. You can have any

shape or size, so long as we've got it in stock. If we haven't, you're not allowed to want it.' He paused, then added, 'On pain of not being one of us!' He beamed at Lou; he'd spoken triumphantly though feeling worse than those he despised. She said, 'It's not a very good place to talk, is it?' referring to the sound level, almost as high as at Lecky's party.

'It doesn't get any better. We're under instruction from the owners. They want sound belting out all day. All day and half the night.'

'D'you feel like lunch?'

'I only get half an hour. It's too rushed to talk. Come around to my place tonight?'

It was moving faster than she'd wanted, but she agreed. 'We can go out for a drink.' He nodded. 'See you tonight,' then moved away; Lou was leaving the shop when she found her path blocked by a man who seemed to know her. 'Remember me? I'm Brett. B, R, E, double T. Of course you do. Lecky's party. The balcony. Let me think. You're Lou, aren't you? I think of you as Lulu.'

She had to admit she was often called that way. 'I thought you might. You know the opera?'

'What opera?'

'*Lulu*. What else?'

Lou didn't know how to take it. '*Lulu*? That's the name of an opera?'

'It sure is. You don't know it?'

'I have to say I've never heard of it.'

'Then one of life's experiences lies in front of you. I'll play it to you if you'll let me.'

She hesitated. 'Is it good?'

'There's operas that are as good, but there aren't any better. I kid you not.'

She thought. 'Well, if it's that good, why not? Not tonight though ...'

He said sourly, 'Ah, our friend Christopher.'

She felt caught out, and very uncomfortable. 'A drink or two ...'

‘None of my business, I realise that. Any other time you like.’

‘Give me your phone number. And address.’ He gave her a card. ‘I’ve got a little office behind the store here. I’m hardly ever there. This is my home number. That’s my mobile. Don’t make me wait too long, will you.’ He was even more pressing than Christopher, she thought. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

Lou visited the Edwardian house that night, entering for the first time. Christopher had the front room, with a tall set of windows giving light. There was a fireplace from the period of construction, and a Chinese screen. ‘Bed’s behind that,’ Christopher indicated. ‘It’s got a little leadlight window, if you care to look.’ She looked, and it did. ‘The people who built this never expected it to be broken into bed-sitters.’ He agreed. ‘That’s not the only thing that would surprise them, if they were to come back.’ She told him she was studying history, and he was interested to ask how much changed and how much was preserved as periods flowed by. ‘How do we know a time’s run out, Lou? It can’t be language, because we can read things they wrote a long time ago. Do you think it’s the music? That’s all I can think of.’

It was the longest statement he’d made to her. She weighed it. ‘How do we know a time’s run out? The simplest way is to claim *some* time as our time. When we get old, we think time’s growing old, though it’s not. It’s always fresh. Another way is to pin our hopes on something. A government, a movement. That makes us part of what’s happening. If it succeeds, we say its time has come. If it doesn’t, we say its time’s run out. What we should do, though, I think, is look for time’s internal, inherent fluctuations ...’

He was out of his depth. ‘Maybe we should take this up over a drink? That okay with you?’

The point at which he’d interrupted was not lost on her. ‘Sure. Let’s get a drink.’ They strolled to the bars and restaurants looking over the water. ‘It’s nice to be out tonight.’ This was the first time she’d heard him say anything relaxed. ‘All this at the end of your street.’

He said, 'I'm lucky I suppose. And I'm not. You saw where I work.'

'We all have to make a dollar.'

He said sharply. 'You've got parents to support you. That's more than I've got.'

'What happened to mum and dad?'

He brushed the idea away. 'Oh, they're still cleaning their teeth and polishing their shoes. But I left home at sixteen, and I haven't been back. They know where I am. They meet me once in a while. Dad more than mum. He says I've broken her heart. Well, what right's she got to invest that in a child? How can people grow up if their mothers are hanging around, refusing to let go!' He was working himself up. 'Let's go in here.' They entered a bar where he was known, and sat at a table which he regarded as his. When they'd ordered, Lou said, 'I think, excuse the cliché, it's a matter of give and take. The parents give, the child takes. Or the child takes, so the parents, if they realise in time, say it's okay. Even if it's already happened, the parents give. Or the child says "This is okay, isn't it?", and does what she wants to do anyway. They let each other go, gently and without too much strain.'

'Is that what happened to you?'

'It's happening right now.'

'You haven't broken away yet?'

'If you let each other go, you don't have to break away. The pain's only there if one side won't play its part.'

He thought, his cockscomb swaying slightly, then he said, 'I need a smoke. Can we go to the door for a minute?'

Leaving their glasses, they went to the door. A few people dawdled past as he puffed. 'I can't seem to give this up. Sorry Lou.' She felt that in using her name he was softly taking possession. In her heart she noticed a withdrawal taking place. He was too dramatic, too involved in struggle, to be able to catch the implications of her decision, made a few weeks before, about how she would live. They stood in the fading light until he flicked the butt towards the gutter, and they went back to

their drinks. When she said she had work to be done before she could do herself justice the next day, he walked with her, willingly enough, to the house she'd entered once. She stopped at the gate. He put his arms around her shoulders. 'At least I'll be able to say you did come in.' Softening, she squeezed him. 'You're going to be okay. It's going to take time, so bear with it.' Talking rather than face the embarrassment he would have to deal with, he said, 'Now I've got to be a bear, you're telling me. I'll have to change my haircut!' She rubbed his back, knowing that she was hurting him, but sending goodwill in, if she could. 'Seeya Christopher!' He said, wistfully, the only line allowed him by their situation, which she commanded: 'Seeya, Lou!' He entered the house. She expected his light to come on as she made her way across the street, but he must have been sitting in the dark. She went to where she'd got a taxi, a few days before, and caught another, and gave the driver the address. 'Home. And a night's worth of work!' The cab sped away.

In the days that followed she developed her presentation. She wanted to give a portrait of the black people before Giles' parties moved through, but information was hard to find. Much of what she found quoted Giles, as if he had created the places he 'discovered'. When the day came and the members of her group had settled, she began: 'There's a newspaper headline that sums up the approach I want to take, and it's this. WE FIND LOST TRIBE! Does anybody remember it? Some reporters from *The Herald*, as it then was, came across these aborigines in central Australia, and they wrote about them. Someone back in the office put that heading on it. It became a talking point because even journalists, or some of them, could see that it was the people from *The Herald*, not the tribe, that were lost. How can you be lost if you've lived your whole life in a place? To put it another way, if white fellas meet black fellas, how is it that it's only the whites who think they've made a discovery? To answer that, we have to ask what discovery is, and the answer is that to make a discovery you have to ask a question of some sort, and asking a question is admitting that you're ignorant of something you want to know.'

She looked around. 'That may seem an elaborate preface to a talk on Giles, but on some levels this has been an easy topic to prepare. If you want to know how many horses Giles had, where he went, what sort of guns he carried ... most of it's pretty easy to find. But what's harder by far is to know how to give it all a meaning which doesn't slavishly accept the meaning it had in Giles' mind. Listen to this.' She read two excerpts from Giles' journals, trying to read them fairly. When she'd finished, Marthe broke in, 'You don't like him, Lou? I could tell from your voice.'

Lou looked warily at Marthe. 'He was obviously a cut above most of the people encountering the blacks at the time, and he did respect them ... it was just that they were lesser beings, and he was one of those he described as "more intellectual, more dearly beloved, than they." The point I want to make is that we've been so brainwashed into seeing the arrival of the whites - that's us - in the way the whites at the time liked to present it, that is, the displacement of inferiors by their superiors, that we're almost unable to make any assessment of the achievements of the black culture, or even whether the black people would have understood what we mean - what we impose as a meaning - by "the achievements of a culture". They would have said that you can't measure the thing you live in ...'

Someone, one of the men, said it was possible to run a tape around a house, or a room, and to live in it as well, and the argument raged about cultural relativity until Stephen asked them to let Lou finish.

Lou finished, Stephen congratulated her, and the group agreed that she'd opened up questions worth considering, yet, when she got home that night, she felt unfulfilled. She told her parents she had a feeling that she should go out, that she needed to encounter something strong enough to challenge her existence; her mother thought it would be better to start afresh the following day. Her father listened to her, puzzled, in much the same way as he'd been surprised by her return from Perth: Ken had told him how well they'd got on, he'd decided from listening to his daughter that she'd seen the qualities in Ken and had learned, very

early, how to tap into his considerable understandings; it had been a success, apparently, but it was also part of some process of maturation, of development, which neither he nor his wife could describe. Neither of them were surprised when Lou came to them later and said, 'I'm going out for a few drinks. I don't expect to be late, I've got a lot to do tomorrow, but I won't get any sleep if I don't do something first.' They said it was fine, wondered where she might be going, and her mother asked her, at the door, if she had money. She did, and she was away. The door closing behind her felt final in some way. She got a taxi and asked the driver to take her to the bar where she'd drunk with Christopher. She sat at their table, sipping occasionally, then she asked the barman if she could make a call. He offered her the phone and she dialled Brett's mobile. His voice came back as if he was calling down a tunnel.

'Hellooooo - uuuuuwww?'

She smiled. 'Brett? It's Lou. I'm having a drink. Can you join me?' She told him where she was. Within minutes he was walking in as if he owned the place. 'Hellooooo - uuuuuwww!'

She stood and took his hand. 'Great to see you. What do you want to drink?' They were soon talking; she told him what she'd said in her talk, earlier that day. Brett listened closely. 'I think it's very hard for one group of people to accept the equality of another, unless they've been made to feel scared of them. Your man may have felt the blacks were his equal when he was surrounded by a few hundred of them, but once he got back to Adelaide, or wherever, he'd sing the whitefellers' song. He wouldn't be able to do anything else.' Mention of song reminded her. 'You were going to play me Lulu. Remember?'

He smiled; he did.

'Who's it by?'

'Alban Berg. Second Viennese school. Atonalist.' She didn't know the term. 'All twelve notes on the scale are equal. It might undermine harmony, though it doesn't need to.' She heard the metaphorical connotations of this. 'Undermine harmony? That'd be serious!' She grinned. 'Music's important, isn't it. I wonder why?'

He pulled his chair closer to their table. 'You can't own it. You can sell it, as I do. You can own the musicians, if you get'em on your payroll. You can even own copyright, but you cannot keep the notes caged up. They flit through the air like birds, or moths ...'

She looked at him. Moths? It struck her as an odd comparison.

'... the poorest man on earth can bring joy to the richest. Slaves can bring tears to the eyes of their masters. I've got a friend who likes to say that if they drop the bomb and the world's destroyed, somewhere in the aftermath, when the dust is settling, a scrawny shepherd high in the Andes will take out a pipe and play a tune ...' He laughed, and trilled his fingers; Lou tingled with delight. She felt her eyes go damp. 'A little pipe, singing away, after the big bang! What an idea! I want to tell you about an even better place to do it, somewhere I visited earlier this year.' She told him about the depression Ken called a lake, in the scrub beyond the Nullarbor. 'Such as they fuckin are,' she told Brett. 'That's what Ken said about the trees.' She laughed. He liked it too. 'Poor bashed-up, scrawny gum trees in a place fit for nothing. *Such as they fuckin are.*' He laughed. 'It'd be good if the trees could tell us what they think of us roaring through. What do you think they'd say?'

It struck her as pertinent. She became quiet. He wondered what he'd done. After a while she said, 'I don't want to listen to Lulu tonight. I've got a feeling what we just said would spoil it. When can we get together, Brett, so you can play it to me?'

'Any night you like, really.'

'Friday?'

'Right. You want to meet here?' She shook her head. 'I've got your address.' He thought. 'It's not on the card. Have you got it there? I'll write it on for you.' She found it in her bag. He took it from her and wrote. She felt the involvement both deepening and becoming more distant. He sensed her mood. 'Finish our drinks.' They did. 'Friday night. Look forward to seeing you. Any time that suits.'

A minute later, he was gone and she was in a taxi. Things he'd said about the opera entered her mind but she pushed them away.

Something else was trying to direct her, and she couldn't identify it. It had to do with him mentioning birds and moths in the same breath, as if their flying was the same thing when, for her, it wasn't. What was the difference? She couldn't tell, but the search for it needed her. She let herself into the house, said goodnight to her mother - father was asleep - and went to her room. 'I'm almost back from Perth,' she told herself, settling into bed. 'That part of the trip is over.' What did she mean? She didn't know. She pulled the pillow where it suited her, wriggled, and closed her eyes.

Brett's flat, when she went there on Friday night, was crammed. He was a collector. He had a glass cabinet full of pots and plates. He had birds, stuffed and mounted, some of them under glass, some on perches or sticks. And he had moths by the score, pinned to spread their colourful wings, and neatly aligned in rows. This display of once-living things made her uneasy; she was relieved when the music took them to another room. 'I'll tell you the story first. Or would you rather read it?'

'Tell me in your words, so I'll know what it means to you.'

He told her the tale of Lulu/Mignon, the adored, the lust-compelling attractor of the worst in men, but also of the idealism in Alwa, the cynical admiration of Schigolch, and the fervid loyalty of the Countess Geschwitz. 'Quite a tale,' she said. 'I think just two or three bits tonight, to get used to it.'

Brett offered her the libretto. 'Pick your bits.' Lou studied the story, wondering how much she'd be able to take. She noticed that while she was reading, he went to the room they'd left, and was turning lights on and off. When he came back, she said, 'The last scene of all, I suppose I have to hear that. The one before it, when the railway shares crash. And ... I don't know, you pick one for me.' He smiled. 'Act 1, scene 3, the humiliation of Doctor Schön. He's the one who returns as Jack the Ripper. He gets his revenge. Lulu puts him through hell, she shoots him, but someone else gets to do what the good doctor never did, and it's the same actor who plays that part. I like that, I think there's something ... not exactly just, but satisfying, about it.' Then he wanted Lou

to move back to his display room. 'The music's better if it's diffused by the time it gets to us. You mustn't sit right on top of the speakers, it's not like that in a theatre.' He saw she was unwilling. 'Well, I'm sitting in there. You sit in here if you like. You'll see what I mean after a while.' He put on the scene where Lulu refuses to dance in front of Doctor Schön and the woman he wanted - though not very much - to marry. Lou listened in fascination, but uncomfortable at being on her own. When it ended, she moved to where Brett was sitting, moths and birds above him; he put on the second of the scenes she'd allowed herself. In the complex ensembles, he closed his eyes, allowing Lou to study him, hating his collection. How could anyone who respected life ... Suddenly she felt sick. The intrigue of the opera, its treachery, was something he was offering her. She was being collected. When the scene ended, he wanted to know how she felt about it, he told her his theories, replayed parts to illustrate. She wanted to go. 'Now,' he said, 'the gruesome, ghastly dénouement. Hang onto your hats, darlings, this is going to be awful!' She wondered if there was moonlight pouring on Ken's truck, or if he was sprawled in his sleeping bag while night's creatures went their ways. Brett put on the final scene. Four characters - Lulu, Schigolch, Alwa and Geschwitz were on the run, desperate, living on the former beauty's prostitution, all their illusions revived when Geschwitz unrolled what they hadn't seen for ages - the portrait of Lulu. In the middle of this ensemble Lou stood up, shouting, 'No!' Brett opened his eyes, startled. 'What's wrong? What do you mean?' She could feel her body tightening, clustering to protect itself. 'I mean no! I can't stand it! I can see what the playwright's done with her! He's made her sexuality focal! She's the force ... no, she's the excuse for all that happens! Is this the best the Austrians could think of when things were going wrong?' Brett looked at her, amazed. 'Yes, it is. I'm surprised you can't see it.' Since she wasn't softening, he added, 'Berg understands what's getting at you. That's why he's written it. You have to look at it, much as you may wish to avoid it, so you can know what happens if the world thinks

this way, and what happens once they get their ... not their hands, their minds on you! Isn't it clear?'

She sat down, listening in silence. Lulu's dying screams, and the death-song of her faithful Countess rang out in the other room. Her eyes settled on the birds and moths. The opera ended. He said, 'I think that upset you in ways I didn't expect. I'm sorry, I'll make coffee now, you might feel better about it another time ...'

Lou stood again. 'No coffee. I'll go home. I'll talk about it with you in a few days. I'm sure it's a masterpiece if you say so, but it got me from an angle I won't allow. I can't be objective, and I don't think you can either. It's too powerful to be given freedom without people being cautioned that it's abroad.' He was going to speak, but she went on. 'No, I really mean that. I suppose it's brilliant, but as a force let loose in the world ...' her hands flung away from each other, as if describing an eruption '... it's not the way I want to live.' She looked at him. 'I think that's all I can say tonight.' He stood too. 'Don't come with me, I can let myself out.' She wanted to add 'of this', but courtesy held her back. She wanted to tell him he was a creep, but it wouldn't be fair. She wanted, in fact, nothing more than the purity of night, and distance, and emptiness, and a world where everything moved in harmony with its purposes, but she had no illusion: such a world had vanished, if it ever existed, and evil was loose, everywhere, and would take you from within unless you could find strength to hold it under. 'Good night, Brett,' she said, heading for the door. 'Thanks.'

Quotations on pages 221 - 222 are from *Australia Twice Traversed: The romance of exploration, being a narrative compiled from the journals of five exploring expeditions into and through Central South Australia, and Western Australia, from 1872 to 1876* by Ernest Giles, London, 1889, republished by the Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964. Musical reference is to Act 1, Scene 3, and Act 3, Scenes 1 & 2 of *Lulu* (1935) by Alban Maria Johannes Berg.

Marthe

Marthe considered the photos on the walls. The glint of advantage shone in her family's eyes. Snow-capped mountains towered above them, steepled churches housed their weddings. Elaborately gathered curtains shaded the backs of their chairs. Everything they used, right down to the early cars that took them about their mountainous land, had been fitted, carved, ornamented, by hands and minds with skill. They had delighted in their cleverness. No Ledoux had ever imagined that the world owed anything to those who didn't make opportunities. Her father, who was back in his homeland on some mission of which Marthe doubted if even her mother understood the purpose, had always said, 'Kindness? Let's have plenty of it. Welfare as a right? I wouldn't take it if they offered it on a plate.' His adopted country - how temporarily, was a question Marthe asked herself - wouldn't let itself agree with him. One could make money, but not enough to let one live with delicacy and finesse; there was plenty, but not refinement, availability but not exclusivity, and this deprivation appeared, to the natives - the white, European-derived - as a positive, when, to Marthe, and more strongly to her parents, it meant a defect, an unwillingness to go for the very things that made life good enough to be worthwhile.

'A strange land,' her father liked to say. 'Its people have been in the sun too long. They get too much too easily. They've forgotten things they need to remember.' Marthe felt he was right, and it troubled her that her university years were being spent in this place when she should be forming links with people whose energy, and machinations, would impel her through life. You couldn't marry one of these Australians! Her only affairs had been back in Europe, as if her vitality lay dormant until she was in the land where her parents' families had lived, loved and

died, to become, as they were now, memories in a frame. It depressed her. She wanted to ring someone, to get events to circulate, but the impulse had nowhere that she could see to go. The land of opportunities gave none.

The phone rang. She glided through the rooms. ‘Hello?’

It was her father. ‘Where are you?’

‘Lausanne.’

‘What’s it like over there?’

‘Quite warm for this part of the world.’ Then he said, ‘Is your mother there?’ As she answered, Marthe raised her wrist to look at her watch. It was ten minutes before noon, which meant that in Switzerland it was almost three in the morning. Something told her not to mention this. He said again, ‘Marthe? Are you there?’

‘Yes father. She’s out at the moment. I thought I heard her car, but no, she’s not here.’

Her mother had been unwell the night before, and was lying, probably asleep, in her bed upstairs. ‘That’s a shame,’ her father said. ‘Give her my love when she gets home.’

‘I will.’

‘I won’t give you a number to ring back here, I’ll be in Brussels in a couple of days, I’ll make contact from there.’ He’s got someone with him, Marthe thought; that’s why he’s ringing in the night. She’s asleep, that other woman, and he’s slipped away to phone; he’s sitting in the dark, whispering, and he didn’t want his wife to be home when he rang. ‘How are things going with you, father?’

‘Up and down. As always. I need to move some money. Have you had any contact with Pietr Wilhelmz since I left?’

Wilhelmz was a lawyer whose life centred on the movement of money from one jurisdiction to another. ‘I saw him in a restaurant the other night, but I wasn’t talking to him.’

‘Give him a ring, would you. I can’t get onto him. I haven’t got his mobile number with me. I’ve tried his home and his office but he’s never

there. He's caught up in something. Unfortunately, the something isn't mine. Give him a ring, and if he doesn't answer, go to his office.'

'What do I say when I see him?'

'Tell him the Angora files are ready to be opened, and I need things in readiness. That's all you have to say, he'll do the rest.'

'The Angora files are ready to be opened, and things need to be ready.'

'That's it! Now. How are you? How's everybody? How's your course?'

Marthe never trusted people who asked multiple questions; it was a way of shifting the spotlight in your mind from what you were noticing about them to what they demanded of you: a trick she didn't like. Her father, she realised, had taught her much that he didn't perceive about himself, but which was part of his range of techniques for operating in the world where money moved from availability to being out of reach within a matter of seconds. 'If you want to make money,' her father said, 'you have to know where opportunities are likely to surface, and you have to be ready. The ocean is big, but where are the fish feeding? You need to be there!' This feeling that he knew what most did not was at the heart of her father's confidence; he idled through an unlikely range of sources, watching for signs. 'If I'd become a doctor,' he liked to tell his daughter, 'I would have been good at diagnosis. Careless at medicine, unskilled with surgery, but diagnosis - that would have been where I came first!' He liked to laugh at himself, certain that nobody else would gain that advantage. Lausanne! Marthe tried to picture the woman he'd picked up. Call girl? Somebody from a bar? She thought of her mother, in her bed upstairs.

She went up and looked in. Mother was asleep, turned away. Marthe went down again, and drove to the fashionable street where Wilhelmz had his office. He was at the door, shaking hands with a man who was leaving. She studied him as they said their last words. Her distrust, she realised, sprang from the combination of inheritances in his body; he was tall, he stooped, he moved in a feline way, his skin was

olive, and it was all topped by a crop of thick blond curls. As his visitor turned to go, Marthe watched him run his hand through his hair, nervously, she felt. He'd been telling lies, and putting his hand there was the equivalent of swallowing, for some people, when they wanted to gulp down what they'd said. A caution, she thought.

'Marthe!'

His attention was on her now, and he feigned admiration. 'Good morning Pietr.'

'How are you? And what news of your father?'

'He rang me a little while ago.'

He glanced at his watch. 'Where was he?'

'Lausanne.'

He grinned. 'Couldn't sleep!' Without waiting for comment he added, 'Any message?'

'The Angora files are ready to be opened. He wants everything ready.'

'You know what that means, of course?'

'I've no idea.'

'You surprise me. You'll benefit if he brings this off.'

'I'll benefit, or some company with my name on it?'

'Same thing, are they not?'

No, she thought; since I've no knowledge, I've no control. The value can be whisked away and converted to something else. It was the fictionality of her father's schemes - and Wilhelmz's schemes - that she found whimsical. You didn't have to do something substantial, or even real, to be rich, you had only to capture the faith of others that there was something underlying the name you sold them. One had only to capture the minds of those who wanted to believe.

'You must know,' she said, 'that I never know what my father's dealing in. Think about this. He gives me more than most people of my age can hope for, but what he doesn't give me are, first, the knowledge of where the benefits spring from, and second, the chance to give him

anything in return. He's a polished conjuror, but he never lets you know how his tricks are done.'

'Come inside.'

She followed him to his office, she heard him say to his secretary, 'A pot of coffee please Bronwyn', and then they were in a secluded room where screens shone from every wall, and the furniture was a clash of reds, mauves, blues and yellows. He caught the repugnance in her eyes. 'Sit on the one you think is worst. You won't have to look at it!' She laughed, and chose the yellow. 'Good choice, Marthe! I actually threw that one out but we needed another seat for a meeting and Bronwyn brought it back.' He sat too. 'The file's ready to be opened. Well! You realise,' he said, 'that the law has to exist, otherwise there'd be no safe haven to put money apart from your pillowslip or under grandma's bed.'

'But ...?'

'If anyone wants to make serious money, they have to be faster than the law. They may not break it, they simply need to know how good its eyesight is, which way it prefers to jump, when it's active and when it sleeps ... A good operator like your father knows these things, and moves accordingly. It's commonly said that people like your dad are unprincipled. Not so! He believes in the law having penalties. People should be punished if they get caught! Only the stupid get caught. The clever test systems without putting their fingers in traps.' She saw his hand scratching the curls at the back of his head. Not itching, she thought, just dissembling. He talks to make sure he's got your mind diverted from ...

... what? 'Do I have to sign anything?'

'As a matter of fact, it would make things easier if you did.'

'So I own something, do I?'

'Quite a considerable equity as a matter of fact.'

He knew and she didn't. Direct questions were a sign that you couldn't play the game that was being played. 'That's interesting.'

His attention was focussed. 'You didn't know? Well, everything's a matter of finding the best timing.'

'Who does my signature best? You or my father?'

There was a tap at the door and Bronwyn came in with a tray - coffee, cups, sugar, milk. She put them on a bench beneath a group of flickering screens, then left the room, smiling at Marthe, who nodded to her, murmuring, 'Thanks.'

When she looked again at Wilhelmz, he looked smug. 'Bronwyn is very useful. More useful than she realizes.'

It hit Marthe sharply. The office girl was somehow persuaded into writing names, and Pietr used what she wrote to produce the signatures he needed. Somewhere in the office they had 'signatures' of hers. What did they look like? How would Bronwyn write her name? And when they had 'her' signature, where would they use it? She remembered her question from before Bronwyn's arrival.

'Who does my signature best?'

'We only need the one.'

'So you've got one of mine?'

He lowered his eyes. She said, 'When will the Angora file be open?' A playful grin appeared on his face. 'Two minutes after you've gone.'

'Was my father tricking me?'

'No. He was bringing you into his trust.'

'How do you see that?'

He smiled slyly. 'One person on his own can do almost nothing in this world. Two working together are better, and three are better again. Somewhere ...' he raised the fingers of his hand '... and I'd say it's a number smaller than this, there's too many. Somebody in the group can't be trusted. Think about what a transaction is. There are two sides. The people on one side have to trust each other, and the other party, they have to trust too. You can't have a transaction without the two trusts, as it were.' His hand, she saw, was nowhere near his hair. He tapped his table. 'We have to trust each other. They have to trust us.'

'And do we need to trust them?'

‘We don’t give a bucket of shit about them. Correction! We have to *know*, not *trust*, that their money’s real. Without that, there’s no such thing as a bottom line. No bottom line, you can’t sign off. You know all this already. You’ve absorbed it. Now your dad wants you to come on board and use it with him. Be a player. That’s why he sent you to me.’ He sat back, waiting.

‘Show me what I have to sign.’

He pretended to be hurt. ‘Nobody says you have to.’ She lifted her eyes, then lowered them. With his left hand, he took the top document from a pile of papers and put it in front of her. ‘Agreement,’ she read, ‘between Angora Securities and Vigilance et Veille Cie, Lyon.’

It was the city of her mother’s birth. ‘Who are they, Pietr?’

‘I can’t tell you much about them.’

There wasn’t much she could do about this. ‘Where do I sign?’

‘Bottom of page two.’

She turned the page, tempted to try and read it, but knowing that this was un-cool; Pietr or her father would tell her as much as they wanted her to know. ‘Here?’

‘That’s it.’

She signed, and pushed the agreement back, wondering what effects, what outcomes, would flow from what she’d done. ‘So what happens?’

‘I let the relevant bankers know the agreement’s been completed, they put money in an account your dad can access, he does business when he’s ready, which sounds like it’ll be pretty soon.’

‘How will he know?’

Pietr smiled. ‘Knowing your father, he’ll be trying every five minutes to see if it’s happened yet. Not a very patient man, your father, when he scents something in his nostrils.’

This was true. Marthe knew her father was unstoppable, and knew the effect this had on her mother, whose wistful reluctance to understand what was going on about her was a result of her husband’s style. She stood, then wished she hadn’t. ‘Anything you want to tell me, before I go?’

He put his hand on his head and twisted the curls. She couldn't stop herself. 'All right, don't bother. I know what that means.' He blushed, which she imagined must be a rarity in his life. 'How did you know what I was going to tell you?'

'I didn't, but I knew it wasn't going to be true.'

'Wow! Marthe, my dear, if you're that good at reading people, we really need you.' She considered him. 'Going to tell father about that, are we?' He managed to look blameless. 'He'll be proud of you!' A minute later she was being shown through the front door, he was waving as she edged her car into the traffic, and he was wondering, she decided, about how he'd re-balance the three of them when her father returned.

Her mother was in the kitchen when she got home. She was having coffee. She looked depressed. There was a newspaper on the bench but the table was bare, and her mother was staring at nothing. When Marthe came in, her mother pointed to a cup. Marthe shook her head, and waited. Her mother said nothing. Marthe tried to work it out; was she being questioned, ignored, or what? After a long minute, her mother spoke.

'Has your father rung you?'

Marthe was startled. Her mother had been asleep when the call came. 'Yes, he has, as a matter of fact.'

'What did he get you to do?'

The questions had a direction. They seemed hardly to belong to the inert figure at the table. 'He asked me to take a message to Pietr Wilhelmz. So I did.'

Her mother coughed. 'What did you do when you were there? What changed, is what I'd like to know.' She paused. 'You don't have to tell me, of course.' The beginning of a smile touched the side of her lips. 'If you won't say, that tells me a lot.'

'What changed?' Marthe drew a deep breath. 'I signed something. Apparently it's in my name, whatever it is. They've been forging my signature until now.' In the presence of her mother, this sounded more serious than she'd admitted to herself.

‘He’s got you involved, then. Not a bad effort for someone who’s not even here. It would all have been planned, though, you can be sure of that.’

Marthe had a feeling that she looked naive - easy game - to her mother, and that her mother was probably right. Yet she didn’t want to question the judgement, any more than she’d allowed herself to read the paper she’d signed. A thought came to her. ‘Are you and father fighting over me?’

Her mother fiddled with the cup. ‘He’s fighting me. Not for anything I’ve done, not for any difference between us, not for money, or property, or anything else he cares about ... What else does he care about? It’s a fight, and only one person’s fighting. It’s his nature, you see. He has to have an enemy to outwit, to beat. For a long time I thought he fought me because he had nobody else to fight with, but I realised after a time that he was fighting ... you might say outwitting ... everybody. I was closest to his secrets ... he can’t live without secrets ... so I was his worst enemy. The best victory he could have over me is to take you from me. To get you into his camp. To have you ...’

Marthe could feel the menace before the words were in the air.

‘... do whatever he told you to do. Sign! Go and see so and so. Deliver this. Collect that. Deposit here, withdraw there. Do these things without telling a soul. Go underground. Live a life without identity!’ She might have gone on but Marthe, chilled by what she felt was the accuracy of her mother’s perception, was also angry. Some defence was necessary. Her fingers gripped the edge of the table, and her mother saw this: ‘Don’t attack me for saying what you want shut out. Your father wants dominance. He’s obsessed with it. He’s also clever enough to know that there are many ways to maintain it. Charm. Generosity. You’ve never wanted for anything. You never will, so long as you don’t question him. He hates me, but don’t imagine that I get freedom from that hatred. I’m not allowed to walk away. I’m needed. All the venom in that man is directed at me. I’m a vital part of his make-up. What is the saying? If I didn’t exist, I would have to be invented.’

‘So father used me this morning, and now I have to pay for it? You’re fighting him through me. Inside my mind, that’s where you think you can beat him, is that what’s going on?’

Her mother, still apparently listless, said, ‘What’s going on is that you’re finding out what’s going on. What’s been going on since you were born!’

‘You think I haven’t known that all my life? I could write a book about people who give and withdraw favour in the tiniest and the hugest amounts, while they watch to see how their tactics are working. I’m quite an expert! I ought to be, with the father I’ve got. And the mother!’

It was a declaration of war. To Marthe’s surprise, and displeasure, what she’d said had pleased her mother. She lifted the pot and filled her cup. Marthe told her, ‘That’s bad for your heart, mother.’ This too pleased the older woman. ‘The heart is a muscle that pumps blood. This makes it important, huh? But it is more important for a function it doesn’t fulfil. They say our feelings are in our hearts.’ She laughed. ‘How silly we are.’ She tapped her brow, and then her chest. ‘They say our thoughts are here, and our feelings are here. In different places, that’s the stupid part of the idea. There’s as much feeling in our toes or our fingers as in our heart! Don’t let anyone tell you the heart rules. Don’t let them tell you, as your father will, that the mind rules the heart. You can’t break human beings into different parts, and set one at war with the others. There’s no peace for those that go down that road!’

Why were they talking like this? Marthe wanted to get into her mother’s centre, to clutch it, to demand it give account of itself. ‘Has father always had control of you, mother? He has, hasn’t he. How did he get that control? How early did you give in, and why did you let him? Why, mother, why?’

Her mother stood up. ‘Who knows? Who cares? The question that matters is what you’re going to do about it. Are you going to let him suck you in, the way he did today, or can you get out of his clutches?’

That's the only hope I've got to look forward to.' Without another glance at her daughter, she left the room.

Marthe, too, left the kitchen. Going to the garden, she continued to feel unsafe. She wanted to be somewhere where the battle of her parents would be too remote to affect her. Travel? A change of lifestyle? No. They were forms of escape. She was too proud to run away. She wanted to overcome. That meant becoming stronger, more forceful, something her parents would have to reckon with, something before which they might feel abashed. That would be a change!

She got her things and went to the university. She attended a lecture. She talked to people from her tutorial, then went to the library. Its calm, its vast store of knowledge, soothed her. Some minds achieved more than domination. Scholars had to withdraw from much else to concentrate on what they'd chosen to know, and eventually, if they did well enough, to make their thinking clear to others. She asked herself if this was going to be her life. She thought not. There was too much of her father in her. She'd never give up everything for one thing. Scholarship was only learning, a practice for something bigger, more decisive, too far in the future for her to be able to tell. She wasn't one of the lucky ones who knew from an early age what they wanted to be. She was one of those who pushed forward blindly, only to realise, as they became aware of ageing's grip, that where they were was where they were going to stay.

She took out her history topic. She'd shoved it in her bag, and now she had to do something about it. 'What forces were unleashed by the arrival of rock music? ('Blackboard Jungle') What changes have these forces wrought in this country?' Inwardly, she groaned. Too hard!

She looked again. The film's all but forgotten, but rock music's still pouring out of sound systems. What changes? How would you know? How could you measure? The apparently simple questions sent other questions running in all directions. Rock music, she knew, was supposed to be a blend, a merger, of country music and rhythm and blues, but its real energy was the negro population of America, with its pent-up

resentment, its sexuality, its surging spontaneity; it had broken free of slavery a second time, and had entered the minds of the world because it had captured from beneath the American empire. She groaned again. How could you get a topic like this under control?

She went outside and sat on the grass, in the shade of a statue. Her mood darkened, and she felt energy flowing out of her. She'd chosen the topic, or let it be given to her, in a frivolous, rebellious mood; it had been un-European, it had centred on a culture that was too crude for cultivated minds to handle. Now she had to do something with it. What forces were unleashed ... what changes ... How could you know? It seemed to her that historical methods worked well enough for restricted subjects, but when something new and vast swept through a society, who could say what questions should be asked, except those who had a prejudice to impose? If you hated rock music, it would be fairly easy. If you thought it was the best thing since sliced bread ...

She looked up. Someone was standing near her. It was a music student called Murray Petersen and he seemed concerned for her. That would be something! 'Deep in thought?' he suggested.

'Deep in a muddle,' she said. 'A mess. A stew. Oh Murray, I don't know how I got myself into this!' He sat down. 'What is it? Tell me.' She told him. 'You've got the wrong approach,' he said. 'You're right off the track!' She looked at him, weakly, faintly hopeful. 'Sort me out then. I'm in need, Murray, need!'

'It's because you're European,' he said. 'You look down on rock and roll. You think it's vulgar. Well of course it is! Look where it comes from, for heaven's sake! Mozart would never have let himself be born in Tennessee! If you can't wail like a hound dog on heat, they don't want to know you!' He grinned, enjoying her pain. She grabbed him by the ankle. 'Stop teasing me! Tell me how I'm going to do this. How can I make sense of it?'

'Take it one step at a time. Rock 'n' roll. Where did the name come from? What's it mean?' She looked at him. 'It's black persons' slang for sex. Intercourse. White people didn't know that, though.'

‘But they sensed it! People have whole layers of knowledge that they don’t admit to, because they don’t know how to handle what’s there. Societies are built on repression. The rich and well-fed, they don’t mind repression, because they do well out of it. Those who’re poor, especially those who’re white, and living among blacks they despise because there’s got to be somebody lower than them otherwise they’re on the bottom, they’re the real victims of repression. Then if somebody comes along making music out of that repression, they’ll sing! They’ll dance! They’ll rock, rock, rock! And roll! Roll! Roll!’ He jiggled his pelvis and she laughed. ‘Stop it! It doesn’t suit you!’ He stopped. ‘Don’t you know I’m repressed?’

‘I don’t care what you are. It caught on like wildfire in England, and also here. Among the whites. Why was that? And it’s become normal. It’s as much a part of the scene as cars. How did that happen?’

‘You know very well how it happened.’

She slumped again. ‘I suppose I do. It’s the way of things. Today’s revolution is tomorrow’s reaction. But why? Is human history just a drunk bumping off one wall to crash into another? I can’t believe it.’ Murray grabbed her ankle this time. ‘Oh stop it Murray! Control your foot fetish.’ This made him laugh. ‘Bump! Crash!’ he cried. ‘Bump! Crash! Sounds like rock’n’roll, eh? Bump, bump, bump! Crash, crash, crash!’ This time she laughed too. ‘I’m glad you found me. This isn’t helping but I’m not feeling so helpless.’ He thought otherwise. ‘Is human history just a drunk bumping into one thing after another? The answer’s yes. Yes, yes, yes! It’s no more no less than that. The odd thing though, the really funny thing, is that while we’re staggering from one crisis to the next, between the bump and the crash, you might say, people do clever things. They invent penicillin, they make computers. They open up all sorts of biogenetics. They tune their violins!’ He mimed a virtuosic double stop. ‘We’re brilliantly stupid. We’re stupidly brilliant. The reason you’re troubled is that your question makes you look at the stupid side of human nature. Rock and roll got loose at the time the Un-American Activities Committee was destroying careers all over the

place. At the same time as the US was building nuclear warheads like they were going out of fashion! Something got free! Got away! The guards took their eyes off the gate and the prisoners made a rush! And once they were out, they mingled and there were too many to be locked up again! It's simple, Marthe, simple!' He was playful, he made it sound easy, she wished she could have him beside her, passing notes to tell her what to say. How to answer the questions when they came. 'Tell me what you're working on,' she said.

'The Spanish renaissance,' he said. 'Composers thereof, which mostly means the church. There's not a great deal of the secular music left these days. Pity, isn't it. Some things are preserved, others get lost. When you go back and try to find out what happened ...'

Marthe exploded. 'It's all lost! People can have brilliant ideas, but unless they catch some wave, they're forgotten. It's a miracle that we've made any progress. We do it despite ourselves!' She looked at the grass. 'We're a species that isn't made for steady progress. If we have a good period - I'm talking history now - we fall back again. After a peak, there's a trough. Most of what was gained is lost. God it's depressing!'

Murray caught her mood. 'Tell me about it! It's the same in music. Someone does something brilliant, you think, ah, we're about to enter a new age! Then you see that what's produced next is utterly different, it's not a continuation at all, it's something new and usually not as good ...'

Marthe broke in. 'We're caught up in this! Don't you see, Murray?' He didn't, he was startled, but she was fired up: 'We feel our parents' expectations, we'd like to live up to them, but it's easier to rebel, to throw them off, than to accept the weight, the responsibility of trying to meet their wishes. Freedom is agonising, but the reverse, which is developing a tradition, is worse!'

He said, 'You lost me there. Are we still talking about the same thing?' His patience was short, and he wriggled on the grass, ready to go. She grabbed him again. 'Don't you leave me! I need to talk!' He could feel her nails in the skin of his leg. 'You reckon I've got a foot fetish. Shit, Marthe, I'll be lucky if I've got a foot, the way you've got

your claws in me. Go easy!’ She let go, and her psyche slumped. He sensed her mood change. ‘You’re all strung up, Marthe. What’s going on?’ She said sadly, ‘I’ve got to give this talk and it won’t take shape. I read stuff and all it does is add to the heap in my mind. You know what it’s like when you start to get on top of something, it becomes clear and simple. You can see all the main lines, you know what’s debatable and what’s reasonably settled. You feel good about it because you’re on top. It’s not happening. I feel muddled and lost!’

He said suddenly, ‘What’s dad up to?’ She thumped the ground with her fist. ‘Tell me and we’ll both know.’

‘Mum?’

She looked at him flatly, despairing. He said, ‘That’s the problem, isn’t it?’ She said sourly, ‘Very clever, Murray. You’ve located the problem. Now tell me the solution.’

‘One of two things will happen. You won’t find a solution, and you’ll suffer. Or it’ll come suddenly. Sorry, I don’t know which it’s going to be.’

Frustration seethed in her. ‘Genius!’ He said, ‘I’ll meet you here tomorrow. Same time? Okay? Give your talk. I’ll listen. How long have you got?’ She told him she had twenty to twenty-five minutes. ‘Right. Straight run through. No notes. Straight from the back of your head. Tomorrow.’ She looked sulky; he saw this. ‘If you lose control, if you dither or say you don’t understand anything, I’ll get up and go, and you can solve your own bloody problems. Tomorrow. Here!’ He looked at the statue, a huge female figure made of bronze, and darkened by the years. ‘Get yourself ready. Seeya!’

She still felt sour when she got home, but she made herself work. What were the things that stood out when she cast her thoughts over what she’d read? The strangest, to a European, was the contest between the national anthem and rock. Bill Haley’s Comets had given a concert in Brisbane. They never played for very long. The excited crowd of teenagers - she circled the word, it was something new - kept calling for more. Whoever managed the venue wanted the kids out of the place.

When they wouldn't move, when in their thousands they kept yelling for the show to go on, management played God Save the Queen over the speakers. It was the ultimate statement of finality in the old society - ladies and gentlemen, the Queen! But the old society was in the process of dying and a new one was being born. The kids must have known this in some way. Marthe found herself wishing they'd been more articulate, but that was what the music was doing for them. It was mating music, designed to do no more than stir up frenzy. That meant it was breaking down courtship patterns and familial management of marriage. She found in her notes the statements Bill Haley had made about the propriety of his band's intentions. Who, then, had linked his most raucous song to high school delinquency and made it a best seller? Somebody, smarter than Haley, who knew that the freedom of teenagers and the fears of older people could be linked and then exploited. Haley told his band members that if they picked up women on the road they'd be sacked. So even in its first blazing phase the old puritanism had clung on. But that was America, and she was to study this new phenomenon in a country very different from its source.

She drew up columns, headed them 'USA', 'England' and 'Australia', and started to write. In London, 'God Save the Queen' had been used again to quell the jiving, screaming crowd. The battle of the songs! Long to reign over us versus Rock around the clock, which was the number The Comets finished with, their best known, their most famous, and that because of a film.

The proper way to analyse this, she decided, is not to try to hold it steady, but to think of it as a wave, a tidal movement, with no single person or group in charge, but things falling out of it and new forces adding themselves, hoping for sex, excitement, money or simply a reason to live. How can something aimed at the immature mature itself? What did it mean to be a rock and roll fan in Russia? In Japan? She went through her notes, adding new columns and headings to what she was preparing, then scrapping them as she strove for another sort of structure. There's no one truth, she decided, it all depended on where you were at the time,

and what time you were there. When she thought she had a framework, she went out to her mother.

‘What’s he doing, mother? Has he rung you from Brussels?’

Her mother’s eyes told her the answer was no.

‘What’ll you do if he doesn’t come back?’

There was certainty this time. ‘He’ll come back.’

‘Do you want him to come back?’

‘I’m part of the problem. I let him turn me into what he needed. It was a mistake, but I loved him when it happened, and I can’t undo it now.’

Marthe weighed up the words. “I loved him when it happened.” She’d never been in love, she’d watched others going through it, and she’d been both envious and contemptuous. When would this imp take possession of her? She thought of something. ‘Mother?’

The older woman looked at her, waiting.

‘Have you ever got men to fall in love with you without letting yourself fall in love in return?’

‘Twice. I wouldn’t do it again.’

‘Why not?’

‘With Bernard ...’ Marthe ran through the people she’d known, the adults of her childhood: Bernard? Who was he? ‘... I was responsible. I did my best to be what he wanted. It was agony, twisting and turning to be what somebody else wanted me to be. He was a moody man, always changing, so, to please him I had to change too. Be serious, be wild, be funny, be intimate ... it was so wearing, it nearly killed me.’

‘How did you get rid of him?’

‘Your father came along, and I did the same myself. I fell in love. As you see, I’m paying for it still.’

‘And the other? Did he come after you were married?’

‘No, he was before Bernard. I was awful to him. I controlled him. I made him follow my moods. I was nineteen at the time and I wanted everything in the world brought to me. He did his best, poor man. He’d have laid down and let me kick him if I’d asked. I thought it was funny,

but I grew ashamed, and I told him he had to go. He cried for weeks. By now he must know how lucky he was!’ Her mother laughed. ‘Then Bernard, then your father. Three men, it’s more than enough. Some women have dozens. How they bear it is something I do not understand. Men and women are so different the best they can do is try to treat each other well. Sometimes, when they are older, and not obsessed with sex, they can be good with each other.’ She smiled. ‘Maybe I’ll get there one day.’

‘When he’s out of the way.’

Her mother understood this to be a positive thing to say. ‘It will only be possible then, I think.’

Marthe thought. She decided to share her fears with her mother. She told her how much trouble she was having in getting her ideas in order for her presentation. Her mother listened. ‘Do you want to try it on me?’ Marthe told her about Murray’s offer to listen to her. ‘When you say it,’ her mother said, to the amazement of her daughter, ‘make it a song of love!’

‘What? A talk on rock and roll! How could anyone love that?’

‘They probably can’t. But think about it. How could anybody love me. Love you? Love your father?’ Her voice darkened. ‘Love anybody? It’s beyond all reason, but people do it all the time. Most of us are quite unbearable, but somebody takes on the load of loving us. Why not do it for those shouting rock stars? Love them a little, they may improve.’

Marthe wanted to question, but her mother cut her short. ‘You need to practise what you’re going to say. Say it to this young man, don’t ask me to listen.’ She left the room, Marthe shaking her head at the illogic; her mother wanted to hear her, then her mother refused to hear ...

Her mother, Marthe decided, felt she was attracted to the young man before whom she was going to perform. In a flash Marthe realised that she was. She’d grabbed him, she’d let him grab her. It was something she never did. Then she noticed, as the minutes wore on, that she was thinking of him all the time, lingering near the idea of him in her mind, letting him drift out of her thoughts, then calling him back for

a further, deeper impression. She tried to make herself snap out of it. Hound dog behaviour had to stop!

She arranged her arrival at the statue in the morning so it was exact to the minute. He was already there. He smiled, and shifted so he had his back against the figure. ‘Move,’ Marthe said. ‘That’s where I sit.’ Murray smiled, but stayed where he was. ‘Move!’ Marthe ordered. ‘This is our first negotiation.’ Murray shifted far enough to let her occupy the space he’d had his back against - if she sat pressed against him. ‘Smart,’ she said. ‘Obedient,’ he replied. She put her bag on the grass. He reached across and lifted it, putting it between her right knee and his left. She allowed this without protest. ‘Begin,’ he said, looking at his watch. ‘Let’s say twenty minutes. You don’t want the maximum. Keep well within yourself, it’ll be better that way.’

She riffled through her things for two pieces of paper, pulled them out and put them on the grass beneath her drawn-up knees. She sensed a broadening of his attention, and looked into his eyes. She saw tenderness there, a wish to accept what she was going to offer, and a further wish to be able to admire. He wanted her to be good. It was a challenge, and it drew from her a surge of confidence.

‘People say rhythm and blues and country and western merged to become something new, and that the public became aware of this new thing when Bill Haley and the Comets *gave the world ...*’ she saw that Murray noticed the irony ‘... their hardest driven song, Rock Around the Clock. As usual this is a simplification that obscures important forces at work. Haley and his Comets were an almost unknown band when they first played the song, but a man called Jim Myers - no need to remember the name - pushed hundreds of copies off to Hollywood producers, and one of them used it on the soundtrack of a film called *Blackboard Jungle*, 1955.’

‘It has been said ...’ she took up a sheet of paper “... that *Blackboard Jungle* contextualised rock and roll in a world of teenage violence and ignorance, an unfair categorisation which did however provide a perfect opportunity for characterising a changing era.” The song took

off because the film sold it. Eventually something over seventeen million copies of *Rock Around the Clock* have been sold.’ She looked at Murray, who was wincing. She bumped his knee with hers. ‘You could argue that Bill Haley never understood what he’d been part of. Here he is, twenty years after blast-off: *Soon we got rid of our cowboy boots and we shaved off the sideburns. We bought tuxedos and became a pop act. Then we decided we had to have a name for this.* Then he talks about the song he’s famous for and how it got going, as he sees it, anyway. *At that time there was a disk jockey in Akron/Cleveland, Ohio, getting started, Alan Freed, who began using one of these records as his theme song. He used to start pounding the desk along with the record and holler: ‘Rock, rock, rock ... roll, roll, roll’ and the name rock and roll was born there. Of course we didn’t realize what we had until Crazy, Man, Crazy, our next record, went over a million.* Next he talks about his new recording manager, Milt Gabler of Decca Records. *There never was a first session like ours ... We worked well with Milt. On that first date, we did Rock Around the Clock, which has now sold over seventeen million copies ...*

‘Oh, don’t rub it in!’ Murray was saddened. He could hear laughter in her voice as she went on. *See You Later, Alligator racked up two million and a half. It was our moment and our time. So many people have said, ‘You were a genius.’ There was no genius involved, just something that had to be. We were just a bunch of kids from Philadelphia. And suddenly we were the idols of the world ...*

She dropped the page. He put his hand beneath her knee to pick it up. As she went on she saw that he was half listening, half reading the text of the Haley interview. ‘I want,’ she said, nudging him, ‘to stay a little longer on what happened in America, because the sequel to those events in Australia is only superficially the same. And the same could be said for France, England, Japan, Russia, anywhere else in the world that felt a wave flooding out of the US. It may be the same wave but as it floods through different societies it has different - that’s to say, local - effects.’

‘It’s never bloody ended,’ Murray said, putting the paper down. ‘Sorry. Go on with what you were saying.’ He was so glum that she wanted to put an arm around him.

‘So, staying with America for a moment longer, “a bunch of kids from Philadelphia” became “the idols of the world”. Haley doesn’t understand anything about business. Money. In later years he cracked up. He drank too much. He hallucinated. He made up things that he thought happened, though they didn’t. He retreated from the house he’d built in his glory days to a garage, and he barricaded himself in there with windows painted black so nobody could see in, and flood-lights blazing all night so nobody could approach without being seen, though how he’d see them through the black windows I’ve no idea ...’

Murray was looking at his watch. ‘Bring it to this country. Quickly!’

She took his wrist to get a look at the watch. ‘Yes, I’m almost ready. Hear me out.’ He pressed his knee against her. She felt a thrill of pleasure running through her, and it did something that he noticed to her voice.

‘So Haley was the agent of forces that he expressed, but those same forces had selected him, just as they selected his great successor, *Elvis the Pelvis!*’ She laughed, Murray winced again, then he too laughed loudly, saying to anyone near, ‘God this is ridiculous!’ She said, ‘Don’t resign from the human race, the era isn’t ended!’ He sat bolt upright. ‘That’s what I want to talk about, when it’s my turn!’ She said, ‘Yes, all right, let me finish. Keep your eye on that watch. Call out every two minutes, I need to know where I am!’ He held up his wrist so she could see, and she took it tenderly, turning it a little, before shifting her eyes and speaking straight ahead. ‘It’s important to bear in mind that what was native, or home-grown, in America was something adopted when it reached this country. It was taken up with enthusiasm, but it wasn’t born here, and that makes quite a difference, as we shall see ...’

At a little under twenty two minutes by Murray’s watch, she’d finished. She looked to him for a verdict. He said soberly, ‘Bloody good

treatment of a ghastly subject. It's hard to believe that standards can be so low for so long.' The statement, strong as it was, appeared not to satisfy him. 'What they do,' he said, with misery in his voice, 'is so desperately mindless, so *sub-human*, that you'd think they'd burst out laughing at their public, who're lapping it up before them, but no, they just belt it out, screaming monosyllables into microphones hooked up to sound systems strong enough to send it to the moon. Which is about where I wish it'd fucking well go!' She rubbed his cheek with her hair until he laughed. 'Yes, yes, tell me to shut up, nobody wants to hear people who can only grizzle and grumble, I know, I know. You were terrific, Marthe. I didn't think you'd have it that much together, you really pulled it into shape.' He looked at her. 'When do you give it? Was it Tuesday next? Sorry, I can't remember what you said.'

She said, 'Thursday of this week. Ten to twelve. I'll be free of it by lunchtime.' He took the hint. 'I've got practice then. What about that night? Dinner somewhere? To celebrate?' She looked into his eyes. 'Are you asking me?' He rose to what she was saying. 'Yes. I'm asking. I'm hoping very much you'll say yes.'

She said, with equal tenderness, 'I'll say yes.'

She gave her talk, they had dinner. They talked for hours. They met the next day and the day after. On the fourth night, she stayed with him. In the morning, they taxied to her house so she could get things for the day, then they went on to university. 'I'm spending money like there's no tomorrow,' he said. 'I'll have to get a job!' They put their arms around each other; love lasted longer than money! They went to their classes, met when they could, then travelled back to the place he rented, a flat above a garage housing cars worth more than he ever expected to earn. They thought this funny. They made jokes about living in the biggest car, trundling from one beauty spot to another, and waking with the grandest views outside. In their intimacy, everything was 'outside'. The space of two people in a shared excitement is as big as the world. She told him, one morning, in the flat above the cars, that she loved him so much that she wanted to cry as much as she wanted to show her happiness. 'I don't

know why it is,' she said, 'but I often feel like that. If tears came flooding out of me I could love you even more than I do.' This made him sit up, energised. 'That reminds me of something,' he said. 'I've been wanting to do this, but I keep forgetting. Lie back, Marthe, and listen. I won't tell you what it is. Take it in, and love it. Close your eyes. Please darling, close your eyes. Here it is.' He jumped naked from their bed and she lay back. He put a disk on his machine, then he sat in a corner where he could watch her face. A choir began softly, then wove lines around each other. An appeal rose from them, filling the huge cathedral her mind created for the singers, their voices resonating in the earthly building as they tried to make heaven hear. Then they sensed their station, humility entered them again, and the voices died to a whisper. In the silence once they'd ended he turned off the sound, then went back to the chair. She lay for a long time, eyes still closed. Then she said, whispering too, 'Tell me what that means to you.' He said, 'Some people think it's natural to be happy, and if we're not, it's because we're unlucky. Other people think it's natural to be balanced. They want to be on an even keel. I'm not one of those. I think it's natural to be desperately unhappy, aware of all that's wrong with the world. That's the natural lot of mankind. That's what that music says. It says it all! I might sound pretty gloomy, but I think you can do more good in the world if you're realistic, and that's the most realistic music I know!'

Still speaking with her eyes closed, Marthe said to her lover, in all his newness, his state of potential to be realised, 'And love? Where does that come in? Can they all have it, or only the ones that think misery's natural?'

He said, 'All can have it, it's that good, but it's best, it does its miracle most amazingly, for those who lie in the pit of the world's misery.' She said, 'I'm made differently from you. You'll need my strength. Lie beside me, and know what it is.'

The minutes that followed were among the best they had known. Dimensions added themselves to two lives. When, finally, they lifted themselves from their bed, to shower, dress, eat, and go to classes, they

had been changed. The world outside them had been made different because each had had the other in their minds, bodies, spirits, souls ... They stood at the door, still keeping them apart from the world they would enter, and he said, 'I wonder if we can come back? It feels like this place will disappear once we shut the door. Do you feel the same, Marthe?' She said, 'It wouldn't matter if it did. The magic's in me. It's in you too. We could make it anywhere.' She said it with such certainty that his pessimistic spirit accepted. A minute later they were walking to a station, on a train, approaching the gates of their learning.

A few nights later, at half past three in the morning, she opened the door of her parents' home. Murray had gone to a music camp, and she would have two days without him. Though she wanted to sleep, she wanted the blaze of excitement to go on. The phone rang. She knew who it must be. She went to it, picked it up.

'Yes, father?'

He was angry, fearful, raging. 'What's happened to the money?'

'The file should be open now. It's days since I signed.'

'It's more than open! It's empty! There's nothing in it!'

She said, 'I never knew what was in it. Pietr said it was a lot of money. If you haven't got it, where did it go?'

'That's what I want to know. Why haven't you kept an eye on him?'

She lifted her eyes to the ceiling. A flood of well-being swept through her, and she chuckled. He heard it. 'What the hell have you been doing?'

'I've been studying hard ...' she left a long silence before she went on '... I've been giving a talk, and, ah yes, I've been ... no no no, I *am*, I *am*, I *am* in love.' A shout came from the earpiece. 'You can fuckin well forget the heat in your crotch for a while, we're four and a half million dollars poorer. That bastard's robbed us. What's the time over there?'

She said softly, 'Getting on for four in the morning. The hour for lovers, and people who get the day started while everyone's in bed.'

Some are sleeping, and some are luckier than that. How's that, father? How does that strike you on your side of the world?

'Are you drunk?'

'Drunk,' she said. 'What a nasty word. I am intoxicated, but not with alcohol. Good things have flooded into my life.'

'Get the car and get down to Wilhelmz's office. Park where you can see it and he can't see you. No! Go to his house. There's a little gate in the side fence, it's all covered with creepers. Go in there. Take a knife. Wake him up! Tell him if he doesn't come good he's dead meat!'

The unreality of it, the unlikelihood of her doing it made her chuckle again. He raged at her, giving orders and abuse. She laughed loudly, then she put the phone on the sofa she was standing next to. Sounds came out of it. Ignoring it, looking happily around, she noticed her mother emerging from the passage, staring at her. It occurred to her that her mother might pick up the phone. She picked it up herself and put it down, then, making sure she let her mother see what she was doing, she unplugged it. She tossed the cord on the sofa, then said, 'I need some sleep, mother. You must too. We'd better unplug his fax machine, that'll be the next thing buzzing with anger.'

'What did he want?'

'He wanted to cut Pietr Wilhelmz's throat. Or shoot him. Or get four and a half million dollars out of him.' She laughed. 'Any of the above!'

'You're different! Where have you been?'

'I'm different. And I'm not back from somewhere, mother, I'm still there.'

Her mother saw what the difference was. 'Who is he?'

'I'll tell you when we've slept, and woken up. You can meet him. I don't have to be ashamed of him. He's wonderful, and he's what I want. One of the good things about him is that he doesn't give a shit about money. That's not a bad start, is it mother? Mother darling. Put your arms around me, I've got plenty of love to give. You can have all you need, which is going to be a lot, when he ...' she inclined her head

towards the phone ‘... takes it into his head to come home and try to do something honest. If he ever does. Sleep then, mother, we’ll have a lot to do. But first ...’

She opened her arms wide, and her mother, amazed, but needing what was offered, allowed Marthe to close her embrace around her.

Quotation on page 256 is from ‘Bill Haley interview’ in *The Rockin’ 50s: the decade that transformed the pop music scene*, by Arnold Shaw, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974. Musical reference is to the motet ‘Versa est in luctum cithara mea’ (My harp is turned to mourning) from the *Officium Defunctorum* (1603), by Tomás Luis de Victoria.

Ti Chai

Ti Chai decided one morning that it was time that troubled her. Satisfied that at last she had identified the reason for her discontent, she told her husband. Wu was dismissive. 'We are only fish. Time is the ocean we swim in.' The idea pleased him; he was beaming. 'We can go anywhere we please.' His fingers flicked in every direction. 'When we are old, we sink to the bottom. Unless we are eaten by a bigger fish!' His smile grew wider. 'Maybe we are greedy, and the fisherman's hook pulls us out of the ocean!' Ti Chai knew how her husband loved the fanciful play of images, but she was often sad when he was pleased, and she felt it would be that way again. 'If we are smart fish, though,' he said, 'we can keep away from trouble. The water is our freedom. It lets us go where we want!' He looked at his wife. 'Why are you troubled? Are you thinking about your talk you have to give? Or are you feeling ...' he touched his cardigan to refer to his heart '... troubled by what you are in the world?' She nodded, meaning the latter.

Wu said to her, 'Tell me what you are going to say in your talk. P'aps I will be able to feel your trouble in what you say. Tell me and I will listen.' He sat at the table, and she sat facing him.

'I have been asked to talk about something that happened in Sydney in 1932,' Ti Chai said. 'The Governor of the state withdrew permission for the Premier, Mr Jack Lang, to stay in office.' Her husband was impassive. 'This is most uncommon thing in Australia,' she said. 'They do not have revolutions here. Power is transferred in very orderly manner. Now I tell you another thing. When we give our talks, we are supposed to read from something written at the time.'

'Why you got to do that?'

‘Our tutor says we must give each other something which comes from the heart of what was happening. He says everybody must be able to search through the words we read to see if our explanation satisfies them. He says when we quote we are allowing the others to test our interpretation.’

Wu was nodding; this appealed to him. ‘Read to me what you have chosen, and I will tell you how it seems to me!’

She opened her leather bag and pulled out some pages. ‘You listen hard,’ Ti Chai said. ‘I tell you nothing until I have finished.’ He spread his hands, meaning she had his attention.

‘This,’ Ti Chai said, ‘is from a letter written by Lady Game, in Sydney, to her mother, in England, after her husband, the Governor, sacked the government. She is very excited, and relieved. It is all very odd. Lady Game wanted the government to be sacked, but from the way she tells what happened, you can see that Mr Jack Lang behaved better than the people that hated him.’ She looked at Wu, but his impassivity told her to begin. She picked up her pages, and read:

Then the papers took this moment to pour a storm of abuse on to Philip, hoping I suppose to break him down. The Bulletin had a cartoon of him as Pilate washing his hands, with Lang holding the basin, and ‘See ye to it’ underneath. Ti Chai wondered if this should be explained, but Wu was making no request. This was a reference to his speech at Narrromine lately, in which he said that the people had responsible Government and that it was for them, and their duty, not that of the Governor to find a way out of their trouble. You will see what the Melbourne Age said of this speech, and as it turned out it was marvellous him having said it, as it showed everyone quite openly that he would not interfere except on grounds that were entirely and absolutely constitutional. But the speech provoked fury everywhere, and the Bulletin had a really vile article as well as the cartoon, so that Mr Scullin actually got up in the House ...

‘Whose house was Mr Scullin in? Please say?’

‘It means the House of Parliament. Mr Scullin was a Labor man. He had been Prime Minister but had lost the election, and was not the Prime Minister any more.’

‘Prime means first,’ Wu said, pleased with himself.

Mr Scullin said that they very much regretted this attack on the Governor, which was an unusual thing to happen. They placarded Sydney with ‘Does Governor Game want Revolution?’ and rumours were spread everywhere that he was in Lang’s pay and took a huge sum to make those extra members! The letters, anonymous and otherwise, were particularly unpleasant. But he has been firm right through in saying that he could not and would not do it until he had real grounds, such as illegal proceedings ...

‘Do what?’

Ti Chai wondered how little he’d understood. ‘Dismiss the government.’

‘How could he? If they were elected?’

‘Because he was the Governor. He represented the Crown.’

‘The Crown of what?’

Ti Chai despaired. ‘The Crown of England. They still partly ruled Australia. When you ask me these questions you show me how little I really understand. Perhaps this is why I am studying Australian history. I know so little and I want to overcome my ignorance. You see, when I am reading all about Mr Jack Lang and Sir Philip Game and the Sydney Harbour Bridge ...’

‘What has the bridge got to do with Mr Jacklang being dismissed? This is not clear to me. How long has the bridge been there?’

‘It was finished just before Mr Jack Lang was dismissed. Mr Jack Lang said he would open it. But in England the King thought one of the Royal Family should open it.’

‘Did the Royal Family pay for it?’

Ti Chai laughed. ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune! That is a saying they have here. You see what it means?’ Wu nodded, doubtfully. She went on. ‘You see, many people did not want Mr Jack Lang to open

the bridge. They thought he was a Communist! He was so Red! That is what they said!’

Wu had a detail he could grasp. ‘It was a Communist Party bridge?’

‘No, it was a bridge that everybody in Sydney was proud of. There was bad depression at the time, many thousands out of work, they all felt very bad, but the bridge was one thing they could be proud of. So a vast crowd arrived for the opening of the bridge, and Mr Jack Lang said he was going to open. There was a special ribbon, and scissors to cut it ...’

She paused dramatically; Wu could tell that something had gone wrong. He shouted, ‘Wait! Let me think! Mr Jacklang ... cut himself with the scissors?’ He beamed. Ti Chai said, ‘No! Another man rode up on a horse, a man who had no right to be there, and he cut the ribbon with a sword. Swoosh! He think what he has done is a triumph for the New Guard!’

‘He was a guard? Why was he not arrested?’

‘He was! The police cart him off to jail. And they tie the ribbon and Mr Jack Lang cut it with his scissors, and everybody swarmed onto the new bridge!’

‘So the Governor is jealous because he not allowed to open the bridge, and he dismiss Mr Jacklang. You cannot be Premier any more because I am annoyed with you!’ He felt he was getting to the heart of the matter now.

‘No! It is not like that at all! You are not understanding!’

Wu felt abashed, and not a little confused. ‘I cannot see what I am supposed to see. It is all very confusing. P’aps if I am allowed to hear your talk I will understand. Tell the university man that I will pay if they allow me to enter. Do you speak in a large hall?’

Ti Chai felt very much at sea. ‘Only a little room. There are fourteen of us. One is the tutor. The rest are students. Each has to give a talk. Then we discuss. The trouble is, I don’t really understand anything. It is all very foreign to me. Also, the people that I am reading

about, I do not like them very much, except Mr Jack Lang, I like him because I think he is on the side of the poor people, but I can see he does not have a way to help them, and he is brought down by a system I do not understand, and I ask myself if Mr Jack Lang understood it, or was it too clever for him?’

‘Was Mr Jacklang hanged? What did they do to him?’

‘He stayed on as a Member of Parliament for many years.’

‘He was not hanged?’ She shook her head. ‘He was not put in jail?’ She shook her head. ‘He died an old man?’ She nodded. ‘I do not understand,’ Wu said, ‘how they do things here. I read the papers, but why things move the way they do, it is a mystery.’

‘That is my problem too,’ Ti Chai said. ‘I know much more about it than you do, because I am reading their history, but it *e-wudes* me.’ She wanted to repeat the word. ‘The people in my group think it is natural. They accept that it goes the way they say. I can learn what law was passed. But somehow it is foreign to me. They say to me, “You understand everything so far?” and I say yes, you have told me what happened to this point. But then, when they say, “Well, of course you see what happened next!” I have no idea! There is no thread of logic that I recognise, holding it together.’ Wu knew she wanted to cry. ‘We go for lunch now,’ he said. ‘We will think of something.’

They had barely entered the restaurant when she felt his mood change. Discontent was rippling through him. She looked for a cause. He was stony-faced, and silent. She waited for him to move. He went to a table in a corner, touching, on the way, the revolving top of another table, ready for a banquet. They sat. She looked into his eyes. ‘You are lonely, I think. Why is that?’ He began to cry. She watched, waiting for what would come next. The tears stopped as one mood gave way to another. ‘You are lost now,’ she said. ‘You are in the hands of anger. You want to do something you know I will not let you do. You enjoy this because it means you can call me your enemy. This is what you do when you hate yourself. You find a reason to hate me. Why is this? Because I am the only person who has truly followed you, loyal as anyone could

wish. That was my vow to you - my private vow, you remember? - when we married. You said to me after the ceremony that you did not feel it bound you. I had to promise something more. I promised I would be loyal to you. You remember what you said to me when I swore it? You said, loyalty is better than love. Love is foolish and tries to find others as silly as itself. Two people in love are like two madmen trying to fly a plane. That is what you said. But loyalty is like a rock, you said. Loyalty gives certainty. You have had certainty as long as we have been married, and that is now eight years. Eight years you have been my husband, eight years I have been your wife. You will bring me down one day, unless I can lift you up with greater understanding. That is why I study, and why I am so unhappy when I do not understand. The young people I study with ... they learn easily because what they learn is theirs already. What I learn is not mine, is not yours. You are a clever businessman, but the people I study with would say ... what? They would say you live by your wits. We think that is a clever thing to do, they think it is shameful. They are snobs about us, and they do not know it. They cannot see themselves ...'

He lifted his eyes, gaining strength from the torrent of her feelings. 'You are the rock,' he said. 'I am the stream. It is the stream which people think is meaningful. Living things go to it, to drink, to swim, to float on its surface. Without the rock, the stream is nothing. The rock shows it where it can move. The rock contains everything the stream cannot admit.' His eyes filled with tears again. She took his hands briefly. 'We are through this moment now. We must put it behind us and not let it return. We know what we are to each other. The rock envies the stream because it can do much the rock cannot do. This is wisdom in nature. We need to be in touch with this wisdom. Where I study they would say, we need to be informed by it.'

'Informed?'

'It has more than one meaning. I inform the Post Office that I am changing my address. This is knowledge that I pass across the counter. But we can use it another way. Wisdom can be built into us, like a

computer working with a program.’ She smiled. ‘I just thought of that! You are thinking about fish in the ocean, I am thinking about hidden controls behind a screen, telling it what to show. There are many ways to see the world!’

He sensed the triumph of her type of reasoning, it was what he depended on, yet he wanted to test it too. ‘Tell me some more about Jacklang. If he ruled the state he must have been unhappy when he was told he was ruler not any more.’ She was surprised at him taking their conversation back; he added, ‘Tell me about the man who cut the ribbon, who was not supposed to be there. How did he get so close to Jacklang? Was Jacklang on a horse? Could he ride? And the Governor, was he in a car? I do not know how these things were done in this city in those days.’

Ti Chai considered her husband, feeling tenderness because of his error. ‘Sydney. The Harbour Bridge was to be opened. People had been going back and forward for weeks, but they were all builders and workers. The day came when it would belong to the public. Who would give it to them? Who would take the credit for the gift? That, I think, was what the differences were about. To open a bridge is a symbolic thing. Someone has to open it in the eyes of everybody else. When it is given to the people, they have to know who is giving it to them, that is the way the government works in this place.’ She thought. ‘That is not so hard for us to consider?’ He shook his head.

‘Then let me tell you what I know. And you have to be Chinese, and you have to be a clever young Australian, like the people in my tutorial, who ask things that never come into my mind. You sell them things every day, you know what they are thinking ...’

He shook his head. ‘Only sometimes. Many times, they are a mystery to me. They laugh at me showing them things they will never buy, but when they laugh I know I may surprise them with something they did not expect to see. If they ask me a question I know they are ready to buy. “Where does this come from?” “How can you make this so cheap?” “Why don’t you pay your people decent wages?” When they say those

things I know I can get my order book out very soon.’ He laughed. ‘I am not all the time stupid. Sometimes it helps me to make them think I am stupid. If they feel superior to me they are more likely to buy. You know ...’ his wife saw a realisation in his eyes ‘... I have become a strange man through my work. I look at these Australians like a Chinese who is too clever for them, but when I am back in China, I look at my own people as if I am not one of them any more. I am a smart Australian and I know how to get the better of them. That is what I think!’ He took her hand this time, though she swiftly broke the grip. ‘With one, I am the other! With the other, I am one of these!’ He felt triumphantly clever, yet, she saw, there was a failing of identity too, and his original mood, his shrouds of despair, might wrap him tight again. ‘There is a waiter who has been waiting for us to stop talking,’ she told her husband. ‘We have to decide what we eat.’ She turned to the man who’d been watching, and nodded. He approached with menus, and his eyes drew their attention to the board with the day’s specials. Wu stood. ‘We should be at this table,’ he said, pointing. ‘There is room for more dishes here, that is what we should have!’ Ti Chai stayed where she was. ‘This is where we found our understanding,’ she said. ‘The river found the rock here. Here!’ She tapped her finger. Wu sat down again, smiling, accepting the menu he was offered, indicating that the other should be given to his wife. ‘Eels,’ he said, eyes beaming. ‘See?’ He pointed to the wall. Ti Chai looked up. ‘They are always good here. What will we have with them?’

‘You choose,’ she said, and he saw that her mind was already on something else. What could take a person’s mind from food? He waited. She was considering him, he saw; that meant she was thinking of his limitations, the parts of his life where she propped him up. ‘Chicken,’ he said. ‘The sauce is different as can be. That is ideal.’ He looked at her, waiting for agreement, but when it came, it seemed without conviction. ‘You are deep in your thoughts,’ he said. ‘I cannot follow you. The scholar is too wise for the businessman, because the scholar understands the businessman, but the businessman does not know what the scholar

is thinking. That is when the scholar must tell people his thoughts.’ He looked at her, and she knew that his formality was truthful, and his soul had been in his words.

‘This morning I told you,’ she said, ‘that time was the enemy of human life. I am studying history. In my class, we talk about the things that have happened, but we are not deep thinkers. Even our tutor, who has much knowledge in his head, is not the reflective man I would like for my teacher. There are levels where I cannot believe that his mind is working. But perhaps I am wrong ...’

Her husband supplied the words he knew she wanted. ‘What is missing, would you say?’

‘The people in this country are obsessed with fairness. Have I got as much as you? Have you got more than your share? If you have, it must be because you cheated. That is what they say. I ask myself what I think is missing from their lives, and it is the idea of enlightenment. Many other things are missing, but that is the one that matters most. It is why they cannot respect age as they should. They think age is a time of losing, but as we lose certain things, we gain others that matter more. I think,’ she said, her eyes turning to the waiter who was approaching to set up their table, ‘that if people are living with balance, and care, then the benefits of doing this will be obvious. If we lose as we grow older, then what is left should all the more be of high quality. My Australian friends do not look at each other in this way. They are concerned only with what people have got. They make me think that if they could see all my possessions then they would know all about me. This is untrue! But I cannot make them see this. This makes me seem a failure when I think about myself. I do not have a tennis court. You, my husband, do not play at a golf club. We are not smart, only intelligent. I feel I am judged by the wrong standards. This means I must fail in every person’s judgment, because how can I succeed if I do not know what is needed for success? It is as if we are playing in a game, and we are the only ones that do not know the rules.’

Her husband grasped her point. 'They move the goalposts,' he said. 'That is what they say!'

'And I,' his wife answered, 'have to think what they mean! Their sayings have no meaning for me. Their words are like banknotes which I do not know how to spend. It is very puzzling. I do not want to become like them, but I do not want to die without understanding them. I have set myself a hard exam, I think, and I am failing at the moment. This is my distress. Can you help?'

Before he could speak they were distracted by a party being shown to the table beside them. A stylish woman of forty-five said to the waiter, 'You got our order yesterday. Everything okay?' He nodded, and busied himself with seating them. The woman cast a wary glance at Ti Chai and Wu, nodded curtly, then dismissed them from her thoughts. 'Drinks first!' she said to their waiter. 'Have you got those bottles open? We're right on the time I gave you.' Again the waiter nodded, and a Chinese girl hurried over with champagne glasses, setting them in front of the six people. Another young woman with jet-black hair arrived with two uncorked bottles and began pouring. A bright young man, the most talkative of the party, lifted his glass. 'Okay everybody! First toast! *Tortilla!* Many races, and many wonderful wins!' They clinked their glasses, smiling at each other, radiating excitement. 'Something pleases them,' Ti Chai said to Wu. His eyes, she noticed, were on the door, where a couple in their early fifties had entered, and were looking about, waiting to be seated. 'That is Mr Trilling,' Wu whispered. 'He is one of my biggest customers.' Ti Chai looked more closely. 'Mr Trilling?' she said, rather more loudly. The young man who'd proposed the toast spun in his chair, and burst out laughing when he saw who'd entered. 'Anthony!' he called. 'Lesley! Come and join us! Come on, there's plenty of room!' The couple came over, surprised by the greeting. The stylish woman who'd spoken first took Lesley Trilling by the hand and made room beside her, then looked around; there was a chair at Wu and Ti Chai's table. 'Do you mind?' she said, putting her hand on it, but this drew Anthony Trilling's attention to the people he hadn't noticed.

‘Wu!’ he called, puzzled by the connection, if there was one. ‘Don’t tell me you’re a man for the horses too?’ ‘A friend of yours?’ said the stylish woman. ‘Have you and Lesley come to have lunch with them?’ This took some sorting out. Anthony Trilling explained to the champagne party that he’d decided to celebrate with his wife the fact that he’d sold his racehorse, he’d chosen the restaurant because he thought it would be quiet - ‘I didn’t expect anybody I knew!’ - he’d never dreamed that the syndicate who’d bought his horse would be celebrating at the same restaurant, and then, to make it all the more confusing, he’d spotted Wu, ‘who supplies my stores with a number of our best-selling products! I was going to ring Wu this morning, wasn’t I darling?’ he said to his wife, who explained to the Chinese, ‘But I told him to wait until after we’d had this lunch. It’ll put you in a very good mood and you won’t think business is so important!’ Then she added, ‘Darling, get your friend to introduce his wife, and I think, don’t you, we should have introductions all around! I want to know the new owners of our horse!’ A little more quietly, in a pretend-confidentiality, she said, ‘He’s a lovely animal, so docile, a perfect darling, but a fireball when he gets stirred up! Tell them what our jockey told us, Anthony, if you haven’t already!’ Ti Chai felt embarrassed. People from the larger table, the new owners of this horse, were moving chairs to make it possible for them to join their celebration, as the Trillings were obviously going to do, and Wu’s business connection meant they were happy to draw him in; only she, she felt, didn’t belong, but more glasses were being called for, the horse’s pedigree was being expounded, introductions were being made between bouts of speculation on the racing season; Anthony Trilling, overjoyed to have an audience, was telling them about Tortilla’s feeding habits, and how he enjoyed a roll in the sand near his stable. ‘A good job we don’t talk as freely about our bedroom habits the way we do about our horses!’ cried Lesley Trilling, and the six new owners laughed loudly. Ti Chai felt, as she sat on the chair that gave membership of the gathering, that she’d been pulled from her problematic mood, her husband’s misery, by a current of events that would drop them unceremoniously,

and that she would then be more troubled than she'd already been. 'I'm Katrina,' said the woman who'd been directing events. 'Do tell me how your husband knows Anthony. How did they meet? And tell me about yourself. Are you running a family business, the two of you? I think it's more common among Chinese people than it is with us.'

Ti Chai told her she was studying, and the business was her husband's preserve. 'The best way to have it,' Katrina proclaimed. 'Now tell me what you're studying.' Ti Chai found the inquisition relentless, but it also provided her with a chance to unload, so she told Katrina, who appeared to know everybody and everything, about her confusion over Premier Lang and Governor Game. 'I keep thinking there is some key to this mystery, and I do not know where to look.' Katrina leaned towards the young man who'd proposed the toast to the horse: 'Phillip, take charge of the ordering, would you? I'm otherwise engaged.' Phillip noisily began to do her bidding, reciting everything on the menu for them to choose. The three waiters hovered, two of them filling glasses, the first writing orders. Katrina said to Ti Chai, 'I know why you're troubled by those events. I've never studied them like you have, but I actually know the descendants of some of the people involved. My husband' - she indicated with her hand - 'is a Sydneysider. An old Elizabeth Bay family.' She expected this to mean something but Ti Chai's face was blank. 'Very old inner area,' Katrina offered. 'Run down for many years but it's back with a vengeance now. I don't get there very much these days. I don't like new money, to be frank. I'm not sure if you people use that expression, but you'll know what I mean. It's one thing to make some money, but what are you going to do with it? Money needs to be handled with style, otherwise it's merely vulgar. And we're losing that sense of style all too rapidly ... but you don't want to hear about that. You want to know what happened back in the thirties. Start with power! Ask who had it, and how events revealed which source of power was more influential than others. Power! It probably sounds like a joke to you, but you're talking about a time when the world was in crisis because there was a depression, the worst there's ever been, and nobody

knew what to do about it. Well!’ She paused, checking the others at the table to see if her tirade could continue. ‘That meant that many people’s claims to power were shown up. You mention Premier Lang. He’d won an election by a handsome majority. He felt he should have power. But what could he do about this depression? He said he wouldn’t pay back the loans his state had received from London financiers ...’

Anthony Trilling broke in, and his wife, Ti Chai could see, was just as interested. ‘If you’re telling Mrs Wu about how the Governor withdrew his Premier’s commission, there’s things you mustn’t forget to mention! Don’t forget the parallels with 1975. There are more similarities there than people have bothered to notice, mainly because of the way Gough Whitlam’s been grandstanding ever since his dismissal. People don’t seem to understand that elected governments can make fatal mistakes. It’s probably going to be obvious in time of war, but people seem to think that a mistake in peace time can somehow be recovered. Well, sometimes it can’t ...’

Phillip banged the table with a knife. ‘Glasses, everybody! Fill’em up! *Tortilla!*’ He raised his glass, then swung it around to click on others. ‘We’ll drink to the former owners.’ The Trillings, glowing with pleasure, nodded their acknowledgment. ‘The former owners!’ Phillip said again, very loudly. The wine was sipped, glasses put down. Phillip banged the table. ‘Haven’t finished yet! The new owners! Us! Okay everybody, drink deep! The new owners!’ As if realising that he was ruining Ti Chai’s attempt to understand something, he turned to her. ‘An election is like a long and very slowly run steeplechase! Horses fall! Somebody scrambles across the line, and they’re said to have won. I suppose they have, but only after a few disasters have wiped out some of their rivals!’ He thought this riotously clever, and so, surprisingly did Wu, who came brightly to life. ‘What you say very true,’ he announced, as if the conversation had finally reached his level. ‘For every activity there are rules. Maybe very complicated. Hard to remember. You mention steeplechase. It is very interesting word. In olden days, riders rode their horses across the country, falling if they did not leap the fences well. Steeple

of the church was the highest thing they could see, so they rode to it. Steeple was their goal. Everything must have a goal. Otherwise, how do we know when a thing is ended? Everybody in the race must agree. Race is finished when first one gets to the steeple.' He was pleased with his exposition, though only his wife had any idea of where it might lead, or, for that matter, end. 'Always,' Wu continued, unaware that his audience was far behind, 'there is contest. Struggle to win! Car race. Horse race. Money race!' This idea amused him and lifted him, at last, from the gloom enshrouding him. 'My wife,' he announced, as if the mystery had revealed itself at last, 'studies things where many contests come together at once. Not one contest, like a well-run race. No! Many contests mixed in together, and she is not sure what she sees!'

He looked around, as if applause was his due. Lesley Trilling's eyes were darting here and there, appraising the situation, and how it might be recovered, if that were possible. Her husband said sententiously, 'Some things in life are easy. A horse race, for example, has a winner. First past the post gets the money. In sport, it's clear who's won. In politics, it's often - in fact, almost all the time - not so easy.' He paused, and Phillip broke into the silence with another thump on the table. 'Here's to the mystery of things,' he cried. The questions for which there are no answers!' He broke into riotous laughter. 'To the winner of the first on Saturday! Whoever it may be!' He thumped the glass so hard that the stem broke, the glass was left without a base, and Phillip found himself torn between downing its contents in one go, or hanging onto the glass because he couldn't do anything else. Ti Chai giggled. 'What you going to do with it?' He felt he was rising to an occasion. 'Skoll!' he called, and down went the wine. 'You're Ti Chai,' he said. 'Don't tell me what it means, I want to guess. Now! The interruptions ... sorry, the introductions ... got interrupted before. You didn't meet the other owners. Let me present ... are you ready? ... Don, Di, Dave and Donna!' He laughed again. Ti Chai thought she had never met anyone with so much laughter in him. 'More slowly please,' she said. 'I have to put a name to each face, so I can recall.' She gave a feeble smile at the nearer

woman, whose cascading hair clashed with a dress of blazing sunlight. 'You are Di?'

'Donna.' Ti Chai apologised. 'That's okay,' Donna said. 'This is Di. Not to be confused with Lady Di. You don't know who she is? Was? You never missed a thing. Just forget all about it.' Ti Chai was confused, trying to remember names but being told to forget things. Again she giggled. 'This is difficult for me,' she said to Donna. 'We came here expecting to be alone.' 'And you got caught up with us,' Donna said. 'Not to worry. This is Dave, by the way. If you want to straighten him up a bit, call him David, and he knows he's expected to behave.' David grinned and offered a hand. Ti Chai took it and forgot to let go because Phillip was telling her she'd have to come and see their horse. He waved expansively, confusing her. 'Is it outside?' Phillip laughed. 'It is, really, but a long way outside. At Jack Newbury's stables, wherever they are. Where are they Anthony?' Trilling told him, complete with map references and the corners where turns had to be made. 'Racing is a game of great fortune,' Wu observed. 'This meeting may bring us luck!' His wife realised he was staring at something. Her hand. 'Oh! Pardon,' she said to David. 'I became forgetful. I ...' she showed an embarrassment which made her attractive to the young man whose hand she'd held '... can only think of one thing at a time. I become distracted.' David said, 'If you want to distract me, tell me your name. Someone forgot to finish their job!' He was looking into her eyes in a way that disconcerted Ti Chai. 'I am Mrs Wu.' Her husband caught the words and looked curiously at his wife. 'Oh come on,' David said. 'I can't call you missus something! What shall I call you when I want your undivided attention? Heart and soul territory is about to be entered. What do I call you then?'

Ti Chai was flustered, but felt, more deeply, that a world was opening where her rules gave way to others, controlled by people whose principles she didn't know. 'Is that a blush?' David said. 'I hope it is. It'd be a first for me.' Katrina gave him a hard look. 'That is a blush, David. Caused by the fact that you're coming on a bit hard. Ti Chai's used to

people making approaches rather more decorously than comes naturally to you. Back off a little. Mm? For a moment?’ David’s eyes were fixed on his object. ‘Ti Chai? What a memorable name. Somehow it seems written on your face. No, it’s in your eyes.’ She could feel his wishes pulling her to do something she would have thought impossible.

‘I am Ti Chai,’ she said. ‘And you are David.’ Her lips trembled. ‘I think you will bring good fortune into my life.’ Katrina was furious, but Phillip blundered in. ‘We all will. You can back our horse the first time it runs. We’re going out this afternoon to see how it is. To tell little Tortilla that she’s ours, and we’re going to see she has nothing but the best. And when she races, you can put some cash on her, and have a mighty clean-up! What’ll you do with your winnings?’

Ti Chai had never thought of unexpected - unearned - money flooding into her life. She budgeted carefully, every dollar accounted for. Wu let her manage their money because she was strict. ‘Ti Chai?’ he said, sensing that something was happening to his wife. She ignored him. To David she said, ‘You are the owner of Torteeya?’ He was shrewd enough, opportunistic enough, not to smile. ‘When she’s going to have her first race in our colours, I’ll ring you, so you can put money on her. She’ll bring you luck! And Tortilla will get luck from you. I think you’re the sort of person who brings luck to anything you’re involved in!’ He touched her hand again, to remind her. She was dazed. ‘This is a dream I am in. I never expected this. It came upon me, like wind bringing fragrance from an orchard.’ She looked around, as if seeing things that were not there to the others. ‘I never knew it was there. It has been there all my life and I did not know.’ She spread her fingers as if to let them catch some light hidden from the others. ‘Your horse will have the freedom,’ she said to the others, ‘and we will be tied to it. It will gallop, taking us wherever it goes. We do not know where good fortune will be,’ she told them, emboldened in a way they couldn’t understand. ‘Your horse will show the way!’

The others looked at her in amazement. The waiters arrived with the first dishes. Ti Chai, noticing this, stood slowly and as slowly settled

back into her seat. 'You bastard!' Katrina said to David, 'Look what you've done!' He was amused. 'No one knows yet. This race has got a long way to run!' Pleased with himself, his magic powers, he would have said, he settled back to see what would happen next. Katrina was deeply troubled. 'Do Chinese people ever change their names?' she asked, 'to bring them a change of luck?'

This idea was pleasing to Ti Chai; indeed, as the days passed after the confusing luncheon, she began listing new names, keeping them hidden so her husband wouldn't know. 'Today,' she would whisper, when he'd been gone for perhaps half an hour, 'I will be ...' and she would choose who she would be for the day, trying names to see what effects they would have. A good day in the library, gaining fresh understandings of things that had puzzled her, meant the name had been a good choice, and therefore to be considered as her next name, when she decided on a change. Wu sensed that something was happening to her, but had no words, no concept for what was going on, any more than she did, for she had always relied on well constructed habits rather than self-knowledge to give a discipline to her life. 'I have gone inside myself,' she realised, 'where all is mystery, and much that was impossible is now open to my hand. I can be whatever I can imagine. My mind is my only limit.'

Sometimes she thought a fearful condition had come upon her, sometimes she sat trembling beside the pool that lay close to the building where her tutorials were held, wondering whether her enchanted condition would last until she gave her paper, and whether she wanted it to do so. 'What if I don't know what I'm saying?' she thought. 'Or people ask me questions and they see, as my husband can see, that I'm somewhere else? What will happen then?' She couldn't imagine any answers to these thoughts, she had simply to suffer them, afraid yet ecstatic, released in a way she'd never expected.

Wu came home one afternoon full of accusation. 'You are in love with that young man who sat next to you in the restaurant. The one who held your hand! Are you seeing him? If you are I will kill him, then you, then I will kill myself! I will make headlines out of you!' Ti Chai denied

vigorously, then became silent, Wu watching like a lion waiting to spring. 'You are in love with that young man! Where do you see him? What happens when you are together?' Jealousy blazed in his eyes. Ti Chai, deeply afraid, said, 'I have never seen him since that day. I do not know where he lives. I do not know any of those people.'

'You are lying! The woman beside you gave you an address. You can send him messages through her.' A quaking Ti Chai reached for her bag, scabbled nervously, and found a piece of paper. 'That is her name. There is her address. I have not looked at them since the day of the lunch. The day of *Tortilla*! How strange it all is! You take this paper. You contact them if you want. I will not. I will go nowhere new! That is my vow to you!'

Wu could sense the truth in what she said, but not its limitation. Ti Chai had no need to go anywhere: release had broken out in her brain, and wasn't to be stopped. She began to search the newspaper for mentions of the horse and discovered that it was to race on the Saturday before she gave her paper. She shifted ten thousand dollars from the account used by her husband's business to one used for paying household bills. 'I have to put it back,' she told herself. 'Tortilla must win the race!' If she couldn't put the money back, she knew, she would have to kill herself. She thought of putting only a few hundred on the horse, because the sum would be small enough to repay from her household account, but some resolve gave her no choice. All or nothing. Ten thousand on Tortilla. 'The world will end if the horse fails me, but it will not fail! It will be running to grant freedom to all who know what it stands for.' The danger inspired her. Her life moved onto a poetic plane she had never known existed. Two or three weeks more, and she would either be dead, or vindicated in a way that would last the rest of her life, though nobody else would know. She wanted to share, but the enchantment, the powerful possession, would go wrong in some way if the circle of secrecy was broken. 'My will,' she told herself, 'controls the affairs I have chosen to decide. Tortilla will win for its new owners. After that, I will let go my power!'

She had been sleeping badly, but once she accepted her position, her fate, this changed, and her husband felt that whatever had disturbed her existence had gone away. His jealousy dissipated and he became tender, though he could sense his wife keeping him at a distance. He waited for her, patiently, certain that she would return to him. When? And where was she now, when she wasn't with him as she'd always been?

He didn't know.

Each morning at university Ti Chai slipped out of the library and bought a copy of the *Herald-Sun*, scouring its pages for references to Tortilla's training. She gathered that its performances on the track were good. She gave no thought to what she would do with her money if it won. The alternative, her early departure from the world, was what kept her focussed ... though she still believed that her state was the visionary one which allows all that can't normally be seen to be clear to mortal eyes. 'I am most fortunate,' she told herself. 'Even if I die, I have had a time others never have.' She considered a farewell note to her husband, but postponed any decision.

She decided one morning to work in the State Library, and walked from the university to the city, passing a music store. On an impulse, she went in. Young people stood tethered by cables feeding their headsets. 'You are the future,' she told them, though they didn't hear a word. 'You have your dreams. I want something to happen but it is outside my control. Luck must be on my side. The world will not swing the other way because I wish it. Somebody puts limits on what it can do. I wish to speak to that man.' She left the shop, excited. Had her exaltation put her close to the Almighty? She believed it had. What would she say to this great force, if he bent to listen?

What, indeed? What would it be like to hear that voice addressing her and no other? Her desire for this contact had nothing to block it in her submissive soul. 'If I do no wrong,' she told herself, 'I can ask anything. I will do no wrong, though my husband foolishly thought I wanted to. My back is turned on wrong.' She felt able to ask for and receive any gift of this world; she was content, and she knew, as if a

stiletto had written it on her heart, that her days as a visionary were limited. She would return to normal life on the day Tortilla ran its race. She would be Wu's wife again, or he would bury her, and try to restart his life. 'He is capable,' she told herself. 'He has money. Some other woman will help him.'

The next morning she read newspaper accounts describing Jack Lang's struggle to persuade the Governor that extra members should be appointed to the upper house of the state's parliament. The Governor had eventually given in. Mr Lang - she smiled, thinking of Wu's way of saying the name - had been determined to get control of, and then wipe out, the upper house, the house frustrating his policies. He had picked the wrong target. He had fought the enemy that surrounded him, not the stronger, more cunning enemies out of reach. He was fated to lead the life of self-deception, and he would fail, and then he would come to realise, slowly, that his cause had never had any hope.

In such a moment, Ti Chai saw, one would accept that one was supremely foolish, and one would be able, if anyone offered it, to grasp the wisdom that was always in the air.

She went back to the music shop. Young girls with hair as black as hers were attached to the sounds of their choice. Sounds and emotions were being sent through wires to their brains. Ti Chai went upstairs to a room filled with disks. A young man with NIKE and a tick across his back put down his headphones and walked out. Ti Chai looked, and yes, the room was empty. 'I have given myself no name for today,' she realised. 'I shall be Nike with a tick!' She went to the headphones, put them on, and sat to listen. What she heard amazed her. She had no idea such music had been written, ever. It had been written for her struggle, she decided. It was telling her what to do. She listened for a minute or two, then went back to the notes she'd left in the library. What had she heard? The voice of God? Yes. It had been brought by a miracle she didn't understand. What had it told her? She would lose her enlightenment soon; she knew she had to write down what she'd learned. She took up her pen.

‘An old man, jocular, supremely wise, his voice full of caution and the certainty it gives, and a young man, unquestioning, bold, wanting no more than to have his way. Youth to triumph over age when it has no right to.’ Ti Chai told herself, ‘That is what is wrong with their civilisation which they think superior. It is no more superior than ...’ She could think of no comparison. This told her that her state of special vision was over, was done. She had nothing to do, now, but go home and listen to a race.

Wu knew something important was gathering around his wife. He sensed that questioning would be unwelcome. He sat beside her, wanting to hold her hand, but afraid that he might be interfering. Occasionally she patted his wrist or touched his hair, and he felt he’d been granted a favour. He wondered how long this phase would last, linking it, correctly, to the paper she had to give at the university. ‘When she has spoken,’ he told himself, ‘she will return to what she was.’ This made him think some more. His wife was about to go through something, and there was a *before* and there would be an *after* of this something. What was it? He knew only that a change would pass through her, and he wondered if she would take the experience alone, in a park perhaps, or share it with him.

When he sat beside her he was letting her know he was available. He could offer no more.

On the morning of the day Tortilla was to run, she told Wu she had shopping to do, and she went to the betting office. She had never entered such a place before, and had to ask what to do. A grizzled old man who told her he was only a whacker, but he knew a bit about horses - he claimed to win huge amounts every year through inside knowledge - showed her how to fill in the betting slip. She went to the window and gave money and slip - ten thousand dollars - to a young Asian man who looked at her closely: compassionately, she felt, feeling also that no sympathy was needed because her horse would achieve its mission. It would win, she was sure. She put the betting ticket in her purse and went to the supermarket.

As she was unpacking her purchases in her kitchen she realised that she had not noted the time of Tortilla's race. The newspaper was folded over a chair because Wu had finished with it. She decided to leave it where it was. If she moved it he might notice, and a chain of investigative logic in his brain might lead him to a discovery. She decided to trust her attachment to the numinous forces of time: when the race was being run, she would know. As Tortilla passed the judge's cameras, she would see a vision, and be certain. She waited. Her husband was checking orders, listing goods he would supply to his customers. He rang them frequently, suggesting, offering, trying to push up the size of their orders. He was good at gauging their hopes and fears. He soothed them when they had doubts, he built their hopes. Ti Chai knew what had been going on when she saw him reach for his book to adjust an order up by another thousand, ten thousand ...

He lives in a world of numbers, she saw; things moved here and there on trucks and trains, on cranes and ships, but it was the numbers in Wu's notebooks, and those more important numbers in his company's accounts - which she kept - that mattered.

Numbers, numbers. As the afternoon wore on, Ti Chai grew restless and at the same time drained of energy. Some of her vitality was feeding into a horse she'd never seen. Did it know, that horse, that it was borrowing energy from its supporters? She thought it might; horses must know many things that humans supposed they didn't. How else would they know which way to run, or when to put in their supreme effort, lunging at the line?

She was in the garden when the vision came, of a black horse with a slim jockey - a man of fifty, not a boy - wearing silks of white with a crimson sash. There were other horses in the vision, straining neck and neck, but blurred, and a little behind. Tortilla had won. She thought of the people she'd met at the restaurant - Katrina and Phillip and Dave/ David, the man whose attentions, whose desires, had triggered off the psychic moves that had almost run their course. Then it hit her: what would she do with the money?

What indeed? The grizzled old man - the whacker - who'd helped her with the betting form had told her Tortilla would 'start' at ten to one or thereabouts. She would have won, therefore, one hundred thousand dollars. She had a feeling that it should be dispersed quickly, that if allowed to lurk in a secret account it would spread its darkness. To stay clear she had to be free. There were good causes. She had to give her winnings away. The Red Cross. The Salvation Army. These were people whose work was selfless and therefore pure. Any taint on the money would disappear when it was swallowed by their purposes. Perhaps she would give to others. She decided that she would decide in the minutes following her tutorial talk: the money would be hers until then.

She went to her husband. 'I am going to the library for two hours. There are things I need to check.' He offered to drive her. She almost said no, then remembered his need to be close. She let him drop her in the narrow street beside the statues, columns and the arches where people went inside.

On the Monday she had a change of plan. Before visiting the library she went to the betting shop. The old man who'd helped her - the whacker - was already there. 'Gee miss,' he said, overawed. 'Ya come to collect! Ten to one on ten thousand. Whaddaya gonna do with it?'

Ti Chai scented danger. The money would wreck her marriage. Wu would never understand, and she wouldn't be able to explain. It had been part of a temporary enlightenment, a passage of time, tantalisingly brief, when she'd been able to see through the veil that keeps humans ignorant and foolish. If there was evidence of this change of state, she'd be accused by everybody she knew of not letting them have something she could turn to whenever she wanted. Such people are hated. She said to the man, 'Will they pay me with a cheque, or do I have to take it in cash?'

'They'll giveya a cheque. Any way you want. Just fill in this and show'em your ticket.' He gave her the thing to fill in. She looked at him, wondering. He sensed what she was thinking. 'Me wife's crook, ya know. Really bad. She needs an op but we can't afford it. She'd love

to see the kids again before she goes. I tell her we're going to get her treated if it's the last thing we do. Trouble is, it will be the last thing we do. I haven't got a cent.'

Ti Chai's mind snapped shut. 'Write your name on that piece of paper.' He went to a bench, picked up a biro which didn't work, and threw it on the floor. Hands trembling, because he knew he was in a magical moment - the sort of moment that dreams bring, and take away - he grabbed another biro and wrote his name: Sid McCool. She took it to the counter. The Asian lad who'd dealt with her on the Saturday had given way to a grey-haired woman whose wrinkled face suggested she'd seen enough ebbing and flowing of fortune to make her contemptuous of fate. 'Good morning,' she said, reaching for the ticket and the form.

'Two cheques please,' Ti Chai said, 'made out as I've written there.'

The shadow of a smile came to the other woman's face. 'Giving your winnings away? The most sensible thing you could do, I reckon.' She looked past Ti Chai. 'Poor bloody Sid. He's gonna think all his birthdays have come at once and he's going to get the rudest shock. But,' she said, turning back to Ti Chai, 'that's fate, isn't it? It's not easy to control. I see a lot of funny things, I can tell you, but I think I know why you're doing this. Just wait a moment please. I have to get a second signature. Won't be a moment.'

As she disappeared through a door, Ti Chai found herself joined at the counter by Sid McCool. 'First thing I'm gonna do is pick this week's winners. I'm gonna double it by next weekend. Sunday night's the big blow-up, I'll take Ella, that's me wife, out for the best dinner she's had in years.' Ti Chai looked into his eyes and felt sorry for Ella, trapped with this man. The door to the office swung open and a man came out. 'You're not getting it all paid to yourself?' Ti Chai shook her head and pointed at Sid McCool. 'It's your money,' the man said, reaching for his biro. 'Whatever you want.' He signed the cheques. Ti Chai nudged the old man. 'Take that one,' she said. 'It's your ...' the word *fortune* refused to come out '... yours, all yours. Try not to let it control you.' McCool wanted to thank her but she rushed from the betting shop, hailed a taxi

and was away to the library with her folder full of papers to do with events in Sydney, years before.

She sat under the grand dome. Light from one of the green-shaded lamps touched her pages. She took a biro from her bag and studied it, as if it, too, might do something strange, and she wrote, 'When there is a struggle, the loser also wins.' What did it mean? How could you apply it to Jack Lang, or Governor Game? To the socially-defined and wealthy people of Sydney who despised what the Labor Party stood for? To the royal family in their castles and country homes, on the other side of the world? To the bankers of England, who wanted debtors to pay? To the confused members of Australia's still-young federal parliament, who felt bound by their belief that the rules had to be followed and agreements kept? To the voters who'd put Jack Lang in power, investing their hopes in him as if he was superior to any bank? Everybody has desires, she told herself. Desires conflict. Those who are swift, and simple, have the best chance of winning. The drawn-out struggle is loss for everyone involved. Agreements matter. Social fabric can't be repaired; once torn, the rent, the rip, is there ... not forever, but until a later generation no longer remembers whose the fabric was, and why it mattered.

She added a few notes, mostly names and dates, then closed her folder. I am ready, she told herself. I know all I am going to know. The order must come from the material I have, and it must use me to express itself. The surging passions of 1932 will become orderly because my mind is allowing them a place. When these events happened, everyone was passionate and wild. Today they are dead, but I make them live in the minds of those who listen. Those who fought for control of New South Wales have become story people, puppet people, and my hands, my imagination, hold them. One day, if I do anything important - and I won't - somebody will wiggle their fingers and it will be me who sways and dances. The moment is always now. Now is when all history happens and we students and those who teach us, we are like dogs waiting to get our teeth on events while they are still wriggling with the life that was in them. All passion has to be fitted into moments, and they follow

each other, passion bleeding away into endless forgetfulness, and we, distressed at a process that is too pointless to be borne, revive the passions. We breathe into them what they were, wanting to make the ghosts believe there is still life in them. 'Jack Lang,' she said, 'rest in peace.'

Quotations on pages 264 - 265 are from *Dismissal of a Premier: the Philip Game papers*, by Bethia Foott, Morgan Publications, Sydney, 1968. Musical reference is to Act 3 of *Siegfried* (completed 1869), by Wilhelm Richard Wagner, beginning at 'Dort seh' ich Siegfried nahn' and ending at 'Zieh hin! Ich kann dich nicht halten!'

Angela

Above her desk Angela had a timetable which she knew her mother looked at when she wanted to know where her daughter might be. On Thursday nights it showed a two hour tutorial that took place in the morning; she'd told her mother there wasn't any alternative because some people could only attend after work. This story had been swallowed, but she'd felt certain she was under observation ever since she'd sighted Roberto, the son of her parents' friends, keeping an eye on the foyer of the library. She'd marched out to let him see her, but the following day she'd held a discussion with Maritsa, a girl who worked in the library, about alternative exits: Maritsa had shown her a door where she could get out without passing the checkpoint. Angela promised she'd use it only when she needed to avoid watching eyes. 'In a family like mine,' she'd told her friend, 'there's too much riding on what they think you're up to. They can't control you if they don't know what you're doing!'

Maritsa said, 'You're safer if they think they know, but they happen to be wrong!' The young women laughed, their lives constructed by the shaping of families, and reconstructed by lies chosen not to give way under pressure. Angela had a boyfriend called Carlo, whom she met in the college room of his sister; each could find a way there without raising suspicion. In his sister's bed one morning, the two of them squeezed together, she told Carlo that she wanted him to take her to Italy. 'We'll be a couple, we won't have my family looking over our shoulders!' It hadn't occurred to her that the deception, the secrecy, added spice to what they were doing, and that they were not yet mature enough to act in the open. 'I'm going to buy Tessa some sheets,' Angela said; Carlo jumped on the idea. 'Specially and solely for us! That your idea, Ange?'

She shook her head. 'For Tessa. We owe her so much. She gives us a place where we can be what we need to be.' Dramatically she said it: 'Lovers!'

A minute later, though, she gave him a push. 'Get dressed. I've got to go!' They got out of the narrow bed and he picked up his jocks, but she pushed him again, and moved until she was almost at the wall. He could feel power in the grip of her eyes. 'Look at me Carlo,' she said, 'and tell me what you see!' Flummoxed by this, he said, 'You've changed your mind, you want to get back into bed?'

'Try again. Tell me what you see.'

'Someone so beautiful I can hardly believe my luck.'

'Try again. That's you, not what's before you.'

He had no idea why this question had been flung at him. What was he supposed to say? But she was reading his mind. 'Don't try and guess what I want you to say. Tell me what you see.'

There was impatience in her voice. He said, 'I see you with no clothes on. In the buff.' He added, 'Your body seems ready for things to happen, but your eyes are where the action is. I can feel the force of you in your eyes. And that long fall of hair past your shoulders, that's got energy too. It's your halo. Your aura.' She seemed satisfied. 'Let's get dressed. But keep thinking. I'll ask you the same question next time. Next week. Earlier if we can manage. Keep thinking, Carlo, it's something I need you to do for me!'

It puzzled him, but within minutes he was with his group, and it came to him that she'd been questioning him about clothes. What they hid. What meanings they layered about a body which, seen for itself, was something else. She's been thinking, he realised, and she was testing him. Someone standing behind him used the words 'well dressed' and it was as if a dimension was opening to give a view he'd never had. They were mostly well dressed, these young people on their way to legal careers; if you stripped them they might be less than average, but the claims they were making were wrapped about their persons. He thought again of Angela, whose warm body he'd held that morning. She was all

desire when they were together, and she filled him with desire to match. But now, apart, their lust was hidden. He could feel himself starting to tremble. Forces which the law could hardly describe, let alone control, were working. He felt inconsolably alone without Angela. What would she say if he were to repeat her demand, to stand before her with his clothes on the floor by their rumped bed: 'Tell me what you see, Ange. Tell me what you see!'

Angela, deep in the library, was in subversive mode. Her presentation would change the meaning of the others. She had a list of the topics, and looked for pictures of the people who'd been mentioned, or might be. Captain O'Hara Booth of Port Arthur. Sir Philip Game, Jack Lang. Men marching to war, men coming home. The cricketers Brigitte had talked about. Prime Minister Curtin ... a line of figures in the country's history. Then she looked for people unlikely to be mentioned, but notable for what they were wearing. Who were they, or - the form of the question mattered - what were they, apart from what their times had made them? Did they exist, apart from the presentation they'd made, covering their naked bodies?

She was convinced they did not.

They had once had inner lives, uncertainties, and might have acted differently, but history, in passing through them, had taken their freedom with it, leaving them as its detritus, evidence only that a larger force had passed. They were nothing once they'd had their moment. It made her nervous, both because it affected her view of herself and because she feared the reception her talk might get. What if the others couldn't see what she wanted them to see?

It took her most of the day to find the pictures she wanted, then on the second day she went looking for viewpoints from which she could analyse what people wore. She quickly found that although any number of people wrote about clothes it was a chaotic field; nobody could impose anything that looked like order. This was a setback. She needed definitions that her fellow students would agree with: it was either that,

or let them trivialise their reactions to her pictures of people as they'd been.

What did she want to prove?

She got a message to Carlo. He had a two hour break on Fridays; she'd meet him at his sister's room.

He was there, as she knew he would be; she drew the blind before she let him touch her. When they'd kissed she began to loosen the knot of his tie. 'What's so special about today? Have you rented yourself an office in the city?' She flicked the tie across his nose. He said, 'I have to see the Dean. He's been meeting the whole of our year in groups. Now he wants to talk to some of us individually. I'm one of the chosen, whatever that means. He says it's part of a course review. We think he's watching us.' She raised her brows. Carlo said, 'I need to look like a bright young get-up-and-go-er. Ready to join a professional team.' He laughed nervously, then he pulled the tie undone. 'Don't ask me about it. I'm toey enough without having the Dean in here.' She gave him an appraising look, then rubbed his trousers. 'Let's get rid of restrictions!' She helped him undress, fondling him when she saw that he was hard and excited, then she stepped back. 'What do I mean,' she said, 'standing here as you see me? Come on, I said I was going to ask you this!' Carlo, wanting to have her in his arms, said, 'Last time you said that, you had nothing on!' She said, 'And this time it's the opposite. I'm covered by the things I wear. What do they mean? Can you tell me that?'

'I'm not very good on women's clothes, but I know the shops you go to, in the city, and Toorak Road, and ...'

'How do you know where I buy things? And if you're in a shop, could you tell the things that would attract me?'

'I think I could.' He wondered how long this talking would go on, holding up what he wanted to do.

'I'll set you a test!' Her eyes dropped to the centre of his body. His yearning increased. 'You have to choose something I'd like to wear. It must be right for me!'

'What sort of thing? What season of the year, if it comes to that?'

She moved to him and put her hands on his shoulders. She pulled him to her and whispered in his ear, 'We have flown into Roma. It is springtime. We have gone to our hotel and taken off the things we wore on the plane. We sleep. When we get up, we put on things we have never worn before. We are new people and we want everybody to know this. We say it quietly because it would be vulgar to say it any other way. How does that sound? Does it answer your question?'

He put his hands inside her blouse. She let him unbutton it, then she wriggled out of her things and pulled him towards the bed. He said, 'That's a stiff challenge you've set me.' She said, 'Shouldn't be a problem for you!', and they were laughing, falling over each other in their desire to be entangled, involved, to be getting and giving the maximum possible in their time together. When their rush of lust and happiness was over, he said to her, lying on top of him, 'That really is the most difficult test, you know.' She said, 'You know why? It's because there's no authority for the answer. It's something you and I must find for ourselves. Perhaps I won't know the answer myself. You'll buy something and if I'm in one mood I'll love it; another mood and I'll say it's shit, I wouldn't be seen dead in it.' She laughed. 'What a challenge! Can you see that?'

Stupid as he felt he was, he could see the excitement, the sheer abandonment to chance that her challenge involved. 'I'm the luckiest man in this city, Ange!' She looked at him shrewdly. 'Perhaps I'm lucky too. Perhaps I'm foolish. I'm not setting a time limit, by the way, but there is one.' He waited. 'We'll get tired one day of meeting in secret, and we'll want to go public. Before then, you must have something for me!'

They would come out together, in the things he chose, or they would part. It was the test of tests, but confidence and daring were strong in him. 'I accept,' Carlo said to Angela.

His undertaking caused him to change. He began to think about clothes. They were statements, or claims, and they drew their existence from deeper definitions. Sometimes those who wore them knew exactly what they were doing, sometimes they put them on without thinking.

When he watched films he stripped the actors in his mind - not an unpleasant thing to do, Carlo found - so he could see what the clothing added. Most of the women he saw as Angelas, most of the men - or the ones he liked, or felt jealous of - he imagined as himself. Then he could let the clothing slip back on, in his mind, and ask what difference it made. That was what his lover had asked of him: to find the things which would make the statement she was longing to make. 'She's got to look brilliant,' he thought, 'and it's got to be me that makes her that way.'

But how to do it? He became curious about her thinking, the ideas she wanted to propose in the presentation which took up so much of her time. 'Do you want to try your talk out on me?' he asked her, one morning as they sat outside the library, thinking it was too sunny to go in. 'You've got me interested by now, I really want to know what you're going to say.'

'I don't know what I'm going to say. I think of things, then I decide I don't believe them. The way it's going, I'll pass a few photos around and ask people what they think of them.' Carlo said, 'This is going to count towards your result though, isn't it?' She looked at him sharply. 'That's why I have to find a position I can defend. It's a lot harder than it sounds.'

He scratched his ear. 'Maybe you don't have to take up a position. You could throw the whole thing open for everyone else. What I mean, for example, you put a lot of pictures on the wall, ones they probably haven't seen, and then you give them a range of theoretical statements, and you ask them to talk about which statements fit which pictures. Work it out together, see what I mean?'

'Our tutor's smart. He'd see through that.'

'What's wrong with it? You open up an inquiry ...'

'That's not what he wants us to do. We have to have a thesis for everyone to argue about. Whatever we say, we've got to be ready to defend it. That's the way the game is played. You know that.'

'So what's the problem?'

She winced; he couldn't help noticing how plain she looked when she was troubled, and what a contrast this made with when she was sure. He wished that holding her in his arms could solve all her problems, and he saw that the idea that attracted him was a delusion. She sensed something happening inside him.

'What is it?'

'I've just realised why people are important for each other.' She watched him. 'And?'

'It makes me feel serious. Committed. I want to be strong enough for you. I want to help you become what you want. I want to be proud of you, and I can't be unless you're proud of yourself, and just at the moment you're uncertain. I wasn't expecting it.' He looked at her, letting her study his eyes. She knew he was giving himself to her, that he was on the verge of saying they should get married ... She stiffened. 'Stop! Don't go any further for the moment. It's good that I've got your support. I need it. But I mustn't be so weak that I'd fall over if you weren't propping me up. I need to know what I want to say. Something in me says I do know, but I'm scared of saying it because I won't be able to prove anything, and the others in my group will say she had a lot of wild ideas she couldn't do anything with, and I'll have disappointed them, because all year I've sounded sure of myself, but when it got to the point, I didn't know what to say.' She felt wretched.

He knew he mustn't touch her. 'Tell *me* what you want to say.'

She looked at him, gathering strength, then she became aware that inside the foyer of the library, Roberto was talking to Maritsa. She felt sure they were talking about her. Anger flared in her; Carlo looked around and saw the cause. 'Stuff them!' he said. 'Whatever they're up to, who cares! Let's get back to it. If we can't say it now, when we're thinking hard about it, and we need to say it, then either the ideas are no good, or we're no good, or ... both!' The last word was shouted, and the other couple, in the foyer, looked out, imagining that a quarrel was breaking out. They saw, instead, that Angela had taken Carlo by

the hand, and was speaking rapidly. He was nodding excitedly, giving encouragement.

‘It’s been on for a while,’ Maritsa said, ‘but they’ve never let anyone see them together until today. Something’s happened.’ Roberto was glum. ‘Where do they go?’

‘They meet in one of the colleges. I don’t know which one. I don’t know whose room, but that’s where they go.’ She added, ‘That’s all she’s told me.’ He said, ‘There’s a lot to find out. I’ve got a class. I’ll see you at twelve, okay?’ Maritsa nodded. ‘If you don’t want them to see you, come through here. There’s another way out. Nobody’s supposed to know about it, but ...’

Angela, seeing the couple move back from the foyer, sensed that Roberto was to be shown the way out that Maritsa had shown her, weeks before. She felt betrayal in her heart, then she felt that betrayal was a wider principle, operating all the time, and that it had to be at the heart of what she wanted to say. ‘I know now,’ she told Carlo, and he felt her resolve and certainty flooding back. ‘I’ll be okay. I know how to handle it.’

He waited, then: ‘Aren’t you going to tell me?’

She had to let him in. ‘I’ll prepare my talk tonight. Next time we’re together, I’ll tell you what I’m going to say.’ He accepted. ‘In Tessa’s room?’

‘Yes. The perfect place.’

They met. She sat him on the other side of a table. He watched as she went through her papers. Certain of his attention, she read: ‘Furetière, 1690, gives three definitions. They’re in French, I’ve had them translated.’ He smiled, not knowing a word of the language. ‘I’ve got the French here though, because of Brigitte, I’ve told you about her. I want to keep her on-side. Furetière’s defining *La Mode*. Fashion: there’s my first question. Where does fashion stop and simple body-covering start? Why? Don’t try to answer that. Furetière: *Custom, manner of living, of doing things*. Then he gives his second definition. *Fashion deals also with everything which changes according to time and place*. Sorry,

that's plural. *Times and places.*' She looked at him. 'Yes, I know. Here's the third. *Manner of dressing according to the custom accepted at the Court.* The royal court he means. Anything you want to say?'

Carlo, feeling inadequate, could only think of the problem he was going to have, buying something for her. He wished their meeting was as simply sexual as those that were behind them. She said, 'No? It's difficult, isn't it? Here's another Frenchman, Grenaille. 1642. A book called 'Fashion'; he talks about *Life a la mode, social relations a la mode, maintaining yourself a la mode, war a la mode ...*

Carlo found this hard to handle. 'War? Did you say war?'

'He did. Grenaille. Why? Don't you follow what he's saying? Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, you haven't heard it all yet. What he's really saying is that fashion is driving everything. Things are done in certain ways at certain times, not for the reasons that people give to justify what they're doing, but because that's the way of doing things at the time. It's saying, really, that there's no underlying reason for anything, only fashion. *The way of doing things.* Furetière again.' She looked at him. 'Don't drop your bundle! I told you this was going to be hard.'

He could only say, 'It's much harder than I expected. I thought ... why are you starting back as far as that? There must be people writing today that aren't as hard to cope with?'

'There are people writing today, and they're harder to cope with. They make the French guys seem simple.' She half-smiled. 'Try this. *The heterogeneity of dress styles characteristic of the aristocratic order, in which ostentatious display was a social imperative ... was replaced at the beginning of the twentieth century by a fashion that was homogeneous in tendency, based precisely on a rejection of the principle of lofty, majestic exhibition of hierarchy. "Before," according to Poiret, "women were architectural elements, like ships' prows, and they were beautiful. Now they resemble underfed little telephone operators."* She riffled her notes. 'Don't say anything. Try this. New York, 1981. *Fashion is in ceaseless pursuit of things that are about to look familiar and in uneasy flight from things that have just become a bore. Smart, huh? Try this, Carlo; same writer. ... fashion is everywhere around us just*

the same. It's there wherever political strategies are planned, movies made, books published, art exhibits mounted, critical columns turned out, dances danced, editorial policies formulated, academic theses germinated: wherever people think, speak or create our shared forms of self expression. She glanced at him to make sure he was listening. Fashion usually is neither named nor noted but is simply the lens through which our society perceives itself and the mold to which it increasingly shapes itself. This hidden, powerful mental sort of fashion is thus worth taking stock of. This woman,' Angela said, 'goes on to say that these new forms of fashion are pretty much the same as the older, simpler fashions of dress. Clothes. Now you can see why it's so hard to get a grip on this.'

Carlo felt a little enlightenment come over him. 'That third one, the New Yorker, is saying pretty much what the French chap was saying, the 1640 man, I mean. Don't you think? Am I right?'

'Yes, she is, near enough. And I don't know whether that's gratifying, or dangerously disconcerting. Maybe it's both, in which case where does it leave me?' He felt inadequate, she saw, and tears would be flowing soon, from one or the other of them. 'Let's hold each other for a while. It's about all we can do. I thought I'd have it all wrapped up by now, but I haven't. It's all unwrapped, bits of it everywhere. God knows what I'm going to say. The trouble is,' she said, standing up, 'the way these people think ...' she indicated the pages she'd had in her hand '... challenges most other ways of writing history. Some books give you bits at the end of a chapter about the writers and painters of the time. A bit of extra colour, thrown in to be interesting. Politics and power are the real things, according to the way those people write. But these fashion people, they know something deeper. It's as if they're weary of pretending. They're saying that the human race goes on doing exactly the same things, and the ways of doing them have to change - that's fashion, that's what it is, and all it is - so that we don't know we're just repeating what everyone else has done. Oh my God it depresses me.' She began fumbling with her clothes. Carlo, so keen to undress, normally, could only undo buttons and tug at shoelaces. Angela getting into bed, he saw,

was like a patient who needed to rest, to be hidden from demands; she'd asked something more of herself than she could deliver. He pressed in beside her, their bodies inactive, both staring at the ceiling, then he turned to look at her. 'We've still got each other.'

'It hardly helps.'

He waited. Finally she too turned in the bed - his sister's bed - and put her head on his chest. 'I never dreamed it would be so complex. I've bitten off more than I can chew.'

'No you haven't. You've picked something where there's never any final answer because it keeps changing all the time. It has to, to stay fashionable. That's the nature of the beast. It can't remain the same.'

'Except it does.' He felt inspired. 'Things must change in order that they remain the same!'

'Who said that?'

'I don't know. I heard it somewhere. Or read it, I don't know.' He could tell from the quality of her quiet that she was considering it. 'Rub me in the middle of the back,' she said. 'You know how I like it.' He soothed her tenderly. 'We're not giving up,' he said. 'We're going through this together, till we're out the other side!'

Wryly she said, 'Changed. Bloody, fuckin-well changed. Changed by a little job I thought I'd knock off in a couple of nights. A snappy little talk, a few questions, and I'd go home feeling good. I got brought down, didn't I? I suppose it's good for me but what a ball-buster!' He moved his hand to the front of her body. 'Speaking of which ...' 'Just keep on rubbing,' she said. 'Calm me down. Get me happy with myself. I think I only want to be held. Sorry but that's how I am till this thing's finished.'

He saw that it would never be finished, that in some way she'd accepted the challenge of maturity. 'I have to get your outfit for Rome,' he said. 'We're not going to hide what we're doing much longer.'

'We won't be able to. Fucking Maritsa and that creep Roberto will see to that. My mother will shriek and sob, and my father will be envi-

ous, which he'll hide by getting stern, and he'll let mother have her way as his way of hiding what he thinks ...'

'Because he thinks that sex needs to be hidden if it's to be good. Is that what you're trying to say?'

'I think I am. Keep rubbing Carlo, please. Get me calm. Don't try to get me worked up, I couldn't stand it today, I'd shriek and yell like my mother, and I've sworn I won't ever do that.'

'It's hard not to be like our parents.'

She said sadly, 'Poor bastards, having to watch their kids repeat what they've been.' She wanted to cry, he knew, and he put his hands on her head, teasing out the golden hair that had drawn him to her. 'You can have anything from me that I've got to give ...' he gathered the courage to say the rest '... and if I don't have what you need, you can get it from someone else, I won't mind.'

She spoke softly. 'What you're offering is called love.' She moved her head to stare at the ceiling again, as if the future could be seen there. 'It's my problem that's called it up in you. That's a beautiful thing.' He waited, gratified beyond measure. He could tell she was examining her thoughts, but she said nothing. 'What can we do with it, Ange? Is it just passing through, giving us a happy moment, or is it ours, permanently? Do you think?'

'It's ours,' she said sadly, 'if we stay together. I wonder if we will. It would be nice, but who knows?'

He wanted to reassure her, to claim her as his, but she, he could see, was in the throes of producing something - a sequence of thoughts to be judged by those studying with her - and she couldn't commit herself to something outside that process - as he was - until the process had worked itself through. To be with her at the end he had to be with her as she moved towards the end. It meant maturing, and he wanted it to happen. 'This is painful for you, Ange, but it's making us grow up.' She accepted this inertly, then suddenly she squeezed herself against him. She clung to him a long time, then, when her grip relaxed, she said, 'We've come through a test, Carlo. Carlo, Carlo, Carlo. Now we have

to get ready for the next one. I suppose it goes on forever.’ They both knew something important had changed; whether or not their bond was stronger, or simply more vulnerable, they didn’t know. Minutes later, they dressed again, smiling faintly at the garments each put on, knowing that whatever thesis she produced to bind her ideas, her reading, must by inescapable logic apply to the things they covered their bodies with. If there was a law, somewhere still to be found, then it bound them too: if there was none, they, like the rest of the race, had so much less to shelter them.

When Angela got home that afternoon, her mother was out; this spelt danger. When she entered her room, she noticed that her timetable, though still on the wall, was in a different position. Why? Her instincts told her that it had been taken down and put back. Roberto’s face, full of lust and a desire to snare a victim, came to her mind. Her mother would be with Roberto’s mother, and the young man would have been given the job of verifying the timetable. When would he be reporting back?

Right now, she thought; what to do?

She found a piece of card, ruled lines on it, and wrote in her classes, exactly as they were. Then she threw the old timetable in her bin. Looking down on it, she found it amusing - a lie she didn’t want to present any more. The new lie, on the wall, was the truth: somehow the duplicity of this heartened her. Minutes later she heard the front door open, and close, and knew the challenge was near.

Her mother, though, was in no hurry. She even sang a few bars of something tragic, and bitter, which Angela didn’t recognise. She was tempted to go out, to confront, then she realised she needed things on her terms. Eventually her mother appeared in the door, paper in hand.

‘What is it when my daughter tells me lies? Why is it? There is always a reason, worse than the lie itself!’

Angela looked up, saying nothing. ‘These are your true times of classes, I got them from the university! What you got on the wall is to deceive me!’

Angela looked at the paper. Roberto's work had been accurate. 'That's correct,' she said. 'That's what I've got on the wall.' She pointed. Her mother raised her voice, getting ready for the kill. 'No it's not! You're lying! You've been seeing somebody and you had wrong times up there so you could see him while your father and I thought you were in a class!'

Angela unpinned her new timetable and put it on her desk. 'Compare,' she said, gesturing. Her mother reluctantly looked. 'Deceiver!' Her daughter took the paper from her mother's hand and put it beside the new timetable. 'You'll find they're the same.' Her mother bent to check, and saw, soon enough, that her daughter was right. Then she noticed the timetable in the basket. Snatching it up, she put it beside the others, and cried in triumph: 'Ah! This is the lie! This is what you told me! And this is what I found out!' She jabbed her finger at the proof. Knowing how to play the game, because she'd been watching it all her life, Angela took the old timetable, held it up and said, 'This has been out of date for ages. Some of the class times got moved. Quite early on. If you'd asked me I could have told you. I didn't alter it on the wall because I knew it in my head.' She dropped it back in the bin and patted her hair. Her mother said, ominously, 'There are stories about you going around, stories that should never be said about a young woman.' Angela was ready for this. 'There are always stories. We must be careful of the ones that come from filthy mouths. Think of this! A mouth is filthy when it's the outlet of a filthy mind! I know who told you those stories! And think of this! If someone tells you lies it's because they want to harm you! Or they want to make enemies of people. They want to spread the hate that's in their hearts to better people who know how to love properly, the way people in good families do. The thing is not to listen, but to ask why they want you to listen. Tell me this, mother! Why did Roberto start spreading stories about me? Why did Maritsa start spreading stories about me? Can you tell me that?'

Her mother grew sullen, her initiative disarmed. Angela pressed on. 'You and father like to say that in a good family everybody trusts each

other. So why did Roberto hang around to check when I was in the library? Why was he watching me? Was someone paying him to follow me? How much was he being paid?’

This enraged her mother, as Angela intended. ‘He was never paid a cent! You think I would hire someone to spy on my own daughter?’

‘So the spy who was watching me wasn’t even paid! Think about it, mother. You got him to do dirty work. Work that breaks our trust! He’s paid nothing, so he wants something other than money. What’s stronger than money? Sex and the desire to do harm. Think about it, mother! Sex and the desire to do harm! Potent stuff, eh!’

Her mother spoke quietly, admitting much by the tone of approach. ‘Who you been seeing?’

This, Angela knew, was the tricky part. ‘There’s a young man who’s fond of me. I talk with him when we’ve got time. He’s a student too.’

‘Same place?’ Angela nodded. ‘You got plenty of time.’ The older woman looked at the timetables on the desk. ‘Time to do anything you got in mind to do. What am I going to tell your father?’

‘Whatever he wants to know. What he doesn’t ask ... say nothing.’

Angela knew her mother wanted to do what she’d suggested, but hated to reach an end-point without being the victor. How to make her feel good?

‘If I do well, this year, at university, will you and father take me to Italy? We could see the family, and you could show me the places where you grew up. You could show me ...’

She knew this was risky, but wanted to say it.

‘... where you and father met. Where you did things together the first time. Where he proposed, and where you married. Where you went for the fittings for your dress. You shouldn’t let any of that be forgotten. I’ll want to pass it on, when I have kids. What do you think, mother? Can we go back, this Christmas? Back to where you and father came from?’

Her mother said nothing. Angela, watching, wondered what the silence covered. Intuitively she grasped it. ‘I want you to show me

where you and father stayed the night after your wedding.’ This, too, drew no response. ‘Were you a virgin, mother?’ Her mother shouted, ‘Of course I was! What sort of family you think I come from? They wouldn’t let me ... do anything like that!’ It was so obviously untrue that Angela felt like laughing; then she saw how saddened her mother had become. ‘How did you feel, the first time you took your clothes off for him?’ The older woman surprised her. ‘We didn’t take our clothes off. We were in a church.’ Her face was stiff, confessing. ‘Was a service being held?’ The older woman nodded. ‘Your father was in a side chapel. I knew he was there. He told me to meet him. I knelt in front of him, and he ...’

She touched her body. ‘I knew it was the most terrible thing to do. That made it wonderful. I have never felt more daring in my life. I have never been more daring in my life. It’s because I know what’s in myself that I watch over you, trying to make sure ...’

‘That I don’t do what you did! Isn’t it stupid? Secrecy’s so silly. Nothing stays hidden. Tell father what you like, so long as you tell him I know about that first time in the church!’ She felt she had her mother under control.

‘No. It is his secret as well as mine. He must think I keep it to myself.’

Angela said, ‘I’ll swear he’s told dozens of men. Perhaps he makes it a story. “I was in a church the other day and I saw this fellow with a girl. You know what they were doing?” He can tell the story without letting on that the woman was his wife before she married him. Before the church had put its blessing on what was going to happen, except it had already happened.’ Her mother looked at her. ‘You being careful?’ Angela, smiling, nodded; her mother looked a little better for knowing that. ‘You want to marry this boy?’

It was an opening, Angela saw; invitations to visit, meetings between the families could follow. ‘He wants to marry me. I’ll see. If I bring him home to meet you, mother, it means I’ve made up my mind, and I do.’

The older woman considered her daughter, and what a difference it had made to her to become a parent. ‘When we are young, we say it will be good when we don’t have anybody to boss us around. As we get older we learn there are more and more bosses. You never going to have more freedom than you got now. Enjoy it, but don’t enjoy it too much. Don’t tell people. Keep your face well hidden ...’

Angela looked at her mother’s suit, a sombre yet glowing green: ‘That colour looks good on you. You’ve got another like that, when did you decide that colour suited you? Did someone pay you a compliment, or did someone in a shop suggest it?’

Her mother lowered her eyes. ‘I was wearing this colour the day I met your father, like I was telling you.’

‘And you’re still wearing it?’ Her mother said nothing. ‘Has it been worthwhile, mother? I think it has, for you, hasn’t it?’

Her mother didn’t speak for a time, then shifted her body in the way she did when she was about to end something. She’d conceded more than enough to her daughter’s frankness. Something, too, depressed her, an awareness of ageing, of being replaced, a feeling that what she did, her feelings, didn’t matter, and hadn’t any weight in the world. She walked heavily to the door, and spoke before she left, ‘Before you bring this boy home, be sure you can control him. Never ever get involved with someone who makes you afraid!’

She was gone, then, and Angela was alone. Afraid? Her mother had revealed what she most needed to share in that final moment. There must have been another man, one she was frightened of, so she’d taken the un-fearful route through her time of decision. She’d been daring, but only with her body. Somewhere back in Italy, Angela realised, there’s a man who frightened my mother, and she’d been attracted to him, so attracted, and so frightened, that she’d found a way to avoid him, to escape.

She’d done it wrapped in the white of her bridal gown, a garment which hid more than any other thing that women wore. Dark suits for

men's hypocrisy, white for women's deceits. I've got a talk to give, she reminded herself; how do I fit that little bombshell in?

She finalised her examples, she decided what points she wanted to make for each of the pictures. She arranged to have lunch with Carlo afterwards. He asked her to meet him at Tessa's: 'We can take a taxi from there. We'll go somewhere special, a long way away.' She knew he was thinking of Rome; they were still full of hopes. He met her across the road before the talk, wished her luck, and went to his sister's room to add his energy to what she was doing. Tessa was there, and surprised to see him. 'What's bringing you here this morning? It's not your usual time!' Carlo told her, 'It's a big morning for Ange. She's got to give a paper. I'm backing her up.' Tessa had never heard him say anything like this before. 'Getting serious, are we? Is there going to be an announcement soon, maybe? Huh?' Carlo said nervously, 'Might be. We've got things to work through first.'

Tessa left him, and he realised he had brought nothing to fill the time. He looked around his sister's room. There was a newspaper on the table, opened out. It featured a photo of a man singing, his arms extended in a gesture that would be silly offstage. In the background was a woman with a coiffure so elaborate that he wondered how long she'd sat before the performance having it arranged. Idly he scanned the column. 'David Symmonds' rendition of the tenor aria in the middle of Act 1, the opera's turning point, was rousing to the point of being overwhelming, the most notable performance in this country since the late Donald Smith thirty years ago. I asked myself if Strauss and Hofmannsthal meant it to be so energetic, or simply a graceful distraction, and found it hard to make up my mind. Symmonds certainly achieved the purpose of the aria, which is to divert us from what's going on inside the Countess. The production underlined the trick being played on the audience by reminding us, only for a moment, by using a searing beam of light, that the true action was elsewhere.'

Carlo studied the picture. 'The true action was elsewhere.' He could relate to that. How was she doing, the woman who shared his

sister's bed with him? Were they going to marry? He sensed that if she gave him the chance to ask, then he'd be accepted. Some men - males, boys - he realised, would be happy with what was already happening; the sex would be enough. 'I'm being joined to her,' he told himself. 'I went into this not knowing what was going to happen.' It struck him that if he wanted to escape, he had a little less than an hour to do it, and if he was still in the room when Angela arrived, he was hers. At her disposition. He saw, too, that this joining sometimes took place by one person capitulating to another, and sometimes by negotiations that took years. He looked at the trees in the college garden. Everything was still, shaded, and the flowerbeds were well-groomed. The place where Tessa was a resident was old by local standards. Would he and Angela ever get to Rome together? He hoped so, and then it came to him again: if I want to get away, it has to be now.

Now!

He stood stock-still in the middle of the room, wishing impossible things. That he could hear what Angela was saying. That he could sing like the man in the photo, commanding attention with the power of art. He's got music pouring through him, Carlo thought, so where does that leave me?

He searched himself. He had no wish to move. He was in Angela's hands. He looked at the critic's words again. 'The trick being played on the audience.' 'The true action was elsewhere.' Angela could do with him what she liked. That was the position he'd placed himself in. He wasn't going to run. 'It's my fate,' he said, 'and I wish I knew how she's going.'

As twelve o'clock came closer he became restless, trying to work out how long it would take her to walk to the college. Would she get away quickly, or would someone keep her talking? Would her body be readying itself to press against him in the room they'd made their own? To his surprise, he noticed a taxi swing into the college grounds. It stopped below Tessa's window, and Angela got out. She said something to the driver, then looked up. Seeing him, she beckoned him down. They'd

never been in a taxi before, and it struck him as strange in a way that he could only interpret as a warning. He looked back, in the moment before closing Tessa's door, and saw his sister's bed, neatly made, as if it had never a thought in its head about who would use it next.

Down the steps he rushed, into her arms, laughing, and asked where she'd decided they should eat. He asked about the talk, and she said, 'Interesting. Not sure. It went well enough, but I don't really know if the ideas have anywhere to go. We'll talk about it over lunch.'

The taxi took them to a Balinese restaurant close to a grand town hall, one of the nineteenth century monuments pegging their city to the land it sprawled on. 'This place has quite a reputation,' Angela said. 'I thought today would be a good day to try it.'

He felt happy, but apprehensive too. They'd been so careful to cover the tracks of their relationship, their arrangements for privacy, that they'd never done what they were doing so easily today - rushing about, laughing, being public. Both twisted in their seats to see the carvings on the walls, and the flowers in pots outside on the street. Carlo had a feeling that Indonesia, Bali, this little restaurant, had somehow taken the place of Rome: that the famous city which had been their goal was eternal no more. 'I feel a bit strange, Ange,' Carlo said, and she said, 'Everything feels different, doesn't it? Now I've got that behind me, things are going to change.' She added cautiously, 'In some way.'

How? Neither of them knew, but she was optimistic and he was anxious. 'Tell me about the talk.'

Angela raised a finger; to caution him, or to attract attention? A waiter brought menus, unfamiliar dishes on the pages. They went through them, talking, choosing, and gave their order. The waiter recommended iced tea. Angela felt bold. 'I've never had that before. Could you bring it now!'

When the tea came, and they'd sipped it, Carlo asked again. 'Tell me about the talk.' Angela became thoughtful. 'When I finished, a woman called Becky - I've told you about her - said something. She said, "History is artificial, because it's restricted." She said, "If you pick

up a ruler, you're going to measure length. Distance. That's all a ruler will do." She said, "If historians say they're going to study some period, or movement, they mightn't realise it, but they're going to leave out a lot. They have to, because the measuring stick won't measure those other aspects." I'm not sure if you see what I mean?"

'Keep going. I'm with you so far.'

'Becky said, "Suppose you want to write a history of a famous garden. Like our Botanical Gardens." She said, "Ten to one the historian will write its political history. How the land was acquired. Who was on the committee of governors. Who the designers were. Who built the famous gates, or chose the sculptures. Who said the paths go here instead of there. But the real history of the garden," she said, "isn't do with those things at all. The real history of the garden is growth. Roots are burrowing into the soil to find water. Leaves are stretching to the light. Things so tiny you wouldn't notice them are turning into enormous trees. That's what a garden is! It's a place where amazing things happen, but so slowly you don't notice. Most writers," Becky said, "ignore the most wonderful part of history and only concentrate on what they call big events. Wars, revolutions, treaties. Whatever's so big you can't fail to see it!"'

Carlo searched for the direction of her thoughts. 'And this applies to clothes? Is that what she was saying?'

Angela looked at him as if to remember who he was. 'Sort of. I think they all thought that what I had to say was too hard. Probably true, but what could anyone expect them to do with it?' He could feel her pushing things away in her mind. Anxiously he said, 'You put so much work into that talk, I was hoping they might give you a better hearing than that!'

'They gave me a very good hearing. They really did. They were all interested. I don't know if I've ever told you about Sam. Used to be a truck driver, and he hurt his back. He's rough but he's really genuine, and he says things as they come to him. He said, and this made everyone laugh, it was so funny, he said, "Ever since you said you wanted to talk

about clothes I've been thinking it would be good to get'em off, but now I've heard your talk, I think it's best we keep'em on!" It was the funniest thing anyone's said all year!' These words were said seriously. Carlo said, 'And what did your tutor say? Stephen?'

'He said, "Listening to you has made me realise that I don't use my imagination much when I'm thinking about history. I would have said I did, but I see I don't."'

'His imagination? What did he mean?'

She frowned. 'It's not easy to say. He wasn't sure himself. He did say one thing, though. He said, "I can't grasp all the implications of what you're trying to say. I think the only way for us to do that would be if you wrote the history of something yourself - something big or small - and did it from the point of view you're implying." What he meant was that if I could think of another form of history I should produce it and let people see for themselves what it could be like.'

'Gee, that's a tall order!'

'Too tall for me. It's one of those ideas I'll have to push into the back of my head and see what comes of it. One day I might have a brainwave.' She sounded doubtful. He looked at her soulfully. 'It might come to you in Rome!' She said, 'That's another idea I might have to ...' Her flow of words stopped, to save her the pain of saying what hung in the air between them.

Gasping, he supplied, 'Abandon?'

Puzzling him, she said, 'You have to do what feels right.'

He waited. She said no more. 'Could you go on a bit? Ange?'

'Something's happened. Doing this has changed me. How, I don't know. Why, I've no idea. But something's happened. What it is, I don't know yet. I have to wait, and watch myself, if I want to know, as of course I do.'

'You think you're going to change?'

'It's already happened, somewhere inside me. What the change is, I don't know, because it hasn't reached the outside to let me know what it is. Sorry, that's all I can say. Watch this space.'

Full of self pity he said, 'I've been waiting so long ...'

She said, 'No you haven't. Quite the opposite. We never kept each other waiting!' There was humour in her eyes, and the tenderness of recall. When she took his hand to toy with his fingers he knew that he too had been brought around a corner to face another view. 'Everything's different, Ange. Suddenly. What brought this about?'

'I don't know. I can't tell. There's nothing that I'm hiding from you.' He looked at her clothes, because that was what they'd talked about, mostly, for weeks. Seeing this, she smiled. She fiddled with a button of her blouse, as if to undo it, and he knew that he would never see her body again. The barrier, the reservation, of her clothing would be between them.

When their lunch was over, and they were standing on the footpath, she suggested they walk to the university. This was tempting, because it would take longer than a taxi ride, but he knew it would be that much more painful. 'Let's not Ange. Let's face what's happened. I think I'll go into the city and sit through a film. By myself in the dark, that's all I think I can handle.'

She didn't want him falling apart. 'We have to say when we'll see each other next.'

'You really want to manage this, don't you. It's a way of treating me as if I'm the problem, when it's you. You've done a spectacular back-flip, I don't think you know why, and it might seem right for you but it's pretty bloody awful for me. I wasn't expecting this!'

'*Touché*. I wasn't expecting it myself. It just arrived. Hey! I want to tell you about a dream I had last night. I'd forgotten about it till now!'

He listened to her account of an incoherent dream which she felt offered some interpretation of what had happened. It was the usual jumble which was all people could remember of their dreams. 'Doesn't tell me anything, Ange. Sorry.' He was irrecoverably glum. She tried again to arrange their next meeting, but he could only say, 'You're trying to put things on another footing. You're trying to shift me without me noticing. Sorry to be difficult, but it's not on!' She took him by

the hand. 'Look at our two hands, Carlo. They go naturally together. Still. Have you ever thought about this? You're walking down a street. Hundreds of people pass you. You're not interested in any of them. Then someone passes and you know there's a spark. You want to be with that person. He wants to be with you. Why? Nobody can explain it, it's a thing that happens, that's all. It's no good denying it even if neither of you can act on it. But then, what if the spark dies? It was there, and it isn't any more? You can't ignore that. You can be sorry about what's happened, but you can't make the fire flare up again when it's gone out. I think that's all I can say.' She still held his hand. He said sourly, 'Next time I see you, you'll probably have gloves on!' She laughed and he couldn't stop himself smiling too. She said, and he knew it was her envoy, 'You stuck really close to me, all the time I was working on that paper. In some way - I don't know how I know this - I know that if you'd been a bastard and taken no notice, I'd be crawling back to you to get in favour again. But you didn't treat me like that. You were great, and I'll never forget it Carlo, as long as I live.'

The words tore at him. As long as she lived ... with someone else, knowing nothing about him except the odd scrap of information, the snippet of gossip, that might float from one life to another, in a city the size of theirs. 'It's too much, Ange. I'm walking down here ...' he waved '... till I find a cinema, and I'm going in!' He looked at her, ready to go.

Tears came into her eyes and heaving sobs came up her throat. He watched, sorry for her as for himself, but resolute. 'There's nothing else for us to do, Ange. Walk back to the uni. Go to your classes. When you know what this is all about, get in touch. I might want to hear by then.' He turned and took a street heading south. She watched him walking away. She became aware that the waiter from the restaurant was observing her. She turned her back and walked across the road. A minute later she was outside the town hall, which looked quirky and out-dated. 'I'm carrying the moment in myself,' she thought, 'and it's an awful one.' There was no escape except by walking away from what

she'd done. She walked to the university, took a seat in a theatre and listened to a lecture on the arts in Germany between the wars. A list of references was handed round; she put it in her folder. She did an hour's work in the library, then she caught a train home. Her mother noticed that she was serious, and withdrawn. Her father, when he came home, asked her how things were going; she answered as if the day was no different from any other. Both her parents noticed, though, that her light went off hours earlier than usual; her mother peeped in to see that Angela was asleep. 'She had to give a talk today,' she told her husband. 'It must have taken a lot out of her.'

Angela finished the year at university, chose her program for the coming year and noted the deadline for re-enrolment. When her parents said they'd be entertaining some members of her mother's family, visiting Australia from Vicenza, Angela offered to show them around. The relatives arrived in January, and amid the lunches, dinners and family visits, Angela took them to see the city's sights, and then the parts of the state which they'd find most like, and most unlike, the Italy they took for granted. The relatives wanted to know how anyone could deal with such distances and empty spaces. 'How you know where you are? How you know what to do when there is nothing in sight?' Angela found them amusing, and lovable in their perplexity about this - as they said - strange place. 'I'm used to it,' she told them. 'It seems right to me. Natural. *Non e strano!*' They liked the certainty she had about herself, and the consideration she gave them; they kept demanding her youthful energy while apologising for taking her time. She seemed indifferent to any sense of demands being excessive. They felt they were the highest priority of her summer, and could only wonder that she should be prepared to give them so much. When she came to Italy, they told her, she had to stay with them, and told her the places she'd see in their care, the wonderful food she'd have, the castles, wines, the sunlight ... they made Italy sound like a paradise their imaginations had created for the delectation of visitors. 'I'll come one day,' Angela promised. 'But I've got to finish my course, and ...' she kept them waiting '... I think I'd enjoy it more if I

was married. I'll wait till I've got a husband!' She laughed at this, and they found it infectious. Italy, they told her, was full of handsome, sexy men. Some were wealthy, some were great dancers, some had sleek cars, and every last one was a lover to dream of. If Angela wanted to marry, she had no better thing to do than to put her heart in their hands, they'd see everything arranged.

When the day came for them to leave, Angela and her parents were at the airport, embracing them, kissing, crying, and eventually waving at the aircraft rushing down the runway. 'I'm coming,' she told them in the minutes before they boarded, 'but I have to be ready.' The relatives knew the meaning of 'ready'; they, when they got back to Italy, they said, would start at once to prepare: she was the hope of another generation which they were claiming for themselves. 'It's definite,' Angela told them. 'When I've found myself a husband!' They all laughed, and the relatives had floods of advice for her mother and father, who enjoyed being at the centre of so much fuss but also suspected that their part in finding this husband would be small. 'She knows her mind so well!' Angela's mother said, and it was Angela's enchanting smile that the relatives remembered as they filed their way through duty-free shops to the point where they would board their plane.

Quotations on pages 296 - 298 are from Furetière, *Dictionnaire* 1690, and Grenaille, *La Mode* 1642 quoted in *Signification de la mode sous Louis XIII* by Louise Godard de Donville, Université de Provence, 1976; *The Empire of Fashion* by Gille Lipovetsky, Princeton University Press, 1987; and *The Fashionable Mind: Reflections on Fashion, 1970 - 1981* by Kennedy Fraser, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1981. Musical reference is to the aria 'Di rigori armato il seno' in Act 1 of *Der Rosenkavalier* (premiered 1911), by Richard Georg Strauss.

Karl

Karl, driving his battered VW to university, turned on the radio to hear the announcer read the weather forecasts, a ritual that amused him. Why did anyone who lived in Geraldton want to know the forecast for Hobart? Or Darwin if you lived in Port Augusta? Wollongong if your day was in the Alice? He twiddled the knob to bring up the sound.

‘Perth is expecting a top today of twenty six, and inland at Kalgoorlie ... Albany, in the south west ...’ Karl had to make himself concentrate; he wanted to pull over, but it would be silly to stop so he could laugh.

‘In Geraldton they’re expecting ... should be twenty eight in Port Hedland ... while in Broome ... Darwin should have a top today of thirty three.’ Karl switched it off. Stupid bastards! He was introspective enough to know that a sediment of laughter would underlie the scorn he’d feel for much of the day; most of his fellow students only wanted knowledge as furniture to live with, instead of concentrating on techniques, acceptable or otherwise, for using one’s mind. They were intellectually as unwashed as his car. He locked it and walked to his tutorial.

Near the steps that led into the building he saw Kramme, the American, Neville, Sam and Becky, the four from his group that interested him least. Saying ‘Good morning’, he passed them; it was typical of him that he never dawdled, nor let time drift, but moved briskly from one thing that mattered to another. No lacunae in a life! But glancing in at the door of Stephen Macfarlan, his tutor, he saw himself beckoned. Karl knew what it was; he’d not yet decided on a topic for the presentation they had to give. Stephen had his list in front of him. ‘Are you any nearer to a decision, Karl? I’d like to get this out to everybody, topics,

dates, things they need to read, the lot!’ He looked at the restrained - constrained, Stephen would have said - young man.

‘What about “Things that came to nothing”?’

‘Such as?’

‘Oh, there’s lots of them. Fear of the Russians invading. Attempts to set up a slave trade to harvest sugar in Queensland. Ah, what else? Moves to form new states. Things that fizzled out, I mean, but were big in people’s minds for a time. That sort of thing.’

‘What would you do? Pick a handful and contrast them: why they came to nothing? Is that compatible with your interest in method? I think I mean, do such movements raise any particular methodological questions?’

Karl thought. ‘Too many people like to tackle their history in a nation-building way. Steady growth of cities, industries, transport systems. Democracy emerges from the slum of transportation. Some things do develop in a linear way, it’s true, but others just pop up, then disappear. We shouldn’t let the more transitory occurrences drop out of the record because if we do we falsify it by making it appear more purposeful than it was. Muddle and foolishness are as much a part of history as anything else.’

Stephen appeared to concede. ‘You’d better firm up the ones you want to deal with. I’ll put what you’ve said on the list and have it available from Donna tomorrow. You’ll have to circulate the specifics yourself. Okay?’

Karl thought he’d got out of it lightly. ‘Will do!’ He nodded, in the quietly contemptuous way he had for people who failed to stretch his intellect, and left the room, but he’d barely reached the passage before he found himself called by Donna, the department’s secretary. ‘Mr Roenfeldt! There you are! I thought I saw you a moment ago, then you disappeared.’ She came up, carrying a note. ‘I was asked to give you this message. I said it’s not what I’m here for, but the person was insistent, and I wasn’t busy for once, so I took it.’ She gave him a piece of paper.

Ring Else and Bobo ASAP 9671 8829 The plot thickens!

'They asked me to be sure and put that exclamation point at the end,' Donna said. 'They didn't say any more than that. And I made them repeat 'Bobo' because I wanted to be sure I'd got it right.'

'His name's Bob,' Karl told her. 'Bobo for long.'

'Pardon?'

'It's not short, it's longer. By one letter, if you think.'

The secretary wasn't pleased. 'I *think*, Mr Roenfeldt. I think lots of thoughts that don't get told to anybody.' She moved briskly away.

'Karl nought, office one,' he thought. 'Get fucked, silly bitch!'

When he got home that evening, after some fruitless hours in search of topic material, Karl found Ronny, who shared the flat, sipping a beer and contemplating the insides - the guts, Ronny called them - of a computer. Karl looked at the circuitry with incomprehension. How did the monosyllabic Ronny know what to do?

'That, to me, is the equivalent of brain surgery.'

'It's a bit of fuckin ratshit.'

'What's the problem?'

Ronny said nothing, but he put his glass down, seized two screwdrivers and began to probe. 'I've got a call to make,' Karl said. 'Back in a minute.' Ronny, diverting none of his attention, grunted. 'Use my mobile.'

Karl didn't like mobiles but when he got to the phone it too was in pieces. What was going on? 'Where is your bloody mobile?' In the room behind him Ronny mumbled, 'Usual place, whaddya fuckin think?'

Karl found it, pressed buttons. Bzzz bzzz, bzzz bzzz, bzzz ... A recorded message told him to try another number. He put the thing down. 'It's supposed to be the age of communication,' he said to Ronny, who'd heard it before. 'It's really the age of barriers. Every route has an access block. It's a way of making yourself important by building things you can hide behind. The harder you are to reach, the more important you must be. *Eh?*' This was flung at Ronny, who never dealt with speculation: what was the use? He didn't even grunt. 'What did Else and

Bobo want, you know?’ The technician shook his head. ‘It’s important,’ Karl said. ‘It’s a big opportunity if it comes off.’ Ronny had nothing to say. ‘They’ve got connections at Channel Eight, people there want to get a new series going. It’s only at the ideas stage, but Else and Bobo think I’m the one to come up with some fresh ones. *Hey?*’ He was trying to conceal his excitement. Ronny squinted at a defect, glanced at a meter, probed, then began work on a corner of a card. ‘Any more of that beer?’ Ronny took no notice. ‘Any more of that beer?’

‘Plenty in the shop.’

‘Oh fuckya,’ Karl grumbled. ‘All right, I’ll go and get some. If Else or Bobo rings, I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.’

He got onto them later. The man they dealt with at the station, known only as ‘Ian’, was interested. He wanted sketches of what was proposed. Something to kick around, have a sniff at. Something he could show the ones who controlled the purse strings. ‘Did he say what sort of detail he wants?’ Karl asked. ‘Do we get down to dialogue, or just sketch in the ideas? And costs? What did he say about the budget for a program? Half an hour, I presume, right? Is he talking about a series, say ten shows, or a thing that goes on for years, or will they be one-off, special occasion jobs? Prestige productions for a big event? Come to think of it, who’s going to sponsor the series? Do we have a company in mind? It’s got to suit their needs, if that’s who it’s for. Lot of questions there, Bobo, Else ... any indications from Ian about those things?’

Else worked in advertising, Bobo hung around wherever films were made. ‘Not really. It’s early days. What he wants is an idea that’ll sweep his bosses off their feet. Ya know? Ka-boom! When they see it, they say “That’s it!” They gotta love it at first sight ...’

Karl knew his doubts must be trickling down the line to them, like cold water on their backs.

‘... which is where you come in, Karl! Only thing I could say is, get yourself a brilliant central idea, then think of half a dozen ways it could go. Know what I mean? Get the thing off to a great start, then map in the ways you could take it. Like, say it’s a family ...’

'I know,' Karl said. 'The family's today, but they've got their grandfather living with them. The kids say to granpa, "Tell us about how you came to Australia, granpa", and he tells them. You could have a modern soap running side by side with something historical ...'

'Modern soap running side by side with old soap,' Else called from the second phone at their place. 'Arpège and Lifebuoy!' They laughed. 'When's he want it?' 'What's today?' Bobo said. 'Wednesday, shit it gets away, doesn't it. Ian's pissing off for the weekend. Got a new woman I think. Weekend's out. Only time he'd look at it would be Thursday night. Yeah, that's when you'd need it. He's usually there till about six, so ...' He stopped. There was no need to say more. The deadline for Ian would be six the following day. 'How's that sound?'

Karl thought it sounded impossible, but if that was the way they did things ...

'I'll have something by then. See you at six tomorrow night.'

Six tomorrow night. He didn't even have Ronny's computer to work on, it was in pieces. Depressed, and certain that his promise would be the wreck of his hopes, he went back to the kitchen. The computer was back together, screen brightly shining, and Ronny was drinking one of the beers Karl had bought. 'Fuckin fantastic!' Karl said. 'Ronald, you have saved my life!'

The technician must have been pleased. 'Woof woof! Man's best friend, they call me.'

'Can I use it right away?'

Ronny waved his hand. 'Take it. I want to get meself some dinner.'

Karl took it to his room. A central idea that could go in any direction. The studio wouldn't want to spend money on costumes and elaborate sets, so why not ...

... work around that somehow? How? Karl thought, then he thumped his fist on the table. Pictures! Paintings, that is, famous pictures brought to life. The camera zooms in on somebody, we hear a voice-over telling us what he's thinking. She. The camera pans across

the others, their voices come into it. Then the action develops, the characters only need to be dressed in a couple of things that remind viewers of the figures in the painting. So long as the viewers understand that, then dollars don't have to be spent on scenery and costume. Great! Karl was excited. 'Ronny? You got my History of Australian Art? Where the fuck is it?' Ronny didn't bother to speak. Why would he take Karl's book? 'That girl you had here the other night. The one you were trying to impress. Didn't she take it?'

'Rosie? I didn't say she could. Maybe she did. I didn't see her take it!'

'You, mate, didn't see her go, because you, mate, were out like a light. Once you saw she wasn't going to stay the night ...'

'Okay, I can recall. Life's hard enough without fantasies obscuring things.' Ronny was grinning. 'Give her a ring?'

'I said I wouldn't speak to her again. Fuck, who's got a book I can use?' Ronny said wearily, 'Books, ya live in fuckin libraries.' He laughed. 'Ya let her get off with a book ya gonna need, then you say you need a book.' He shook his head. 'Y're out of fuckin control, Karl. You ...' he spaced the words out '... have ... lost ... it!' This amused him, and he slurped his beer. Karl was peeved. 'It's too late to go back to the library, and I'm not ringing Rosie, who's got a copy I can borrow? Let me think.' Ronny said nothing. 'I said, let me think! Stop banging around, I need to keep my nerves steady. The History of Australian Art, who'd have a copy?' He thought. Something came to him. He dashed into the other room. 'You used your mobile after I did, Ronny, what did you do with it?' He reappeared, anxiety across his face. Ronny was opening another bottle. 'Ronny? The mobile? Where is it? Where'd you put it? Ronny?'

The technician patted his shirt pocket. 'In me coat, where else would I put it? Christ you're a bundle of nerves. Ya're in a state, ya can't fuckin think!'

Karl made calls and organised the book. He went out for it, and brought it home. Drysdale, yes, von Guerard, though the figures were

small. Okay though. Margaret Preston, not much there. John Brack, useful if you wanted to make quirky references through those battles of playing cards and pencils. Arthur Boyd's shearers playing for a bride ... Which one would he use to start the series? How many of the paintings gave birth to a real idea, as opposed to a twinge that something might develop if he waited long enough? He only had until tomorrow at six ...

He worked through the night. Somewhere along the way he went out for pizza, and more beer. As first light came into the sky he knew he had enough to impress this Ian from the TV studio if he was willing to let himself be impressed. He looked at his scheme from Else and Bobo's point of view. It was okay, they'd see possibilities. He needed them as advocates. He was also aware, at the edge of his weariness, that he'd done next to nothing for the class presentation he had to give, but that'd have to wait. That was a low hurdle to be jumped, this was a fair-sized foothill. Righto, he thought, the ideas are there, let's turn it into a document for Ian, this unknown who'd dominated a night of his life. Karl wondered if he'd ever meet him, or would Ian be a mythological figure existing somewhere at the edge of Else and Bobo's consciousness? How many other 'Ians' were there? Had there always been Ians? No, that was unhistorical, when did Ians start to be important? Could be an honours thesis there, Karl laughed to himself, feeling light-headed: 'The rise of the Ian in the national socio-economic'. 'The Ian index of Australian culture'. 'Inscrutable Ian; the cultural cringe reinvented'. Karl laughed loudly, left his room, found a bottle, and sat at his screen again. Would it be better to sleep, now, and finalise it later? No, he decided, I'll finish it on a roll. Light filled the sky outside. The sun would be up before long. He sipped at his beer and worked up the document to be presented to ...

He couldn't stop himself giggling. What a farce! Ian wouldn't have a clue! He worked for another hour, the sun lit the sky, he sipped steadily on what he'd convinced himself was his last beer for the night, and he was within a minute or two of finishing when he became aware

of someone behind him. Turning, he saw a naked Ronny, towel draped about his breadbasket, as he called it. 'Up all night mate?'

Karl was elated. 'Up all night, and I've got a bloody beautiful proposal. Have your shower and I'll read it to you.' Ronny wasn't keen. 'Wait till they a-ssept it, that's the time to pull the tops off.' A thought came to him. 'You been on it all night?' He meant the beer. Karl said, 'No. This is my first since before midnight. Why?' Ronny said, 'There's a fuckin big pile by the fridge.'

'You mean bottles?' Ronny nodded. Karl was amused. 'They, mate, must be your little nightcap. I left this screen just before midnight to get myself a bottle. There were five empties there then. Here's the bottle I drank at midnight, or thereabouts. This ...' he lifted the bottle in his hand '... is the only other one in here. Take a look if you don't believe me.'

Ronny said, 'Fuck, I'm havin a shower,' and disappeared.

A week passed, then Karl got a call from Else. 'Ian likes your idea. He says there's a lot to be done, but he wants you to develop it further. We know he's been talking about it to people around the studio because they talk as if it's something that's ready to get the green light.'

'Sounds good,' Karl said. 'Who's we, by the way? Are you working for the studio now?'

'Since yesterday,' Else told him. 'An opening came up, they sounded me out, I grabbed it.'

'How's Bobo feel about it? He pleased?'

'He's funny. Gone quiet. I think I got the position he was hoping might come up for him.'

'But he's behind the camera, you're on the side that raises the revenue. No money, no cameras rolling, simple as that.'

Else spoke quietly. 'It's never as simple as that, is it.'

Karl decided it was time to get serious about the talk he had to give. What about? He remembered what he'd told the tutor - things that came and went. The un-lasting features of the country's history. A shithouse idea. The stuff he was presenting to the TV people had far

more oomph. Disillusion with scholarship began to nag him. What was the good of being pure if people preferred the impure? He was going to face the pain of finding a job one day, and he knew he had too much scorn for students to be an academic. So the studio was the way to go. The tutorial? He went through his notes on the presentations he'd heard so far. A sorry lot. He took out his frustration by presenting his peers to the inquisition of his mind. 'Ah, Becky, sit down. After that truly fascinating presentation there are just one or two queries I'd like to put to you. No, no, please be comfortable. Who said this? Tell me, if you can, whose words are these?

The so-called gum trees constitute the main timber vegetation of the whole Australian continent ... The vernacular name of Gum-trees for the Eucalypts is as unaptly given as that of most others for our native plants, on which popular appellations have been bestowed. Indeed our Wattles might far more appropriately be called Gum-trees, than the Eucalypts, because the former exude a real gum (in the chemical meaning of the word); whereas the main exudation from the stems and branches of all Eucalypts hardens to a kino-like substance, contains a large proportion of a particular tannin (kino-tannic acid), and is to a great extent entirely soluble in alcohol, thus very different from real gum.

Karl beamed at the Becky he held hapless in his imagination. 'Nothing there, darling? Take a seat, we'll consider your situation in a minute. Neville! You're going to talk about the Port Arthur prison system? How lovely. You should find this interesting. Tell me, who said these words? Concentrate, Neville, they may not be familiar.'

I sentence you, but to what I know not; perhaps to storm and shipwreck, perhaps to infectious disorders, perhaps to famine, perhaps to be massacred by savages, perhaps to be devoured by wild beasts. Away - take your chance; perish or prosper, suffer or enjoy; I rid myself of the sight of you.

Neville's face showed that the question was beyond him, but Karl had charity. 'Not an easy one, is it? Oh well, off to the library, try to find a satirist or two in the England our forebears left. Now Sam. Sam, Sam, Sam, the broken-hearted man, here's one for you. Who wrote this? With the breadth of your reading, it shouldn't present too many problems ...'

Yet again the old restless feeling is bothering her. She feels that her art does not suit the times, that her mentality has changed and that her work is not following her mind. Good lad, Sam, it's about a painter. Follow what she says! She feels that this is a mechanical age - a scientific one - highly civilised and unaesthetic. Yes, Sam, unaesthetic! It's the ultimate condemnation of a period, isn't it, to be unaesthetic? You've always felt that! But let's see what she goes on to say! She knows that the time has come to express her surroundings in her work. All around her in the simple domestic life is machinery - patent ice-chests that need no ice, machinery does it; irons heated by invisible heat; washing-up machines; electric sweepers and so on. He smiled at his victim. 'That was in 1927, Sam, no twenty-tonne diesel engines then, and no endlessly baffling computers either, eh Ronny?' He shouted the last word again. 'Ronny!' In his mind he called his flat-partner to face the same judgment-bar. 'She watched the transition to the modern world, and you don't know who she was. Is! You ignorant, good-for-nothing bastards! Are you listening? They all surround her and influence her mind and, as her mind is expressed in her work ...

'Off ya fuckin rocker at last?' It was Ronny, standing in the doorway, making a judgment of what he'd heard. Karl looked scornfully at the lesser mortal presuming to judge. 'I'm preparing a talk I have to give, Ronald, if I may call you that. Savouring a few delicious quotes I might work into what I'm going to say. Anything wrong with that? Winston Churchill used to practise his speeches in the bath. How he kept his cigars dry, I can't tell you. It's got to be good. I need to prepare!'

Ronny had his own view of that. 'Ya like me to getya one of those nightshirts they use when they're gonna take'em away? They can't wave their arms around. Reckonya could use one.' He was gone. Karl stood up, shouting. 'Straightjacket is the term you're looking for, ignor-fucking-ramus! Straightjacket! You don't even know the word! That's because your mind's full of pictures! You're like a child that only looks at picture books! You haven't learned the names yet! Why? Because names are words and you don't have any! The brain operates on words the way the body does with blood. Without one, the other can't function. No words,

no mental activity, Ronny, you ignorant bastard, you understand?’ He listened, for however brief a moment, to see if his shafts had hit their target. From the street outside he heard Ronny’s voice, dour, rejecting all meanings that might trap him. ‘Rave on ya fuckin mongoose! Roll around in the string till ya tie ya-self up!’ Karl looked out to see Ronny trudging towards the station. He looked as if, though it pained him, he was heading for the only future that was possible. ‘I don’t think he’s coming back,’ Karl said aloud. ‘Good-fucking-riddance!’

What to do next? He rang Else, looking for a lead. Should he go and see this Ian? He wanted to push the project, but he didn’t want to put it at risk by trying too hard. What did she suggest? She told him to come around after work, they’d go out for something, then he could take her through the stories he’d imagined rising from the famous paintings. ‘Happy to do that,’ he told her. ‘How’s Bobo, by the way? Been a while since I saw him.’

‘He’s in Queensland,’ she said. ‘A couple of commercials, and they think he may be the man they want on a film that’s supposed to start shooting any day now. That’s what they say. Who knows who you can trust? They don’t know what they’re doing themselves.’

He went to the university and worked his way through the morning, then a disquieting, because attractive, idea entered his mind. Bobo was away and Else was asking him around. Was she ...

... perhaps, thinking ...

She must certainly be interested, to put herself in a position that Bobo would be annoyed about, if he knew ...

Karl found this amusing. There was no need for Bobo to know, ever. He and Else could have a brief encounter, with nobody the wiser. He liked the idea. The trouble was, it was hard to be sure of Else. She was one of those people who touch you a lot without meaning to send the signals that touching usually sends. He thought about it. When she touches me, how will I touch her? Where? Do I make eye contact early, late or never? Do we simply touch, and touch, and touch? Rub a little, stroke a little, start to caress?

The afternoon was a nuisance. He wanted to start the touching game, but time wasn't to be hurried. He went to the library. This blasted talk. The truth was he didn't want to give it, because it was a formal exercise, a hurdle as he'd already decided, put there to see if the students knew how to jump. Stephen, their tutor, pretended - convinced himself - that they were all busy with their search for knowledge - such an objectivised thing, in Stephen's eyes: Karl thought this ridiculous - because they were, each in his way, already the scholars Stephen thought he was. They don't know anything, Karl knew, because they won't discuss what it means to know. Ways of knowing change all the time. He wondered if perhaps he should build his talk around a selection of philosophers on knowledge: what it is, how it develops, how reliable it is. What its province, and powers, are, and when it can no longer be undoubted. He thought some more. This bloody talk! Everyone so far had treated it as an exposition. They talked as if there was a central certainty, and doubts were at the edge. This wasn't the case. Certainty was no longer central and probably never had been. The church in centuries past had persuaded European civilisation that it held truths one could be certain about, but now the central feature of intellectual discourse was the definition of the problem. It occurred to him that there was an analogy to be drawn with the phenomenon whereby two or more people, scattered far apart, suddenly 'discovered' the answer to a problem. Suddenly there is radio, suddenly the telephone. Suddenly the unthinkable, like the theory of evolution, is accepted. How does this come about?

The answer, Karl saw, is that a civilisation, a society, first gets its question into some state of clarity, of definition, so that the discovery of a useful answer is at least possible, and then the answer itself comes into focus. It arrives, not because A or B is a genius, but because the underlying thought patterns of the society make the arrival of an answer likely. You can't have a solution unless the question has been posed, a discovery without an object of desire ...

Do you want me to hold you, Else, he asked himself. Shall we go to your bed to caress? Do you want to lie on top of me, then wriggle

down until I'm inside you, and my arms are around you, joining as if we'll never part?

He went to Else and Bobo's apartment with the History of Australian Art in his hands, a heavy book to stop them trembling. 'Come in,' Else said. 'Ah, you've brought your source material. Good. I'm looking forward to talking about that. In fact we've got lots to talk about. Come inside and have a drink.'

They drank, they went out for a quick dinner, they came back. After an hour they had books everywhere, with scraps of paper marking places. Karl felt that Else was appropriating his idea, yet he knew, because she kept saying it, that his idea was liberating her imagination. 'It seems to give the paintings a prophetic validity,' she said, pleasing Karl. Nobody had ever praised him in that way. Prophetic! He fancied this. He liked Else rubbing against him, brushing him as she rushed to turn pages this way and that, jabbing his knee with a finger when she wanted to make a point. Eventually, stressed a little by the excitement which she, he saw, could keep up for longer than he could, he said, 'You've got more idea of what to do with them than I have. Do you want to make a partnership out of it? We'll do it together?'

Her face froze so swiftly that he thought he must have said something terrible. Slowly some life, tense though it was, came back to her lips, and her eyes, normally so sharp, so quick, looked glazed, as if she too, now, saw something not apparent to the lens, the retina. A tear ran down her cheek and she nodded, one simple, quick, nervous nod. 'Else!' Karl called, alarmed, stripped of his cynicism, responsible for her in a way he hadn't thought about. 'Are we ...' He took her hands; they were clamped on his fingers before he knew what was happening. 'I think,' he said, 'I think we've come to an understanding!' He looked into those eyes full of dreams of success and stardom, and he added, 'We're going to do this together! We are, aren't we? That's what you want, isn't it Else?'

He spent his evenings and his nights at Else's place. Occasionally Bobo rang from Queensland, and Karl heard her telling him how he had

to take every opportunity that came his way because nothing wrecked a career more than pushing aside an approach from someone who mattered. Why would they want you unless you did what they asked? She blew kisses down the phone and sometimes, when she was listening with cynical concentration, Karl knew that Bobo was telling her what he'd like them to be doing. Occasionally, but not very often, when there was a lull in their lovemaking, Karl thought of Bobo's imagination working hotly in the north, and decided that cold climates were better for lovers than the tropics.

The paintings. Drysdale, von Guerard. Governor Phillip taking possession of New South Wales. Bushrangers in Saint Kilda Road, by William Strutt. These seemed obvious enough. He agreed with Else that they had to limit themselves to pictures that had people, and perhaps a situation, as a starting point. 'I don't know how we'd ever begin an episode based on an abstract,' she said. They talked about this, but couldn't find a way. 'We've got to be solemn, and we've got to be funny. Above all, we must be unexpected,' Else determined. 'The idea's so simple that anybody can understand it. So we've got all the room we need. As the series goes on people will be disappointed unless they get surprises. They'll say the show's in a rut. We can't let that happen. We, as scriptwriters, must stay a long way in front of what people think we're going to come up with. God, what a challenge!'

By now Karl knew every nerve in her body, yet never quite knew where her mind would surface next. He had a feeling that hers was a better imagination than his, but she hadn't realised it because the initial idea, for which the credit was his, was something he'd put in her path. This gave him courage. He'd been able to take one big step that no one had thought of, he must surely be able to take more. Gradually he left the filling in of detail to her, because she was better at it, while he turned his mind to the shape of the series. The structure, the sequence of what it contained, had to be expressive in itself, before the working out of detail. I am a historian, he told himself, and Else is the scriptwriter. I walked into her field with an idea she could use. Watching her at the

table where they worked, Karl felt a compassion for her that entered his emotional range unexpectedly. She was so busy, shuffling sheets of paper, making notes here and there, scrawling arrows from this to that, pen-portraying characters in a line or two. 'Listen to this!' she'd command. 'Does this sound like you think he'd talk?' She'd stab a finger at a minor figure in a painting, open on the table before her. Hundreds of dollars were spent on art books, and catalogues of sale from auction houses; Else was building an archive as if to deny her vulnerability. Karl grew daily more tender with her, aware, as he was, of that inner fire, the convulsions of excited love that she shared with him every night. She wasn't in love with him, he knew, but she was in love with the excitement of an idea, with, perhaps, excitement itself. This is a blessed time, Karl thought, often, as he waited for more rapid-fire queries, demands and cries of excitement to come from Else at her working table. One night he felt he could stand it no more. 'Else,' he said, 'I feel I've got nothing more to give you. I think you've exceeded me in a way I didn't expect. I'm not grudging you anything, believe me, but I simply don't know what to do from here. I'm a very limited man. I'm sure you'll say I'm a disappointment. I don't want to disappoint you. What we've had these last few weeks has been beyond belief.' He didn't know how to go on, and he could see that she was barely listening. He stopped. After perhaps half a minute she noticed some change in the air. 'That's okay,' she said. 'Don't get your knickers in a knot. Keep the ideas coming, it'll be all right!'

That night, as she lay sleeping beside him, he examined his situation. She was his! It was something he'd dreamed about, and now it was true. He'd envied Bobo, and wondered how anyone so limited could have the vivacious Else. Now he had her, and he hardly deserved her. Slowly his thoughts began to focus. She was obsessed because she was liberated. People loved with their imaginations, he saw, and he, more or less by chance, had provided the liberating idea. As long as she felt that way, he would pass without question. He was, in a way, part of the assumption that gave her the ability to soar. One day, one night, he feared, she would

look down, would see how high she was, and be afraid. Their love would be wounded, even if she didn't crash at once. If he wanted it to go on, he had to keep her aloft. But if he *tried* to keep her aloft, she'd notice. It was the only thing about him that she would notice. As long as he stayed the same, unnoticed, unquestioned, things could go on until something outside the two of them - the end of the series, if it ever started - brought about an end. A hiatus. A pause for looking around, reconsidering. He trembled. He didn't want that. He wanted to be forever where he was, in the warmth, the excitement, of her bed.

He was so tender in the morning that even Else noticed. 'You don't have to fuss over me darling. I'm pretty robust. Bobo mostly took me for granted. I think that suits me. If you make a fuss of me it makes me self-conscious first, then I get uncomfortable. Just be yourself, darling. Be natural, that's the easiest way for us to be together.'

He smiled tenderly, but he knew it was going to be hard. He'd have to act. He was aware of the duplicity in their position, and she wasn't. She was soaring. She came home with scraps and notes written in odd moments of insight, vision, during the most tedious and sometimes the most panic-stricken meetings when some stuff-up had to be rectified. She read them aloud over a gin and tonic while he prepared their dinner, and the tone of her voice told the delight she felt in being back in the safe but soaring world of the imagination. Another layer had been added to her life and she explored it with every drop of energy in a mind crammed to bursting. He often surprised himself by his capacity to anticipate what and where she might arrive at, and she, in turn, was amazed to find her most fanciful ideas, born who knew where in her mind, greeted by a response that showed his mind had walked the same paths. When they lay in the darkness of her room he had only to touch her thigh, her back, the nape of her neck, and she was exultant again, her body craving the excitement her mind already possessed.

A fortnight after his first breakdown of confidence, he knew another was on the way. 'Darling,' he said to her, 'this is so full on, it's so wonderful but so demanding, that I want to step back. Just for a moment.'

One day and one night. I want to sleep at my flat. I know I'll be incredibly anxious, I'll be dying to get back to you, but I feel I'm losing myself in what's happening between us. It's the most wonderful thing ...' He could have gone on, but she was, he saw, accepting.

'Twenty four hours. That's the limit?'

'Not a minute longer.'

'When?'

'The moment we get episode five completed.'

'That'll be tonight.'

'Okay, tonight. From the minute I leave till the minute I come back will be twenty four hours, not a moment longer.'

'Not one single second!'

'Not one!'

'You feel you need it?'

'I do.'

'Have I been too intense?'

'You've been more wonderful, more loving, than I ever dreamed was possible, but I need to regroup. Get some perspective on what's happening. It's not that I want to be away from you, I don't, but I need to look around myself for a while, to get my bearings, to reclaim a feeling that I've got some idea of what I'm doing with my life ...'

She held up a hand to stop him. 'Finish episode five. Now.'

They worked for an hour, and the episode was done. They'd written it as a long flashback, and the episode was ending where it began, with the owner of a small property in the western district driving his horse and carriage to a wealthier neighbour's property where he would beg the hand in marriage of the family's daughter, an object of his long-standing desire whose attainment, as told by Else and Karl, was the start of the farmer's downfall. 'That's a sad story we've written there, Else.'

'I want to cry, and I don't know whether it's because of what we wrote, or because of us.'

‘It’s him. Not us,’ Karl said resolutely. ‘What’s the time? Eight fifty five. I’ll be back tomorrow night at eight fifty five. Synchronise watches! I won’t keep you waiting!’

‘Don’t go, Karl! Let’s postpone this! Do it tomorrow night. Hold me now that we’ve finished that one. It’s too sad for me to be left alone. I’ll cry all night if you do!’

Karl stayed. But in the night he felt something steely, some resolve that was scornful of Else, of women, of softness, of the tender interaction of lovers, creeping over him before he slept. The next night he did leave, with all the protestations he’d come out with the night before. He expected to find a cold, deserted flat, with everything where he’d left it so long ago he could hardly remember, but the lights were on, heaters were on, and Ronny was at the table with a bottle before him and three empties by the bin.

‘Fuck! Ronald!’ Karl wasn’t sure if he was pleased.

‘Long time no see.’

Aware that he could be a little more gracious, Karl said, ‘Sorry, Ron, it gave me a surprise to find you here.’

The bulky young man said, ‘Gives me a surprise to see you. I thought you’d made the break. Seemed silly to pay the rent and not live here, so ...’

This confirmed what Karl had thought. ‘You did move out then?’

This wasn’t the territory where Ronny liked to be. ‘Wanna beer?’

Karl thought about it. ‘Just one. I’m home to get some sleep, actually. Thanks.’

They drank two bottles each, affably enough, then Karl, weary from nights of love, crept into bed. Somewhere in the night he had a dream. He was lost in dense forest, looking for Else. She was above him somewhere, flying, and looking down. He had to send a signal to get himself rescued. Then he heard an overwhelming sound, which seemed to come from the trunks of the forest, from the leaves, from the earth itself. There’d never been a sound to compare with it since the surface of the earth cooled to let creatures roam. The sound displaced the need

for Else in his mind. He wanted to find where it came from. He rushed here and there, banging into trees, stumbling into holes dug for him to fall into. Even in the deepest pits the sound followed him. He woke, startled, shaking. There was no sound. Yes there was! What was it? He listened. Ronny was watching TV, there were some desultory voices talking. Karl wriggled deeper in the bed and slept.

In the morning he mentioned his dream to Ronny, who was slurping Cornflakes. He nodded, as if he'd been told a boatload of refugees had been sunk off the coast of Vietnam, or an avalanche had wiped out some Nepalese villages, or fighting had broken out for the fifty-fifth time in Kashmir. When there were no more Cornflakes in the bowl, he got up.

'Y're in luck. I taped it.'

He went into the next room, fiddled with the video, and came back. The sound of commentators' voices came through.

'Nice ball. Well left though. He picked up the swing the moment it started, which was much later than we've seen so far this morning. And he let it go through to the keeper. Now what's the bowler doing? I think he wants a change in the field. He's signalling ...'

'What's all this about?'

Ronny lifted a finger, meaning wait. The commentators babbled for another three or four balls, then a deep drone came through the speaker of the set, and into their kitchen, filling the room, the flat ... Karl banged down the knife he was using on his toast. 'Shit!'

Ronny was amused. Karl felt he'd been taken over, body and soul. He'd asked for a day and a night away from love, and now there was something else. 'What is it?'

Ronny got up, Karl followed. Ronny squatted on the floor not far from the screen, grinning. Karl pulled over a chair. It was a cricket match replayed from years before. Though not a follower of the game, Karl knew that the signage on the players' clothes was out of date. Australia was playing somebody, and the ground, he could see, was Adelaide. The camera kept panning, trying to locate who it was that was filling the stadium with sound. The commentators were at first non-

plussed, then they realised that what they were hearing was a didgeridoo. 'What a ... what a ... what a noise!' Karl said. 'Fuckin fantastic,' Ronny returned, in charge of their relationship at last.

Karl's eyes were on the screen. 'Where's it coming from?'

'Keep watchin.'

The camera continued its search, passing quickly, for once, over skimpily clad young women, children with dobs of cream on their noses, old men with wrinkled faces comparing the players with their efforts of years before. The cathedral crept across the top of the screen as the camera searched. Eventually it located a man with a wooden pole somewhat longer than his legs. His cheeks were puffed with the air he was pushing down the pipe. The cricketers, when the camera returned to them, batted and bowled as if nothing was happening, but everything was happening. Everything was changing. 'Nothing's ever going to be the same!' Karl yelled. 'Thought it might getya,' Ronny said. He was grinning. 'How long have you had this?' Karl wanted to know. 'Coupla weeks now.' Karl thought. 'How did you get onto it?' Ronny reverted to his normal self. 'Huntin through the replays one night. Couldn't sleep, they had this on. Fortunately I was tapin it. No good decidin you like somethin and then turn on the tape, ya miss the best part of it.'

Karl looked at the accidentally but amazingly preserved record of a moment that was changing his life. *Wwwwwwoooooaaooooaaooooaaa ...* The sound was so deep that it lay below any normal music. It was scarcely more than a reverberation, but it seemed to be booming off something both close and an infinity away. Though the camera lingered on the man - was it a white man? - playing the tube, it was as if he was only miming, pretending to locate what came from a mental space, a vast collective of all the minds that watched over, and received the magic of his country. Their country. Our country. My country.

Karl thought, with some abashment and a little shame, of his scorn for the weather forecasts. They too were reminders of the vast collectivity of distance. There was no separation between them if they belonged on the same simple plane in the mind. That was where they belonged,

and everything anyone did in those places, all their actions, were connected too, joined, in some mysterious way connecting with, or rejecting, the binding statement that came, or looked as if it came - or did it come? - from the simple tube. Ronny flicked a switch. Karl wasn't expecting him to do this, and would have rebuked him, as he felt he had the intellectual seniority to do, but Ronny was grinning. 'Getsya doesn't it! Tellya what, it got to me! I played it three or four times, and I knew what I had to do.' Karl had never seen him grinning so widely. 'Talk about the cat finding the saucer of milk, what's got into you?'

Ronny left the room. Karl heard a wardrobe door pulled open, something hauled out, then the door swinging shut with a whine. Why didn't Ronny oil the thing?

Ronny was back, carrying a wooden tube. It was shiny, and parts of it were painted in burgundy and black, in the style of the native people. Ronny squatted on the floor. His grin faded and he became purposeful. Karl realised that he was being ignored. Ronny's concentration was switched on, the way he did when he was working electronically, and he was breathing deeply. Suddenly his cheeks were full of air, his lips had disappeared inside the curve of the mouth-end, and an enormous sound was present in the room. *Wwwwwwoooooo* ... It was not deafening, in the European way, but overwhelming, as if something bigger by far than any concept was being revealed. What it offered was not a truth but a phenomenon. The scale of what it displayed was such that nothing could remain unchanged in its presence. Ronny fed some squawks, some clucks, into the tube, and it sent them as far as the sound could reach ...

Karl felt trapped. He'd pleaded with Else to give him time away from the infinity of her desires, and now he was presented with another, even more demanding, even more absolute infinity. Or was it? Which was worse? Which was which? 'Ronny!' Karl said. 'This is too much. I've got to get away from this. I'm supposed to be resting. Give me a break!' Ronny's concentration was unyielding; he didn't hear his partner's appeal. He kept the air moving down the tube:

Wwvwwoooooaaooooaaoooooaaaa ... clck! clck! qwrrk! qwrrk!

Karl flung himself on the sofa with three wheels. It skidded until the stump of its fourth leg hit the floor. Karl took his head in his hands. 'No! Shut up, Ronny! Stop! Silence, please, blessed, merciful silence!' Then a realisation cut through his pain. Into his mind came a popular expression: 'between a rock and a hard place'. That was where he was! Between Else, the passion of a woman, and this ... the sound filled his mind, as it must be filling the district. It was! There was a shout from down the passage. Above them, feet were stomping on the floor. The floor of their flat, someone else's ceiling, was being poked by a broom. Suddenly there was silence. Ronny had put the tube down, and was grinning. 'I only do it to stir'em up a bit. Bastards got the cops last time I settled down to play a bit. No sense of humour, some cunts.' He grinned even more broadly. 'Whaddya reckon, Karl? Okay?'

What could he say? 'Fantastic, Ronny. I'm amazed you're so good at it, you haven't had long to practise.'

'Nah, not long. Tellya what,' Ronny said, 'I reckon I'm a natural. Some of us've got it and some of us haven't. 'S how it is.' He offered the tube to Karl. 'Y'want a go?'

'If I managed to get a sound out of it there'd be all hell break loose.'

'Ah fuckem. Y'want a go?' He was offering the instrument respectfully, a side of him Karl realised he hadn't known about. 'Not in here Ronny. It feels wrong. Maybe we could try it out in the bush one weekend, er ...'

Ronny pulled the didgeridoo back. 'That's okay, it's not everyone's cuppa tea. But if you change your mind, let me know. Shit! I better start thinkin about work.' He dashed into his room, leaving Karl in a state of perplexity. The devil and the deep blue sea. The rock and the hard place. The instrument had told him something about his native land that he didn't want to know, namely, that it was a native land, and his was not a native mind. As for the hard place, it was very, very soft indeed. Else's receptivity, the enveloping lusciousness of her, was no

more nor less than a threat to swallow him. Men had to dominate their women. What else could they do, but submit, be enfolded, be cycled into a process that swallowed their minds, bodies, beings, ambitions, hopes, desires, their purposes ...

He was lost. He looked at the clock. It was eight fifty. In twelve hours and five minutes he was due to return to his lover. Half a day to decide. If he went back, he was lost; if he didn't, he could never forgive himself. And the alternative was to wander in the sonorous, booming landscape that the wind-tube had brought into their flat. There was no identity out there, no remission, no comforting spirit, only a vastness bigger than the mind could imagine. I'm lost, he told himself, truly lost. Ronny came back to the room, slightly better dressed, a bag in his hand. Karl grabbed his arm. 'What am I going to do, Ronny?' The technician was amazed. 'Fuck, I dunno. Haven't ya got a talk to give? Y'were gabblin about it all the time. Haveya given it already?'

Feebly Karl said no.

'Work out whatya gonna say, I s'pose. What else ya gonna do?'

'I could catch a train to the back of beyond, and find a hilltop, and play your ...' He waved at the door to Ronny's room. Ronny thought this very amusing. 'Ya said next weekend. Y're on! I'll showya. Y're a bit self-conscious, ya wanna be outa sight. Fair enough! Next weekend. I gotta rush, Karl, I'm late already. Seeya!'

Ronny was gone, the didgeridoo was in his wardrobe. Else would be at work by now. Eight fifty-five. He had twelve hours, now, to decide. The agony came back.

The agony stayed with him. When he got to Else's, at half past eight, she took one look at him and said, 'My God, have you seen a ghost?' He made a feeble attempt to smile. 'I have, sort of. Two, really.' She stared at him. He tried to say something but couldn't. 'You've got a big load on that mind of yours,' she said. 'So have I. Guess what. I got a call this morning from Bobo. He's coming back. Flight gets in tomorrow night. I'll have to meet him, Karl.' Befuddled as he was, Karl could see that she was asking his forgiveness. 'You'd like me out of the way?'

‘For a while. You see, it’s easy for me to have an affair, especially when I’m with someone inattentive like Bobo, but finishing the thing off completely is another matter. I have to do it properly. I couldn’t have a relationship with someone else at the same time, if you see what I mean.’

Karl was relieved, though he knew not to show it. If he could only wipe that booming tube of air from his memory he’d be almost back to where he’d been ... He said, ‘I’ll be sorry if this is the end of us, Else. We’ve been good.’ This relieved her. ‘You’re staying with me tonight. We’re going to have that, at least. Bobo isn’t the man for the rest of my life. He isn’t going to last that much longer. When the scene’s clear, you and I ...’

It was a promise of sorts. Karl said, ‘Okay, we’ll postpone it, ah, we’ll look forward to a later opportunity. It’s what we have to do, I suppose.’ They looked at each other, neither of them sure what would develop. ‘Put your arms around me,’ she said. ‘Oh! And there’s one more thing.’ He knew in a flash what it would be: ‘You want the working partnership to go on.’

‘I want that very much.’

It was possible that it would be the only thing ever to be born from their intimacy. She was so much smarter than he was about TV; could he afford to let her stay in? He didn’t want to, but it would take a meanness he didn’t feel to shut her out. ‘Yes. We’re partners. We’re going on regardless. For sure.’ She squeezed him with the excitement he’d come to know well. ‘Great! Now I want you to tell me why you were so pale when you arrived!’ He opened his mouth, not knowing what to say, but she butted in. ‘Oh, there’s one more thing! Ian came up to me at work today. He said everybody who’s read our scripts reckons they’re terrific. They’ve got ideas for bigger and better ones, wouldn’t they, the bastards, but Ian told me to tell you that we’ve got to keep at it. He’s pretty confident the green light should be flashing soon! How’s that, Karl? Isn’t that fantastic?’

Karl knew he should be happy but he still felt lost. All he could think of was the need to prepare his tutorial. History was the only thing he had left. Else had effectively taken his scripts away, though she didn't know it, and they could pretend for months. She'd got away with his sense of his own importance, though again she didn't know she'd done it. And Ronny and that sound that pushed all other sounds, all ideas, aside, had changed him forever. He had to do one last thing, one last action of the old Karl, before he let the future, the coming time, sweep in. He slept with Else, giving her more love than he'd ever dreamed was in him. She knew something had changed, and she wondered how quickly she could make the cut with Bobo, and if Karl would be around when she was free.

In the morning they had grapefruit and toast. 'Where are you going today, Karl?'

'The library. I've got work to do.'

He did his work. It only took a few hours. He found a quote for each of the others in his group. Then he put them in a folder. Then he waited.

His Thursday came. He was last to enter the room. He walked around, putting sheets in front of everybody. He sat, and began to speak.

'This session will be different from the others. I don't believe in settled pronouncements. It's not possible, in my view, to take up a position which overlooks the culture as if from outside. The culture's inescapable. We're all in it, like blood vessels.' He couldn't resist. 'Or toenails. Sorry about that. Let's put ideas of scientific method well and truly aside. Let's think in terms of a question being raised. Where was it raised? Why? What does the question want? What does it want to ignore? What will it take to draw the energy from the question, so it settles back, satisfied?'

He thought for a moment of Else, and Bobo, and Ronny, but went on.

‘What I’m putting to you is that we are no longer, today, dealing with the nature of statement, or evidence, but of the nature of inquiry itself. That’s what today’s experience is meant to explore. Let’s start. You’ve all got something in front of you, a primary source, in the old parlance. Each one matches a talk that’s been given or is to be given.’ He glanced at Neville. ‘I want each person in turn to read the words in front of them and then to propose a line of inquiry arising from the quote. That way we can see a little about our notions of inquiry.’ He looked to his left. ‘Becky. Gum trees and wattle trees, is that the one you’ve got?’ She looked at him suspiciously. ‘Fire away, then. Read it to us, then tell us what the little detectives in your mind are trying to make of it. Ready, everyone? This could be interesting!’

Quotations on pages 323 - 324 are from *Introduction to Botanic Teachings at the Schools of Victoria through references to leading native plants* by Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1877; Jeremy Bentham, quoted in *The story of Betty Steel, deaf convict and pioneer*, by Jan Branson and Don Miller, Deafness Resources Australia Limited, Petersham NSW, 1995; and ‘From eggs to Electrolux’, by Margaret Preston, reprinted from ‘Art and Australia’, No. 22, 1927, in *The Art of Margaret Preston*, The Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1980. Musical reference is to an incident at the Adelaide Cricket Ground, date unknown.

Neville

Neville insisted on his full name. His mother, and, in intimate moments, his father, called him Nev, and the possession of him that he heard in the shortening was something he didn't want the world to know about. He had so much growing up to do. At university, he felt troubled by the intellects he encountered; they were so much cleverer, these people, or was it that their minds had more and better tricks? Against the simple, satisfying ideas he put forward their responses began with, 'That's a rather simplistic approach' or 'I think if we look into it more deeply, however ...' He noticed also that although these superior minds took no notice of him once a discussion was underway, they rather liked him to make the opening remarks, the triteness of his ideas offering a springboard for their superior insights. He noticed, too, that when the people in his tutorial were deciding on the topics they'd research, they all agreed that convict life had to be examined but none of them wanted to do it. Stephen Macfarlan, the tutor, had exhorted them from the whiteboard, 'It's too important to ignore. Neville, we haven't got you down yet, how do you feel about it?' Neville could do no more, no less, than nod. Then the tutor pressed him further. 'Could you let me know in the next few days what your angle's going to be? I want the person giving each presentation to tell the rest of us what we need to read so we can critique the argument.' This point had been made before, nobody expected Neville to supply his line on the spot, but he said, 'Yes, I think I'm ready to say that now. I'd like to concentrate on prayer and improvement at Port Arthur prison.' He said it again, challenging their idea of him. 'Prayer and improvement.' Eyes that normally ignored him switched their gaze. 'Improvement, Neville?'

'And prayer.'

Kramme, the flabby American, said, 'You mean private prayer, or church services?' He thought. 'What do you people call them? Church of England ... Anglican!' They were looking at Neville. 'The services,' he said. 'They may have been the worst people in the colonies, but they listened to some of the finest sentences ever written in English. They had to.' Max sneered. 'They were led in one at a time and put in those boxes so they couldn't see anybody but the minister.' 'Priest,' corrected Angela. Max spread his hands. 'Whatever ... there wasn't anything communal about it. Solitary participation in church.' His scoffing told Neville his talk would have to be good. Stephen wrote 'Prayer and improvement' on the whiteboard. 'Will we allocate dates today? You can leave it till next week if you like, but no later than that, we've got to get them underway.' He looked at Neville. 'You seem pretty well organised Neville, can we put you down as first? Your topic comes before the others.' He had the marker poised to write.

'No,' Neville said, 'I think my topic should come last. At the end you look back to the beginning to see where you've come from, and it's all so much clearer. Last, if you don't mind.'

There were objections, some of them loud. Max said it was ridiculous. Karl threw up his hands. Marthe was clever enough to like being tricked, as she felt they were; it was so unlike Neville, the private school boy, to get the better of anybody that she found it funny. Lou's eyes, moving restlessly around, were asking where Neville was coming from. Stephen wrote 'last' next to Neville's topic. 'We'll try it your way. We might find something we didn't know was there.' Kramme said loudly, 'Well, Neville, you need a good fairy to put a pot of gold at the end of your rainbow, otherwise you're gonna be in deep shit.' Stephen frowned, but to the others, Kramme was right. Neville thought he'd got away with more than they'd realised, that if he could make a good case they'd have to revise most of what they'd said before he gave his presentation. What did he want to say?

He took himself off campus and sat in a cafe. He spread on the table his papers about the course and its requirements. Then he listed

the people in his tutorial and what they were going to talk about. It seemed to him that each of them was out in some way to prove a claim. Kramme wanted to rub it into them that America had saved Australia. Max wanted to show that the early labor movement hadn't had the guts to be as radical as it should have been. Angela? He couldn't make head nor tail of what she was likely to say about clothes. He rather wished she'd take hers *off*; that would bring the tutorial to life! He had a feeling she did take them off quite frequently, and wondered who the lucky male was. Brigitte the French woman puzzled him; she looked normal enough when he saw her collected by her husband, their children jumping around noisily, but there were things going on there that he could tell were troubling; and Elly, surely, would never finish the course. Would drop out. Would slip out of their lives leaving a readiness to hear bad, perhaps fatal, news of her, long after they'd gone their ways.

Prayer and improvement at Port Arthur. It was the topic that nobody had wanted. It was, as they said, *the pits!* That's why they'd been happy to leave it. He, they thought, had been handed the shitty job and they'd elected things that could bring credit. They didn't think much of him. He, in his turn, didn't think much of them. They were competing for results, and that meant establishing a pecking order, and he'd been placed at the bottom. The only way for him to win was for the bottom to overturn the top. That was what he had to do. A waitress said to him, 'Ready to order?' He'd heard her use the word 'sir' to the man at the table beside him. 'Cappucino, please, and one of those tarts with the apricot glaze.' She rushed away, but when the coffee and tart arrived, they were brought by a tall man twice his age. 'You a student sir?' They started to talk. The tall waiter told him his name was Antonio, and his wife wanted to improve her English so she could go to university: 'She thinks our children are not proud of her. I tell her this is not true, but she wants to learn. What do you think she should do?'

Neville was amazed to be asked. Who took any notice of him? He said he'd be willing to talk to Antonio's wife at a time of their convenience, and Antonio asked him to visit the following night, after six,

when Clara would be home. He gave Neville an address in the next suburb, above a shop. Neville drank his coffee, curiously encouraged. People had been finding their way from the bottom as long as the country had been settled, and others were forced down; *the pits* needed to be there!

They were what everything rested on. He felt frightened; at least, he felt, I won't have to come up with an alternative, because there isn't one. I'm a spokesman, he thought wryly, for those who aren't heard because they've been pushed down. Modern Port Arthurs aren't seen for what they are because they've got televisions and flush toilets, but the game hasn't changed. How was he going to win credit for a presentation that said things like this?

He finished his coffee, he sat in a park. Over dinner that night he mentioned to his parents that he'd be late home the following evening. His mother was curious, but he resisted. The following day he visited the little apartment where Antonio and his Clara lived. They introduced him to Clara's sister, Marisol, a plain faced woman in her mid thirties who was encased in folds of cloth. They sipped sherries while they spoke of books Clara was trying to read, and the things she wanted to know. 'I don't want to fail. I will be discouraged, and that is no good. I want to do something very simple, and when I finish, I know I'm improving. Then I do something else. When I finish that, I must feel I am on my way.' Her husband put in, 'Every step a winner!' He studied Neville's reaction, which appeared to satisfy him. They talked for a long time, then Marisol stood, as if ready to leave. Antonio spread his hands, asking her to remain. She sat. 'We need a goal,' Neville said, when their discussion resumed. 'We can't map out the path until we know where it goes.' They agreed that Carla should think about this, finished their sherries, and Neville announced that he was leaving. Antonio implored him to come back the following week; Neville noticed, as he headed for the stairs, that Marisol had not risen to farewell him. What did this mean?

On the day of his second visit, Neville went early to the suburb of his Spanish friends because it was so unlike the place where his parents lived. What would it be like, living here? For perhaps the first time he considered moving out of home, as people of his age were doing. He wondered what people paid in rent, whether rain got through the roof, whether it was safe at night ... He was in a lane looking at a small cottage between two factories when he realised that he too was being observed; some fingers released a curtain, and a slit of observation closed. He was still digesting this when the door of the dwelling opened and Marisol was looking at him. Her glance affected him strongly, though she said nothing; then she disappeared, leaving the door open behind her. Neville glanced around at a street empty except for cars and cats, and went in.

It was dark inside. His eyes needed to adjust. He realised, after a moment, that this woman who'd not said a word to him was in the front room. Something in her eyes gave him an instruction. He pushed the front door closed, feeling that he was being brave, and possibly very foolish. She sat, and touched the sofa beside her. He sat on the edge, turning so he could watch her. She said to him, as if knowing the answer, 'What brought you?'

The words that came from Neville's mouth belonged on his family's plane of reality. 'I was curious to have a look around before I visited your sister. And Antonio.'

She said, 'There are forces at work. What else brought you?'

'I don't think,' said Neville, 'that anything else brought me. I was simply curious.'

'What did you need to know?'

He said, 'I don't know that there was anything, really ...' then stopped, knowing that an enormous force was in the room, and it was either emanating from this mysterious woman or she too was subject to it. He swallowed, flushed, and his fingers closed to make two lumpy fists. Seeing this, Marisol half-smiled, and, putting a hand under one of his she encouraged, perhaps enticed, his hand to unclench. A dimension of himself that Neville hardly knew about was opening. He put

the other hand, still closed, on the knee nearest to her; she caused that hand to open too. He looked down at his hands, tingling where she'd touched them; it entered his mind that if she'd given, she could receive. He took her hand and examined it. It was loose, but integrated, as if trained to perform a world of movements with the delicacy of a musician, a pianist's hands; he ran his fingertips along one of her fingers. The finger was receptive, and in receiving seemed to give. 'I begin to see,' he said, while she looked gravely at him. His eyes met hers for a moment, then he looked down at her hands, and took them both, exploring the tingling sensations they both caused and submitted to. 'Sit back,' she said. 'You are too tense.'

This was true, but how could he be otherwise? He stroked the palms of her hands more gently than he'd ever done anything before, until he felt warmth rising in her, and her fingers took the ascendancy, finding their way to his wrists inside the cuffs of his shirt. What, he wondered, would it be like if the flame of this contact engulfed the whole of his person? He wanted to touch every part of her body inside the drape and hangings which were her style. She smiled, reading his mind. 'We must not rush. You can come when you like. I have a husband. He is in South Australia. I will tell you when he is coming back. I am alone most of the time. I do not go out to work. I make clothes here, where I live. You can come and go without being seen. Now, before you go to my sister's, we will take one more step.'

Trembling, he felt the sofa move as she moved. The two hands he held disengaged from his and settled like birds alighting on either side of his neck, not caressing, but carrying something like a benediction. Then he was being kissed in a way that was new to him, a powerful call that ran right through him. Eyes closed, he recorded what was happening, knowing that it was like homework being given to him: analyse this and see what you think it means, but don't be surprised if, when we do it next, your first answer has to give way to a second!

He quivered. 'I'm not experienced. We mustn't rush. It's marvellous. But a step at a time is right. When shall I come back?' She said

softly, 'Tomorrow. The next day. When you are ready. Now. I will ring my sister. I will not be with you tonight. I will tell her I am busy with an order. You will not be embarrassed. If I was there your body would tell everyone what was happening!' Her eyes were full of amusement. She rose, they moved silently to the door; she held his eyes with hers for a moment, then the door was open, he was through, and it was closed. His initiation had begun.

In the weeks that followed there were two new strands in his life. On Thursday evenings - the day of the history tutorial - he spent two hours with Clara and Antonio. Clara read him things and asked him questions. She told him what she was reading next, and what she would be looking for. Then he told her what had transpired in the tutorial that morning; she wanted to know what it was like to lead a student's life. Antonio ended their sessions by calling them to the table; when he wasn't busy in the kitchen he sat with them, listening respectfully. Their children became very fond of Neville who was helping their mother in some way not available to their father. 'They are beautiful people', Neville told Marisol when he visited her, usually when darkness deepened the mood of a day. They had grown accustomed to sitting on the sofa where they'd sat, that first afternoon, but now they touched freely, and Neville knew that he was putting himself in her tutoring arms. At times he looked into her eyes with a trust that was deepening him; that enormous force he'd felt on his first visit was something he welcomed now, and he was getting ready to be embodied by it. 'I'm not so scared now,' he told Marisol. 'I won't tell you I'm relaxed because I'm not, but it's as if I know there's a current there, ready to sweep me up, and I want to swim till I'm in it, and then I can float to where it takes me.' She heard him, appraisingly, then put his hand inside the folds of what cloaked her, and he felt her breast: soft, curvaceous, forbidden, waiting. He caressed her. He felt her straighten her back, and he knew that pride would be the girder in the love she gave him, and that it would soften magically, the strength would rise in him, and it too would be given. If you gave, you imposed, he saw, unless there was acceptance, a gift in return, and then,

there, everything changed. You would be at creation's very point. She clasped his hand and took it from her clothes. 'Are you wearing nothing underneath?' he said to her. She said, 'Nothing. I want to be ready for our moment when it comes. But do not let your mind play on what I have told you. Our imaginations are our enemies sometimes. They get in the way of the force that wants to run through us. They can twist it from its proper path. Trust me and we will be well.'

His parents noticed that their son was changing; he told them about the sessions - 'counselling', he called them - with Clara, and the Spanish dinners Antonio made for them, and the bubbling conversations he had with their dark-eyed sons and daughter, but his mother, certainly, and his father, possibly, sensed that something else was happening. He came home one evening from Marisol's nest, as he called it, after they'd become lovers, to hear music from his father's study, upstairs. He closed the front door as quietly as he'd closed her door, and made his way up the carpeted staircase until he was near enough to hear properly. It was a piano his father was listening to, and the person who was playing was into a passage that must be difficult to execute because there seemed to be more trills than two hands could manage. This was a soul taking flight! He knew it must be Beethoven because that was the composer his father chose as his companion, and he knew that what he was hearing must have come from the musician's last years because nobody who was young could express such things, though they could certainly feel them. Just as Marisol had released the floods of love in his body and the tenderness of giving and receiving, which he knew he would have to relinquish when her husband came back from the fishing trawler, so the composer was giving from a life that had little in so many ways, and that gift came down the centuries, picking people from the floor of their existence and taking them into clouds that were no illusion but had, for Beethoven, been real, and therefore could be re-experienced by anyone skilled enough to manage the notes or wise enough to listen.

He thanked the powers for the miracle of life, and went down to make a jug of coffee; that would give him an excuse to push his father's

door, a little later, and say, 'I heard some of that, dad. It was marvelous!'

His father was serene, and pleased by his son's entry. It was a chance for him to savour the change in him: 'Neville', the full name, had to be used from now on. This thought entertained him. 'Thanks, son.' He picked up the spoon and added sugar, stirring softly. 'I didn't hear you come in. Your mother's over at Hilda's. I thought I had the house to myself. That's when I like to have some company.' He turned his head towards the cupboard where he kept his CDs. 'The best company a man can have. I know it's unfair to say that. The human race is lucky to have a few people who can reach the peaks; it's too much to expect the rest of us to live there. We're too busy making messes or cleaning them up ... I sometimes dream that we might have a government that would say that one part of the population had to guarantee a basic standard for everyone, while the rest had to set new goals, new standards, and achieve them. Why do we have crime, and crooked deals ... it's because we're such a greedy species, we can never grab enough ... yet the riches we crave are available, and they cost next to nothing. It's so stupid.'

He sat back, suffused by the experience of music. 'What do you think he would have written next, father?' Neville said. 'Did he leave any notes? People are big on reconstructing unfinished works, these days, I read.'

'They are, and I wish they wouldn't. There's nothing wrong with orchestrating a few bars, or sorting out something the composer left in a mess, but this wholesale creation of things only sketched by the master ... it's an attempt to cross into death's territory and bring back a treasure they imagine is there, when it isn't, it died with the composer, and there's no bringing it back. Or that's how I feel.' Neville felt tenderly for his father who spoke, when seized by music, as if there was no barrier between himself and others. It occurred to him that he had the same benefaction from Marisol, and that an agreement between two people to use each other for their two single benefits was almost as good a bargain as the race could manage. His father, sensing the serenity and maturity

in his boy, wondered who had made him what he'd recently become. 'When we get to a peak,' he said, diplomatically, 'it's not always easy to see where we can go next. I suppose that's the nature of a peak, really. Even if it's not very high, it gives us a view. We can see how others are getting on. We can't live there - that's what I was saying before - but it's much better to have been there, and seen, than not to have had the view. The vision, I think I mean. It's good to see you so happy, Neville,' his father said.

'It's good to be as I am,' Neville said. 'I haven't started to ask myself about what comes next.'

It was all his father needed to know. 'You're young. Savour the moment. Don't let yourself be hurried.'

The following Thursday, when Neville arrived for his tutorial, those already in the room were discussing, somewhat heatedly, where the boundary lay, the transition point, between being young, juvenile, immature, and the condition of being grown up. Adult. Kramme said noisily, 'Here's the guy who'll tell us. How can you tell, Neville? What's the test you apply? Eh? How do you know if the line's been crossed or not?' The big American was grinning. Neville put his things down. 'I've just come in. I'll listen for a while.' Kramme seemed to approve, but Max said sharply, 'Oh come on, Neville, you must be wondering when you're going to get over the line. How long's it going to be, and what are the signs? Don't tell me you haven't thought about it!' Neville let his amusement show through. 'I've almost forgotten!' He lowered his eyes. Angela came into the room, with Lou and Marthe a pace behind, pleasing Becky who'd thought the argument too male-centred. 'Just when you were needed! Ange? Lou? Marthe? These guys are talking about how you know you're grown up. I told them if they had to talk about it, they didn't know! If you're secure in who you are, you don't discuss it. I might as well have kept my mouth shut because they didn't take any notice. Tell them what they need to hear!'

'Grown up?' Angela chuckled, and wiggled her hips; Lou and Marthe grinned. 'We've got to go further than that,' Becky said. 'People

can be childish about sex you know.' The group became noisy, the argument firing up again. Karl announced loudly that if a society didn't have initiation procedures - rites of passage, he called them - then there was no line and an individual could make his or her own decisions on the basis of their personal feelings about themselves. This distinction between personal freedom and social rites was one they'd heard him make any number of times; it was central to his thinking. Kramme was annoyed by it: 'When you stop saying that I'll maybe start to think a bit of growing up's happening in you, my friend!' This slight angered Karl. 'What about nations, Krammie? Can public policy be juvenile too? It can, can't it? Sometimes a whole nation can carry on its affairs in a way that's either disgusting, or juvenile, or both! You don't have to look far to find examples!' He was referring to the fixation of the United States with the sexual activities of its president. Kramme, knowing this, was furious. 'Juvenile? That's a word you don't want to throw around unless you're sure it can't be hurled back - and stick like egg on your face!'

Stephen came in, ready to apologise for being late; surprised by the atmosphere in the room, he looked around. Only Neville was apart from the furor, sitting back, his papers in front of him. 'We'd better get things started,' Stephen said. 'It'll be the only way we'll end this. You ready to go, Neville?' The young man corrected him. 'I am almost ready,' he said, 'but it's not my turn, it's Angela's turn today. Clothes,' he added, smiling, because he'd been waiting to hear what she'd say. Stephen turned his eyes to Angela, who was waving a few sheets of paper in the air. 'Clothes,' Stephen said. 'Yes, sorry, I'm getting mixed up. Muddled, to tell the truth. I've just come from a faculty meeting. Some unfortunate things were said. Sorry, I think I've got my dates mixed. You talked last week, didn't you Ti Chai? So ... yes, Angela.' He glanced at his list. 'Clothes. Well, a lot could be said about that, I suppose.' He looked around, hoping the rumbles of the argument would quieten, then something made him realise that attention was focussing, not on Angela, who was ready to talk, but on Neville, because an aura of well-being surrounded him: in some way he was giving off a feeling

of superiority, detachment, of generalised love and charm. In a moment of silence, Kramme said loudly, 'Why are we all looking at you, Neville?' Answering his own question, he went on, 'You're feeling pretty pleased with yourself. What's happened? I know! You don't think you've got a problem with growing up. Hey! That's unusual! Tell us your secret, my boy! Anybody can see there's something behind that smile. Eh? What do you say?'

Neville's smile became broader. He said nothing. There was a sound at the door, then Brigitte slipped in, aware of the group's attention being focussed on something and fearing it might be her entry. 'I'm sorry I'm late. The friend who was going to look after my children was delayed. Car trouble. I've been hurrying, I'm puffed. Sorry, Stephen.' She looked at the tutor, who said, 'I was late myself. I had to apologise too. Ah ...' He looked at Angela, who had her papers in front of her, and a roll of photos for her talk, but her gaze was on Neville who, for a reason he couldn't have explained, had become central to their concentration. 'What's got into you all?' Max said. 'Why don't we start? We're not stunned mullets, are we?' They were silent, in contrast to the noise of a minute before. Max looked at Neville. 'Have you got a trick up your sleeve, Neville? Why are we looking at you?'

The young man felt taken over by something outside himself, much as he'd felt the first day he'd sat with Marisol, and had felt the force of sexuality flowing into his life. 'Let's begin,' he said. 'I'm curious to hear what Angela's going to say. I think it'll open our eyes.' He opened his hands, and Stephen wondered, again, what was happening in his tutorial; he was supposed to manage things, and somehow, for a few moments, a force, a moral authority, superior to his own had filtered into the event. He studied the young man whom, for the most part, the others disregarded, saw nothing changed about him, then turned his eyes to Angela, inviting her to start.

That afternoon, in the house between two factories, Neville tried to tell Marisol what had happened. She listened, then drew him to the room where she slept. With a few deft movements she slipped off the things

she was wearing, then stepped back to let him look at her. He began to unbutton his shirt, but she advanced, moved his hands, and undressed him herself. Each stage, each action - buttons, belt, the unpeeling of his shirt from his arms - was a sacral act. The young man felt helpless, yet immeasurably strong. Her strength, her desire, was his. Everything he had was hers. She moved him as smoothly as if he rolled on wheels, then bent him backwards onto the bed. She put a hand on his inner thigh, then climbed beyond him on the bed, and there she turned him to face inwards. Her face appeared before him, inside his range of focus. 'You can't put a meaning on me,' she said, proudly. 'Meanings have limits. They can be made, and unmade.' She felt him trembling. 'We can look at a flower,' she said. 'We can crush it. We can cut it, and put it in a vase. We can admire it, and we can plant some more so we get the same flowers next year. That's what we can do. Do. But we can't be the flower. Its life is outside ours. All we can do is be *like* the flower, and let natural force flow through us. Kiss me now.' As he kissed her he felt her fingers exploring him, his desire rising at her touch. He sighed, putting a hand on her hip, then sliding to where their child would form, if they caused a conception. 'Beautiful,' she murmured, rolling on her back, drawing his hand to keep caressing the same spot. 'I want to have your child in me, but perhaps it is a step we are not supposed to take. Who can say? Perhaps it is enough that I teach you to be perfect for me, then you can be perfect for your wife, when you have found her.' He felt a sadness come over him. 'Why does there have to be an end?'

'Why indeed?' Marisol became quiet, then put her hand on his, two hands where a lovers' child would form, if that was the way they went. 'How long can a thing go on?' Marisol turned her head so she could look into his eyes. 'Some men pay women to do what we are doing. So many dollars for so many minutes. Why? Because it is a transaction. That is the nature of what is happening. Dollars become minutes. A transaction. We are different, we know that. But what is the word for us? If there is no word, there is still an inner law to what is happening. The process has a certain amount of energy behind it. We have to obey

that energy, but when it is gone, the process is ended, then we have to part. That will be sad, my beautiful boy, very sad for me. This is more perfect than I have had before.' He felt her fingers tighten. He gripped them hard, and in a moment they were in the throes and agonies of love, releasing their passions and pain through expenditure of energy until at last, softened, exhausted, they lay in a state of fulfilment. 'Hold me now,' Marisol said to her lover, 'Softly, till we sleep, and then wake, to start all over again. Every act of love is an entry into sleep, after which we're reborn. The world is the same but you and I have made each other new.' She added, 'My love.' He said it back to her, affirming, resonating, joining, holding, as certain as uncertainty, as permanent as impermanence, 'My love.'

A week later, it was Karl's turn to talk. He was next, and last. He worked long hours on his paper, but he went to Marisol as often as he could because he had a feeling that her husband's stay in South Australia was ending. When he asked, she could only say, 'I have heard nothing. He does not write me letters. Sometimes when they come back from the sea, he rings me. But it is many days since he has done that. How long have we got? I don't try to guess. Anyone who tries to measure time is silly. We have all the time there is, and when it runs out, we must not let ourselves regret. No. We have to go on as best we can in the new time that follows this time. Can you see that, or are you regretting what must be? I think you are. You will look back one day. When you do, think of me looking back on you. We will be ghosts around my bed. Two spirits that know each other well.' She looked tenderly on him, her young man: her creation, in a way.

In the library he turned his papers over, and riffled through books and articles, trying to sort out what he wanted to say. Prayer and improvement? It seemed to him that humans had strange ways of imagining, of picturing, the world they lived in, and that measurable realities interacted in varied and very loose ways with the depictions people carried in their heads. Anyone who'd visited the remains of Port Arthur

wanted to talk of it as a hell-hole, yet those who'd created it called it a Model Prison. How could both be right?

It seemed to him that there was an unspeakable sadness about the place, especially the Isle of the Dead, where the convicts' graves were unnamed. Death in anonymity: could anything be more sad? He found himself trying to anticipate the objections his description of the prison would meet from those whose talks he'd listened to. In particular, he remembered Max's objection - common enough, no doubt - to the business of restraining the solitary confinees in cubicles during services so that they could see the minister but not each other. He was certain to have that flung at him if he tried to develop a logic for the way the prison had been run: why couldn't the prisoners look upon each other?

Why not, indeed?

Why should they? Why should they not?

Because, it occurred to him, the whole system had been played out between two poles called God, and Satan. Good, to be striven for, and evil, to be shunned. Movement towards God - good - was to be encouraged, perhaps rewarded. Punishment lay in the other direction, and punishment must not be softened, any more than the condition of sinfulness, of wrongdoing and perversity which had brought it about should be condoned, or yielded to. Weakness in the treatment of evil was mortal, and would lead to the administrator's evil, inevitably. The bad would have infected the moderately virtuous. No, the conflict was full-on, and as it was for the soul, it was all-important, unavoidable. People didn't see the world like that any more. People today were ...

He couldn't say. It was too hard. All he knew was that being part of the modern world meant that the key to the way the prison had been operated was no longer available. Prayer and improvement. Punishment was what you got for your crime. It had to be endured cheerfully. Punishment was your opportunity to see your folly, to repent, and to resolve that thereafter you would follow God's laws. That way led to improvement. But there was no guarantee, because humans were fallible. That was why prayer was necessary, because only God

could ensure that one's upward path wouldn't be reversed. He found himself shaking his head. How had they believed it? Max would say they wanted to believe it because it suited them. No doubt, in today's terms, that was true. But the prisoners and their gaolers hadn't lived on today's terms, they had lived inside the thinking of their day. This was the deciding moment for Neville.

The thinking of their day had bound them; why should he believe the thinking of his own time was releasing him? Surely it was as likely to imprison, to bind? He knew this must be true. When had he ever been free? When would he be free again?

He had been free inside the love of his parents, he'd been happily bound in his years of schooling, and he'd been free-est of all in the bed of Marisol, from which he must soon be an exile. Where would be his freedom then?

It would lie in the respite he had before he was entangled in a further relationship. We choose our own imprisonments, he saw: his father, busy, conservative, conventional, was as liberated as anyone when he listened to music: what was wrong with that? Sitting beside a window in the library, a further thought came into his head. There was no point in reading any more. He had enough in his head, or in his notes. The effort lay in getting himself clear about what everything meant to him, and that, he saw, was the outcome of being young. He hadn't lived long enough to have things sorted out. Every idea in his brain was recent, and which mattered more than others was beyond him to say. Suddenly he had a picture in his mind of a fishing trawler, off the coast of South Australia, trailing nets, hauling them in, taking the catch to wooden piers poking out from shore where it would be loaded onto trucks and taken to market. The tables of the hungry. The whole human race wanted to be fed, and Marisol's husband was on the water, working to satisfy those throats and bellies, and he, Neville, was one of those wanting to be fed, but one day Marisol's husband would come home and want things to be as they'd been. He, Neville, was lucky, and learning, because he was in someone else's place. Someone else's bed. At last he saw that time was

running out like a line, and that the end of the moment, the hiatus, had always been implicit in its beginning, just as extinction was implicit - a hovering ghost - in the beginning of life.

He folded his papers, and left the seat he'd become so attached to in the library.

On his way home he decided to take the next day off completely. To go somewhere he'd never been, a place where he might get his thoughts in order. He asked his mother if he could borrow her car. This surprised her a little, but she agreed. The next morning he drove to Marisol's suburb, and turned into the narrow street where her house sat squeezed between two factories. He was earlier than he'd ever been and there were still some vehicles parked in the street so that it wasn't until he was outside the house that he saw a utility with a South Australian number-plate. The front door was open and there was a suitcase and a backpack on the verandah. Her husband must have driven all night. As he rolled past the house Neville glanced down the passage and saw the silhouettes of two figures. He kept his car moving and left the narrow street, unseen by husband or wife. In the next street he speeded up slightly, and then he was in a main road, following a tram, his first sexual passion behind him. For a moment he thought of taking the car home and going back to the library, then he decided to make, alone, the journey he'd hoped to make with his lover. He drove steadily until he got onto a freeway heading south, then he drove to the very end, the beginning, of the enclosed water that came to the feet of his city. He parked, and went through the visitors' information centre. Visitors could be driven to the end of the park, or they could walk. He decided to walk.

It was exhilarating, liberating, but he felt lost. Un-anchored. Alone when he'd hoped to be sharing. He wondered if he'd ever see Marisol again, and knew he wouldn't. She wouldn't be there when he visited Antonio and Clara and he wouldn't be doing that much longer. He felt they didn't need him any more, and wondered if they'd observe a link between his departure and the return of her husband. Would they realise what had been going on? Marisol and Neville, when the other was away?

An opportunity taken, and a warning given, never to take anyone for granted. He thought they probably would, and they'd wonder what it had been like for the inexperienced young man he'd been when he first called on them, and the answer, which they'd never hear, would be in his bones, his flesh, muscles, psyche, a description of what went on when a woman taught a man.

He walked. The bush was low, but there were dunes overlooking the sea, and a track or two so that the water could be seen as well as heard, and smelt. He walked to an observation point and looked across the water, white waves beneath, horizon at the edge. It was a weekday, there was hardly anyone in the park, he felt painfully alone. He realised how he'd grown used to imagining Marisol with him when they were apart, how he'd offered her his thoughts because they took on new life if he imagined her responses. One should not be alone, he realised, unless one has had enough years with others to be able to manage the state, as he could not. He wanted to drive back to the city, but knew he had to walk on.

He returned to the main track. Before long he was looking at a cemetery, wondering whose bodies had been interred in the little clearing. Not far away, he recalled, was where the earliest white settlement in his state had been, in an ill-chosen, waterless place. The white men had no idea! They were English, and the continent they'd seized hadn't had time to alter their minds. They'd imagined that the thinking they'd brought around the world would serve them in their new place. It was a foolishness that still held people in its grip. What would he be like when he was his parents' age? Most people, his father liked to say, had their character in place by the age of twenty: his mother said it was much earlier. She said people arrived in the world with their dispositions, their characteristic approaches, in position, ready to develop into the mature features they would display, but, if you looked back from this maturity you would see that the person had always been much as they had become, and that there wasn't much anyone could do with this process except live within it and try to guide it where possible.

He walked. The track brought him to a spot where he had the sea on one side, the peaceful bay on the other. His city lay out of sight to the north. Marisol and her husband would be shopping. She'd have made him breakfast, she'd have put the filthy things he'd brought home into the washing machine, he'd have told her about his days on the ocean and as much as she was to hear about his times on shore. He, Neville, would be locked in her silences, hovering, perceived only by her, in the rooms of the house that he'd entered, the lounge and bedroom, mainly. Would her husband ever sense that someone had been there? He thought not. Marisol would keep her husband's concentration on what he could see of her life, not allowing him to think of what he wasn't aware of. The secret would be safe, but it would be like a jewel, a ring, locked in a vault which nobody knew existed.

He walked. On the last tip of land there was a fortification, built years before to fire on Russian warships. Neville laughed. Why wouldn't the warships have fired on the fort and blown it sky-high? Why not? War-mongers were usually optimists, thinking that their guns would do their job and the enemy's wouldn't. Suddenly he felt lonely, and something deeper. He sat beside the track, looking at the matching tip of land to the west, and the water in between, where bay and sea encountered each other with a swell that was making an oil tanker rise and fall as it made its way out, its business done. Something told him that he had to admit a change in himself before he'd be able to deliver his paper, and that this was the moment to do it.

He looked into himself, he looked at the waters, froth-capped, to the left, peaceful, to the right, and the big boat making the transition. It was used to oceans and harboured only briefly in quiet bays. He, he decided, had left the harbour of his formation, and everything hereafter would be decisive, real, all mistakes having to be paid for without excuse or mercy. Parents, and those that loved you, indulged you in the time of your formation, but the time came when you couldn't claim that indulgence and you admitted the risk of anything you did. That was where he was, now that ... he thought tenderly of her name, a name he'd never written. He

saw a stick and picked it up. He walked down to the water. In the sand he started to write her name, then, deciding it wasn't big enough, he smoothed it with his shoe and started again. He wrote in the sand, over a space as big as the side of a house, the letters M, A, R, I, S, O, and L. There it was. He'd said it to the world. He wrote, beneath it, in smaller letters, 'I love you'. The next part took courage but he had to finish what he'd begun. Turning the stick to use the other end he wrote, in letters the size of his foot, N, E, V, I, L, L, and E. He glanced at it, feeling a little embarrassment, and walked away from the beach, the water, the names. He drove home, gave his mother her keys, and slept.

The following day, when the tutorial members had seated themselves, Stephen began: 'Weeks ago, when you chose your topics, I think some of you wondered how interesting they'd be. By now I'm sure you feel the exercise has been worthwhile. It's certainly been so for me. Teaching a course can be boring if you let it become repetitive, and the only way to avoid that is to let things happen unexpectedly.' He smiled. 'Not always as we'd have liked it,' he added. They thought of Elly, missing from the group that had begun. Moving with this new gravity in the room, he turned to Neville. 'We were a little surprised when Neville wanted Port Arthur discussed last instead of first, but we ...' nobody challenged his pronoun '... decided to see how the beginning looked when we came to it at the end. Which is where we are now.'

Neville said, 'Thanks everyone for letting me take this topic last. If I manage to say anything useful it will be because of all I've heard in the past weeks. The title of my talk is Prayer and Improvement. There was plenty of prayer at Port Arthur, and only a little improvement, I have to say. The two don't necessarily go together.' He found himself looking at Angela, who blushed. Becky's eyes were sternly on him. 'When I said I'd take this topic, you, Max, were very scornful. You mentioned the prisoners being led, one by one, into little capsules where they could only see the minister and the altar ...' 'Enforcement by psychic repression,' Max said. 'Cripple those you want to overcome. Force them to think that acceptance of your will is their only hope. It was done more

skilfully in the Nazi camps, but that doesn't alter what was being done.' 'You may be right,' Neville countered, 'but I want to put another way of seeing it. It's one that recognises their world view, and that isn't easy to accept today. Let me begin with some of the hymns they sang in those services. People at the time commented that the prisoners, however rebellious they might have been at other times, roared out these hymns as if their lives depended on making God hear them!' Scepticism filled the room, but Neville passed sheets of paper around. 'Dearly beloved brethren,' he said, and they were amazed to find him laughing at them from some vantage point they'd never conceded, 'let us turn to Hymn number 489. It's on the sheet before you.' He made his voice sound both unctuous and stern. They looked at the sheet:

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord,
She is his new creation
By water and the Word:
From heaven he came and sought her
To be his holy Bride,
With his own Blood he bought her,
And for her life he died.*

*Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation
One Lord, one Faith, one Birth:
One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy Food,
And to one hope she presses
With every grace endued.*

Sam grumbled, 'What's wrong with these people? They don't talk like anyone I've ever met.' Neville said, 'They've got a certain scheme of ideas, if you notice. Certain words which we still use, but which had special meanings for them. Water, the word. Bride, blood, faith, birth, food. Most important of all, salvation. That's the one that mattered

most. And you have to accept those special meanings, or you're lost!' They felt he was laughing, still, and wondered what his amusement was based on. 'There is a concentration on struggle in this world-view,' Neville said. 'Look at the way it ends: "And the great Church victorious/Shall be the Church at rest."' The idea of victory is, dare I say it, crucial.' He laughed. Brigitte put it to him. 'You make me feel you are laughing at us.' He raised his brows. 'Crux, crucis, means a cross. To be crucial is to partake of the crucifixion, if you think about it.' Kramme said, 'So?' but Neville looked down again; they read on:

*Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we
Like them, the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with thee.*

'What's the significance of these verses in your mind, Neville?' Stephen said. 'Have we got dates for them, by the way?'

'The authors of both the hymns I've given you were born in 1810, which puts them at twenty years of age when Port Arthur prison was opened, and forty-three when transportation ended. The prison wasn't finally closed until 1877.' Max brushed aside the dates. 'What do you expect us to find in these things?'

'Could we look at the other one first, before we talk about it?' They turned their eyes to Hymn 486:

*Ten thousand times ten thousand,
In sparkling raiment bright,
The armies of the ransomed Saints
Throng up the steps of light;
'Tis finished! all is finished,
Their fight with death and sin;
Fling open wide the golden gates,
And let the victors in.*

‘It’s all about warfare,’ Becky said. ‘This is mad. Sorry, anybody who’s more of a churchgoer than I am, but I’ve never really looked at this sort of thing before, and frankly, it unsettles me!’

‘It was meant to do that,’ Neville said. ‘To make you think there was only one answer! Look at the last verse:’

*Bring near thy great salvation,
Thou Lamb for sinners slain,
Fill up the roll of thine elect,
Then take thy power and reign:
Appear, Desire of nations,
Thine exiles long for home;
Show in the heaven thy promised sign;
Thou Prince and Saviour, come. (Amen)*

‘As you see, there are no answers on earth, only in heaven, which means in God. You have to pray to him, and hope he’ll help you improve ...’

‘Oh, that’s only a cheap verbal trick!’ Max said. ‘Surely we can examine the penal system in a better way than this!’ Most of the others agreed. Stephen said, ‘We don’t see where you’re coming from, Neville. Could you state your position more clearly?’ It was what Neville had been waiting for.

‘Port Arthur prison returns us to a question we’re always running into, namely, not what happened, but how you look at it. For years now, people have looked at the remnants of the prison, and the stories that have been told about it, from a position of claimed superiority. *They* were brutal, *we* wouldn’t be like that. *Their* harshness hardened criminals, *our* emphasis is on finding prisoners a way back to normal life. That’s what we say. To paraphrase what you’d say, Max, *we have to say that, don’t we?*’ He smiled, and again they found him puzzling, possessed of something they hadn’t suspected. ‘Let’s look at that idea of brutality. People have looked at the amount of food and clothing, the warmth and shelter they had, such as it was, and they judge it by what we expect today. This is not only unjust, it’s inappropriate. Various writers have

shown that convicts in Australia, even in Port Arthur, regularly had more to eat than some sectors of the English population, particularly the rural poor. People have fixed on the fact that at Eaglehawk Neck, the gateway to the prison peninsula, some pretty fierce dogs were on long leashes, waiting to savage anyone trying to get through. Well, modern prisons have men with guns looking out from towers, so what's new? People have concentrated on floggings, and the tiny, dark cells some prisoners were put in ...' he paused '... and that takes me back to where I began with the hymns.' One or two of his listeners toyed with the sheets he'd given them. 'Can I make a contrast, though. Think, if you will, of what comes into your mind when anyone says the word 'prison'. Locked doors, bars, and maybe a tiny window, giving a glimpse of freedom. Yes?' He considered them quizzically. 'Why not work? The prisoners at Port Arthur worked most of the time. They made boats.' He tapped one of the papers in front of him. 'Quite a number, actually. Details here if you're interested. They made roads. Dug coal. Cut timber. They built buildings, or helped with it. They were far more active than prisoners today. They were given work which might have improved them, and often enough, no doubt, it did. But ...'

Sam laughed. 'There's always a but!'

'There is. It was policy in those days that if someone didn't respond, if they reoffended, if they stole, or lied, or tried to cheat the system, then they were getting worse when they should have been improving, and if their morality declined - and that was the measure religion supplied them with - if they got deeper into the pit, then the system followed them down, trying to turn them around. Misdemeanours? Punishment. Insolence? Punishment. Defiance? Punishment.' He was ready to go on, but Brigitte shuddered. 'Oh don't go on with that, Neville! You aren't that sort of person. I don't want to hear you talk like that! It's not ...'

There was so much agony in her voice that everyone looked at her. Neville stopped, as asked. Brigitte's mouth, and the muscles of her throat, moved silently, then she added: '... how we should treat each

other!' Neville knew everyone in the room was with her, with the exception, perhaps, of Stephen. 'Perhaps not,' he said, 'but they couldn't think of anything better, and it was consistent with the way they imagined the universe to be. Heaven and earth. Hell and damnation. Eternity in pain, or eternity in bliss, illuminated by the Almighty. This is the heart of what I want to say.' He leaned forward, the humour that had tinged his presentation disappearing, though none of them noticed: 'Most of what repels us about that prison was simply a part of the time. Most of the rest can be put down to stuff-ups, bad planning, those on high not wanting to know what those lower down did with the problems they dumped on them. Imagine trying to run a prison system, hard enough at any time, when the orders come from the other side of the world, and in a sailing ship at that! Foul-ups and confusion were inevitable. It's common to blame the people who ran the prison. That isn't fair.' He tapped some books he had on the table. 'Governor Arthur, O'Hara Booth ... they couldn't stop British problems being shipped to the arse-end of the earth, excuse my French.' He looked at Brigitte and felt stupid. She glanced at him with fire in her eye. 'A silly expression,' he said. 'Forgive me, I wasn't thinking ...'

When he got home his mother asked him how his talk had gone. 'Not too badly,' he said, 'but really I don't think I convinced anybody.' His mother looked shyly at him, a sign he knew of a challenge. 'Perhaps you weren't fully convinced yourself?'

His answer came quickly. 'It isn't that. My problem is that I don't know yet how to make people take seriously what I say. They think they can brush it off, so they do. It's a way of reducing the load of things they carry, I suppose. What I said overturned a lot of what those people've been saying in their talks, but I don't think many of them bothered about that because they don't even know it's happened. Oh well.' His mother said, 'Can I make you some coffee, darling? And those biscuits you like ... there's still a few left.' She looked tenderly at her son. 'No,' he said. 'I'll go upstairs. There's a bit of music dad plays that I like very much. I came home one night when he thought he was on his own. Well, he

was, you were at Hilda's, and this music was playing, and I caught a bit of it. I want to hear it all, properly, from beginning to end.' He looked at his mother. 'I think it might help. Balance me up again, or that's what I hope.' She said, 'Your father's got hundreds of discs in his cupboard.' She laughed. 'I'm not allowed to touch them. He says I'll get them out of order if I go near them. What sort of order they're in I'm blessed if I can tell, but somehow he finds what he wants. Do you know what the music was?'

'It was music that put everything in order,' her son replied. 'It was very precious. I could tell, even from the bit I heard, that the man who wrote it had to lose everything else to become what he managed ... no, I mean *struggled* ... to become. It was music ...'

His fingers were trembling and his teeth on the verge of chattering; his mother watched him shrewdly, and with concern.

'... that says that any cost is worthwhile, if your goal is big enough, or grand enough, dainty or delicate enough ...'

She saw that he couldn't finish; he was too young to conclude anything yet. 'Go and put it on, darling, nice and loud, so I can hear it down here. And when you've finished listening, come down and talk to me, if you feel ready. I'd love to hear what you've got to say.'

Verses of Hymn 489, 'The Church's one foundation', and Hymn 486, 'Ten thousand times ten thousand', are from *The English Hymnal*, musical editor R. Vaughan Williams, Oxford University Press, 1933. Musical reference is to the second movement of the Piano Sonata No. 32, opus 111 (1822), by Ludwig van Beethoven.

didgeridoo

didgeridoo is a variant of one of the oldest literary forms - a gathering of people, each of whom tells a story. A group makes its way every week to a tutorial where one of them presents a paper. Each has chosen a topic and is in some sense subject to the thing being considered. History is no easier to get in order than a person's life, and the fourteen characters of this collection are depicted as they try to do both. They have all to choose a passage, written long ago, to illustrate their theme, and the author has a similar challenge, because a passage of music, the art revealing the innermost psyche of a culture, enters every story. Music too is history: thirteen of the pieces are European, and 'classical', while the sound of the didgeridoo is a vestige of the past and a reminder that the land, timeless and anonymous, shapes all in its unrelenting way.